



Photo courtesy: Collection of Ann Underwood Kulish



Welcome to the historic United States Courthouse located at 312 N. Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles. Built between 1937 and 1940 to serve as both a federal courthouse and a post office, the building was designed by architect **Gilbert Stanley Underwood** (1890–1960), who was acclaimed for his public architecture including lodges in national parks, over two dozen post offices, a number of federal courthouses, and the U.S. Mint in San Francisco. Designed in the Art Moderne style, the building was the largest federal building in the western United States at the time of its completion. The post office, which was originally located on the ground and first floors, moved to another site in 1965, and the U.S. District Court took over its space.

In 2006, the National Park Service added the courthouse to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2012, the courthouse was designated a national historic landmark by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar as the site of the 1946 landmark civil rights case *Mendez, et al. v. Westminster School District*.

Spring Street Exterior, Entrance and Lobby



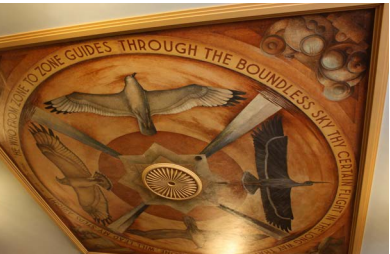
The main entrance, which faces Spring Street, is three stories high and recessed behind fluted columns. The five entrance doorways each consist of two bronze doors capped by a projecting curved hood bearing a bronze eagle. Above each doorway, an elaborate aluminum grille extends to the full height of the bay. The grilles are decorated with flowers and the seals of five U.S. Government departments: State, Treasury, War, Justice, and Post Office. A stylized glazed terra cotta seal of the United States with a bald eagle appears on either side of the columns and grilles. The bronze eagles above the doorways and the stylized U.S. seals were designed by Henry Lion (1900–1966).

The Spring Street lobby, which originally housed the post office, has a rectangular plan and, like the Main Street lobby, has retained most of its original finishes and furnishings, including polychrome terrazzo floors, ornamental plaster ceilings, and aluminum light fixtures. The west wall bears the building dedication plaque and a poster honoring architect Gilbert Stanley Underwood, and a plinth against the wall bears a plaque with the Bill of Rights. Original escalators with extruded aluminum casings lead down or up to the Main Street lobby or the second floor, respectively.

Four murals were originally installed in the lobby, but were removed in 1965 when the post office moved out. Three were restored and reinstalled, and once again grace the lobby:



“Life on the Old Spanish and American Ranchos” (1938) by Lucien Labaudt (1880–1943) was reinstalled on the north wall in 1993. The 8’ by 14’ mural illustrates the city’s birth and early history against a backdrop of an old map of the Spanish and Mexican ranches of early Los Angeles. The legendary sale of a large part of the city for a barrel of wine, some groceries, and \$200 is depicted on the left. On the right, Native Americans and Mexican farmers with livestock represent life on the early ranches. Beside the mural is an article about the restoration and reinstallation of this and the following mural.



“Aerodynamism” (1941), also by Lucien Labaudt, is a 16’ by 16’ oil on canvas mural that was reinstalled on the ceiling in 1998. The mural symbolizes aviation through four large birds in flight within a large circle divided by four rays of light emanating from four points of an eight-pointed star. On the band of the circle are two lines from the poem “To a Waterfowl” by William Cullen Bryant. The circle is inscribed in a square, the corners of which contain motifs related to aviation.



“Los Angeles-Prehistoric and Spanish Colonial” (1939) by Edward Biberman (1904–1986) graces the south wall. Reinstalled in 2003, the 8’ by 14’ mural incorporates the first map of the city, with prehistoric Los Angeles represent-

ed on the left by saber-toothed tigers and other animals of the La Brea tar pits. The founding of the pueblo is depicted on the right, with Felipe de Neve, the first Spanish governor of California, on horseback, surrounded by a Native American, Father Juan Crespi, and two soldiers firing muskets to commemorate the raising of the cross marking the site of the new city.

Main Street Exterior, Entrance and Lobby

The Main Street entrance has an additional lower story due to the slope of the site, and has three entry bays. The grilles bear the seals of five federal departments: Navy, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Labor. Like the Spring Street entrance, each doorway is topped by a bronze eagle, and on both sides of the columns and grilles are the stylized U.S. seals also by Henry Lion.

The Main Street lobby has an oval plan, with walls of Tennessee brown marble with golden Sienna travertine accents and engaged columns of black and gold marble from Montana. The floor contains an inlaid, eight-pointed starburst design in red, yellow, and green terrazzo with Cardiff green marble accents. The lobby is also adorned with an ornamentally painted ceiling and original aluminum light fixtures.

Two sculptures grace the lobby at opposite ends:



On the south end is **“Law,”** an 8’ limestone statue depicting a young woman with a tablet by Los Angeles sculptor Archibald Garner (1904–1969), who designed, and with five other sculptors sculpted and cast, the monument in front of the Griffith Observatory. Inscribed on the tablet is a quotation from Abraham Lincoln: “No law is stronger than is the public sentiment where it is to be enforced.” A photo of Garner with the “Law” statue is mounted next to the statue.



On the north end is “**Young Lincoln**,” an 8’ statue of the young Abraham Lincoln by sculptor James Lee Hansen (1917–), who used himself as a model for the barefoot and shirtless Lincoln. Alongside the limestone statue, which was exhibited at the 1939 World’s Fair, is a photo of Hansen next to his creation.

Next to the “Young Lincoln” statue are two display cases containing six letters written by Lincoln at various stages of his life. The “**Lincoln Letters**”, which were reproduced from the Huntington Library’s vast collection, include an 1838 letter describing a young woman’s rebuff of his marriage proposal; an 1848 letter confirming a loan to his father; an 1854 letter describing a case he handled for the Illinois Central Railroad; an 1862 letter of recommendation; a comment on slavery written in 1864 for a charity auction; and an 1864 letter to General Ulysses S. Grant expressing Lincoln’s confidence.

Moving from the lobby at the southwest end through the corridor to the Clerk’s Office, you will find two exhibits by the Court Historical Project Committee:

“**Artistic Depictions of Spring Street Courtroom Proceedings**” is a series of courtroom sketches depicting proceedings involving musicians that took place in the courthouse. The musicians depicted include Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, the Beach Boys’ Mike Love, Dolly Parton, and Lionel Richie.

“**Office of the Clerk of Court: Past and Present**” is a series of canvas panels, each describing the history, duties, and background requirements of a different occupation within the Clerk’s Office. The display honors the contributions of deputy clerks to the administration of justice and their important roles in support of the federal court system.

Second Floor

At the head of the elevator bank and next to the Attorney Lounge entrance is a memorial display recognizing the personal and professional accomplishments of deceased district judges of the Central District of California.

The second floor houses eight original courtrooms. Designed according to four different plans, each are three stories in height and finished with walnut wainscoting and plaster ceilings bordered by various geometric designs such as stars, waves, and squares.

Courtroom 8 was the site of the 1946 landmark civil rights case *Mendez, et al. v. Westminster School District*, in which the court ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine in support of school segregation ran counter to the U.S. Constitution – a precursor to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court.



Third Floor

Across from the elevator bank, the anteroom to the jury assembly room features artwork done by students from a local elementary school as part of the Court’s “**Kids in Court**” educational outreach program.

In the corridor north of the jury assembly room is “**312 North Spring Street through the Decades**,” which documents in photos the history of the building from its design in the late 1930’s to events and landmark cases that took place during the late 1990’s. Over 80 cases and events are featured, with over 90 accompanying photographs and images. Each panel features a color palette and font type representative of its decade. ★



UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE
312 NORTH SPRING STREET
A SELF-GUIDED TOUR



BUILDING HOURS
7:00 AM – 5:00 PM, MONDAY – FRIDAY
EXCLUDING FEDERAL HOLIDAYS