

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Social Security Administration Building
other names / site number Wilbur J. Cohen Building

2. Location

street & number 330 Independence Avenue, SW not for publication
city or town Washington vicinity
state District of Columbia code DC county District of Columbia code 001 zip code 20201

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments).

Signature of certifying official _____ Date _____
State or Federal Agency or Tribal Government _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments).

Signature of commenting official/Title _____ Date _____
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the National Register
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Government	Sub:	Offices

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	Government	Sub:	Offices

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Modernistic: Stripped Classicism

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Limestone

roof Asphalt

walls Indiana Limestone

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of our history.
- B** Property associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Area of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Government: Social Security Administration
 Architecture: Charles Z. Klauder and the Office of the
 Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department

Period of Significance

1939-1940

Significant Dates

1939-1940

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Charles Z. Klauder
 Louis A. Simon, Supervising Architect of the Treasury Dept.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

Previous documentation on files (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

U.S. General Services Administration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

Summary:

The Social Security Administration Building is located at 330 Independence Avenue, SW on a site bounded by Independence Avenue to the north, C Street to the south, 3rd Street east and 4th Street to the west. Prominently located on Independence Avenue, the building is a monumental presence amongst significant public buildings on the National Mall. The building is part of the modern architectural movement of the first half of the 20th century, while harking back to 19th century revivalism in its organization and detailing. Charles Z. Klauder, consulting architect under the supervision of Louis A. Simon, then Supervising Architect of the Treasury, designed the building with block-like massing, planar wall surfaces and simple geometric forms that are reflective of classically influenced modern styles that dominated the design of public buildings during the 1930s and 40s.

Constructed in 1939-40, the Social Security Administration Building is primarily clad in Indiana limestone and rises five stories above grade with a sixth floor penthouse/recreational space. The building features centrally located entrance pavilions; four-story deeply recessed vertically ganged windows; large exterior light courts fronting Independence Avenue and C Streets; and monumental pilasters and a continuous cornice line representing Egyptian pylons. The interior of the building falls more clearly into Art Moderne stylistic characteristics through the use of sharp contrasts between materials, clean geometric forms and shiny and smooth textured materials. Original interior materials remain intact, including original murals and sculptures, in the main public spaces, which contribute to the building's overall architectural integrity. Today the building retains a high degree of integrity and continues to serve as a prominent federal presence along the National Mall.

Narrative Description:

The Social Security Administration Building's rectangular shape is defined by four interior light courts and four open exterior courts fronting Independence Avenue and C Street. From the second floor through the fifth, the central block of the building assumes a square shape that is divided by the four interior courts and is separated from the east and west wings by the four exterior open courts. A central spine runs from east to west, uniting the sections of the building, and rises to the sixth floor forming the penthouse.

Clad in Indiana limestone, the Independence Avenue (north) elevation is divided into five distinctive sections – the central block (containing the central pavilion and flanking bays), two open light courts and two end wings. The main entrance from Independence Avenue is located in a three bay central pavilion and is approached by a flight of eight Conway Pink granite steps. Three doorways provide access to the building and consist of a prominent three-story central doorway flanked by two one-story entrances. The central doorway is framed in polished Prairie Brown granite that is designed in an abstract Egyptian style with battered sides and a substantial cavetto cornice. The deeply set double leaved central doors are bronze and plate glass. Above the doors is a Carnelian granite relief sculpture by Emma Lou Davis, entitled "Unemployment Compensation."¹ Two side doorways, simpler in ornamentation, are also

¹ Short & Ford Architects, *Historic Structure Report and Preservation Manual: Wilbur J. Cohen Building* (Washington, DC: U.S. General Services Administration, 1991) 82-83.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 2

deeply set plate glass and bronze double leaf doors, and are topped by plain rectangular dark granite panels. Behind the central frontispiece, a stepped limestone projection begins at a level between the third and fourth floors, above which the walls are sheer and unadorned. A vertical band of ganged windows extend above the two side doorways to the fifth floor where they terminate in oversized keystones. Above the keystones is a carved Greek fret.

To either side of the central pavilion are six bays of rectangular windows that define the first floor of the building, above which are vertical bands of ganged windows extending from the second to fifth floor. The windows are deeply recessed between stone piers and are topped by a splayed lintel and carved band of fretwork. The group is enclosed within a block of doubled, battered pilasters that carries a continuous cavetto cornice and gives the effect of Egyptian pylons. Flanking either side of the blocks are the two-bay light courts, open above the first floor. Attached piers with simple capitals frame their recessed facades, and a central pier divides the opening of each court into two bays, supporting the entablature above. Within the courts are five of the vertical bands of windows on each side, and two along the rear – all detailed in the same way as windows on the central block. Skylights with thick, heat absorbing glass are set into the court's floors. Shallow pilasters define the relatively narrow facades of the end wings of the building. Each end wing contains a vertical band of ganged windows, similar to those mentioned above, and is surrounded by battered pilasters and a cavetto cornice that continues from the central block.

The C Street (south) elevation is similar to the Independence Avenue in composition, but differs in materials and detailing. The ground floor and entrance frontispiece are sheathed in limestone and the remaining sections consist of buff-colored Norman brick. As on Independence Avenue, there is central entrance with three doorways, fronted by pink granite steps and platform. Because of the slightly sloping site, the entrance platform is only three steps above grade. The central doorway is similar to that on Independence Avenue, but composed of limestone rather than granite. Above the recessed central doorway is a granite panel with another of Emma Lou Davis's reliefs entitled, "The Family."² The two flanking doorways have plain granite panels above. There are two bands of 16-paned ganged windows over the central entrance and one band of twenty-two panes over each of the side doors.

The central block to either side of the entrance pavilion repeats the form of the Independence Avenue façade, with six bands of ganged windows grouped within battered, doubled pilasters supporting a cavetto cornice. The window heads lack detailing seen on the north elevation, but consist of brick soldier courses to give the effect of splayed jack arches. The composition of the light courts and two end wings are like that of the Independence Avenue elevation, but here executed in brick, with limestone pilaster capitals and cornices.

The 3rd Street (east) and 4th Street (west) elevations are identical, with variations only in detailing. The composition of the elevations is similar to C Street, with the walls completely sheathed in limestone. Each has a central entrance pavilion fronted by Conway Pink granite steps, with only a single central doorway. The over door panels on both elevations are carved by Henry Kries with the 4th Street panel representing "The Growth of Social Security," and the

² Short & Ford, 83.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 3

3rd Street panel portrayed "The Benefits of Social Security."³ The central doorways have the same Egyptian-style surrounds and are flanked on either side by 22-paned windows. Above the doorways are 16-paned ganged windows with large limestone keystones and a band of fretwork above. To either side of the central pavilion are six bands of ganged windows grouped within pilasters and cornice in an Egyptian pylon form.

Interior

The Social Security Administration Building is a large structure with a number of recurring interior features. The interior building configuration on the first floor is rectangular, filling the entire block. Above the ground floor, the building shape is altered because of four light courts located on the outer corners of the building. The light courts divide the building into a central main block and two long east and west wings that run along 3rd and 4th Street. A large portion of the interior has been completely modernized, including the basement, most office areas and the cafeteria. However, many of the most publicly visible interior spaces retain a high level of integrity, and contribute to the building's historical significance. These spaces include the first floor vestibules, lobbies, hearing room (auditorium) and primary corridors; the fifth floor Administrative Offices and Board Room; and the sixth floor recreation room.

The Independence Avenue Vestibule and Lobby originally served as one of two main public entrances, but now are restricted to visitors. Three exterior doors opened into a narrow vestibule situated on the east-west axis.⁴ A glazed screen consisting of two square piers clad in dark green Vermont Antique Verde marble piers and inset plate glass separate the Vestibule from the Lobby. In the center of each section of glazing is a double-leaved plate glass door with bronze rails and stiles. Floors and walls are consistent throughout the vestibule and lobby. The floors consist of patterned fields of pale gray-green terrazzo with dark green borders. Beige Granox golden veined Travernelle marble set in rectangles clad the walls, and are finished with a thin concave bronze crown molding. Lighting in the Lobby consists of bronze lamps suspended within three recessed circles and centered on the entrance doors. The walls on either side of the entrance doors contain murals by Seymour Fogel and are entitled "The Wealth of the Nation" on the east wall and "The Security of the Family" on the west. The murals were highly praised by fine arts experts at the time of its unveiling, and Shahn was praised as "a necessary link in the interpretation of social conditions to the public."⁵ Flush bronze doors at the east and west walls lead to the side corridors and are decorated with a pattern of three raised, double concentric circles, ranged vertically. At the south end of the lobby another pair of marble piers flank the entrance to the north-south corridor.

The C Street Vestibule and Lobby are identical to the Independence Avenue entrance in configuration and materials, but lack murals. All visitors to the building use the C Street entrance, in which only the central doors are used. There

³Short & Ford, 84.

⁴ Push bars and automatic door operatives have been added to all of the exterior doors.

⁵ Ada Rainey, "Social Security Building Mural Praised by Fine Arts Experts," *Washington Post* 19 Jul 1942: L5.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 4

is a flush bronze door at the north end of the west wall, but none on the east wall. Lighting and detailing of the space is similar to the north Lobby and Vestibule.

The 3rd and 4th Street Vestibule and Lobbies are the same in general plan and finish, and are secondary to the main entrances at Independence Avenue and C Street. Because the approaches from the side streets are through single doorways, the vestibules are narrower than their corresponding lobbies. The vestibule floors are terrazzo with green borders and gray-green rectangular patterned fields. A glazed screen, similar to the C Street and Independence Avenue entrances, separates the Vestibule and Lobby. The travertine Vestibule flooring continues into the Lobby where the walls are clad in Beige Tavernelle marble. The north and south walls contain flush bronze doors ornamented with raised concentric circles. The ceilings are coved and covered with aluminum leaf over hard plaster, a detail evoking the building's Art Deco interior.

Circulation throughout the building consists of a series of main and secondary corridors. The central corridor is the main corridor and runs east to west along the central spine of the building. Parallel to the central corridor is the Independence Avenue and C Street Corridors, which run along their respective sides only in the central block of the building. Intersecting the central corridor are corridors A, B, C, D and E. Corridors A and E run north and south along the end wings and corridors B and D intersect with the Independence Avenue and C Street corridors, forming a square. The central north/south corridor C bisects the center corridor and is of primary significance on the first floor, as it connects the Independence Avenue and C Street lobbies. All of the corridors are similarly finished on the first floor with pale grey-green terrazzo floors with dark green borders, and walls clad in Antique Verde marble. Additional original features in the corridors include polished architectural bronze elevator doors, Greek Key motifs running in equally spaced horizontal bands, and original telephone booths at the end of each corridor before entering the lobbies. The escalators, which are located at the central crossing of the corridors, are some of the most impressive features of the building's interior. Housed in Antique Verde marble with plaster ceilings and narrow bronze crown moldings, the escalator's dramatic, broad Art Moderne yellow bronze rails terminate in sweeping streamlined curves. The tops of the rails are treated as bands divided by incised lines and the side panels are ornamented with recesses. The escalators extend from the first floor down to the basement and up two flights to the third floor. At the first and third floor levels, the escalator spaces open into the north-south corridor, and at the basement and second floor open into the main east-west corridor. The escalators are virtually unchanged, and contribute greatly to the historic character of the building.

The Hearing Room lobby corridor (corridor C north) consists of a widened section of the main corridor with three alcoves opposite the auditorium. Similarly to the other corridors, C north has green-grey terrazzo flooring with dark green borders and Granox Golden Veined Travertine walls. Three rectangular niches along the east wall of the corridor contain inset plate glass display cases framed in bronze. Located in the niches along the east corridor wall are three murals by Ben Shahn depicting "Unemployment," "Child Labor," and "Dependency."⁶ On the opposite (west) wall of the corridor is another Ben Shahn mural, entitled "The Accomplishments of Social Security," which consists

⁶ Short & Ford, 268-71.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 5

of seven different panels interrupted by the three flush double doors leading to the Hearing Room. The themes of the seven panels are "Recreation," "Work," "Public Works," "The Family," "Housing," "Social Security," and "The Harvest."⁷

The auditorium (now referred to as the Hearing Room) occupies most of the northwest quadrant of the first floor main block. Three double doors lead to the space, and curved part walls create a separation between a vestibule and the hearing room. The hearing room rises to the second floor level and originally contained a segmentally arched ceiling.⁸ The original floor was parquet, composed of quartered oak strips laid in a herringbone pattern and the walls were covered in a bleached walnut veneer.⁹ The hearing room contains original seats arranged in two rows, forming a center aisle and two side aisles leading to the west end that contained a stage area.¹⁰ The room narrowed toward the west end, with the apron of the stage projecting into the space and approached by a flight of oak stairs. The stage is finished bleached walnut paneling. At the rear of the stage is a projection screen and mounted in front is a tripartite mural by Philip Guston. The theme of the mural is "Reconstruction and the Well-Being of the Family." The right panel exhibits two construction workers, while the left panel depicts the methods of building check dams against gully erosion. In the center a family shares an outdoor meal, surrounded by an abundance of nature and pleasant landscape.¹¹ Behind the stage is a dressing room area, which is approached through doors at the ends of the side aisles.

Also adjacent to the Hearing Room lobby corridor is the former record keeping room in the northeast quadrant of the main block. Record keeping for the new Social Security Administration was a massive undertaking and required hundreds of clerks to keep records of the benefits that were given out to many Americans. The planners of the new Social Security building believed that watching the clerks at work would interest important visitors in Washington, D.C., as well as for security reasons, and decided to build an observation platform on the west end of the record keeping room. The platform is a long, rectangular space with three viewing alcoves, and is accessed by two sets of stairs on the north and south end of the tripartite murals in the Hearing Room corridor. The floor of the platform is grey-green terrazzo with a black terrazzo border. The Antique Verde walls carry over from the corridor steps to the first observation window recess. The window recesses are composed of bronze framed plate glass, but have now been covered from the workspace side. The space is now used for storage, as the workroom below has been converted to offices.¹²

⁷ Short & Ford, 224-25, 268-75.

⁸ White folded acoustical tile and recessed lights and grilles now cover the original plaster ceiling.

⁹ The floor and stage area is now covered with a carpet, covering the original parquet flooring. A vinyl covered gypsum board wall on metal studs now covers many of the original surfaces in the hearing room. However, the original walls and bases flanking the stage are exposed.

¹⁰ The seats have been refinished and reupholstered.

¹¹ Short & Ford, 94.

¹² Ibid, 230-31.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 6

The remaining first floor quadrants contain office spaces and the former private dining room. While most government buildings of the period contained private dining rooms for senior management, they were typically located on the upper floors devoted to the executive offices. The building's private dining room was located on the first floor in the southeast quadrant, where it was serviced from the basement kitchen that also served the cafeteria on the east side of the corridor leading from the C Street Lobby.¹³ The private dining room no longer serves its original function and has subsequently been divided into three separate spaces and now contains a small dry cleaner and a post office. Most of the original fabric is no longer extant or concealed under numerous renovation treatments.

Most of the offices on the second, third, fourth and fifth floors have been renovated and contain no remaining original features of significance. The basic plan is a modern, open office space with original walls at the perimeter and some added metal stud partitions. The original plaster ceilings are hidden above suspended acoustical tile ceiling with recessed fluorescent light fixtures. Many of the secondary corridors on these floors are incorporated into the suite office plans.

The fifth floor executive suite extends along the north Independence Avenue façade. The reception area for the Social Security Administration Board is centrally located and flanked on either side by offices for the board members and their administrative staff. The reception area is entered through an oval vestibule on axis with the north-south center corridor. The walls are elaborately adorned with decorative trim and slender reeded pilasters on the curved corners and are capped with a frieze and cove. The doors leading to the vestibule are ornamented with three faceted octagonal panels, stacked vertically, with a louvered panel above. The door openings are trimmed with a four inch band of diagonal reeding and the jambs have four raised rectangular panels arranged vertically and two across the head of the opening. A Reception Room is located between the vestibule and board room, and is a rectangular space and is finished similarly to the vestibule. The Board Room is also a rectangular space, entered through the Reception Room with similar doors as the vestibule. The door opening is decorated with a Greek fret and an outer molding in the form of a stylized pediment. Flush birch doors with simple wood molding along the same wall lead to the private corridor of the board suite. Centered in each end wall of the Board Room is a door with octagonal panels surrounded by a fret pattern band and wood molding. On the north wall, there is a mural that depicts a snowy mountain landscape with farmers driving wagons loaded with hay.¹⁴ Offices for the Social Security Board members and chairman are located along the private corridor. These rooms have retained their original configuration, and for the most part, their original materials.¹⁵

The Administrator's suite, located on the south end of the central north-south corridor, was designed after the building's construction was well underway. The suite was originally intended to be more elaborate than the Board

¹³ Short and Ford, *Building Preservation Plan*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁵ The vestibule and board room have been carpeted and the reception room contains vinyl tile, which covered the original cork flooring.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 7 Page 7

Room suite, but was configured similarly with a vestibule and reception room leading to executive offices and private support staff offices. Doors leading to the vestibule and reception room featured pyramidal, square panels. A short corridor linked the vestibule and reception room with walls paneled in raised, square panels. The reception room contained curved niches on either side of the entrance from the corridor, and held simplified Tuscan columns. Another pair of columns flanked the Administrator's office entrance, which contained double doors. Like the board suite, private offices were located along a corridor that was accessed on the east and west sides of the reception room. All of the spaces in the Administrator's suite have been modified in plan except for the vestibule. Gypsum board partitions have been added in the Reception room, but original sections of the raised panels are still in tact. Original lighting is no longer extant, and the columns have been enclosed within the added partitions.¹⁶

As mentioned earlier, the sixth floor includes a mechanical penthouse, existing only over the central east-west core and the C Street section of the main block. The recreation room, a long rectangular space with a lunch counter, is located in the center of the north side of the penthouse. The room is reached by a staircase from the fifth floor and opens onto a roof promenade on the north side. Finishes in the space are strictly functional with the flooring a grey-green terrazzo with a dark grey border that turns up to form a baseboard. The walls are made of Keenes cement, an extra-hard plaster. The recreation room is currently not in use.¹⁷

Despite interior alterations to accommodate changing governmental agencies, the building retains its historic character and significance. Through its location, materials and monumental massing, the Social Security Administration Building remains a prominent federal presence along the National Mall.

¹⁶ Short & Ford, 331-34.

¹⁷ Short & Ford, 372-73.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 8 Page 1

Summary Statement of Significance:

The Social Security Administration Building was constructed as part of a major building campaign to accommodate growing numbers of federal employees in the District of Columbia during the 1930s. The building is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for Criterion A on a national level for its association with the Social Security Administration and 1930s coordinated efforts to effectively plan and construct government buildings in the District of Columbia. The building is also eligible under Criterion C as an example of Stripped Classical architecture that embodies distinctive characteristics of federal architecture during the first half of the 20th century. The building also represents the last work of prominent Philadelphian architect, Charles Z. Klauder.

Resource History and Historic Context:

In response to the federal government's expanding workforce, Congress passed the Public Buildings Act of 1926. The Act established the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (NCPPC) to implement and carry fourth the proposals of the 1901 McMillan Plan for the District of Columbia, which prompted development of public areas flanking the National Mall. The first of the projects, carried out under the Hoover Administration, was the Federal Triangle development in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Following the completion of the Federal Triangle buildings, the city's attention turned to other areas of the city – the Northwest Rectangle, where the new Department of Interior and the War Department buildings are located, and the southwest quadrant of Washington, D.C., where the Social Security Administration Building is located.

During the early years of the Roosevelt Administration very few construction projects were started or completed, with the exception of the Federal Triangle (1926-1935) and the new Department of the Interior Building (1936). However, in 1937 Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated five and ten year plans for new government buildings to house new workers serving under New Deal programs and the expanding services of existing agencies.¹⁸ The Social Security building was only one of a few buildings that were constructed under this program before World War II intervened – the others being the Railroad Retirement Board Building (1939-40), the Department of Interior Building (1936), and War Department Building (1941).

The Social Security Administration, original occupants of the building, was the first wave in government pension plans that provided family assistance and old-age benefits. Before the Great Depression, the United States showed very little interest in government-funded retirement assistance and generally relied on personal savings and family for old-age care. The Railroad Retirement Board, established in 1934, was an example of retirement plans that predated the Social Security Administration. In providing old-age assistance to retired railroad workers, the Railroad Retirement Board was thought to be a predecessor to the Social Security Act of 1935.¹⁹ After the depression, a

¹⁸ "Planning Federal Building." *Washington Post* 10 Feb 1937, 8.

¹⁹ Short and Ford, 3.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

realization that personal savings, in many cases, were inadequate for retirement prompted the creation of pension plan programs in the 1930s.²⁰ The Social Security Act was signed into law in August 1935 and established the Social Security Board (SSB). The SSB consisted of three presidentially appointed members to provide public information on social security benefits as well as establish field offices and train new employees. The task faced by the SSB and new field employees was to register employers and workers before the January 1, 1937 deadline when workers would begin accruing credits for social security retirement benefits.²¹

Following the Social Security Act, proposals to house the new agency in Washington, D.C. began almost immediately. In early 1938, the Railroad Retirement Board requested that its needs be included in planning for the Social Security Administration building, shortly thereafter the Public Health Service also requested space.²² With the growing number of workers needed to run the Social Security Administration, along with requests for a new building to house the Railroad Retirement Board and Public Health Service, the government was prompted to construct two new buildings to accommodate the agencies' functions.

Design and Construction (1935-1940)

Design and construction of the Social Security Administration Building resulted from extensive petitioning and collaboration of the Railroad Retirement Board and the Social Security Administration. As early as November of 1935, plans and sites for the new building were being considered with a recommended location in the Southwest Rectangle of the District of Columbia – an area of the city that had been targeted for future development by the NCPPC. In the fall of 1936 Admiral C.J. Peoples, Director of Procurement of the Treasury Department instituted a study for a new building and asked the chairman of the Social Security Board to determine the agency's office space requirements. Later that year, the NCPPC suggested the building be limited in size to accommodate the agency's current operations only, and house administrative offices in less expensive space. Government officials at the time assumed that the Social Security Administration would quickly be a regionalized program, and the central headquarters would eventually become obsolete.²³

While plans for the new building developed, the Social Security Administration was forced to separate their functions into six different privately owned office buildings in D.C. and Baltimore, as well as other federally owned spaces throughout the city. The Social Security Administration's Chairman, A.J. Altmeyer, stressed in a letter to Peoples that

²⁰ United States. Social Security Administration. *Social Security Programs in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: SSA, 1997) <http://www.ssa.gov/history/pdf/histdev.pdf>, 2-3.

²¹ DeWitt, Larry. *A Brief History of Social Security*. (Washington, D.C.: SSA, 2003) <<http://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html>>, 22-23.

²² Short and Ford, 3-4.

²³ Ibid, 11-12.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

the separation of workers was seriously impeding the progress of the organization, and that a new building was necessary for the success of the agency.²⁴ As the new Social Security Administration building plans came closer to reality, other agencies began requesting space in the proposed structure. Both the Public Health Service and Railroad Retirement Board were searching for more adequate facilities to accommodate the growing number of workers.²⁵

In 1938, the Railroad Retirement Board initiated proposals to secure the construction of a facility that would serve as headquarters for its operations and records. Proposals for the building stipulated that it was to be constructed with private funds and leased annually to the federal government. At the time, all of the prospective sites for the Railroad Retirement Board building were in the northwest quadrant of the city. When asked to comment in October 1937 on how the proposed sites for new buildings would affect planning for future federal properties in the city, the NCPPC advised against any further development in Northwest Washington, D.C. The NCPPC stated that locating any new federal buildings in areas of the city already experiencing traffic congestion would be a mistake and would worsen already overcrowded conditions.²⁶ As a result, the NCPPC proposed that the Railroad Retirement Board consider sites on East Capitol Street, a site bordering Union Station Plaza, or a site in Southwest D.C. – all were areas outside of the congested central business district.

By March 1938, the Social Security Administration and Railroad Retirement Board were officially acting in conjunction to appropriate funds and land for buildings that would house the functions of both agencies. The site Southwest Washington, D.C. was deemed most appropriate because the area was removed from the most congested areas of the city and worker housing was far lower than in the more expensive Northwest quadrant.²⁷

Charles Z. Klauder was hired as consulting architect, and all designs were overseen Louis A. Simon, Supervising Architect of the Treasury. Designs for the Social Security Building were of particular interest because of its prominent location adjacent to the National Mall. The design was to remain in concert with the monumental stature of public buildings on the north side of the mall, and a series of debates regarding the building's appearance ensued. Klauder's original "fishboned" design, which consisted of a series of open courts on the north and south elevations, was deemed inappropriate for the building's monumental location. Klauder modified the fishbone design to include four closed courts with piers acting as screens to the open courts on the ends. Klauder's final submissions indicated a monumental structure with a low base and a massing of central projections to give the appearance of Egyptian pylons.²⁸

²⁴ Short and Ford, 12-13.

²⁵ Ibid, 20-21.

²⁶ Ibid, 18-19.

²⁷ Ibid, 22-23.

²⁸ Ibid, 27-30

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 8 Page 4

The building was officially renamed for Wilbur Joseph Cohen (1913-1987) in 1988. Cohen was a government official and public affairs educator who began his long career as a government worker in 1934 and retired in 1969. Aside from brief periods spent in academia, Cohen worked continuously for the government and was the author of several books on Social Security, social policy and the New Deal.²⁹

Architectural Significance:

Stylistically, the Social Security Administration Building is part of the modern architectural movement of the first half of the twentieth century, while harking back to revivalism of the nineteenth century. The building is an example of Stripped Classicism, which is alternately referred to as Art Moderne, or PWA Moderne. Influenced greatly by industrial design, the style is characterized by block-like massing, simple geometric forms, planar wall surfaces, sharp setbacks and stylized detailing. In its government manifestation, symmetry was frequently stressed and classical detailing was often employed. The arrangement of the building's façade is symmetrical and the building is defined by its bold and simple massing. As in the War Department Building, the façade is articulated in a classical manner. The appearance of pilasters is implied by the deeply recessed, ganged vertical windows that repeat across each of the building's elevations. The overt reference to Egyptian architecture on the exterior of the building was somewhat an anomaly in the stripped classical style. The building's interior is clearly more Art Moderne with the use of sleek geometric forms, and sharp contrasts in color and smooth, shiny surfaces. This is especially evident when crossing the main corridors at the first floor level, where the sweeping escalator curves descend into a room composed by part walls and square piers. The yellow and white bronze of the escalators contrasts with the equally shiny dark green walls of the corridor.

The Social Security Administration Building is the last example of prominent Philadelphia-based architect, Charles Z. Klauder. Klauder made his name mainly in building educational buildings, particularly in the Gothic Revival style. One of his best known works is the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh (1928), which consisted of an Art Deco skyscraper in Gothic clothing. His other prominent works included campus buildings at Princeton and Yale.³⁰ While much of Klauder's work appear to be derived in more historical styles, he frequently integrated modernistic design into his work. The Social Security Administration Building appears to be somewhat of an anomaly when compared to buildings constructed by the federal government during this time period. However, the building really embodies Klauder's honed skill of integrating historical references into modern building design.

²⁹ Short & Ford, 58.

³⁰ Ibid, 62.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 10 Page 1

Verbal Boundary Description:

The U.S. Public Health Service Building and its grounds at 330 Independence Avenue, SW occupy the block bounded by Independence Avenue, C Street, 4th Street and 3rd Street, SW in Washington, D.C., on Square 534.

Boundary Justification:

All property lines are as they existed at the time of the building's construction. The nomination includes all property historically associated with the building.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Social Security Administration Building

Name of Property

District of Columbia

County and State

Section 10 Page 2

Photographs: