

**The Olympia Armory
515 Eastside Street SE**

Nominating Statement of Significance

Amended to include Heritage Review Committee recommendation for future preservation treatment.

Significance of Property

The Olympia Armory is eligible for the Olympia Heritage Register for its association with important events that have contributed significantly to the broad patterns of Olympia and national history.

The Olympia Armory, built in 1939, is part of a long history of Army National Guard and Militia presence in Olympia from the earliest days of Washington Territory. The role of the Coast Artillery units which first headquartered and trained at the building is part of the history of Washington state coastal defense in the era of the coastal gun emplacements of the early 20th century. These same units, activated from the Armory during World War II, were part of overall U.S. coastal defense as well as other wartime operations during the period. Washington State Guard Units were active at the Armory as was a unit of the Aircraft Warning Service during World War II.

Through a series of reorganizations to meet continuing military and state emergency needs leading to its present classification as part of the 81st Infantry Stryker Brigade headquartered at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the National Guard units stationed at the Olympia Armory have maintained their tradition as an artillery force to the present era.

The Armory units have been activated by Washington Governors for service to the state in natural disasters as well as security missions and federally for service including in the Korean Conflict and Middle East deployments in the early 2000s.

With its commodious drill floor and open plan, the Armory has been central to Olympia's community history as a well-used venue and gathering place and is especially significant as the location of Washington State Inaugural Balls in the 1960s.

The Olympia Armory is also significant because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Art Moderne style of the Public Works Administration period, designed by architect Joseph Wohleb in association with Roland Borhek, both National Register-recognized architects.

Designed by Olympia's premier architect, Joseph Wohleb, with noted Tacoma architect Roland Borhek, who is listed as an associate on the project, the Olympia Armory is an excellent example of the PWA Moderne style. It is the most ornate of the PWA Moderne armories built in Washington during the late 1930s. The building is reflective of Wohleb's mastery of the Moderne genre as evidenced in his other commissions locally and around the state, some of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The distinctive Art Moderne eagle sculpture surmounting the front façade of the building is the work of renowned sculptor John Elliot whose work is recognized as a significant element in several National Register buildings including the Old Federal Courthouse, Northern Life Building and Washington Athletic Club in Seattle, and is also found on Sundial at the State Capitol Campus associated with the National Register State Library Building.

As was stated when it was designed, the Armory is a building "fitting for a capitol city" and stands on the exterior much as it was when it was built in 1938-1939, a legacy of the Public Works Administration era and notable statewide for its continuous military and community service and

architectural integrity. The building stands as only one of two PWA Moderne armories still in military use in Washington.

Historical Importance

The Washington Army National Guard has its origins in the Territorial Militia of the 1850s, which was headquartered in Olympia during the Puget Sound Indian War of 1855-56.

Other volunteer militias including the “Puget Sound Rifles,” the “Olympia Light Brigade” and “Capitol Guards,” operated in Olympia from the 1860s to the 1880s. The Capitol Guards was one of the first companies that eventually became the Washington National Guard. The leader of the group, R. G. O’Brien, is known as the “Father of the Washington National Guard.”

After 1903 state militias became part of a federal reserve system. In World War I, a volunteer home guard was organized in Olympia, prior to the official National Guard in the city.

Part of the federal strategy in the 1880s was to create a coast defense which resulted in the construction of fixed artillery emplacements in Washington at locations such as at the entrance to the Straits of Juan DeFuca and the Columbia River. Local National Guard units were formed to work with regular Army to man these guns. In 1921 a new Coast Artillery Unit was organized in Olympia, first drilling at what was then the new American Legion Building. The unit also was called for domestic service by Washington’s Governors. Created as the 248th Coast Artillery, the unit was the first to occupy the new Armory in 1939 and its insignia is over the side doors on the front of the building.

The Olympia Armory was part of an effort of Washington State in partnership with the federal government through the Public Works Administration to build several new armories around the state. The location of the Armory was previously the site of the 1890s era Washington School that was replaced when the current “Old Washington” was built across the street in the 1920s. So it is a doubly important historical location in Olympia. Fittingly, it is bounded on the south side by “Legion Way” (named in 1927), an avenue of sweet gum and oak trees dedicated to the war dead of the Civil War, Spanish-American War, and World War I.

Olympia’s Armory was one of several built in what is described as the “PWA Moderne” style—which melded the then popular Art Moderne Style into the PWA construction. Joseph Wohleb with Roland Borhek, a Tacoma architect, designed the all-concrete Armory to serve as a base and training site for the Coast Artillery units which had been established in Olympia in the 1920s. The Armory is a stylish, landmark building replete with glass block and fluted concrete detailing surmounted by a stylized eagle done by noted sculptor John Elliot, who also designed the sundial on the Capitol Campus as well as ornamentation on other Seattle landmark buildings.

The Art Deco-inspired entry with “Armory” lettering and castle-like doors lead to the monumental drill hall on the interior which retains its original wood block flooring. Around the periphery were offices, lounges, kitchen, locker rooms and training spaces while the basement offered ground level access for motorized vehicles as well as a shooting range. These spaces have generally been upgraded and some re-configured over the life of the building. The exterior has plaster insignias over the side doors for the 248th Coast Artillery. The Armory opened in May 1939 with civic ceremonies and the units at the Armory were re-designated as units of the 205th Coast Artillery in late 1939.

Olympia Guard units were inducted into federal service in February 1941 for training at Fort Lewis and in Olympia before being deployed for coastal defense in California and later for European war duty. Volunteer State Guard units operated at the Armory during the war for civil defense and a unit of the Aircraft Warning Service staffed by mostly women volunteers operated a “filter board” for tracking possible enemy aircraft was at the Armory from the early 1940s.

After World War II, military strategies moved away from fixed coast defense and the Guard was re-organized at Olympia in 1947 for anti-aircraft duty. A unit from Olympia was mobilized during the Korean conflict but did not see foreign action. Through the 1950s and 1960s the units at the Armory were variously part of infantry and armored units affiliated with the regular Army at Fort Lewis. The “long barn” or shed was built on the west side of the building in the late 1950s.

Guardsmen (no women were in the Guard until 1971) trained one weekend a month as well as two weeks in the summer—a regimen which continues. Field training was at Fort Lewis (now Joint Base Lewis-McChord or JBLM) and at the Yakima Firing Range. The Armory Building is used for drill, training, storage of gear and administration. The mission of the Guard units changes with the needs and strategies of the military nationally. The U.S. Army determines what Guard units are assigned to each state and the Washington Military Department assigns units to various armories around the state

Now the Headquarters and Headquarters Battery of the 2nd FAR (Field Artillery Regiment) of the 81st Stryker Brigade at JBLM, the units from the Armory were called to federal duty in in the Mideast in 2003 and 2008 and have served the state in operations including the Mt. St. Helens eruption, fires, floods and most recently in 2020 for the Governor’s mobilization related to COVID-19.

The Armory has always been a community gathering place as well and in many ways has been at the heart of Olympia activities--for recreational basketball, volleyball and ballroom dancing as well as being leased on weekends for swap meets antique shows and sales. Patrons of South Sound Cultural Activities (POSSCA) staged benefits at the Armory. Among the recurring Armory events have been the Olympia Ski Club Ski Swap, Artists’ Garage Sale and Capital Antique Show. Boxing matches, cat shows, Toys for Tots, boat shows, high school graduations, bird shows, wrestling and rock concerts have all found a home at the Armory. The Armory played host to St. Martin’s College (now University) intercollegiate basketball games in the 1940s and 1950s.

The Armory has also been a site for job fairs for homeless vets and community members as well as Guard events such as welcoming home troops from active duty. The Armory then has been more than a military installation but an integral part of Olympia’s history.

The Olympia Armory along with the Centralia Armory are the last of the PWA Moderne Armories still in use by the military in the state. (As of August, 2020, the Military Department has given notice that the Olympia Armory will be sold). The Armories from the same era in Seattle and Pullman have been sold or repurposed.

The Olympia Armory is an excellent example of the PWA Moderne style which has a little altered exterior and maintains its historic drill hall and other appointments on the interior. Exemplifying over eighty years of Olympia’s cultural, social, military and architectural history, the building is emblematic of the eras of National Guard history and service statewide as well as the legacy of the Public Works Administration era of the 1930s in Washington State.

Architectural Importance

Facing east, the Armory is located on a full block of almost two acres on the east side of Olympia on Eastside Street between 5th Avenue and Legion Way on a slight rise tapering to street level on the west side. Fronted by a circular driveway and a tall flagpole, the imposing PWA Art Moderne-style concrete structure is two stories tall with a full basement that opens to the rear of the building at ground level. Constructed of concrete, the building has a central vaulted roof surrounded by flat-roofed extensions with a front parapet.

The smooth concrete exterior walls form a plinth at their base, above which they are punctuated by recessed vertical bands of fluted concrete containing two rows of five windows each, which are original narrow steel casements. The alternating smooth and fluted concrete bands form a slightly crenelated parapet at the top of all of the walls of the building. The parapet is stone but now capped with metal.

Centered on the symmetrical front (east) facade and approached by handicap ramps (not original), the triple doors of the main entrance are recessed within a wide segmental arch topped by a row of small, recessed, sculpted shields and Moderne-style letters spelling "Armory." On the north side of the recessed entry is a bronze plaque reading: "Clarence D. Martin, Governor; Maurice Thompson, The Adjutant General; Edward C. Dohm Station Commander; Jos. H. Wohleb Roland E. Borhek, Associated Architects."

The castle-like, wooden front entry doors, which are original, have recessed panels, with newer hardware. Original light fixtures have been replaced on the sides of the entry.

Flanking the archway are tall, fluted, square pilasters which rise to the roofline, ornamented by small vertical bands of glass block at their bases. Above the entry at the apex of the front parapet is a large Moderne, streamlined eagle, sculpted in relief with incised lines radiating from the plaster eagle. The area above the entry has alternating fluted (three) and plain vertical elements. Three metal vertical windows are above the entry in the fluted elements.

The vault of the front façade is recessed behind the front parapet and has five pilasters which follow the arc of the vault and extend over the top of the vault.

The projecting entry towers on the north and south front facades are slightly lower than the main façade and have incised lines decorations. There are low steps which lead to a single door entry of the same design as the front doors on either side of the front. The doors are surmounted by colored plaster insignias of the 248th Coast Artillery, the original unit in the building. A single metal casement window is over the insignia.

Adjacent to each of the stairwells is a lower square element which has incised and sculptural block elements with the front plinth continuing to this area. There are vertical bands of glass block—two on the front and one on the side of these elements.

At the four corners of the vaulted roofline are large square columns with a fluted design and corner pilasters.

The front south side of the building rises to the height of the front facade and continues the same design as the front façade with fluted elements broken by vertical metal windows, separated by projecting smooth pilasters. There are two rows of nine windows, with three in each section between the pilasters.

The rear of the south side steps down to one story again with the plain and fluted pilasters. This section has a single band of six metal windows, separated in groups of three between three projecting pilasters.

Flanking this lower element is another stepped down, corner section with a flat roof and angled sides. It extends around the side to the rear of the building. Inset in this element is a vertical band of glass block on the south side, one in the corner and three in the rear. On the back side is a door entry with a flat concrete canopy.

The main section of the rear of the building follows the arch of the vaulted roof and has five projecting pilasters which extend over the roofline. The top part of the vault wall has a square incised design with two vents. The section below this top incised element was originally glass block which has been infilled. There remain eight small, multi-pane windows along the bottom of the first floor. The basement opens to the rear lot with a garage door bay in the center of the rear. The corners of the building have projecting pilasters with the fluted design.

The north façade has the vault roofline ornamented by the fluted and plain pilasters and on the rear a one story section mirrors the south side with fluted and plain elements and a single row of six metal windows between the pilasters. There is a small rear entry door at the northwest corner with a flat concrete canopy.

Rising on this side in the center of the one story section is a tall square chimney with smaller side projecting elements. The front of the north side mirrors the south side with similar fenestration and design. A signature of the pilasters on the north and south sides are flat projecting elements topped by a fluted design.

On the west side of the property is a large 50 x 128 feet storage shed built in the late 1950s which has garage bays on the north and south ends and small multi-pane windows set high in the building. There is also a small flammable materials storage shed. The rest of the rear of the building is a gravel parking lot—this area is surrounded by a security fence.

Interior:

The outstanding element of the interior is the original drill floor made of square wood block. The drill floor has offices on the front and sides reached by interior corridors and doors from the drill floor. The front of the building now has enclosed office spaces. There are balconies overlooking drill floor on the east side. A kitchen and dining area are on the north side of the building. There are offices on both floors of the building. The basement has locker rooms and shower facilities as well as large supporting columns in an open area which is accessed by a rear garage bay. The building also retains an original caretaker's apartment accessed from the basement as well as a maintenance area. The original basement shooting range has been removed.

Material and Design Integrity

The Olympia Armory has good integrity and looks much like it did upon its completion in 1939. The major change to the exterior is the removal of the glass block on the west wall of the drill floor which was done in 1964 so is more than 50 years old. Although glass block is a signature element of the PWA Moderne style, the building has several other areas of glass block trim and embellishment. The front entry was altered with an ADA ramp in the late 1990s and there are newer lights mounted on the front exterior. The fenestration arrangement and window material are original. The original front entry doors and side doors are intact as is the signature eagle sculpture over the entry. A metal cap has been placed over the original stone parapet but the original material remains under the metal.

The major interior space which is most historically significant, the drill floor, including the original wood block, remains intact. Spaces on the interior have been altered but uses such as kitchen and locker room remain, although updated.

Anyone who would have viewed the Armory 1939 would certainly recognize it in 2020.

Vehicle Storage Building:

The vehicle storage building, measuring 50 feet x 128 feet, to the west of the Armory was built in the late 1940s (likely 1949) of concrete and originally had a pre-cast concrete plank roof. According to Ron Cross of the State Military Department, there were three standard plans for vehicle storage buildings issued by the military and this is one of them. The building is divided into shop area and vehicle storage on the interior. The gable roofed building has two overhead vehicle bay doors (newer) on either end of the building which runs north and south. There are two louvered vents over the vehicle bays on each end. There is a man-door (likely a newer metal replacement) on the northeast and southeast sides of the building. There are a series of six-over-six windows, seven on each side of the building which are placed high in the sides of the building. There is a concrete block chimney on the northeast side of the building.

Future Preservation Treatment

The entire exterior of the Armory Building is character-defining and should be preserved or restored.

The interiors of the Armory Building include the following character defining features which should be preserved or restored:

- The Main Entry Vestibule including the spatial entry sequence, original tile floor, and wood door casings;
- The large volume of space that constitutes the Drill Room ;
- The Drill Room floor; and
- The distinctive structural columns of the ground floor.

The “Long Barn” or Vehicle Storage Building also on the property is historic and should be retained and rehabilitated, but is secondary to the Armory Building.