Downsizing the Public Realm
Building and Razing Winona’s Grand Post Office

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On an October evening in 1891, Postmaster Daniel Sinclair hosted the dedication of a new post office building in downtown Winona. As expected, the assembled members of the local elite gushed with enthusiasm for the massive Romanesque stone structure. After all, they had campaigned for more than five years to obtain a larger and grander building than the one Washington had originally offered. In his speech, the president of Winona’s Board of Trade urged Winonans to “point to this artistic and beautiful building with satisfaction and pride.”

For the next six decades this building played a key role in fulfilling the mission of the Department of the Post Office: to “bind the Nation together” by providing universal service to every household and every American. Like all post offices, Winona’s was also a “paradigmatic site of public life,” in the words of one historian, where citizens routinely rubbed shoulders not only with friends and coworkers but also with strangers from diverse backgrounds. The lobby was a busy social hub where Winonans bought stamps, deposited mail, checked their brass mail boxes, exchanged gossip, and launched business deals. The building also housed a federal courtroom, representing the federal presence in the city. Its impressive tower dominated the skyline and proclaimed that the community was part of something larger than itself: a nation that had survived the Civil War and was becoming a world power. During the New Deal, the federal presence in Winona grew when the Public Works Administration funded an addition to the post office.

Although Winona’s leading businessmen had taken great pride in the grandeur of their new post office in 1891, business leaders in the 1950s had very different attitudes about public buildings. A fairly mundane event brought their new viewpoints to the surface. In 1956 the federal government proposed a $100,000 upgrade to the historic post office building. Surprisingly, the Chamber of Commerce, successor to the Board of Trade, organized a powerful opposition, demanding not only the demolition of the post office but also the county courthouse, a building of similar vintage. In the interests of efficiency, the chamber wanted a single modern structure to house all federal and county offices. Most provocatively, it sought to take over a city park to house the new facilities. Too much land, chamber leaders argued, was tied up in public edifices and parks.

In 1891 Winona’s elite had desired large, expensive, and ornate public buildings meant to last for centuries. In 1956 leaders felt strongly that their commercial success depended on tearing down those Victorian structures and replacing them with smaller, significantly cheaper ones. By this time, the business class nationwide had concluded that economic growth required new buildings in an architecturally modernist style. But something more was at stake. Winona’s business leaders had also changed their attitude about the significance of public space.

Buildings ultimately represent the values of their creators. Public buildings, in particular, reflect the political, economic, and cultural priorities of the societies that construct them. The fate of structures that outlive their original owners indicates how attitudes toward the built environment have changed. Frequently, historic properties are torn down and replaced with little fuss, but not always. When the Chamber of Commerce unveiled its 1956 plan to demolish two of Winona’s prominent public buildings, a major controversy erupted.

Winona was born as a center for grain milling and shipping, but lumbering drove the city’s dynamic growth between 1870 and 1900. Four companies dominated the riverfront, and their combined output made Winona a major lumber producer in the Upper Midwest. As the city’s population grew, successful...
entrepreneurs constructed elaborate buildings for their businesses and grand homes for themselves, but they also developed the public components of the built environment, including a fire department, water and sewage systems, a city hall, county courthouse, parks, schools, library, and hospital.\(^3\)

Major investment in the public realm was common in the rapidly growing towns and cities of the midland prairie states in the 1880s. Settlers, whether established Americans moving west or European immigrants, wanted their new cities to equal if not surpass those of the East. They tended to share, as Judith Martin noted, “urban expectations.” For the commercially minded men who formed Winona’s elite, creating the public institutions they associated with great cities was very important. They preferred structures made of brick and stone even though lumber was plentiful and cheap.\(^4\)

In the 1880s Winona’s leaders devoted a great deal of time and political capital to the construction of two massive government buildings downtown. The first was the county courthouse, an imposing stone structure completed in 1889. The second was the U.S. Post Office and Federal Building, similar in appearance, which opened two years later. Charles G. Maybury, a prolific and talented local architect, was central to both projects; he was the designer of the first and building superintendent of the second.\(^5\)

When the Winona County commissioners asked Maybury to propose a design for the new courthouse in 1887, he responded with a plan that closely followed the lead of H. H. Richardson, whose unique American style, now referred to as Richardsonian Romanesque, dominated the look of courthouses, churches, commercial buildings, and mansions in the 1880s and 1890s. Maybury’s courthouse showcases the elements that make up this style, including rock-faced masonry, arches over windows and doors, elaborate carvings, asymmetrical towers (one square and one round), a hipped roof, and bands of windows separated by pilasters. This massive and elaborate building was just what Winona’s leaders wanted. They felt it proclaimed to the world that Winona was a growing city with a great future.\(^6\)

Maybury could build an impressive building because the county leaders were willing to pay for it. They wanted a courthouse at least the equal of those built by comparable midwestern cities, and they knew this required a substantial investment. County officials allocated $103,000 for construction, exclusive of land acquisition and architectural fees. Historical monetary values are difficult to translate into contemporary terms, but the cost of such a project today would range between $12.7 and $20.8 million.\(^7\)

At about the same time, Winona’s leaders also decided they needed a new post office. The town’s postal service began in 1852, and the post office occupied a number of temporary locations until 1872, when the government leased the first floor of a new three-story building at the corner of Third and Center for it. In 1885 Minnesota politicians in Congress succeeded in securing a $100,000 appropriation for a new federal building in Winona. At that time, the U.S. Department of Treasury owned only one other building in Minnesota, the Custom House in St. Paul, although appropriations had been approved for a Minneapolis post office, completed in 1889. Winona became the third Minnesota
city to have a freestanding post office, beating out Duluth (1894) and Mankato (1896). 

As soon as the money was appropriated, the Department of Treasury appointed a local commission to assist in selecting a site. There was a minor controversy in early 1886 when Treasury chose the northwest corner of Fourth and Main, a block or so from the site recommended by the commission, apparently as a result of some back-door influence. The disagreement was quickly forgotten; Winona’s leaders were much more interested in the size and quality of the building than its location. They actively lobbied for the grandest building possible, intervened to enlarge the footprint of the design, and carefully monitored construction details. They felt that it was crucial to anchor Winona’s downtown with grand, long-lasting public buildings.

Until World War II, the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Department of Treasury was responsible for designing federal buildings. Although supervising architects were political appointees who were replaced frequently, their staff architects generally produced sturdy and attractive buildings that were well accepted by local communities. Regardless of who was in charge, the more-than 50 draftsmen in the office typically reflected national trends, which at the time were transitioning from Gothic to Romanesque styles, especially as Richardson became more influential among architects. Post offices in the 1880s tended to be picturesque buildings of brick or stone that usually featured a prominent tower. Winona’s would be no exception.

After a two-year delay, Supervising Architect Will Freret sent preliminary plans for a 48-by-60-foot building to Winona. The press reported that local citizens found the plans to be “manifestly inadequate for the needs of Winona” and argued that the project be delayed while the city’s allies in Congress won an increase in the appropriation. Thomas Wilson, Minnesota’s First District representative, succeeded in gaining approval of an additional $50,000 at the very end of the 1889 congressional session.

In 1889 James H. Windrim became supervising architect, and in July he sent revised plans with an enlarged footprint to Winona’s postmaster. The Board of Trade organized a public review session, at which the general sense was that $150,000 should buy a more impressive building than the one proposed. The board’s president argued that the “new Winona county court house was a larger and better building than the one contemplated in the plan and its cost was only $103,000.” A powerhouse committee was created to pursue the matter, including Minnesota Supreme Court Justice William Mitchell, Postmaster William Whipple, newspaper editor Daniel Sinclair, lumber baron A. B. Youmans, and Jefferson Maybury, junior partner of Maybury and Son.

Winona’s leaders achieved their goals through the efforts of a group of lawyer-politicians who felt a strong allegiance to the city. Justice Mitchell and former Lt. Gov. William H. Yale looked out for Winona’s interests from home. Rep. Wilson shepherded the necessary funding bills through Congress. But the most important of Winona’s power lawyers was Secretary of the Treasury William Windom. After moving to Winona in 1855, he became Wilson’s law partner. In 1859 Windom was elected to Congress and then to the Senate. He was appointed secretary of the treasury by James Garfield but resigned when the president died in 1881. When Benjamin Harrison became president in March 1889, Windom was reappointed to the post, a position he held until his death in 1891. Fortunately for Winona, the supervising architect reported to the secretary of the treasury.

On August 2, 1889, Postmaster Whipple forwarded the committee’s demands to Washington. Very
quickly, Supervising Architect Windrim responded, “It is the wish of this office to give the city of Winona the best building within the appropriation.” When the final plans were received in February 1890, the footprint of the building had grown again. Although four years had passed since the initial appropriation with little result, progress on the building now accelerated. Within days, Charles Maybury was appointed superintendent of construction. Shortly thereafter, Chicago contractor Charles Gindele won the bid to build the post office. Ground was broken on April 25, 1890.

Maybury’s job as superintendent required constant contact with Washington. His correspondence with Windrim and Windom demonstrates the extent to which the local elite lobbied for upgrades to the building. Several prominent citizens apparently thought Windrim had selected an inferior variety of local stone for the exterior. Maybury asked Windom to intervene, “seeing as you are a citizen and directly interested.” Windrim changed the stone. Later, Maybury communicated concerns about fireproofing the upper floors, and Windrim agreed to the requests. The original plans called for “brick paving” around the building, but Maybury wrote that “brick sidewalks are in great disfavor in this city” and won an upgrade to limestone. Citizens demanded that the wood stairways be upgraded to iron, and this request, too, was honored. Then Maybury tried to have the building wired for electricity. Here Windrim drew the line. When the building opened, it was lit only by gas, although the fixtures could accommodate gas or electricity. To finance these improvements, Minnesota senators and congressmen engineered the passage of an additional $10,000 appropriation in early 1891.

On October 10, 1891, the city’s two major newspapers, the Daily Republican and the Daily Herald (Democratic), published special editions announcing the near completion of the new, three-story federal building. The structure was about 69 by 129 feet, with its longest façade and the primary entrance facing Main Street. The main tower—its primary purpose was to impress—soared 121 feet above the street. The walls of Whitewater stone had a “creamy, white color,” the Daily Republican reported. There were carved stone trimmings, including a
winged wheel over the entrance that “symbolized the present rapid flight of the United States mails across the country.” The sidewalks were of “heavy brush-hammered Gilmore Valley stone.”

Passing through the Main Street entrance, citizens entered an 80-foot-long lobby separated from the mail room by “handsome screen work,” mostly of oak and plate glass. There were about 400 letter boxes. At the north end of the lobby was the wrought-iron stairway to the second and third floors. The largest room on the second floor was the courtroom, which featured a 23-foot ceiling and oak-paneled wainscoting five feet high. There were also rooms for the judge, clerk, marshals, district attorney, witnesses, and the Internal Revenue Service. The observation deck in the tower was accessed from this floor. The third floor contained a jury room and space for railway mail clerks. The basement was for storage as well as the steam-heating boilers and their coal supply. The building had ample lavatories and its own sewer pipe which, because it pre-dated the municipal sewage system, delivered storm water and “closet drainage” more than 1,200 feet down Main Street into the river.

Both newspapers gushed with civic pride over the new building. To the Daily Republican, it was “an architectural poem in granite and stone” and “an ornament to the city.” The paper proclaimed it to be “one of the handsomest buildings at the cost ever erected by the United States government” and concluded, “This building is one which citizens will be proud to show to visitors.” Under the headline “A Magnificent Structure,” the Daily Herald noted that the building was “imposing in appearance and beautiful in architecture.” In its lead paragraph, the Democratic paper clearly articulated its civic value as a public space.

This magnificent structure becomes the common property of the people. Every citizen of this Republic . . . possesses a joint ownership in this indivisible property of the government of which he is a component part. Here the millionaire and the day laborer pass in and out of the same door, where each is entitled to the same privileges, the same consideration, the same courtesy, no more no less, from the accredited officials and their employees, of the United States government.

Press reports estimated that about 4,000 people attended the dedication on October 22, 1891. Board of Trade president William Yale noted, “There is no city in America or in any of the nations of the earth, but what the character of its buildings is, to a large extent, a sure index of the character of its people.” He thanked the politicians who had
secured the funding, especially the recently deceased William Windom, suggesting that “this marble palace is a testimonial of his love for the city of his adoption.”

Charles Maybury reported that the structure cost $145,000 to build, the site $15,000, and the furnishings $16,000. (The total expenditure—$160,000—is in the range of $19.7–$32.3 million today.) Cornelius F. Buck, a former legislator and postmaster, closed the ceremony by noting that the new federal building was “in keeping with our fine court house and commodious hostelry, in keeping with our temples of worship, in keeping with our superior educational institutions, and in keeping with our large and commodious business blocks and residences.” Together these structures “furnish us an absolute guarantee of Winona’s glorious future.”

The great change in twentieth-century business leaders’ attitudes first came into the open in September 1956, when Robert Selover, a realtor and president of Winona’s Chamber of Commerce, and Sylvester J. Kryzsko, a banker who chaired the chamber’s governmental affairs committee, called a lunch meeting at the Hotel Winona. It was here that chamber members attacked Washington’s planned $100,000 upgrade of the post office and proposed that a modern structure housing all federal and county functions be built on the downtown block that was then Central Park. Kryzsko argued that “the present courthouse and the post office could both be torn down to make way for stores and other commerce.” He favored Central Park as the site because Winona could not “afford the luxury of a park in the heart of the city when we are hemmed in the way we are.” The 26 leaders in attendance agreed, as did their guest, First District Congressman August Andresen.

Following the chamber’s initial meeting, the Winona County Historical Society’s board of directors, led by its president, Dr. Lewis I. Younger, a local physician (and Chamber of Commerce member), published an open letter in the Winona Daily News defending the post office, “an historic landmark beloved by our people.” Chamber leader Kryzsko responded with a letter of his own. The question, he wrote, was whether Winona should “work to achieve the clean fresh look of a modern city” or instead, “rest on past laurels with an array of old fashioned monuments?” He could not see “how this sentimental attitude of living in the past will help us in the more essential need of planning a civic program of forward progress for us and the generations to follow.” Kryzsko was sure that the majority would “vote for a clean fresh look for a fine old city.” After all, he concluded, “What woman today would come out wearing the fashions of yesterday? Would you like it if she did?”

Support for Kryzsko’s project was confirmed when the chamber held a second lunch meeting on February 14, 1957. An engineer from the General Services Administration (GSA), which after 1949 controlled federal buildings, told the crowd that there was no reason why the post office could not be effectively remodeled. Nevertheless, the 80 business leaders, apparently all men, voted almost unanimously in favor of the chamber’s plan, with Younger the lone dissenter. The Daily News also endorsed the plan, not only in its editorials but implicitly in its news coverage. In addition to its lead story on the February 14 meeting, the Daily News printed two front-page photos, separately headlined “This Combined County–Federal Building” and “Would Replace these Antiquated Structures.”

The chamber soon learned that the GSA would not agree to a com-
bination federal-county building and so pursued two parallel strategies. The first sought county board support, and then voters’ approval, to demolish the county courthouse and build a modern one on the same site. This plan provoked an 18-year preservation battle that ultimately left Maybury’s courthouse standing, as it is today, but with its interior completely gutted and redone. The chamber’s second strategy sought federal approval for a new post office in Central Park. (The federal district court in Minnesota no longer held sessions in Winona.) This plan also met with opposition, but the outcome was quite different.

Businessmen focused on changing the GSA’s position and, just as their predecessors had done in 1890, they looked to friends in Washington for help. Rep. Andresen had already introduced a bill directing the GSA to build a new post office in Winona. The chamber’s efforts quickly won over Senators Edward Thye and Hubert Humphrey. During 1957, however, the GSA held its ground. In a letter to Humphrey, the regional commissioner said that the existing post office was “structurally sound and can be placed in a good state of repair and preservation through facility changes and improvements.”

In February 1958, the GSA announced its renovation plans for the post office, including an elevator, new flooring, new lighting, new plumbing fixtures, and a suspended ceiling in the lobby. Kryzsko reacted by inviting “all organizations interested in the economic growth and business prosperity of our city” to a third lunch meeting that would consider “whether to go all out for a new combined post office–federal building.” Representatives of 40 local organizations voted almost unanimously to petition Humphrey, Thye, and Albert Quie, who had replaced Andresen in Congress—as well as the GSA—for a new post office. Younger, acting as a private citizen, wrote an open letter defending the post office and highlighting its links to famous Winonans like William Windom and Charles Maybury. The city would not be well served, he argued, if the post office was destroyed and replaced by “the new factory-type efficiency structure we are almost certain to get.”

The chamber’s strategy began to bear fruit in late March, when the GSA announced that it was considering a new building. According to the Daily News, the GSA “apparently was nudged” in this direction by Republicans Thye and Quie and Democrat Humphrey, who seemed to be competing to show “good service” to their constituents. In April the GSA recommended a new Winona post office, reversing the position it held only two months earlier. The formal announcement was made not by the GSA but by Rep. Quie and Sen. Thye.

Attention now focused on securing Central Park as the site for the new post office. Central Park was one of four blocks, one for each city ward, that had been donated to the city to become public parks when Winona was platted in 1857. Originally called Second Ward Park, it was the gift of Orrin Smith, Winona’s founder. In the early years, the city did little to develop the four parks. Ironically, it was the Board of Trade that pushed for a commission to improve them in 1899. Even then, private philanthropy financed most park development. In 1902 businessman William J. Langdon decided to give the city a life-sized statue of Princess Wenonah as a centerpiece for Central Park. He commissioned Isabel Moor Kimball, a New York sculptor, to create the figure, which was installed in a cement fountain with turtles and pelicans spraying water. Langdon meant to memorialize his deceased wife, but the statue and fountain came to represent the entire city. Younger may have had this in mind when he warned his fellow businessmen to “give pause!” in his open letter. Destroying the park with its trees and statue of Wenonah, he wrote, was “so grossly blasphemous that I recoil in horror.”

Nevertheless, the city council voted in July 1960 to recommend Central Park as the site for the new post office, with the proviso that an 80-foot section along Broadway remain a park. But, since the original plat of Winona dedicated the block as a public square, Minnesota’s attorney general ruled that the city did not have the legal authority to sell it. Therefore, the council invited the federal government to use its power
of eminent domain to condemn the property. Mayor Loyde Pfeiffer noted, “25 years ago he would have been opposed to a post office in Central Park.” But now, he asserted, “we have thousands and thousands of acres of parks and everyone has an automobile to get to them.” In October, Quie’s office announced that the condemnation proceedings were going forward.  

In the final months of 1960, numerous letters to the editor on the issue appeared in the Daily News, mostly opposing a new post office in Central Park. In reaction, the paper’s editorialist complained that “one of the troubles with Winona has always been the fact that some of its residents are against progress.” The editorial argued that a vast majority favored the new post office but “a small group of short-sighted individuals are attempting to block this worthwhile improvement.” Another editorial asserted that if the post office was saved, it would only stand as a “monument to stagnation and apathy, a reminder of an opportunity lost and a future neglected.”

As dissent grew, the city council reaffirmed its earlier resolution, noting that it wanted to communicate to Washington firm support for the project. This new resolution proclaimed that there was “currently no extensive use” of Central Park and that a new post office would be “strong evidence of Winona progress.” In any case, the council concluded, “it appears that only a few people are objecting.” A few days later the Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution urging all members “to write to Washington officials to counteract action of minority groups who oppose establishment of the post office in the park.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Younger was writing increasingly impassioned letters to post office officials and politicians. The Post Office Department now told him that a careful study had determined that the present post office “is totally inadequate,” given that the building contained only 24,500
square feet and “our twenty five year anticipated requirements call for 65,000 sq ft of space.” (The new post office, when built, had roughly the same amount of usable space as the historic structure.) The official also reminded Younger that Central Park was taken only after the Winona City Council had unanimously adopted two resolutions affirming the desire to place the new post office there.31

Park and Recreation Board members also endorsed the plan. In July 1961 Commissioner Edward Allen was quoted as saying that putting the post office in Central Park was a “better use of the park than we have been making.” Nevertheless, the board faced the problem of what do with the iconic Princess Wenonah statue and fountain. One commissioner suggested moving it to Lake Park, and that is what initially happened.32

During 1961, opponents organized the Committee to Save Central Park, which on July 28 published a newspaper advertisement headlined “They say a new post office is needed in Winona, but NOT in Central Park!” About 50 committee members were listed, including such well-known Winonans as aviation pioneer Max Conrad; quarry owner Ted Biesanz; Rev. Edward Fitzgerald, the Catholic bishop of Winona; heiress Gretchen Lambert; entrepreneur Ben Miller; and, of course, Dr. Lewis Younger. On August 5 a second advertisement appeared, this one proclaiming “Central Park Is Yours! ACT NOW to Save This Beauty Spot!” The newspapers published many letters to the editor, both pro and con. In August, however, the founders of the opposition committee privately acknowledged that they had lost the battle. Although they had gone “down with their flags flying,” they conceded that they had started too late.33

That summer, federal authorities asked for bids from parties interested in purchasing the land and building Winona’s post office, which the government would then lease. A Milwaukee investment firm was chosen as low bidder (in terms of the annual rent it would charge), and that firm hired Kraus-Anderson, Inc., of Minneapolis to construct the post office. By this time, the Office of Supervising Architect was long gone, replaced by regional GSA offices that provided standardized plans and specifications to builders who erected post offices at a set price. The trend was toward simple, modern, single-story, no-frills structures that were economical to build and considered more efficient to operate.34

The GSA required the new post office to have a 176-foot front on Fifth Street and be 140-feet deep along Main and Center Streets, producing a gross area of 24,640 square feet. Built on a cement slab, the structure would have a concrete-block exterior except for the front, made of precast concrete with alumi-
num and brick trim and plate-glass windows. The GSA also specified eight parking stalls for patrons in front of the building. Unlike the old post office with its interior and exterior stairways, the new facility was easily accessible.35

Ground breaking took place on September 25, 1962. The day before, when the contractor was scheduled to begin felling trees on the site, anonymous individuals stapled booklets to those trees. The booklets were reprints of “Good-By to Our Public Parks,” a Readers Digest article lamenting the loss of parks to development and calling for community vigilance and resistance. The mayor contacted the police, and the Daily News noted that it was illegal to attach material to trees on public property. In late May 1963, postal employees began working in the new building, which was dedicated on September 21, 1963.36

It is interesting to compare this ceremony with the dedication of the earlier post office. In 1891 the president of the Board of Trade presided. In 1963 the Chamber of Commerce played no public role. In 1891 former congressman Thomas Wilson spoke; in 1963 U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy made a speech—about the atomic test ban treaty. According to news reports, the only speaker who actually mentioned the building was Mayor R. K. Ellings. He lauded the government system of leasing post offices from private owners so that the properties stayed on the tax rolls. (The new building, assessed at $113,450, would generate $12,000 annually in taxes.) The 1963 event was also much more nationalistic in tone than the 1891 dedication. The American Legion conducted a flag-raising ceremony while the band from Winona’s Catholic high school, Cotter, played the national anthem. A Cotter student read “Ode to the American Flag.” In contrast, the speakers in 1891 tended to focus on the significance for Winona of a beautiful public space that was shared equally by all citizens.37

Although Winona’s business leaders campaigned hard for a new post office, they had little interest in its design and made no speeches about how its architecture represented something about their community. Its cost also reflected the declining role of post office buildings as key symbols of the nation’s civic life. The Daily News reported that the building permit documented construction costs of $180,000. The federal government ultimately paid Winona $80,000 for the Central Park land. All told, the $260,000 that the government spent in 1963 would be

Winona’s new post office, which opened in 1963 on the site of Central Park
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worth between $2 and $2.5 million today, a fraction of the $19–$32 million (in contemporary dollars) spent on the 1891 structure.38

Even before construction began in Central Park, the federal government had classified the historic post office at Fourth and Main as surplus property, available for sale. The Daily News published a photo tour of the building, noting that the second-floor courtroom was unused. First National Bank bought the building and razed it in October 1963 to make room for a two-story, modernist brick bank that occupies the site today. In 2002 Winona County purchased this building and converted it into the Winona County Government Center.39

Beginning in the late 1950s, social theorists such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Christopher Lasch noted that American elites were becoming disenchanted with investment in public services and public space. They observed that business leaders increasingly called for leaner government, which would liberate private enterprise to thrive in the marketplace. These theorists worried that this turning-away from the public realm would have negative consequences for the functioning of democracy.40 Although the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s committed the country to the interstate highway system—perhaps the largest public investment ever made in any country—this was a unique expenditure highly favored by the private sector, especially the powerful automobile and energy industries. Moreover, the enormous funds spent on highways required diminished funding for other projects, such as public buildings. At the time, some theorists worried that governmental policy prioritizing private mobility in automobiles would undermine public spaces where citizens interacted face-to-face with people of different classes and ethnicities.41

The movement away from public investment has taken a nationwide toll on the post office. The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 transformed it from a Cabinet-level department into an independent, financially self-supporting federal agency. As a result, the U.S. Postal Service began closing post offices or replacing them with new, stripped-down offices located outside of downtowns. This process accelerated in 2002 when President George W. Bush appointed a commission to consider the future of the postal service, including the possibility of privatizing it completely. Reacting in part to the fact that electronic media has led to a decline in first-class mail, the postmaster general in 2012 began closing mail-processing centers and limiting the hours of smaller post offices. Opponents argue that this downsizing is motivated by free-market extremism rather than economic necessity and that a reduction in services will lead to a “death spiral.” They point out that Congress has consistently blocked the postal service’s plans to expand into profitable new services and products. Our civic life as a democracy, they maintain, is crucially supported by the guarantee of universal service anchored by the presence of local post offices.42

The history of the Winona post office provides local evidence that the demotion of the public sphere had already begun in the late 1950s. Just as citizens’ groups today are campaigning in many towns to save their local post offices, some Winonans waged a vocal, if tardy, fight to save their historic post office and Central Park during the 1960s.43 But local business and political leaders, the congressional delegation and, eventually, GSA bureaucrats took the view that private property should grow at the expense of public space.

Fifty years have passed since Winona’s new post office opened in Central Park. Thanks to the dedication and competence of the postal workers, it still functions as a vital public space where people mingle and meet with fellow citizens of all backgrounds. But the trend that began in the 1950s continues, and the long-term future of Winona’s post office, like all others, is in doubt. ☛
Notes

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6. For the impact of Richardson’s architecture on the Midwest, see Larson, Spirit of H. H. Richardson.

7. This range is based on two indicators that try to capture the changing value of labor: the $12.7 million on the unskilled wage rate, and $20.8 million on production-worker wages. Since the value of a construction project is tied to the cost of labor (some of it highly skilled), these indicators are more appropriate than the commonly used consumer price index, which is based on a typical urban household consumption bundle. See Measuring Worth, www.measuringworth.com for more information and calculators (accessed Apr. 15, 2013). All subsequent conversions are derived from this resource.


12. Winona Daily Republican, July 27, 1889, 3. Winona lawyer William Mitchell (1832–1900) became a Minnesota Supreme Court justice in 1881 but apparently stayed active in local affairs. Both Whipple and Sinclair were newspaper editors who served terms as Winona postmaster. Sinclair edited the Daily Republican, while Whipple edited the pro-Democratic Winona Daily Herald. The rivals were appointed when their respective party captured the presidency; Crozier, “Social History of Winona,” 180.


14. Winona Daily Republican, Aug. 10, 1889, 3, Apr. 11, 1890, 3; Proposal for the Erection and Completion of U.S. Courthouse, Post Office, Feb. 18, 1890, manuscript 576, Winona County Historical Society Archives, hereinafter WCHS.

15. Maybury to Windrim, May 3, 1890, and Maybury to Windrim, June 20, 1890, Oct. 20, 1890, Feb. 7, 1891—all manuscript 286, WCHS; Winona Daily Republican, Oct. 10, 1891, 1. Although few primary sources from Maybury’s private practice survive, the letterpress book of his correspondence as superintendent of construction does (manuscript 286). There are about 500 letters: some are illegible and most are mundane. In one of the first, he requested permission to hire an assistant. As soon as Windrim approved, Maybury hired his architect son as clerk, at $4 per day. Another letter reported an accident involving a hod carrier who died when he fell from the second floor.


18. Winona Daily Herald, Oct. 22, 1891, 4; Winona Daily Republican, Oct. 22, 1891, 1. Yale, an attorney, moved to Winona from New Haven, CT, in 1857. On his career, see Curtiss-Wedge, History of Winona County, 1: 270. The paper also reported that Wilson, one of the politicians who had shepherded the funding through Congress, rose to say that although he was happy Winona got the building, “he’d confess among ourselves that I sometimes think that the United States has put too much money here for good government.” This was an early instance of the long controversy about pork-barrel politics in postal construction. James H. Burns, Great American Post Offices (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 77–85.

19. Winona Daily Republican, Oct. 22, 1891, 3 (Buck quote). Maybury’s figures match those in Annual Report of the Supervising Architect to the Secretary of the Treasury for the Year Ending September 30, 1892, 167, showing $160,000 appropriated and all but $151.37 spent, which would be carried over to a surplus fund.

20. Winona Daily News, Sept. 25, 1956, 3. Kryzsko was the president of Winona National Bank. He is well remembered in town for his support of higher education; Winona State University’s student union bears his name.


Mail carriers and other dignitaries posing at the post office doors. Carvings of a winged wheel, symbolizing postal speed, and the federal eagle adorn the façade.


31. Jack E. Grant, director, Real Estate Leasing, Post Office Dept., to Lewis Younger, Mar. 9, 1961, post office file. Besides his leadership role in the WCHS, Younger had another, more personal stake in this issue. His medical office at 64 W. Fifth St. faced Central Park, and if the chamber had its way, his view would change from a fountain and trees to the front façade of the new post office. The Younger Building, one of the city’s few art deco structures, is now an orthodontist’s office.

32. Winona Daily News, July 25, 1961, 3. Princess Wenonah’s odyssey was only beginning. She was moved two more times before being restored, along with her turtles, pelicans, and pool (a citizens’ group raised $100,000 for the job) and relocated in 1993 to what appears to be her permanent home: Windom Park, another of the original ward parks. Jerome Christenson, “Landon’s Princess: Wenonah in Winona,” in his Pieces of the Past (Winona Daily News, 2001), 45.

33. Winona Daily News, July 28, 1961, 2, Aug. 5, 1961, 2 (emphasis in the originals); Dr. Carl Heise and nine others to Members of the Committee to Save Central Park, manuscript file 348, WCHS.

34. Winona Daily News, Sept. 1, 1961, 3; Lee, Architects to the Nation, 287. There were 15 bids; WMC Inc. was the only Winona-based bidder.


37. The more nationalistic consciousness of the midtwentieth century was probably a by-product of the U.S. becoming an imperial power after the Spanish-American War in 1898. Two world wars and the Cold War also played their role. Still, the lack of patriotic symbolism or rhetoric at the 1891 dedication is striking.


39. Winona Daily News, July 1, 1962, 5. First National, one of Winona’s original banks, was affiliated with Northwest Bancorporation headquartered in Minneapolis. Eventually Northwest merged with Wells Fargo, which sold the building to Winona County.


41. See, for example, Sennett, Fall of Public Man, 14; Kunstler, Geography of Nowhere, 119.


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