NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

1. NAME

Omaha National Bank Building

AND/OR HISTORICAL:

New York Life Insurance Building

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:

17th and Farnam Streets

CITY OR TOWN:

Omaha

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)

☑ Building

Ownership

Public

Private

Both

Public Acquisition:

☑ In Process

☐ Being Considered

Status

☒ Occupied

☐ Unoccupied

Preservation work in progress

Accessible To The Public

☒ Yes:

☐ Restricted

☐ Unrestricted

☐ No

Present Use (Check One or More as Appropriate)

☐ Agricultural

☐ Commercial

☐ Government

☐ Industrial

☐ Military

☐ Private Residence

☐ Religious

☐ Scientific

☐ Transportation

☐ Other (Specify)

☐ Comments

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER’S NAME:

The Omaha National Bank

STREET AND NUMBER:

17th and Farnam Streets

CITY OR TOWN:

Omaha

STATE:

Nebraska

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:

County Clerk, Douglas County Court House

STREET AND NUMBER:

1700 Farnam Street

CITY OR TOWN:

Omaha

STATE:

Nebraska

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:

Historic Preservation in Nebraska

DATE OF SURVEY:

1971

☐ Federal

☒ State

☐ County

☐ Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

Nebraska State Historical Society

STREET AND NUMBER:

1500 "R" Street

CITY OR TOWN:

Lincoln

STATE:

Nebraska

ENTRY NUMBER:

ENTRY NUMBER:

DATE:

DATE:

*First Congressional District
The New York Life Insurance Building, today known as the Omaha National Bank Building was built in 1888-89. It was designed by the New York firm of McKim, Mead and White with the main design credit going to the latter, White. McKim, Mead and White also designed offices for this company in New York and most significantly, an identical office tower in Kansas City, Missouri, which was completed at about the same time, 1890.

The New York Life Insurance Building is characteristic of McKim, Mead and White's early flurrish with the Italianate mode of design. This particular building's style was derived from the Florentine Palazzo, with its characteristic rusticated granite below and brick and terra cotta above. It is an important example of McKim, Mead and Whites early attempts to the solution of skyscraper construction. It sets comparatively narrow on the avenue and deep on the street. Notably, it did not follow the Chicago influence of the slab or vertical box construction which dominated most of these early skyscraper attempts. Instead, it was designed quadrangular or U-shaped in plan with two dominating vertical masses on either side of a low arched entrance. To the rear of the entrance, rising in back of a central court, is a tower capped by a typical Italianate loggia. This tower, rising above the main mass of the building, projects the most pure character of Italianate detailing and proportioning and further emphasizes the entrance which was manytimes lost on these early solutions in skyscraper design.

The New York Life Insurance building was among the last to make use of massive masonry bearing walls in this beginning era of skyscraper construction. This type of construction conceded to the iron skeleton frame shortly after the engineering impetus of the Paris Exhibition of 1889, and latter to the high strength steel construction of today.

The building has undergone extensive interior remodeling to accomodate an influx of needed office and staff facilities, and all the original furnishings have been replaced by modern fixtures. Shortly after World War II the inner court was filled in on the second and third floors for more office space. In 1920 an eleventh floor was added to both the main masses on either side of the entrance. The addition is very subtle and bears relatively little influence on the building's original integrity. The large bronze eagle which stood over the entrance was also removed to be placed in front of the new Omaha National Bank quarters. This eagle was said to have been cast from an original marble sculpture by the famed American, Beaux Arts sculptor, Saint-Gaudens but research on the subject points to the sculptor as being Augustus' brother, Louis. However, the work was probably done in Augustus' studio in New York.
Both McKim and White started in the offices of Richardson and worked with him for some time. His designs and philosophies play an evident part in their background. The firm of McKim, Mead and White was founded in 1879. By the year 1887 they had already reached a commanding position in the architectural profession. The only man who could dispute the artistic leadership with them, Richardson, had died the year before in 1886.

McKim, Mead and White founded, quite unconsciously, a school of design that deeply affected the architecture of the United States. Their office was the forming grounds of a mass of talent that, spreading over the country, influenced the architectural thought of a whole generation.

The special gifts of Stanford White and his sympathy with the arts and crafts contributions to architecture, helped in forming a group of friends in kindred professions which dominated the artistic life of their day. McKim, Mead, White, Bigelow, who White replaced within the firm in 1879, and Saint-Gaudens were together frequently, and the four architects traveled and sketched together in New England. In 1878 McKim, White, and Saint-Gaudens made a walking trip in Southern France. In 1879 when Saint-Gaudens returned from Rome they set about the start of what was viewed as an American Renaissance.

The New York Life Insurance Building was Omaha's first ten-story building and marked the beginning of an era, to midwesterners, of the skyscrapers growth in the larger metropolitan areas of New York and Chicago. The New York Life Insurance Building portrays the treatment and philosophy of this early stage in skyscraper evolution.

McKim, Mead and White were disinclined to be closely identified with the design of the skyscraper. They aligned with the view that laws would place restrictions on the skyscraper tendencies of Metropolitan business structures. They consciously avoided the design of facades whose heights were badly proportioned to their frontages and to the width of the streets on which they were placed. The high rise office buildings built for the New York Life Insurance Company in New York, Kansas City, and Omaha are indeed interesting attempts at keeping the height of skyscrapers down rather than emphasizing it.

McKim, Mead and White's designs seek the balance of lines, masses, and projections, rather than overwhelming predominance of any one dimension or
series of lines. This philosophy of design is very evident in the line masses and volume of the New York Life Insurance Building.

The dilemmas in skyscraper design produces many compromises and McKim, Mead and White's tendencies to dissociate themselves from the brutal fact of the American Skyscraper may seem to be an illustration of a deficiency rather than a merit, but in truth, while it brings out the obvious limitations in their ideas and methods, it also brings out the soundness of their judgment and the integrity of their point of view.

The New York Life Insurance Building is truly a lesson in History. It stands as a reminder of the beginning of the everpresent urban problem and is a reflective example of the answer to the solution of the design of central Business District office towers.

The New York Life Insurance Building also marks the former site of Sen. Joseph H. Millard's residence. Millard settled in Omaha in 1856, beginning business as a real estate dealer. He became identified with the Omaha National Bank in 1867 and served as its president from 1884 to 1920. Mr. Millard served as mayor of Omaha from 1872 to 1873, and was, for six years, a Government Director of the Union Pacific Railroad. Mr. Millard represented Nebraska as U.S. Senator from 1901-1907; he died in 1921. Millard lived on this site until 1886 when he sold the property to the New York Life Insurance Company for $85,000, for the construction of this office building.
9. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Persias Kolberg, Curator of Historic Sites

ORGANIZATION

Nebraska State Historical Society

STREET AND NUMBER:

1500 "R" Street

CITY OR TOWN:

Lincoln

STATE

Nebraska

CODE

11

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

- National [ ]
- State [x]
- Local [ ]

Name: Marvil R. Swift

Title: Director, Nebraska State Historical Society

Date: __________

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Chief, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation

ATTEST:

Keeper of The National Register

Date: __________

SEE INSTRUCTIONS
View to the northeast
Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS H673.5-3219)

South elevation looking northeast
Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS H673.5-3259)