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## An Observation of the Post Office and Courthouse

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## An Observation of the Post Office and Courthouse

**Figure 1**  
*1952 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*



*Note.* Provided by Library of Congress.

On a Sanborn map, published in 1952, there lies a massive, blocky building labeled “Post Office & Court Ho.” between the streets of State and Washington in downtown Binghamton, NY. On Google Maps, a building labeled “Internal Revenue Service” sits in the same spot, while the only labeled post office lies about two blocks down, between Henry St. and Chenango St.. I was interested: What had happened to the Sanborn building? Had it been replaced completely by an IRS headquarters? Had it been a poor place for a post office and a courthouse so they were moved? Had some lowly mailman committed federal tax fraud and incurred

the wrath of the most insufferable government agency? What happened to the building between 1956 and 2019 was unclear from the maps, but one thing was for certain—there was no more post office/courthouse combo between Washington and State streets.

I got off the bus Saturday, September 7th, 2019 and walked up State St., the whole time fully expecting to see an IRS complex in place of the historical structure pinpointed on the map. At the corners of State and Henry, I was met with the sight of a majestic government building, the words “Post Office & Court House” chiseled into the facade. It was a shock, and even a little bit of a disappointment; I thought it would make my report less interesting than I imagined it might be. But even though I was disappointed, I still had to go look at the courthouse because of its beautiful and imposing condition. The walls were smooth, bleached stone that had been kept unblemished since its creation. Above each of the three doors were brass emblazoned eagles,

turned green with age, but otherwise untouched. On the handicap ramp, sculpted into the wall, were the names of the original Postmaster, Secretary of the Treasury, and Architects along with the original construction date: 1934. Everything about the building's image was perfectly manicured; this was the building as it had been some 80 years prior. The sidewalks were swept, the trees were trimmed, even the back alley was spotless. The “Post Office & Court House” was impressive, and purposely so, but as I explored farther and farther outward from my initial destination, its perfection seemed increasingly out of place. There was a respect, perhaps, almost an idealization of the courthouse's place in history that was betrayed by the rest of the city.

**Figure 2**  
*Post Office and Courthouse Today*



*Note.* By Lucas Peterka. 2019.

I do not mean to say that Binghamton upkeeping its historical landmarks is disingenuous or shameful, but I do mean to suggest that the wealth and strength that was portrayed by that building was gone by the time I had taken a short walk across the street. The sidewalks were unswept and cracked, sloped and uneven. The buildings, old and storied, were rundown and abandoned. There wasn't trimmed shrubbery, or trees, carefully tended to and lining the other streets. The courthouse attempted to tell a story—one of success, of solidity, of a Sanborn map published in 1956. But that story in and of itself, is a history. I could see it, as I walked: I could see where there had once been fortune and commerce and impressive government buildings along every street. I could see the remnants of architecture similar to the “Post Office and Court House,” their former majesty tucked away throughout downtown Binghamton—history covered in the filth of economic failure, in the shame of government failure.

But its history persists nevertheless. I didn't pull out my phone to navigate Binghamton's streets; I didn't need to. I relied on the historic, outdated maps that I looked at in Special Collections. I expected that to hinder me. I expected the layout of the city to have changed, but I was able to navigate easily. The streets of the city center aligned perfectly with maps drawn over 60 years ago. Those historic maps still reflect the city today; they still hold some truth. But that image of orderliness and neatness presented by the maps is now an incomplete one—an observation rendered painfully obvious as I searched the city in person. The

maps were nice, but did they *really* represent Binghamton anymore? And the "Post Office & Court House" was beautiful, but what did it *actually* communicate about life downtown today?

### **References**

(1887) Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Binghamton, Broome County, New York. Sanborn Map Company, May. [Map] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05775\\_001/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05775_001/).

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