

How GAO Built Its Dream House

Effective July 7, 2004, the GAO's legal name became the Government Accountability Office. The change, which better reflects the modern professional services organization GAO has become, is a provision of the GAO Human Capital Reform Act of 2004, Pub. L. 108-271, 118 Stat. 811 (2004).

The following article was published in 2001 to mark the 50th anniversary of the dedication of GAO's headquarters building. It refers to the agency by its original name, the U.S. General Accounting Office.

Chapter 1 A Novel Design for GAO's Headquarters Building

The year was 1946. Government planning officials were studying the proposed design for a new headquarters building for the General Accounting Office (GAO). The Office's needs were obvious. GAO's employees and records were crammed into 21 different buildings in the capital city during the 1940s. Congress supported the effort to house the General Accounting Office, a legislative branch agency created in 1921 to keep a watchful eye on federal spending. Planning officials also wanted to move ahead with the project, but they raised a yellow caution flag. Would some employees feel claustrophobic in the new building?

The plans called for a block style building, filling most of the area between 4th and 5th Streets and G and H Streets in the Northwest section of Washington, D.C. Back in 1946, a block design was a novel, untested concept for so large a structure. Engineers believed they could make it work by relying on air conditioning and artificial lighting. The supervising architect would later note that the building "couldn't have been built without air conditioning. . . . the thing that made the new GAO block-type building possible was air conditioning."

Although modern air conditioning was developed in the early twentieth century, many public buildings were uncooled until after World War II ended in 1945. Washington's heat could be severe. Congress used to adjourn early because its uncooled chambers and offices were too uncomfortable to permit working through the entire summer. Air conditioning began to be seen in some movie theaters and department stores in parts of the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. Residential cooling lagged behind until the availability of inexpensive window box units helped homeowners counter summer's heat in the early 1950s.

In the days before air conditioning, federal office buildings were designed with interior courtyards and wings, to allow for maximum ventilation and light. Had war not intervened, GAO's employees would have been lodged in such a building. Earlier plans for a GAO headquarters at 4th and G Street had relied on traditional architectural and engineering methods. The designs called for a "fishbone" style structure with a central



spine and interior courts. The government acquired property for a General Accounting Office building and cleared the land but the United States' entry into World War II in December 1941 put a stop to construction. The need to use resources for wartime priority projects forced public works officials to shelve their plans for GAO.



Original 1941 Design for the GAO Building.

If the United States had not entered World War II in December 1941, GAO's employees now would be working in a structure that looks like this

Due to advances in air conditioning technology, engineers believed it would be possible to do away with wings and courtyards as they considered new designs for GAO after the war ended in 1945. They drew up a plan in 1946 for a block style headquarters structure. This was so novel, local newspapers considered it newsworthy. **The Washington Evening Star** explained to readers that plans for a new GAO building called for a “solid building,” without courtyards. The concept was untested and some planning officials wondered whether such a structure would prove claustrophobic for employees. The commissioner of the Public Buildings Administration assured the Commission of Fine Arts in 1946 that “we hope to overcome the effects of claustrophobia” by having low partitions in the interior space “so that you can see the daylight and landscape, which apparently the doctors say is all that is needed.”

Although the commissioners and engineers gave the go-ahead for a block style structure, some members of the public remained skeptical about the proposal. A concerned citizen wrote to the editors of **The Washington Star** in 1947 about the design. He noted with dismay that employees well might “spend their entire working lives in such a building” and asked, “Is this humane?” However, more knowledgeable observers accepted the assurances of engineers that the idea would work and applauded the novel, modern design of the proposed building. News accounts pointed to comfortable “human features” such as the interior escalators



Image of front page of THE WATCHDOG, GAO employee association newspaper, 1948



and multiple banks of elevators, the air conditioning and indirect lighting, the centrally located cafeteria, and the “acoustically treated” office spaces. In 1948, an article in **The Washington Post** explained that a 22 million dollar “Dream House” would assemble the heretofore “scattered GAO” in a structure filling almost an entire city block.

GAO was a well-established agency at this point. It was created in 1921 as part of an effort to improve government financial management after World War I. As the government’s accountability watchdog, it worked with nearly every federal agency. Construction of GAO’s headquarters began in 1949. By the time President Harry S. Truman attended dedication ceremonies for the structure on September 11, 1951, thirty years had passed since the establishment of the General Accounting Office in 1921. The Office grew in size greatly between 1921 and 1951 as it handled more and more work. Despite its expansion, GAO had a long wait before it could consolidate its employees in a headquarters building.

The agency’s chief commented on the delay during a Congressional hearing. Comptroller General Lindsay C. Warren, who headed GAO from 1940 to 1954, noted in 1947 that “we have sat there for years and have seen the executive branch of the Government become properly housed, and the parade has gone by as far as we have been concerned.”



Chapter 2

Where to Put Workers and Their Cars

Why did the General Accounting Office have to wait so long? To a large extent, the delay was due to enormous competition for tight office space in the capital city. The reasons lie in the great changes that took place in Washington during the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1917, when the United States entered World War I, there were 48,313 federal employees in the capital city. The number more than doubled to 106,000 during the next two years. Although the amount went down after the war, it rose again during the next few decades. As government expanded, federal employment climbed to 137,940 by 1940.

Even before wartime expansion brought an influx of new employees into Washington in 1918, many government departments and agencies struggled to house their workers. We now take for granted the large clusters of government buildings in Washington--in the Federal Triangle area between 6th and 14th Streets, N.W., in the Southwest portion of the city, and in the Northwest Rectangle. But when GAO started operations in 1921, these clusters did not yet exist. A few departments had their own buildings near the White House and the parkland of the national Mall but many operated out of leased space.

Responding to pleas for relief from government officials, the newly formed Commission of Fine Arts approved a plan in 1919 for new buildings for the Departments of State, Justice and Commerce and Labor to be built at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. Congress did not appropriate funds for this proposed public works project. Many government employees continued to work in cramped offices, some in rented space, throughout the Washington metropolitan area.

This is the situation GAO faced when it started operations. When the Office first began work in 1921, it employed 1,708 people. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt expanded the federal government to carry out his New Deal programs, federal employment rose, reaching 108,673 in 1935. Inundated with more and more paperwork, GAO had to hire new workers. By 1936, its staff numbered 4,401. As GAO and other agencies grew in size, federal and city planners struggled to house government offices. It wasn't easy. Planning officials had to consider the cost of acquiring land, the building density in city neighborhoods, and parking options. Many planners agreed that the most promising site for building was south of Pennsylvania Avenue near the Mall. However, there were few other sites available for large public works projects in the heart of the city.

Most agencies wanted to be located in the city center, but a rise in automobile traffic and lack of parking spaces caused serious problems for planners as they looked at sites in downtown Washington. At the start of the 1920s, few people drove in the capital city and the speed limit in the city was only 22 miles per hour. Some people used streetcars, but many still walked to and from work. As families moved further into the suburbs during the 1920s, more and more commuters began to use cars. Even then, it seemed as if many Washington area workers preferred to use their own cars to drive



to work. In 1929, only 34 percent of people riding to work in the capital city used public transportation, a much smaller percentage than in other cities of comparable size.

Planners worried about congestion as drivers parked wherever they could, even on the green expanse of the Mall and on the “Ellipse” below the White House. The Fine Arts Commission protested in the 1920s that the “entire Mall has become an open-air garage; in the Department of Agriculture grounds automobiles are parked on the grass.”

In 1926, officials approved plans for an enormous public works project on a triangle of land along Pennsylvania Avenue between 6th and 15th Streets. There was fierce competition for space in this prime spot. The original plans for this Federal Triangle complex pencilled in a spot for a GAO building but this soon was removed from the design. Although GAO lost out on space in the Federal Triangle, its officials continued to push for construction of a headquarters, either on Capitol Hill or near Pennsylvania Avenue. In 1922 and again 1931, Congress considered plans to build a headquarters building for GAO on Capitol Hill but nothing came of the proposals.



Chapter 3

Why Did GAO Need More Office and Warehouse Space?

From its earliest days, GAO, its mission and its work force have been affected by national and world events. After the stock market crash of 1929, the United States entered a lengthy period of economic depression. During President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, federal money poured into relief and recovery efforts aimed at fighting the depression. The expansion of government agencies created a blizzard of paperwork for GAO's employees. This workforce bore little resemblance to the professional audit and evaluation staff of the present day GAO. Charged with a broad mandate to examine how federal funds are spent, the early GAO took a control oriented, legalistic view of its charter. From 1921 until the 1940s, the Office focused on examining individual expenditure vouchers and considering claims for and against the government. Historians refer to this as the "voucher checking" era. A scholar of public administration even described the GAO of old as "a prodigious paper mill."

What did voucher checking mean? Vouchers were forms used by executive branch administrative officials and disbursing officers to record information on spending. Disbursing agents made payments based on the vouchers, then sent the forms to GAO for checking. In addition to auditing vouchers and processing claims, GAO settled accounts, reviewed contracts, issued opinions and decisions on the legality of expenditures, and prescribed accounting forms and systems for the executive branch of government.

The Office performed its voucher checking centrally. This meant federal departments and agencies had to send their vouchers to Washington for audits. The agency's auditors first began doing fieldwork in the mid-1930s, as GAO looked at government agriculture programs in Kentucky and several southern states. Although GAO worked primarily in Washington, almost all of its assignments then were initiated within the agency rather than by requests from members of Congress. In fact, as late as 1965, only ten percent of the effort of GAO's professional staff went toward providing direct assistance to the Congress. As GAO's work changed to meet Congressional needs, the number rose to 40% by 1981 and to over 70% in 1995.



GAO's clerks at Pension Building examining vouchers. Photo (c) 1940, The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.



Until the late 1940s, many of GAO's employees were voucher auditors, claims clerks and freight rate examiners. The United States' entry into World War II placed an enormous paperwork burden on the Office. GAO reviewed defense contracts and audited the accounts of Army and Navy disbursing officers. Its freight rate examiners had to review a blizzard of transportation vouchers as the government used the nation's rails and roads to carry freight and troops.

The law required GAO to examine all paid government transportation bills, to determine any overcharges, and to request refunds from the carriers. Although GAO's employees put in long hours and the workforce expanded to hit an all-time high of nearly 15,000 by late 1945, the agency could not keep up with the demands of the traditional central voucher audit. GAO faced a backlog of 35 million vouchers when the war ended in 1945. In its annual report for 1947, the Office reported that it had reconciled 490 million checks and audited 92,000 accountable officers' accounts, 5 million transportation vouchers, 1.5 million contracts, and 260 million postal money orders.



Chapter 4

GAO Moves into “Meigs’s Old Red Barn”



Pension Building

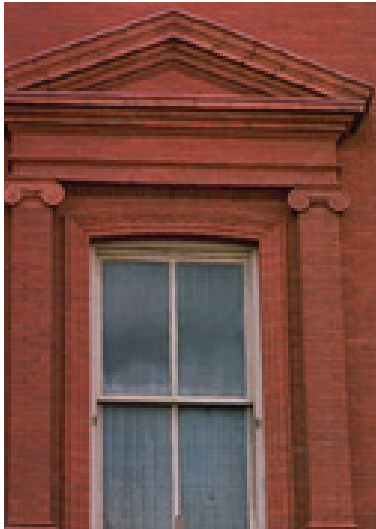
During its first 30 years of operation, GAO housed its staff in various locations. The agency rented space for offices and records storage in several buildings in Washington and across the Potomac River in Northern Virginia. From 1926 to 1951, GAO’s top officials and many of its employees were headquartered in the Pension Building at 4th and F Streets, N.W. The Pension Building presently is home to the National Building Museum. It is a well-known landmark in Washington, D.C. The Pension Building often is described as a memorial to Civil War veterans, since the terra cotta frieze that surrounds the building depicts infantry, cavalry, artillery, naval, medical and quartermaster units from that conflict. However, despite popular perceptions, it never was designated officially as a war memorial. Designed by General Montgomery C. Meigs, the building was constructed in the 1880s to house the government agency that administered military pensions. In 1926, the Pension Bureau, which was an agency of the Department of the Interior from 1849 to 1930, moved to the department’s headquarters building, vacating Meigs’s structure for GAO.

Notable inside the Pension Building is the enormous Great Hall, which served as a site for presidential inaugural balls between 1885 and 1909 and, after a break, again starting in the 1970s. The hall measures 116 by 316 feet and features three courts separated by screens of Corinthian columns. Each column is made up of 70,000 bricks, painted to look like Sienna marble, and rising 75 feet. Seeking to improve the poor ventilation that characterized most cramped nineteenth century office buildings, Meigs placed offices in three stories around the perimeter of the hall. A fourth floor held storage rooms.

Meigs designed a unique ventilation system for the building. His plan called for air to be drawn in from windows and, during the winter, through three openings under each window, and then to circulate into the Great Hall. (Present-day visitors to the National Building Museum still can spot the three openings in the brickwork under the windows.) As air entered and warmed up inside the building, it was drawn up to high clerestory



windows at the top of the building, where it exited. In 1885, Meigs wrote that the volume of air in the Great Hall was replaced every two minutes.



Closeup photo of Pension Building window.



Pension Building, suite formerly occupied by the Comptroller General, pictured in the 1990s.



GAO clerks in Great Hall of Pension Building prior to World War II

In 1980, Congress designated the Pension Building as the site of the National Building Museum. Although it presently celebrates achievements in building, the structure has had an equal share of critics and admirers through the decades. In 1945, Rep. Fritz G. Lanham noted of the Pension Building that “years ago, it was described by some wag as three red barns, one on top of another.” Other observers called the building “Meigs’s old red barn.”

Between June and September 1926, many of GAO’s employees moved into the new headquarters building. Comptroller General John R. McCarl occupied offices on the second floor of the Pension Building, in the southwest corner. The suite included a large open-hearth fireplace and originally served as the office of the Commissioner of Pensions. Several of the executive offices were painted in the 1880s and 1890s with elaborate decorations, but only the commissioner’s office later occupied by McCarl still retains the original ceiling decoration. It was carefully cleaned and restored in 1984, using a painstaking process that relied on artists’ erasers.

In the Pension Building, GAO’s voucher clerks spilled over from the perimeter offices, filling the Great Hall. A guidebook from the 1930s noted that to appreciate the immensity of the Great Hall, “rising 120 feet in height and covering an approximate floor area of over 100 by 300 feet in extent, it is necessary to peer down from above upon the pigmy [sic] clerks below, stowing away endless Government documents, like Lilliputians in a Brobdingnagian hall.” Photographs taken in the 1920s show a Great Hall filled with rows of desks. By 1940, the fountain in the middle of the Great Hall had been shut off and records stored on top of it. The fountain was restored in the 1980s, after establishment of the National Building Museum.



The Pension Building could not house all of GAO's employees, many of whom worked in leased office and warehouse space in Washington and in suburban Alexandria, Virginia. In 1937, the Acting Comptroller General said that some of these buildings were "poorly heated and lighted, with little or no ventilation, necessitating the use of hand flashlights for light, and men have to work in lumber jackets, heavy shoes, and mittens in winter to keep comfortable."

During the 1930s, Congress considered a number of options to aid GAO, including expansion of the Pension Building. In 1934, the Commission of Fine Arts approved plans to expand and remodel the Pension Building, adding wings, altering the roof, and resurfacing the brick walls with stone. The chairman of the commission was no fan of Meigs's design, for he wrote that the remodeling plan provided "a satisfactory solution of the problem of transforming into a building of appropriate monumental character a building which during its entire lifetime has been ridiculed both by the public and by the architectural profession." He called the Pension Building "one of the three or four eyesores of the city." Times and tastes change, and by contrast, an article in **The Washington Post** in January 2001 called Meigs's structure, "Washington's prettiest building."



Chapter 5

Proposal for Remodeling the Pension Building (GAO's Headquarters), ca. 1934

Although Congress approved funding for the remodeling project, there was some doubt in 1934 as to whether even an expanded Pension Building would accommodate GAO's growing staff. Also, District of Columbia officials objected to the proposal because they believed it would interfere with plans to use the Judiciary Square site for new court buildings. Debate over the remodeling plan became quite heated--one planning official contended that remodeling the Pension Building would set back construction of new court buildings by 100 years. Ultimately, the plan was shelved as GAO concluded that the proposal to alter its present headquarters "would be wholly inadequate for the needs of the General Accounting Office now and at any time in the future."



Chapter 6

A Proposal to House GAO in Southwest Washington

Congress considered alternate sites for a GAO building during the 1930s, including a square at the southwest corner of the Capitol grounds; space on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue between 3d and 4-1/2 Streets N.W.; and Square 534, between B, C, 4-1/2, and 3d Streets S.W. (At the time, there were two B Streets in Washington. The one bordering the Mall on the north later was renamed Constitution Avenue, and the one on the southern border of the Mall became Independence Avenue). Square 534, the location of Willow Tree playground, received the most consideration, as planning officials worked out a tentative plan for a five-story GAO headquarters building with a basement for files storage.

The chairman of the planning commission wrote to President Roosevelt in support of the Willow Tree proposal. He asserted that “completing the acquisition of this square would clean up one of the worst and most historic slum neighborhoods in Washington.” In the period before World War II, 4-1/2 Street, described as “obnoxious” by the local black civic association, was the border between segregated white and black sections of southwest Washington. From 1900 until an urban renewal effort cleared the area between 1954 and 1960, the Southwest section contained low-income housing and notorious alley slums. Willow Tree playground stood on the site of Willow Tree Alley, a block that so symbolized the worst of the slums that there was a carefully organized campaign to tear down its dwellings in 1913.

Although GAO agreed to a move to the Southwest section of the city, money remained tight and planning officials made no final decision on the Willow Tree site proposal. They continued to debate various options for a headquarters building. GAO’s need to house records as well as employees was so great that in 1936, planners considered building a separate records storage building for it across the street from the Pension Building. This was the first time officials looked at Square 518, site of the present headquarters building, as a possible location for a GAO facility.



Chapter 7

How the War Stopped Construction of a GAO Building

While documents show no recorded objections by GAO to the Southwest location, its officials continued to press for a more centrally located headquarters site downtown. In October 1940 Congress authorized \$9,850,000 for the acquisition of Square 518, the block across from the Pension Building, for a GAO headquarters building. The Commission of Fine Arts and the national capital planning commissioners considered plans for a limestone-faced six-story GAO building with a “fishbone” structure, consisting of a central section and flanking wings. The use of wings would allow the maximum amount of natural daylight into the offices. Preliminary sketches show a building similar to that built in 1936 for the Department of Interior on the Mall.



Scene from block of current GAO building as it appeared in 1941



St. Mary's church as it appeared around 1941

St. Mary's Catholic Church stands on the northwest corner of Square 518 at 5th and H Streets, N.W. Although Square 518 presently is in the Chinatown section of Washington, the neighborhood was home to many German-American businessmen from the 1860s until well after World War II. Photographs suggest that there also were several businesses in the area that were owned by Greek-Americans.

Some local historians believe that land at 5th and H Streets was donated for construction of a church in order to attract more Germans to the neighborhood during the latter part of the nineteenth century. St. Mary's heard confessions in German as late as 1961. Only with the destruction for redevelopment in 1931 of a Chinatown then located at 4th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. did Chinese-American merchants begin to move into the neighborhood near Square 518. St. Mary's was so well established in the neighborhood, planning officials did not hold out much hope for buying the church property. In the end, they designed the GAO building around the church. The proposed building measured 640 feet on G Street and 400 feet on H Street.

Record Group 373, Union Station, 1940, NARA. Square 518 in 1940 from exhibit, “Washington: Behind the Monuments,” courtesy Emily Soapes, former Chief, Exhibits Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, 1990.



Square 518 contained a number of brick and frame row houses, small “mom and pop”-type stores, restaurants, garages, warehouses, stables, and a parking lot. The block was bisected near St. Mary’s Church by G Place, which ran from 4th to 5th Streets. The aerial photograph dates from 1940. The Pension Building is visible between F and G Streets. Square 518 fills the block between G and H Streets, with G Place splitting the block near St. Mary’s Church.

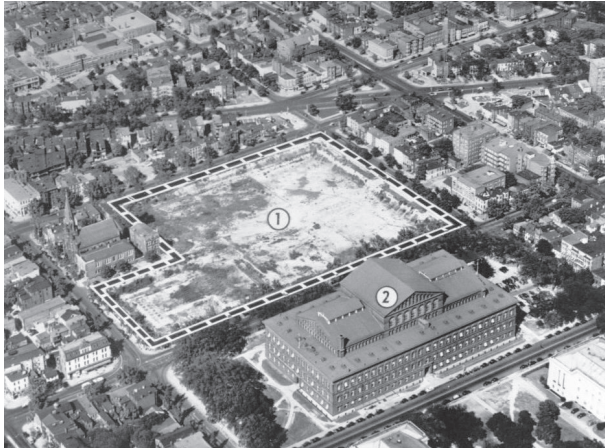


Photo from the Washington Star Collection, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Public Library



Square 518 in 1940 from exhibit, “Washington: Behind the Monuments,” courtesy Emily Soapes, former Chief, Exhibits Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, 1990.

In 1941, the government purchased plots from the individual property owners and razed the structures. The Commissioners of the District of Columbia closed and vacated G Place up to the point where the St. Mary’s church property began. Only a small alley, still marked as G Place, NW, remains next to the church property at the beginning of the 21st century as a reminder of a street that once cut through the entire block.

No sooner had excavation begun than it had to stop because of the United States’ entry into World War II on December 7, 1941. GAO could not get priority for building materials during wartime, and the construction site remained an empty lot, except for the church, until 1949.

GAO’s employees were squeezed into office buildings and warehouses at 20 different sites throughout the Washington area. They sometimes worked under difficult conditions during the war. Comptroller General Warren expressed concern about records “filed or stored largely on temporary wooden shelves, unprotected from dust, insects, and rodents, in buildings beset with fire and water hazards.” Washington’s summer heat caused problems as well. In an article headlined, “Sell the Grub First,” **The Washington Times-Herald** reported on July 21, 1942, that heat in a GAO warehouse at First and M Streets, N.W., reached 100 degrees by 10:30 a.m. Employees were not dismissed until 1:15 p.m., after the cafeteria had disposed of its lunchtime stock. The newspaper added that in the meantime, there reportedly were 52 “calls to the sick room.”

It would have been reasonable to expect that after the war ended, Congress soon would appropriate funds for a GAO building. However, the way in which the war ended caused further delays in public works projects. Caught short by the dropping of the atomic bomb, which had been developed in tight secrecy, government planners



struggled with the transition to a peacetime economy. Lacking knowledge of the bomb, economists and other officials had anticipated an end to the war in 1946, not 1945. Construction supplies and spending remained tight after the war ended in August 1945. After lifting controls over building materials in the U.S. in October 1945, Truman found he had to re-impose them a few months later, as returning veterans confronted a huge housing shortage. Homes for GIs and emergency construction projects received priority consideration while GAO continued to wait for a building.



Chapter 8

Congress Approves a Building for GAO

In October 1945, a bill for a GAO headquarters building was introduced in the House of Representatives. However, because money for construction was tight, Congress in 1946 asked GAO to keep waiting. Comptroller General Warren and his deputy continued to press their case for a new headquarters. In 1947, Assistant Comptroller General Frank L. Yates explained to Congress how difficult it was to work out of 21 different buildings:

“. . . every action of the Office must be taken upon one record, an accounting record. It might be a contract; it might be a disbursing officer’s account; a voucher, a check, or a claim, or a report of investigation, and the severe handicap arises from the fact that many times the record that is wanted in one part of the Office to enable the preparation of a decision, in another part for the preparation of a reported investigation, and yet another part for the settlement of a claim, cannot be in all those places at once, so the work has to be held up until that record can be carried from one building, perhaps in Alexandria or out at Friendship, over near the Sears, Roebuck Building, back and forth, from place to place.”

Warren told Congress on April 23, 1947, that GAO was faced with a “critical situation” because some of its buildings were “not fit for human beings to work in. . . some of them are insanitary and some of them could be classed as firetraps.” The Comptroller General said, “We are the agent of Congress, and we now think it is high time that the Congress looks after its child, at least so far as giving us proper housing is concerned.” Before taking charge of GAO, Warren represented North Carolina in Congress for eight terms and briefly served as Acting Majority Leader. He and GAO were held in high esteem by legislators and the Comptroller General’s pleas found a sympathetic audience in the Congress.

Finally, in 1948, Congress approved \$22,850,000 for the construction. President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 533 on May 18, 1948. The next year Congress passed supplementary legislation increasing the funding to \$25,400,000. Authorization for a building represented a significant achievement for GAO. As historian Roger Trask noted in 1996, “By its willingness to give GAO sufficient funding and staff and, ultimately, an imposing new building, Congress signaled its recognition of GAO’s contributions and its support for the Office.”



Construction site of GAO’s headquarters building, ca. 1940.



John McShain, Inc., a well-known Philadelphia construction firm, won the contract for building GAO's headquarters. Construction began in 1949 and finished in 1951. Office space in Washington, already tight, again was affected by a military build-up, as the Korean conflict flared up. The General Services Administration (GSA) negotiated a deal with the McShain company that allowed GAO employees to move into sections of the building as they were completed. On September 28, 1950, the Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service (PBS) asked the General Accounting Office to consider temporarily occupying part of the east end of the partially constructed building, thus freeing up some space in the Pension Building for defense needs. As meeting minutes show, GAO's officials debated whether they should accept. They concluded that it would be best to move into the structure as "actual occupancy would give GAO 'squatters' rights, thereby preventing its being considered for assignment to some other agency."

Although GAO agreed to the first interim move, officials later expressed concern about "habitability and working conditions" in a building still under construction. In April 1951, the Office rebuffed a subsequent request by PBS to move in more employees. GAO's officials objected because drilling and installation of partitions was to be done during office hours. On May 11, 1951, Assistant Comptroller General Yates informed GAO's executive officer that "no further moves to interim space are to be considered—that is, no moves except to space which the moving unit is scheduled to occupy permanently when the building is wholly completed." He added, "moves of units even to space to be occupied permanently will not be made where work remaining to be completed during working hours will disrupt functioning of the units such as the drilling for and installation of runners for metal partitions."

In the end, PBS worked out a compromise. Mr. Yates noted that Commissioner [W. E.] Reynolds "advised me . . . that he has arranged with the partition contractor to complete all drilling work and all installation of the partition runners at night. This will leave only the placing of the partitions in the runners during office hours and for such hammering as may be required rubber hammers will be used."

The Comptroller General shared his view of the new headquarters building in a letter sent to all employees. He told them that "in addition to strengthening the Office so that its operations may be conducted with increased economy and efficiency, this consolidation provides a means of renewing old acquaintances and molding us into one big family." He explained that

" . . . we were urged to move into our new building several months ahead of the contract completion date due to the critical space situation. Consequently, we have all had to endure many inconveniences and discomforts, some of which might not be remedied until the structure is entirely completed. However, when it is considered that over 1,000,000 square feet of space will have been made available to the National Defense Program months in advance of the scheduled completion date of the building, I feel sure that each of you will take such inconveniences and discomforts in stride. It will not be too long before we can settle down in our permanent quarters and enjoy the many modern facilities that our new home will provide."



Chapter 9

The President Lays the Cornerstone for GAO's Building



President Truman laying cornerstone of GAO headquarters building, 9/11/51

Comptroller General Warren stood next to President Truman as he laid the GAO building's cornerstone.

GAO's new headquarters building was dedicated on September 11, 1951. President Harry S. Truman attended the ceremony and laid the cornerstone. In his speech, the President talked about the perception by government officials that GAO was "a bugaboo that keeps them from doing what they want to do" and that many people outside the government considered GAO "a dry and boring subject." The President assured his audience that "the General Accounting Office is neither a bugaboo nor a bore. It is a vital part of our Government. Its work is of great benefit to all of us. The people who run the General Accounting Office certainly deserve these new and better quarters." He congratulated GAO for handling "the biggest auditing job in the history of mankind."

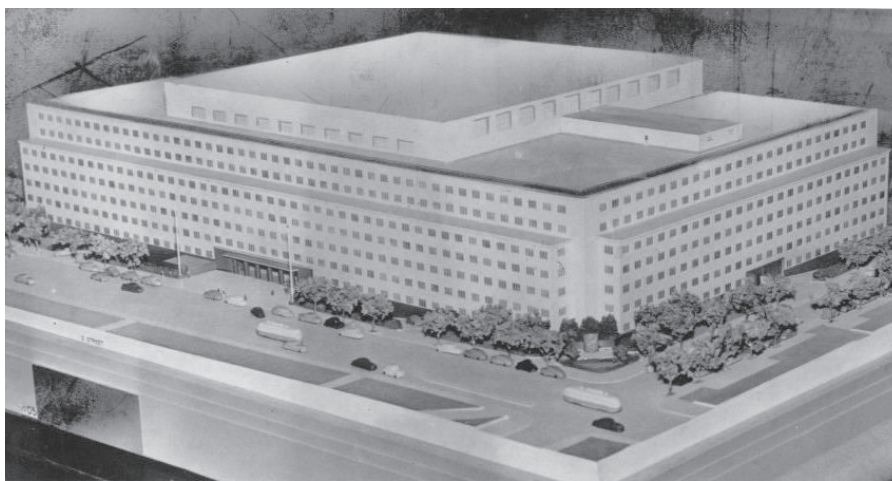
The building's cornerstone is located to the right of the G Street entrance door. Inscribed on it are several names, including President Truman, Comptroller General Warren, and builder John McShain. Sealed within the cornerstone are commemorative items: copies of addresses given by Truman and Warren at the September 11, 1951 dedication ceremony; construction photos; current issues of coins and postage stamps; the 1951 GAO telephone directory; the fiscal year 1951 federal budget in brief; GAO's 1950 annual report; and a September 11, 1951, Washington newspaper.

At the time it opened, the GAO building was the largest air-conditioned structure in the capital city. In the greater Washington area, only the Pentagon in suburban Northern Virginia then surpassed GAO's building in size. A historic structures report prepared for GSA in 1990 noted that the completed building covered a ground area of 209,200 square feet and appeared as "a solid block set squarely on the ground" with walls that "rise sheer and unadorned."



A fact sheet prepared at the time of the building dedication explained that GAO's new headquarters:

- had a total gross area of 1,935,500 square feet, and a volume of 25,862,00 cubic feet,
- had over 1,000 windows,
- measured 638 feet on G Street and 388 feet on 4th Street,
- provided parking for approximately 800 cars in its garage,
- had a cafeteria on the third floor that was equipped to serve 7,500 meals a day,
- was served by twelve passenger elevators, two escalators “to handle the peak morning and afternoon loads” and four freight elevators. The escalators served floors one through five, and remained operational until the early 1990s.



Model of GAO building, 1949, showing proposed outdoor sculpture.

This model of the GAO building from 1949 shows that architects originally envisioned placing outdoor sculptures at the corners of the structure

Inside, the interior reflects a style popular in the late 1940s, when architects and designers drew up plans for the building. The style is called Art Moderne or Late Depression Modern. It is similar to the stylized Art Deco design popularized in the 1920s, but is somewhat more austere and streamlined. The 1st floor elevator lobbies in GAO's building reflect Art Moderne style in the use of stylized lotus motifs and the repetitive groupings of horizontal lines and geometric shapes.

Planning officials considered putting outdoor sculptures at the corners of the building, but decided in the end simply to landscape the areas. Although they recommended placing murals in the entrance lobbies, budget difficulties prevented GAO from carrying out these plans. Bas relief sculptures designed by Joseph Kiselewski adorn the G Street entrance. However, GAO could not find the money to finish similar decorations designed by Lee Lawrie for the H Street entrance.



The panels at the G Street entrance show professional people and laborers. On April 25, 1952, The Evening Star described the new bas-reliefs. In an article headlined, “Brief Case Boys Cut in Granite at New GAO Building Entrance,” The Star took note of one figure:

“The brief case boys, familiar figures on the Washington scene, have been immortalized in sculpture. One of their number forms part of two sculptured panels flanking the south entrance on G street N.W. of the new General Accounting Office Building. Toting his brief case, he is carved in enduring granite. About 30 figures on the two panels symbolize the various activities of Government on which the GAO rides herd. The man with the brief case symbolizes the business activities of Government and Government’s relations with private business. He is not tagged, however. The observer, therefore, may write his own ticket. The man with the brief case may be regarded as an harassed businessman summoned before a congressional committee. Or a happy businessman with a government contract in the brief case. Or a Government official on his way to a policy-making huddle with other officials.”

Elevator in main lobby, GAO building Inside the building, the elevator doors contain aluminum bas-reliefs by Heinz Warneke, a German sculptor who moved to the United States in 1925. They reflect the Art Moderne style popular in the late 1940s. Warneke’s elevator door panels represent the spirit of laws, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, liberty, justice, internal development, national ideology, and national security. Smaller panels around the framework of the sliding elevator doors represent sunlight, rain, snow, wind, hydrography, energy-matter, geology, and astronomy. The photograph above shows the original Art Moderne elements in the elevator lobby on the G Street side of the GAO building. When GAO undertook an extensive modernization of interior space in the 1990s, designers echoed the original Art Moderne style in new doorways and light fixtures throughout the building.



Elevator lobby, GAO building, reflecting original 1949 design Newly renovated hallway, 1999, echoing Art Moderne elements.



The new design for a hallway renovated in the 1990s reflects the GAO building’s original “Art Moderne” style.



Chapter 10

Changes in GAO and Its Building

Mindful of GAO's need to store heavy records, the architects used a flat slab construction that supported heavy loads on each floor. GAO's building was designed to hold records in its center. Ironically, by the time the building was finished, GAO had started moving away from the voucher auditing that required centralized examination of so many individual government expenditure records. The ability to adapt to changing times has been a hallmark of GAO's history. Instead of examining vouchers, GAO moved in the early 1950s to "comprehensive auditing." This major change in GAO's work after World War II reflected practical considerations as well as national and Congressional needs. After the war, Comptroller General Warren sought to make better use of GAO's resources and to increase the Office's effectiveness. In the late 1940s, GAO began auditing government corporations, performing "comprehensive audits," and working with executive agencies to improve their accounting systems.

Instead of concentrating on individual fiscal transactions, GAO began reviewing financial management and internal controls at government agencies. Responsibility for checking vouchers shifted to the various executive agencies, as GAO focused on prescribing accounting principles, performing site audits, and checking financial controls and procedures. The move to comprehensive auditing represented a major turning point for GAO. The agency reduced the number of voucher clerks in its employ and began hiring accountants. In 1951, when GAO moved into its new headquarters building, it employed just under 7,000 people, less than half the number that had been on the rolls in 1946.

GAO has continue to evolve in the decades since its building opened. In 1954, Joseph Campbell became the first accountant to head GAO. He further developed the concept of comprehensive auditing and expanded the recruiting program begun by Warren. Campbell worked to hire more accountants and to raise the professional level of GAO's staff. The effort paid off, as by 1965 over half the agency's employees were college graduates. Campbell emphasized defense contract audits and worked closely with GAO's field offices.

Campbell's successor, Elmer B. Staats, was a strong advocate of public service and constructive change, who worked to improve management throughout the government. The late 1960s and early 1970s brought another major shift in GAO's work. Under Staats, the Office further developed internal training programs, increased its services to Congress, broadened its work and moved into program evaluation. GAO did important work on energy issues, consumer protection, the economy, and New York City's fiscal crisis.

Charles A. Bowsher served as Comptroller General from 1981 to 1996. Under Bowsher, GAO examined a broad range of issues and worked to strengthen federal financial management. The office issued key reports on budget issues, the savings and loan crisis, weapons development, defense issues, the nuclear breeder reactor, the Social Security Trust Fund, health care, the agriculture crisis, the environment and transportation. GAO also began issuing a series of High Risk reports, which provided information on federal activities susceptible to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement.



Today, under the leadership of Comptroller General David M. Walker, GAO helps Congress address issues that define the 21st century. GAO conducts a wide range of financial and performance audits and program evaluations. The Office's reviews take a professional and objective look at the business of government and the missions of government. The modern GAO also is committed to government reform--to helping government agencies become organizations that are results oriented and accountable to the public.

From the time its headquarters building opened, GAO has sought to provide comfortable and up-to-date workspace for its employees. The outside of the building has changed little and looks very much as it did in when the building was dedicated in 1951. Modifications to the exterior include the addition of an entrance door at the northeast corner, construction of a child care center playground at 5th and G Streets, and construction of new sidewalks. Because of various modernization projects, the inside of the building has changed more than the outside. Some of the changes have been driven by modifications in the way GAO works, others by technological advances.



Chapter 11

Hot and Cold Spots and Wind Tunnels

The first large-scale renovation effort occurred in the 1970s. The original vents and returns were designed to move air efficiently in the perimeter offices and an open interior space. Since GAO no longer needed to store records in the interior, it built offices in the center of the structure. Soon after the building opened, problems developed with “hot and cold spots” and “wind tunnels” because of what one official later described as “random construction” of offices and cubicles in the interior. Even the Comptroller General’s suite was not spared. In 1957, GAO’s administrative officer wrote to the building superintendent about problems in the executive suite:

“The stale, musty odors previously mentioned are reported to be particularly bad in this area and such odors tend to increase as the temperature begins to rise. Also, the occupants of this area have reported that the air becomes heavy and oppressive as the day progresses and becomes almost intolerable by mid-afternoon. Further, they report a feeling of extreme drowsiness and fatigue and, contrary to recommended procedures, find it necessary to leave the doors to the outer corridor open and to operate electric fans at the floor level in order to circulate the air. Conversely, they report that when the temperature is lowered to counteract this condition, the air becomes cool and drafty and results in considerable personal discomfort.”



Comptroller General Warren in his office in the 1950s.

The use of indirect lighting in the executive suite also caused problems. Noting that the poor lighting was affecting the eyes of the Comptroller General, the Assistant Comptroller General, and their immediate staffs, the administrative officer asked the Public Buildings Service to take corrective action. Elsewhere in the building, some employees took matters into their own hands and removed the covers from the trough-like light fixtures in an effort to improve lighting. In 1964,

the administrative officer had to circulate a reminder to employees not to tamper with the lights but to report problems to the General Services Administration.

Judged by present day design standards, the general look of the interior of GAO’s building was dull, with pale green or beige walls and dark green or medium gray office furniture. Larry Herrmann, who was GAO’s director of administrative services, described workspace in the 1950s and 1960s in an article written for **The GAO Review**:

“Few people below the GS-15 level had any work space that they could call their own, unless a desk in an office occupied by three or four other people would



qualify; often four GS-13s would be found together. There was no privacy and one telephone might be shared by all of the occupants. The phones rang incessantly, throughout a work area, and getting an answer was a sometime thing. As late as 1968, one could stand at one spot on the fifth floor and see nearly 500 employees in the transportation audit function going about their daily activities.”



Some employees worked in cubicles or offices but in 1952, desks often filled large open areas, such as this one in the Reconciliation and Clearance Division.



Hallway as it appeared during the 1950s-1960s.

Some employees worked in cubicles or offices but in 1952, desks often filled large open areas, such as this one in the Reconciliation and Clearance Division.

GAO undertook a major renovation of its building during the tenure of Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats. Officials sought to improve lighting and ventilation and to provide new furnishings for employees. In the 1970s, GSA began to emphasize “office landscaping,” an integrated program of design concepts. In 1970, it remodeled a section of the GAO Building’s first floor to serve as a design model. Then, between 1972 and 1978, GAO renovated and refurbished over 450,000 square feet of space at a total cost of over \$3,216,000.

Portable vinyl-covered particle board partitioning with attached shelving replaced the existing 7-foot high plasterboard partitions and old metal partitions. New ceilings, lights, and carpets (11 acres worth, according to Herrmann), brightened the work areas. Air feed bars, disguised as black dividing channels in the new ceiling, and changes in the air ducts, helped improve circulation. Some 4,000 telephones were “installed, moved, upgraded, or rearranged.” Modern office furniture replaced the old furnishings. Many of the new furnishings were burnt orange, yellow, beige, or avocado green, hues popular with designers in the 1970s.



Renovated hallway during the late 1970s.



Chapter 12

GAO Takes Charge of Its Building

In the late 1970s, the General Services Administration began an asbestos removal program in the GAO building. Originally scheduled for completion by 1982, the GSA effort ran into delays because of safety problems, a lack of funds, and increasing costs. In 1983, GAO informed Congress about the delays in asbestos removal and other problems with GSA. The Senate Committee on Appropriations called for the Comptroller General to work with GSA to assure timely removal of asbestos. It added that if a resolution was not worked out, it would consider “recommending the transfer of building ownership to the Comptroller General.” GAO continued to express concern about delays in a number of GSA-run projects, and in 1987 the two agencies agreed to work out a transfer of custody. With the signing of Public Law 100-545 on October 28, 1988, the Comptroller General took over exclusive custody and control of the building.

An extensive modernization effort occurred during the tenure of Comptroller General Charles A. Bowsher. Again, the reasons were practical and aesthetic. GAO had to upgrade its electrical and communications network in order to support computers, local area networks, and other modern technology. Its managers also sought to improve the physical surroundings by providing staff with a pleasant work environment. A floor-by-floor asbestos



Renovated GAO office, 1999.

removal and renovation project began in the mid-1980s, and continued through the 1990s. In addition to improving office and conference room space, the renovation effort included remodeling the Comptroller General's suite and the cafeteria, moving and modernizing the GAO Technical Library, and constructing a fitness center and day-care center.

In 1994, employees of two divisions moved into newly renovated space on the fourth floor. According to the **GAO Management News** (November 21-25, 1994),

“The floor plan was designed to let in as much natural light as possible while providing individual workspace for each employee. Offices and cubicles, painted in pleasant shades of maroon, blue, and taupe, have been designed with GAO’s computer network in mind; electrical systems and phone lines have been enhanced to meet the demands created by GAO’s increased reliance on computers and telecommunications. Each office has been outfitted with ergonomic furniture and work stations to enhance productivity. Team rooms throughout the space enable staff members to work together on jobs; and a large conference room, outfitted with videoconferencing equipment, provides space for large gatherings.”



The modernization effort continued into the year 2000, with employees moving into newly refurbished space on the second floor in 1996, the fifth floor in 1997, and the sixth floor in late 1999 and early 2000.



Chapter 13

The “Dream House” Becomes a Model Building



GAO building.

In December 1995, the GAO building was named to the National Register of Historic Places as a symbol of modern block-type federal office design. Architectural historians of the National Park Service concluded that the building warranted recognition because it exemplified American federal design at mid-century:

“Its exterior is characterized by the repetition of simple, rectangular forms in both the massing and fenestration, by overall symmetry of arrangement, by the minimal detailing, and by the uniformly horizontal emphasis In addition to introducing a modern style of architecture for the federal government, the GAO building is an important example of a new type of federal office building. Its construction marked a distinct break from the ‘fishbone’ type of office building which used either interior courts or a series of wings branching from a central spine in order to provide both air and light. . . . The place of the GAO building established a model that would be followed for both federal and private office buildings throughout Washington, D.C.” In assessing GAO’s headquarters building, architectural historians Laura V. Trieschmann and Laura H. Hughes wrote that the building displayed “distinctive construction techniques and decorative motifs that were characteristic of the mid-20th century.” They noted in 1995 that forty-four years after it opened for business, the “GAO Building is in exceptional structural condition and remains essentially intact despite a few modifications required to increase building security.” Trieschmann and Hughes concluded that “the fusion of new aesthetic ideas, new structural ideas, and new technological ideas into a single building marks a significant step in federal design. The GAO building represents the beginning of a new age.”

From the time GAO’s headquarters opened in 1951, the agency’s officials have taken care to preserve the building’s character while providing staff with a comfortable work environment. With the completion of the recent modernization effort, the building once hailed as a “dream house” will continue to serve GAO well for many years to come.



As has its building, GAO has adapted to changing times while retaining its fundamental character. Under Comptroller General David M. Walker, GAO remains committed to core values of accountability, integrity and reliability. GAO's reports cover everything from the challenges of an aging population and the demands of the information age to emerging national security threats and the complexities of globalization. By examining federal programs and operations, GAO helps ensure that the government is answerable to the American people.

The modern GAO relies on a workforce of highly trained professionals who hold degrees in many academic disciplines, such as accounting, law, engineering, public and business administration, economics, and the social and physical sciences. As Comptroller General Walker has noted, "the agency that once checked government vouchers has become a multidisciplinary professional services organization equipped to handle the Congress's toughest audit and evaluation assignments."

