

BENCHES OF THE STATE HOUSE YARD

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Prepared by

Park Historian Robert J. Colbern

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Independence National Historical Park

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

February 1962

Region Five
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pa.

H30

May 14, 1962

Willcox
5/14/

Calvin
5/14

Memorandum

To: Director
From: Regional Director
**Subject: Benches of the State House Yard,
Independence**

We are pleased to forward one copy of a brief historical report on the benches of the State House Yard, prepared by Park Historian Robert Colborn. It represents, in our opinion, a useful survey of the available evidence.

(Sgd.) Ronald F. Lee

Regional Director

In duplicate

Enclosure

FBarnes/MHN/bg

General
Daily
Area

The first reference made to benches being placed in the State House Yard occurs in October 1786 when a William Roberts acknowledged receipt of payment "for sawing fifteen Red cedar plank of two feet for Garden Seats." This reference to cedar planks two feet in width is followed only days later by an order from Samuel Vaughan to pay the same William Roberts for "making two Garden Seats of Redcear [sic] 7 ft 9¹ Long."

Something more than a decade later, in 1797, it was ordered that "eight benches similar to those in the State House Yard" be constructed. In July of 1797, a "Smith & Allison" were paid not only for building the eight new benches, but also for "mending the old ones." The bill for this work included payments for lumber, nails, and "41 Rivets from black Smith." These eight new benches were "painted," as a payment to "Robert Haydock & Co." proves, but no specific color is mentioned.

In an account rendered for the improvement of the State House Yard in 1786, however, there is a strong suggestion as to how the Yard's benches were treated. In the same Work Book entry which lists payment for "sawing fifteen red cedar logs for seats," there is also a "bill for Red Cedar Logs for Chairs." The entry immediately following is for "1 quart Boild [sic] Oil p bill for painting D^o [ditto]." The oil made reference to, of course, was linseed oil--but whether it was used as a primer coat in this case or as a way of treating benches designed solely

for outside use is not made clear. However, it is entirely logical that these red cedar benches were finished in this way not only as a means of preserving them, but also as a method of harmonizing them with their exterior surroundings. Moreover, this conclusion does not do violence to any of the pictographic evidence available for the period. Two Birch prints, one dated 1799 ("Back of the State House, Philadelphia"), the other dated c. 1799-1800 ("State House Garden, Philadelphia"), depict the Yard's benches as having retained the color of unpainted wood.

The Birch prints are also useful in determining the design of these early State House Yard benches. In over-all appearance, the benches bear a strong resemblance to eighteenth century church pews. The back and the seat, as well as the bench ends, are shown to be solid pieces. In profile, the dominant feature of the bench ends is the cyma reversa curve of the front edge which forms the arm rest. The rear edge is angled in such a way as to suggest that the upper portion of the bench sloped comfortably back while the widening which occurs at the bottom of the bench end was designed to give greater stability to the base. In these aspects the benches shown in the Birch prints bear a strong resemblance to those in use since 1804 (but five years after Birch) at the Friends' Arch Street Meeting House. It is likely that a semi-circular portion was sawed out of the base, once again for purposes of stabilizing the bench. No molding is suggested by the lineal representations available, and it was probably avoided for fear that water would have entered around it, thereby causing decay.

In arriving at the design of the benches to be placed in the State House Yard, the most careful attention should be given to "garden seat" which is depicted in William Birch's "Back of the State House, Philadelphia," published in or about 1799. A framed copy of this print is in the possession of the Museum Branch of Independence National Historical Park and should be used as the basis for any final rendering of the design. The most crucial single item of design is the bench end. Generally, its lines should be kept simple and uncomplicated. The front edge at the top should be kept narrow and should dip down at the arm rest only to rise again at the hand rest. At this point, what could be called a rounded hand grip was allowed to develop, after which the line would have proceeded perpendicularly to the ground. The rear edge in most cases seems to have curved slightly in such a way as to allow the back to slope comfortably away. The base was apparently often rounded out in a manner that resulted in the development of what were essentially two short feet, thus producing greater stability.

APPENDIX

[Work Rolls, June-November 1786, 3A, Independence Square, State House Records, Division of Public Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

July 7 - November 30, 1786

Expenditures for the Improving of State House Yard

1786						
Octb ^r	23	To half a Gallon of boild oil p receipt)		No	1	.4.6
		for chairs & Closets				
	27	To 3 quarts d ^o d ^o d ^o			2	.6.9
		To W ^m Roberts bill for Carpenters Work				
		making 2 Chairs			3	7.0.0
	21	To J. Gostelowe's bill for Red Cedar Logs				
		for Chairs			4	2.15.6
	31	To 1 quart Boild Oil p bill for painting D ^o			5	.2.3
Nov ^r	2	To Jacob Heinison [Hunison?] bill for 14-3/4				
		days hauling sand &c for paving			6	7.7.6
	4	To 11 Loads of Gravel @ 2/ p bill for D ^o			7	1.2.0
		To M ^r Beaks for Painting Boxes in Yard 1-1/4				
		days @ 7/13				.8.9

Paid by M^r Vaughan

July	7	To W ^m Murray for 3-1/4 days Work, Leveling				
		&c, @ 4/6 Leveling			8	.14.8
	10	To Jacob Heinison, a horse & cart 1 day				
		removing Earth D ^o			9	.10.-
	27	To d ^o for hauling 4 loads Sand & 1 of Bricks				
		for paving			10	.6.3
Aug.	15	To John Parker for Bricks & Paving p acco ^t			11	.1.7
Oct.	11	To W ^m Roberts for Sawing 15 Red Cedar Logs				
		for Seats			12	.15.-

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[Maintenance Vouchers, March-December 1786, J-Independence Square, State House Records, Division of Public Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

October 27, 1786

The Honrable Executive Councill of Pennsylvania

To William Roberts D^r

1786 To Making two Garden Seats of Redcear [Red cedar?] 7 ft 9¹ Long £ 7..0..0

Octob^r ye 27 By orders of Samuel Vaughan

[other side:]

No 3

[Report of Robert Allison and John Smith, State House Records, Division of Public Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

May 18, 1797

By request I have examined the decays of of [sic] the capping of the Walls of the State house yard and find in many places round wants repairs besides 170 feet on the East must be done all new.- Eight benches similar to those in the State House Yard--To include all materials workmanship as near as I can estimate will amount to between sixty and seventy pounds Bills of lumber nails &c. Bills shall be delivered workman ship valued as customary

May 18th 1797

For the approbation of
the Governor--

Robert Allison
John Smith

approved June 3rd 1797

T. Mifflin

A true Copy

James Trimble
Deputy Sec^y

[Bill of Robert Haydock & Co., State House Records, Division of Public Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

August 16, 1797

Common Wealth of Pennsylvania	D ^r
Aug ^t 16 1797	To Robert Haydock & CO
To painting the Coppen of State House Wall as p Estimate,	
80 p ^{ts}	£ 30-0-0
To 8 Benches painted for Ditto	7.4.0
18/0	
	£ 37.4.0
	or \$99.20

I do hereby Certifie that the above Work has been Done to the
State hous yard

Joseph Fry

[Bill of Smith and Allison, State House Records, Division of Public Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

July 3, 1797

State of Pennsylvania to Smith & Allison D^r
Coping 156 feet of State house wall A new Mending and patching in
many places all around---

Eight new Benches to Stand in ye Yard mending Y ^e old ones & c.	
Amounts to	34..12..8
To Carting ye Lumber and Carring up the benches by hand	1.. 6..3
Lumber for Ditto as p Bill	33..12..7
Ditto as p Bill for Nails	3.. 6..7
41 Rivets from black Smith	1.. 4..6
	£ 74.. 2..7

July 3 1797 or \$197.68

I do hereby certify that the above, mentioned work hath been done by
Smith & Allison.

Joseph Fry

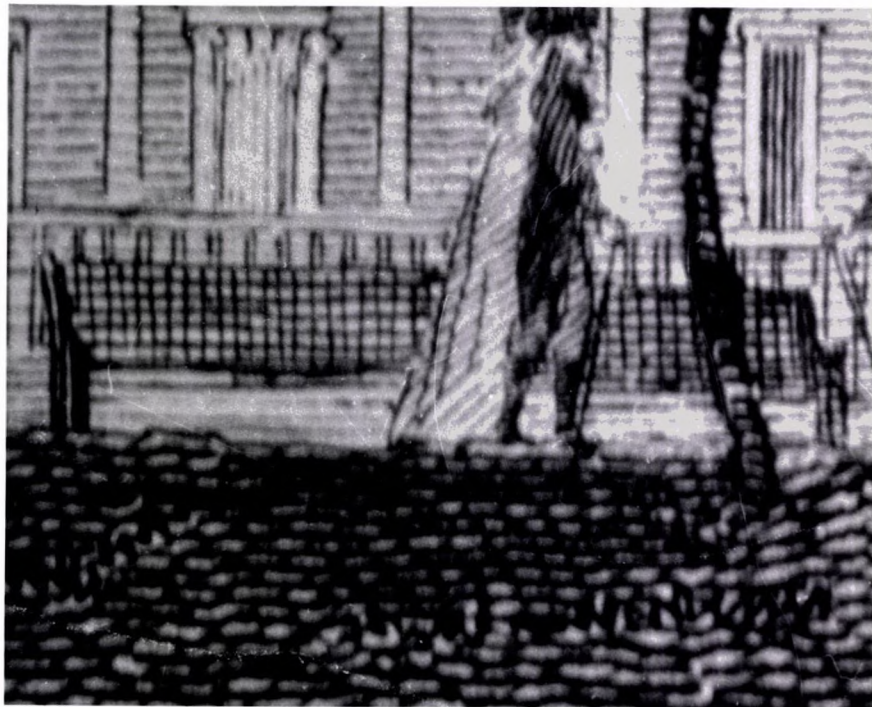
[Voucher of Nickolas Pickels, State House Records, Division of Public
Records, Harrisburg, Pa.]

June 23, 1797

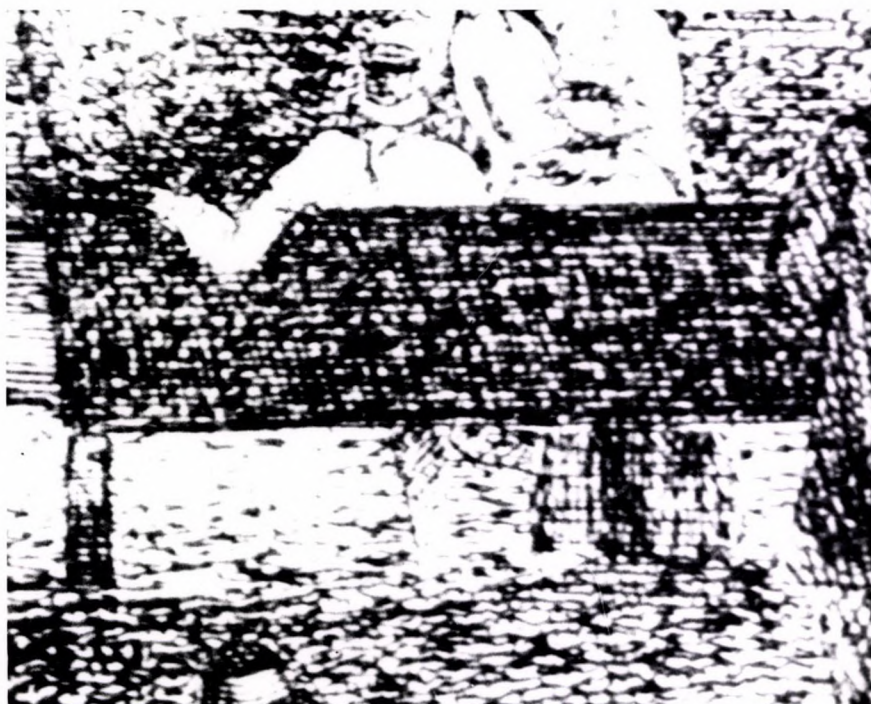
Philad^a the 23 June 1797
Col^l Elison & Smith
To Nickolas Pickels D^r
To 42 Rivits & burs dellivered for the use of the } £ 1..4..6
state house yard }

Re^d th above in full from Col^l Elison
Nicholas Pickels

ILLUSTRATIONS



Detail from Birch's "Back of the State House, Philadelphia," dated 1799. The back and the bench ends are both shown to be solid pieces. Note especially the curvature of the front edge of the bench end and the comfortable angle at which the back slopes.



Enlargement from Birch's "State House Garden, Philadelphia," dated c. 1799-1800. Solid back piece is shown, and the thickness of the bench end is indicated. Seated man with arm draped over the bench's back suggests the height of the bench.