

**A STUDY OF
PHILADELPHIA WATCHBOXES**

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**Revised
July 1964**

PREFATORY NOTE

In May 1961 Mr. Robert J. Colborn of the Independence Historical staff prepared a planning study of Philadelphia watchboxes, using only data already in the Park's research note card file. Since then further research has uncovered additional materials and suggested reworking of the first study. With the projected construction of a number of watchboxes early in 1964, Mr. Colborn undertook to revise the study in the form here presented.

**John D. R. Platt
Chief of Research**

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Early History of the Watch

In 1664 the period of Dutch authority on the Delaware came to a close. One of the first ordinances published after the conquest of the area by the English was concerned with providing a measure of protection for the citizens of the small community between the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. On June 14, 1671, it was directed "'That constables be appointed to keep the King's peace, who shall have staves with the King's arms upon them as practised in the rest of His Royal Highness's dominions'." (H. O. Sprogle, The Philadelphia Police Past and Present [Phila., 1887], p. 8.)

The first notice respecting the watch in Philadelphia after the beginning of William Penn's proprietorship occurred in 1684. In that year, the Provincial Council recommended "'to ye Justices of This towne, to take care of the same'." (Sprogle, p. 20.) It is known that a town watch was in existence by the last years of the seventeenth century, for at a Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions held on March 5, 1694-95, it was "'ordered that a Warrt. be drawn for the keeping the Watch, And that Negroes & loose people be taken up that are playing about the Streets on the First day'." (Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography, Vol. LXXVII [October 1953], p. 471.) Further evidence pointing toward the existence of a watch is presented by the records of the Philadelphia County Court held later in the same year. At this sitting, the Grand Jury presented a group of five men "'as persons that are frequently found in Alehouses at unseasonable times of the Night and giving great abuses to the Watch....'" (Pennsylvania Magazine of History & Biography, Vol. LXXVII [October 1953], p. 477.)

The relationship of the night watchmen to Philadelphia's constabulary force is suggested by an order of Council dated July 1, 1700:

'It was unanimously agreed and assented to by ye Gov'r and Council That _____ be appointed, and is hereby authorized and empowered to go round ye town with a small bell in ye night time, to give notice of ye time of the night and the weather, and if anie disorders or danger happen by fire or otherwise in the night time to acquaint the constables thereof.' (Sprogle, p. 27.)

In these early days everyone took part in the watch. In the minutes of the Common Council for October 1704 is recorded an ordinance dividing the people of the town into ten patrols. It was ordered that "'each Constable bring in a Number to have an Equall Number assign'd to serve upon the Watch, and that nine persons besides the Constable Attend the Watch each night'." (Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia [Phila., 1884], I, 183.) It was the job of the constables to supervise the citizen watch. These early city watchmen were not a paid force. Members of the watch were drawn from the community at large. Regardless of station in life, every male citizen had to take his turn on duty, or furnish a substitute. (Bulletin of Friends' Historical Association, XXV [1936], No. 2, p. 60.)

Constables and watchmen alike were subject to fine if they refused to perform their assigned duties. (Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia [Phila., 1884], II, 874.) In 1704, Gyles Green and William Morris were presented by the Grand Jury for "'not serving their tour of duty as watchmen when nominated thereto'." (Scharf and Westcott, III, 874.) The names of such men as Joseph Shippen, Abram Carpenter, George Claypoole, and Henry Preston were recorded in 1706 as having been fined five pounds "'for neglect to serve as constables'." (Ibid.)

The session of the Common Council which established the watch on a formal basis in 1704 ordered at the same time "'That a Watch-house shall be built in the Market place, 16 feet long, and 14 wide'." (John F. Watson, Annals of Philadelphia [Phila., 1927], I, 59.) It seems that in the interim period a temporary structure was used, for the records of the Council for June 1, 1705, state:

'It is ordered that Alderman Carter and John Parsons do oversee the Repairs of the Old Cage [possibly the place of temporary confinement erected in 1683], to be converted into a Watch house for present occasion.' (Watson, I, 59.)

These early efforts by the Council to provide headquarters for the watch seem to have proved inadequate, for in 1710 the "'Mayor, Recorder, Aldermen, Commonality, and other Inhabitation'" petitioned the General Assembly for a grant of more liberal powers to the corporation in order to check the growth of vice and immorality, "'and also to enable them to build a watch-box and cage....'" The signers of this petition included nearly all the leading citizens of Philadelphia. (Scharf and Westcott, I, 187-88.) According to Howard O. Sprogle in his history of the Philadelphia police, the State House was at one time the headquarters of the watch, but no documentary evidence exists to support this claim. It is known, however, that during the Revolutionary period the old Court House at Market and Second Streets became the city watch house and was employed as such for many years. (Scharf and Westcott, III, 1779.)

The public watch was to retain a somewhat irregular character for many years. But as the mid-eighteenth century approached, it became increasingly clear that Philadelphia's rapid growth was rendering the

old system of watch and ward inadequate. In 1743, a grand jury boldly stated:

'The Watch for some time past has been a great expense to the Citizens and the charge thereof unequal and grievous to the poorer part of the Citizens...a less sum than what was yearly collected on that account raised by an equal assessment and properly managed might in a short time be sufficient to build a watch-house and support a stated watch, who would be more diligent and careful and go their hourly rounds during the whole night.' (Scharf and Westcott, III, 1777.)

The Common Council agreed with this analysis of the situation and noted that a stated watch, paid for by the city, would be the most effective means of providing for the public safety. Application was made for authority to establish such a watch, but this authority was not forthcoming.

In January of 1751, Dr. Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette took up the cry for a more adequate system of city watch:

'...we Think it our duty to offer again to the Court, the Consideration of the Insufficiency of the nightly Watch, so often recommended by former Grand Juries...The Insults upon the Inhabitants, by wicked and disorderly Persons, taking Advantage of the Weakness as well as the Irregularity of the Watch, was one Cause among others, That induced former Juries to move for a more effectual Security...we earnestly press, That the Court will be pleased to endeavour...to obtain a Law, that we may be no longer deprived of the great Advantage and Security that would attend it.' (Pennsylvania Gazette, January 8, 1751; p. 2, col. 2.)

Public opinion was apparently of such weight that the demand for a better regulated watch could no longer be put aside. On February 9, 1751, Governor James Hamilton gave his approval to a bill proposed by the General Assembly entitled:

AN ACT FOR THE BETTER REGULATING THE NIGHTLY WATCH WITHIN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, AND FOR ENLIGHTENING THE STREETS, LANES AND ALLEYS OF THE SAID CITY FOR DEFRAYING THE NECESSARY EXPENSES THEREOF. (The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, Vol. 5, p. 111.)

Under the provisions of this act, a committee of six gentlemen termed

"wardens" was authorized to "order, appoint, hire and employ what number of watchmen they shall judge necessary and proper." These gentlemen were also empowered to "direct and order what wages shall be given," and could at any time remove a watchman for "neglecting his duty or misbehaving."

(Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, V, 112.) It was the duty of the mayor, recorder, and four aldermen, together with the wardens, to

direct and set down in writing at what stands it is fit for the said watchmen to be placed, how often they shall go their rounds; and also appoint the rounds each watchman is to go and order what number of [the] constables of the said city shall watch each night.... (Ibid., 112-13.)

Both constables and watchmen were ordered to keep watch and ward in the following manner:

From the tenth day of the month of March to the tenth day of September in every year, from the hours of ten in the evening until four the next morning; and from the tenth day of September to the tenth day of the month called March in every year, from nine in the evening until six in the morning. (Ibid., V, 113.)

It was the duty of constables and watchmen alike to arrest and apprehend all "night-walkers, malefactors and suspected persons who shall be found wandering and misbehaving themselves." (Ibid.) In fulfilling their special function as the eyes and the ears of the city, the night watchmen were called upon to be especially alert "in case of any fire breaking out or other great necessity." (Ibid.) When such an event occurred, they were to "immediately alarm each other and the inhabitants in their respective rounds." This done, they were to "repair to their respective stands" in order to watch for any further outbreak of fire, and to "apprehend any suspected persons who in such times of confusion may be feloniously carrying off the goods [and effects] of others." (Ibid.,

V, 115.) The wages of the watchmen and all other charges "incident to ...keeping a good and regular watch" were to be raised by an assessment levied against the inhabitants of Philadelphia. (Ibid., V, 117.) This was the first time that public funds had been officially ear-marked for support of the city watch.

At specified times over the next several decades, the original act came up for review. Each time, the state assembly judged the original legislation to be sound and renewed the act in all its essential features. No significant changes occurred in any of the duties or obligations assigned to the night watchmen. In 1779, however, it was found necessary to raise the tax rate "by reason of the increase of watchmen and workmen's wages" and the "excessive high price of oil and materials." (Ibid., IX, 391.)

On March 11, 1789, the city of Philadelphia became incorporated. Under the provisions of a 1790 supplement to the act of incorporation, the duties of the wardens reverted to the mayor, recorder, aldermen, and common councilmen. To these gentlemen passed the full power to regulate "lighting, watching, watering, pitching, paving, and cleaning" the city's streets, lanes, and alleys. (Ibid., XIII, 497.)

The Watch and Watchboxes at Independence Hall

In the years before the Revolutionary War, it does not appear that any special protection was afforded to the buildings on the State House Yard. In the specific instructions given to the city watch in 1772, it is apparent that there was only one watch stand as close as two blocks from the State House. The "orders and regulations" for the watch which

appeared in the Pennsylvania Chronicle for May 11 state that

...one Watchman shall stand at the North West corner of Third and Chestnut Streets, who shall from thence go the following Rounds,... (Pennsylvania Chronicle, May 11, 1772; p. 3, cols. 1 & 2. For details, see Appendix A)

By 1776, however, Philadelphia had become the center of revolutionary activity, and the State House became the focal point of the war effort. It seems almost certain that a military guard was present on the Square by mid-1776. In the Minutes of the Council of Safety for July 24, 1776 can be found this entry:

Resolved

That Capt. Peters be authorized to have the Stage in The State House Yard fitted up for the accomodation of the Guard...

By December 7, 1776, the guard at the State House consisted of one subaltern, one sergeant, one corporal, and twenty men. (Committee and Council of Safety, Papers 1776-1777, Box #1.)

With the coming of peace, the departure from Philadelphia of the Continental Congress, and the development of Pennsylvania executive agencies began to clear the way for launching a State House watch. Writing to the vice president of the Supreme Executive Council on March 13, 1786, Pennsylvania Comptroller General, John Nicholson, requested that a guard be posted in front of and behind the State House:

By an Act of Assembly passed 22d September, 1785, the Honble the Supreme Executive Council are authorized agreeable to Resolve of Congres of the 7th of June preceding, to employ the Invalids who are pensioners, as guards, &c.

I have long considered the papers of this office insecure, considering their importance to the State and the temptations to individuals to destroy them. But I am still more uneasy and anxious for its security since the Certificates received in the Land Office and by the late Act of the 1st of March Instant, have come in. Permit me

to request that your Honble Board will be pleased to direct that a guard be posted here for the security of this and the other public offices in the State House, perhaps one Centinel in front and one at the back part of the House might be thought requisite, the better to secure from danger by night. (Pennsylvania Archives, X, 750.)

There the matter rested for three years. By early 1789, however, it appears that President (Governor) Thomas Mifflin had become interested in working out some sort of special arrangement with the city for the regulation of the State House guard. The Wardens of the city wrote Mifflin on February 3, 1789:

'Sir,

Agreeable to your desire, I have the Honor of enclosing you an Estimate of the yearly Expende of two Watchmen, &c.... The Board of Wardens will have no objection to appoint the Men and keep The whole under The City regulations;... If the Hours those men are to continue on Their stands should differ from those of the City Watch, they no doubt will expect further compensation....

[signed] WM. GOVETT'

(Pennsylvania Archives, 1st Series, XI, 543-544)

By May 1789, payments were being made to watchmen stationed at the State House. Payments for making watch houses and watchmens' coats, as well as for watchmens' wages, remove all doubt as to the existence of a guard force on the State House Square:

May No. 1 ...paid Christian Schaffer carpenter for three Watch Boxes...at the State House.

May 5. ...paid Wm Timbele Taylor for three Great Coats for the Watch man.
...paid the watchmen Their wages. (State House Yard, Main Vouchers, 1789.)

Apparently the watchboxes in the State House Yard were equipped with lighting devices, as was true of the boxes maintained entirely by

the city:

Mr. Charles Biddle Esquire
Dr to Nicholas Hess [May 4, 1789]
... 3 Lamp irons made for on The
 Watch houses W 40 2.0.0
... 3 Paire of Dor hinges for
 The Watch houses 0.7.6
... a Set of iron Work for The
 Watch houses 0.7.6
(State House Yard, Main. Vouchers, 1789.)

The door of each watchbox had a lock. Early in 1792, the Comptroller General's day book recorded that £5 were spent for a "New Lock of Treasury Box." (Comptroller General, Day Book No. 7, February 1-29, 1792.) The accounts of the State of Pennsylvania for 1796 also mention the purchase of "a lock for one of the boxes." (State House Papers, June 1-July 1, 1796.) These entries may refer to strong boxes. However, the account for repairs quoted below is definite on the point.

The materials which went into the construction of the watchboxes is revealed by this breakdown of work done by Christian Schaffer:

...reaparing tow Watch house for The Streat house yard -	
the work amount and setting them	£ 2.9.0
... Pine Board and Cedar Board and	
Shingles	1.2.4
...Chash Paid for Nails 3 hundred of	
Sprigs	14.0
...tow Taps turned	5.0
...tow Stock locks at 2/3 per	
pec [piece] is	4.6
	<u>£4.15.8</u>
...Three Hickery Safts [Staffs]	0. 7.0
	<u>£5. 2.8</u>

These watchboxes were painted as stated by a voucher dated May 29, 1789, in which John Clawges was paid by the State of Pennsylvania for "painting three watch houses." (State House Yard, Main. Vouchers, 1789.)

Although the number of watchmen at the State House apparently varied from time to time, the evidence seems to indicate that three watchmen were usually present on the Square throughout the 1790's. The repeated references to painting "Three watchboxes" suggests that this was the normal number of men on duty.

Several of the watchboxes in the State House Yard are shown in contemporary prints. The Columbian Magazine for January 1790 shows a watch house in place behind the State House (see Illustration No. 4). Almost a decade later, William Birch depicted two in front of the State House in the print entitled "State House, With a View of Chesnut Street Philadelphia" (1798) and two in the yard in the print entitled "Back of the State House, Philadelphia" (1799). The 1804 Birch print shows only one in front and as the documents establish a total of but three, it would appear that one of those in front was moved to the back after the 1798 view was engraved. Perspective studies of both are presented as Illustrations Nos. 1 and 2. The details of construction, materials used, and the fixtures shown in place represent an interpretation of the documentary evidence and of the Birch engravings.

Watchbox at First Bank of the United States

Even before the First Bank of the United States moved from Carpenters' Hall to the new building on Third Street there were watchmen on its payroll. The State House watch in petitioning Governor Mifflin for a pay increase during 1796 pointed out that "The Bank of the United States have two watchmen who receive the following wages--

sixteen dollars 33/100 each p. month, Eight dollars each at Christmas, a new watch coat every two years...." William Birch's "Bank of the United States, in Third Street Philadelphia" (1799) shows a watchbox near the northeast corner of the building. A perspective study of this watchbox containing details of construction, materials, and fixtures based on the Birch view and documentary evidence of other watchboxes is presented as Illustration No. 2.

Watchbox in Carpenters' Court

Of the many institutions housed in Carpenters' Hall and New Hall during the 1790's only the First Bank of the United States is known to have employed watchmen. As the custom of keeping watchmen outside the buildings being watched has been definitely established at Independence Hall and the First Bank building, it can be safely assumed that some sort of watchbox installation had by 1796 been provided in the Carpenters' Court area. Its appearance would doubtless have been the same as the one used later by the Bank's watchmen at the new building (Illustrations Nos. 3 and 9).

Watchbox at the Arch Street Friends' Meeting

In the yard to the rear of the Friends' Meeting House at Arch and Fourth Streets stands the sole surviving watchbox of old Philadelphia. Its design in the opinion of architects is early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, a wrought iron nail was found in a cornice molding while the box was being examined. In preparing this preliminary study, a paint

sample from this cornice was analyzed by Miss Penelope Hartshorne, Architect in Historic Structures, EODC. It revealed that the first layer of paint was a "stone color," 2.5Y 8/2 Munsell. A scale drawing of this watchbox is presented as Illustration No. 20.

APPENDIX A

Appendix A

Pennsylvania Chronicle

11 May, 1772.

p. 3; cols. 1 & 2

ORDERS and REGULATIONS of the MAYOR, RECORDER, ALDERMEN, and WARDENS of the CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, for the Government and Direction of the Constables and Watchmen of the said City...

The several Watchmen shall repair to and be at the Court-House each Night at the Hours herein before appointed for the Attendance of the Constables, and there receive their Staves, and shall afterwards perform the respective Duties hereby further enjoined.

That one Watchman shall stand at the North West Corner of Mulberry and Water Streets, who shall from thence go the following Rounds, to wit: Up Water-Street, up Vine-Street, down Front-Street to Chesnut-Street, thence up Water-Street to his Stand.

(...) (There follow sixteen more such sets of specific instructions, including the following):

That one Watchman shall stand at the North West Corner of Fifth and Chesnut Streets, who shall from thence go the following Rounds, to wit: Up Fifth-Street, up Market-Street, to Benjamin Shoemaker's, down Market-Street, down Seventh-Street, to _____ Alley, down said Alley to Sixth-Street, down Sixth-Street, and down Chesnut Street to his Stand.

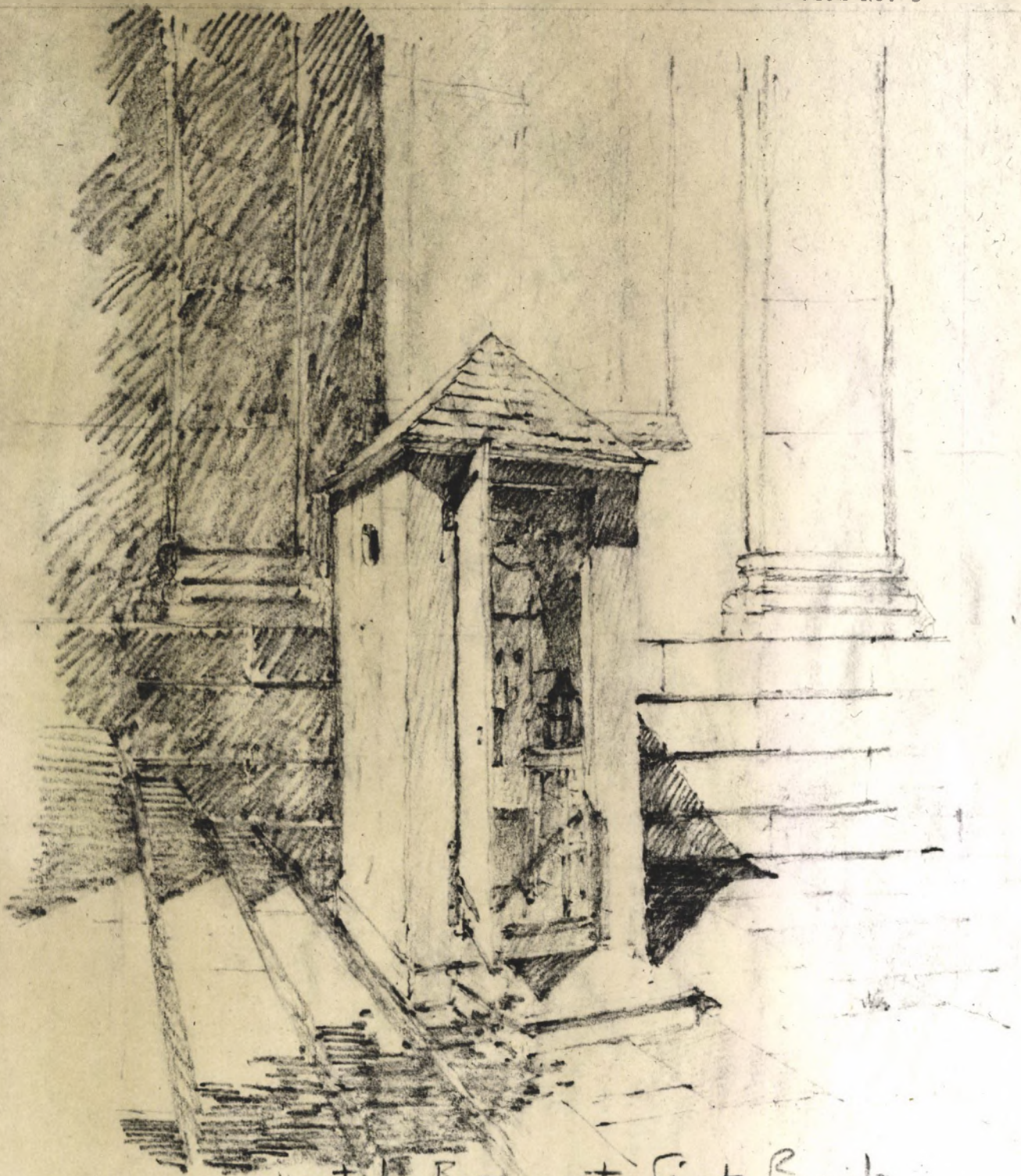
ILLUSTRATIONS



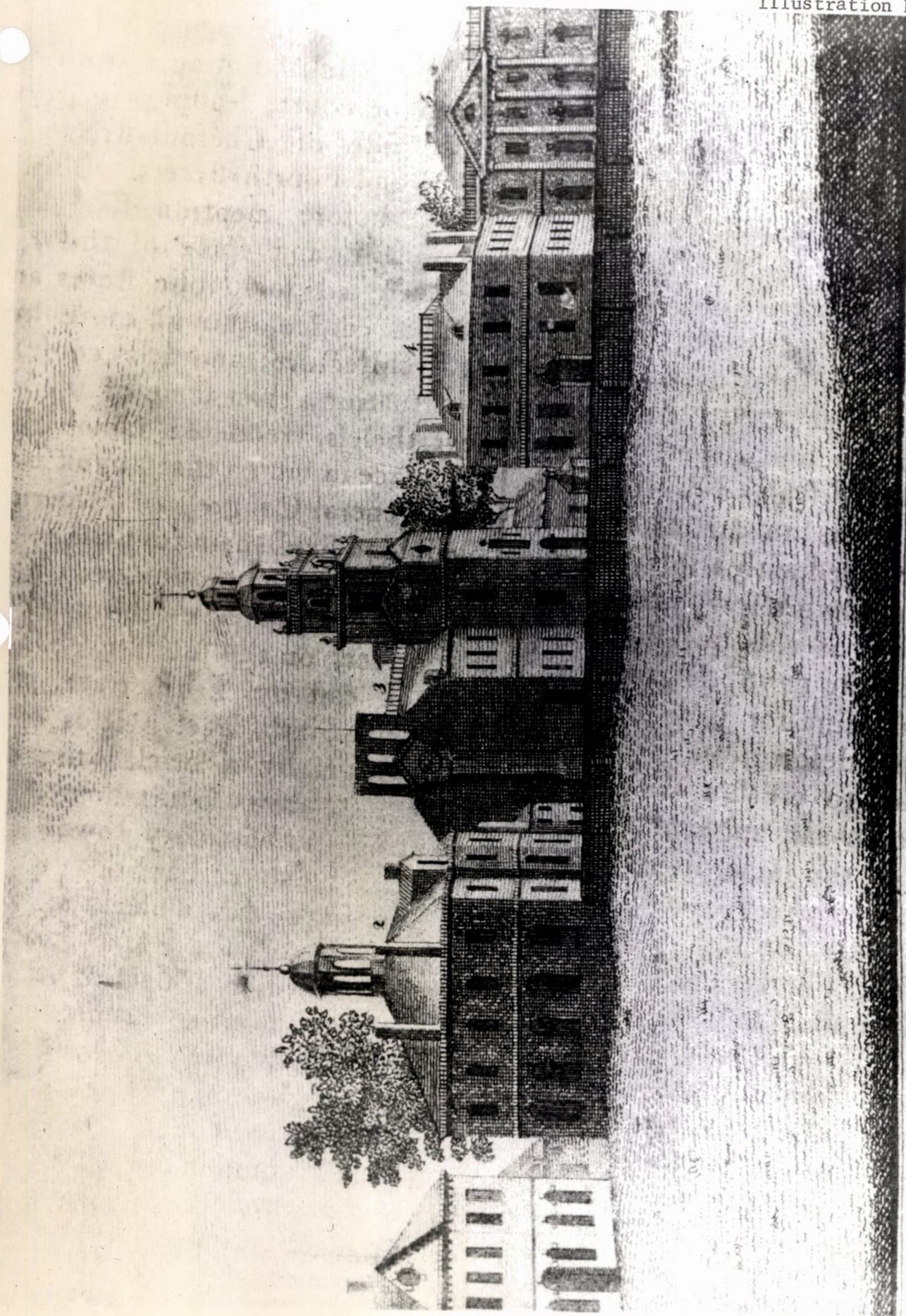
Watch Box
at State House



Watch Box
at State House Rear



Watch Box at First Bank



General Public Buildings, in Philadelphia



View of several watchboxes in vicinity of State House, from Birch print, 1798, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 21.



Detail of watchbox before State House.
Note hexagonal shape, lamp on forked
bracket atop watchbox, and splayed "feet"
upon which box rests. Note also circular
peep-hole on one side. From Birch print,
1798, in Collection, Independence National
Historical Park, Plate No. 21.



Watchboxes in rear view of State House from
Birch print, 1799, in Collection, Independence
National Historical Park, Plate No. 22.



Detail of watchboxes at rear of State House. Note hexagonal shape of both boxes. Note especially what could be funnels emanating from peak of each roof. Stoves are known to have been used in watchboxes at the State House. From Birch print, 1799, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 22.



View of four-sided watchbox bearing resemblance to sentry box, located near northeast corner of First Bank of the United States. From Birch print, 1799, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 17.

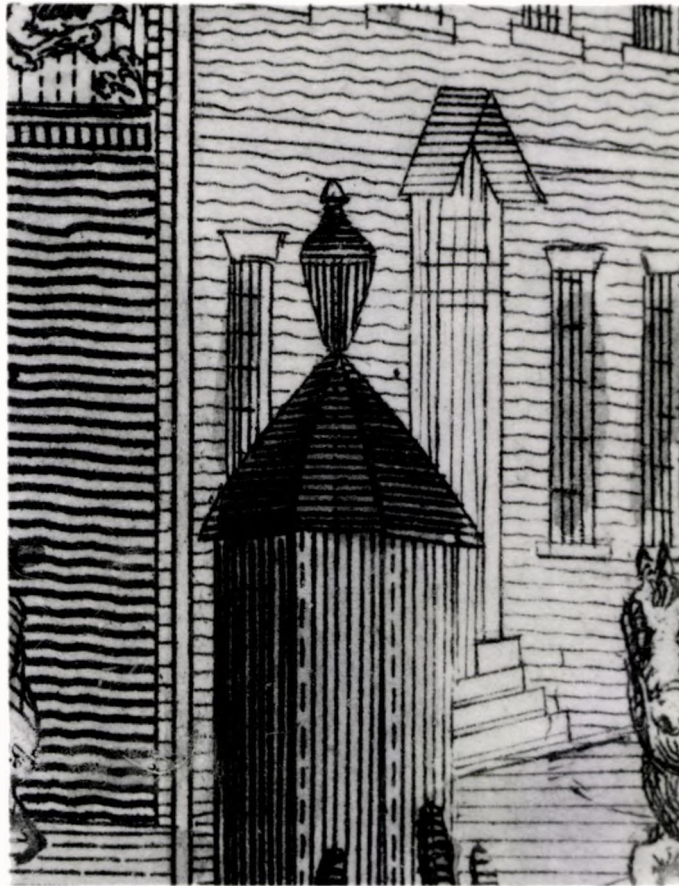


Drawn Engraved & Published by W. Birch & Son

Sold by R. Campbell & Co. N. 5. 50. Chestnut St. Philad. 1799.

*ARCH STREET, with the Second Presbyterian CHURCH.
PHILADELPHIA.*

View of watchbox on Arch Street, from Birch print, 1799, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 4.



Detail of hexagonal-shaped watchbox on Arch Street. Notice lamp fixture surmounting box. Note bollards which have been placed at base of watchbox as protection against reckless street traffic. From Birch print, 1799, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 4.



View of watchbox in vicinity of Robert Morris' unfinished house on Chestnut Street, from Birch print, 1800, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 14.



Detail of four-sided watchbox in vicinity of Robert Morris' unfinished house. Note unusual roof, with heavy rib-lines suggesting possibility of tin having been used. Note also doorway of watchbox and peep-hole visible on one side. Special attention should be given watchman making the rounds with ladder and oil can, and wearing apron. These properties, ladder excepted, were doubtless stored in the watchbox. From Birch print, 1800, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park, Plate No. 14.



View of watchbox in the vicinity of
the Hall of the Academy of Natural
Science, from engraving by C. Burton,
1831, in Collection, Independence
National Historical Park.



Detail of hexagonal watchbox near Academy of Natural Science. Note appearance of roofing and of siding on box itself. Notice especially the suggestion of a peep-hole near roof line. Curved pipe protruding from hole was probably connected to stove inside. From engraving by C. Burton, 1831, in Collection, Independence National Historical Park.



View of watchbox in the vicinity of Philadelphia Exchange, drawn by W. Strickland and engraved by J. Sartain, c. 1834-40. Photograph in Independence National Historical Park files, negative No. 1692.



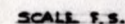
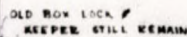
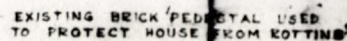
Detail from engraving of Philadelphia Exchange showing six-sided watchbox. Note peep-holes, shape of moulding at edge of roof, and texture of roof itself, possibly indicating shingling. Appearance of lighting device at top of watchbox should also be noted. Photograph in Independence National Historical Park files, negative No. 1692.



View showing watchbox and night watchman, from Daniel Bowen's A History of Philadelphia (Phila., 1839), p. 116. Hexagonal-shaped box has peep-hole and is topped by a lamp. Note especially the appearance of watchman, apparently dressed for summer in oiled linen greatcoat and wearing a lacquered cloth top hat. Leather boots seem to constitute his footwear. He carries a night watchman's torch and a ladder.

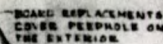


Photograph of old watchbox in yard of Friends Meeting House, Arch Street at Third. This watchbox was located at Eighth and Walnut Streets until 1850 and later removed to its present location and placed on a brick base. Note its hexagonal shape and the peep-holes which appear on four sides of the box. The lower part of the watchbox has rotted and been repaired with new work.



WATCH BOX OF OLD PHILADELPHIA
AT 8" & WALNUT STREETS UNTIL
1850 THEN PRESERVED BY
JOHN JAY SMITH IN HIS GER-
MANTOWN GARDEN. PRESENTED
TO FRIENDS HISTORICAL ASSOC-
IATION BY HIS GRANDSON
ALBANUS L. SMITH 1909

Photographs of this box in INHP
iconographic file
366-367-368-369-370 and 1189.



SCALE 1"=1'-0"

SEC. COM. FILE NO. 102	DATE	UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DIVISION OF MAINTENANCE & REHABILITATION FIELD OFFICE	FIVE
	SUPERINTENDENT - IN H. P. CHIEF, DESIGN & CONST. - E.O.D.C.	GUARDS WATCH HOUSE TRAILER AT ENTRANCE FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE - THIRD / ARCH STREET LOCATED WITHIN AREA INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK STATE OF INDIANA	SHEET 1 OF 1 INDICATED TO NHP - IND 2571
	APPROVED REGIONAL DIRECTOR		26 AUGUST 1964

ORIENTATION	REVIEWED	OPERATIONS	REGION
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INTERP	REGION		
WASHINGTON			
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Illustration No. 20