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INDEPENDENCE HALL, PHILADELPHIA

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT
W.C. MUR

ARCHITECTURAL (PART I)
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In order to understand Independence Hall as it stands today, it is necessary to review the physical history of the structure down through the years. This may be roughly divided into three parts: Construction (1732-1777), Alteration (1777-1828) and Restoration (1828-present). Various studies of this have been published but none have covered the period after 1896 when the most extended studies and drastic restorations were carried out. An attempt is made to do it here.

For over two centuries the building has been in active use for one purpose or another, requiring from time to time alterations both of plan and equipment for human convenience and comfort. For over half its span of life the fabric has been submitted to a remarkable series of restorations intended to bring it back to its appearance during the political crisis of July, 1776. All in all, there is reason to think that Independence Hall is by now about the most complicated structure in the United States.

The three periods are briefly summarized as follows:

I. CONSTRUCTION. 1732-1777

Design: The Hall, or "State House," as it was then called, was a building designed in five parts, the overall length being nearly three hundred feet. Credit for its design is shared by Andrew Hamilton (lawyer and politician) the promoter, and Edmund Woolley (master carpenter) the builder. The exterior character of its earliest parts

does not reflect the classical styles then in use by high-fashion English architects, but rather resembles that of a large dwelling house. The connecting arcades, called "piazzas" at the time, containing the staircases to the second floors of the wings or "offices" are probably derived from precedent eventually going back to Italy. The writer knows of no very successful search for exact prototypes. As to architectural detail, most of it would have been left to the mechanics themselves, who were then competent in such matters, to translate designs from current design books. Structurally there was nothing very remarkable about the building except, perhaps, the hidden trusses that supported the ceilings over the great meeting rooms on the ground floor.

In spite of its obvious provincialisms, the design--especially after the addition of the stairhall-tower and steeple--was successful. At the time of the Revolution, the Pennsylvania capitol was considered to be the most impressive public structure in the Colonies.

Construction: The main buildings and the two offices were begun in 1732 and the exteriors more or less completed by 1736. The arcades or "piazzas" were built connecting them about 1744. The stairhall tower and its steeple were added in 1750-1753 and the "Committee Room" on the southeast corner (not now present) about the same time.

No detailed plans remain from the eighteenth century, and there are many mysteries which will probably always remain as such. For instance, we know that Thomas Godfrey (glazier) originally set the window panes in lead, but we have no details about them or any knowledge of any contemporary examples that have survived in double-hung sash. The few contemporary documents available reveal details

here and there but they are like flashes of lightning through a library window: hardly enough to read by.

The main building seems to have been occupied well before the interiors were completed. As late as 1741 we read an order to plaster the main or "Assembly" Room. Samuel Harding submitted bills for fine wood carvings to decorate the main building and its stairhall in 1753-1756. No written record has been found of the painting of the interiors. There is no record of ornamental ceilings, though we know there was talk of getting workmen from England for the purpose. Less pretentious structures in that period had them.

II. ALTERATION, 1777-1828

Extensive damage was wrought on the fabric during the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777-8, when the interiors were converted for use as barracks. Returning after the Occupation, the Pennsylvania Assembly had partitions on the second floor torn out to make a large meeting room. Concurrently (1778-9) the ground floor rooms were refinished. The present panelling in the Assembly Chamber where the Declaration was signed presumably dates from this period. With its curved corners, it seems to owe something to French influence. In any case it reflects the early Classic Revival style coming to favor. It is certainly not the decoration delineated in the Pine-Savage view, considered to be the best early record.

In 1781 the old steeple was removed as a structural hazard, and was to remain off for nearly half a century. In 1789 the Supreme Court room was subdivided. Charles Wilson Peale, artist and museum proprietor, did over the second floor for his own purposes in 1802 and included a chimney on the tower.

But the greatest changes came with Architect Robert Mills, who in 1812 tore down both wings and the connecting piazzas to build two ranges of fireproof offices. The Committee Room or Library was presumably torn off at that time. Unknown parties were responsible for a decorative frontispiece with Corinthian columns added to the main center entrance on Chestnut Street about 1824.

Whether or not the public approved these alterations is not known. Resistance to change in historic landmarks was probably not much thought of in this country at the time. The painter John Trumbull of Connecticut wrote of the Assembly Chamber in 1817 "the architecture of the Room, which I very much regret to find as lately been destroyed by that restless spirit of change which so much prevails in this country: The Ancients would have regarded as sacred an apartment in which scenes of such deep interest had passed....The Philadelphians have modernized it...."

III. RESTORATION, 1828-present

In 1824 the triumphal return of General Lafayette, veteran of the Revolution, stirred a great wave of patriotic emotion and historical reminiscence throughout America. For his reception in Philadelphia the Assembly Chamber of Independence Hall was decorated handsomely; this prompted some observers to remark on the changes made in the building during the preceding quarter-century. The public attention focused on the venerable old landmark at this time resulted in the improvements made soon after in the name of restoration.

Philadelphia architect William Strickland was chosen in 1828 to make plans for replacing the missing steeple. While a reconstruction

was desired "faithfully copying in features and proportions the original Spire and its finish," it was necessary to compromise with those who wanted to include a clock. A clock was thus incorporated into the new steeple where one had never been seen before. As well as being ten feet taller, the new steeple was generally believed to be an architectural improvement over the original.

John Haviland, a British-trained architect, was engaged to superintend repairs and renovations on the second floor in 1830. The next year he undertook to restore the old Assembly Chamber "in order to render the appearance similar to that which it bore when our ancestors there assembled on the 4th of July, 1776." We have no details of this, but it was claimed afterwards that old panelling stored in the attic was brought down and reinstalled in its former position.

In spite of the apparent desire for exact restoration, it is obvious that both Strickland and Haviland (two of the best modern architects of their time) fell short of historical accuracy.

In 1846 the newspapers announced that "this sacred place is undergoing a thorough repairing, repainting, etc." At this point the Liberty Bell was moved down from the tower into the Assembly Chamber, presumably for reasons of "interpretation."

The next improvement of note came with preparations for the Centennial of 1876. A committee of six, headed by Frank M. Etting, had been appointed four years earlier, and they were augmented by a Ladies Committee. The Assembly Chamber was first "disencumbered of its anachronisms." The Liberty Bell was moved out and the Signers' Inkstand was moved in. The caretaker's quarters in the steeple were removed, strict measures were taken towards fire protection and paint

on the exterior masonry was removed. Plans were drawn by Architect Edward Clark of the U. S. Capitol, John McArthur, Jr. of Philadelphia and others for the restoration of the original wings, but it was deemed not advisable to remove the courts then occupying the Mills wings. In general, there was not much structural change in the Centennial rehabilitation.

But the restorations at the end of the century were both extensive and drastic. After the Philadelphia Select and Common Councils moved out of the second floor in 1895, the Daughters of the American Revolution were permitted to proceed with its restoration. Mrs. Charles C. Harrison as Regent seems to have been more or less in control. T. Mellon Rogers, Architect of Philadelphia and Devon (who had restored St. Davids Church, Radnor), offered his services gratis and was accepted. On July 14, 1896 the Rogers plans were "compared with the original drawings....in the possession of the Historical Society" and approved. Two months later the contractor, Stacy Reeves and Sons, began work. Structural engineers reported on the stability of the fabric and made recommendations for the project. Records of this project show that great interest and care were taken in the search for internal evidence from which to restore and replace the missing parts. Old views were examined and elderly persons consulted. Documents were collected and re-read. The architect declared that "it will not only be possible to restore the rooms to their original shape, but also to remodel the wainscoting and the doors exactly as they were in the old Colonial days." The restored rooms were completed and turned over to the Mayor and the City on February 19, 1897 with elaborate ceremonies.

In spite of all the research and care brought to bear on the project, it now seems obvious that the architect didn't have much feeling for colonial design. The newly restored interiors, as delineated in Harper's Weekly for July 24, 1897, are only caricatures of 18th century woodwork and were later to be removed. Mr. Rogers was, like Strickland and Haviland, a modern architect unable to recreate period work.

The promoters, however, continued to meet. The exterior restoration of the buildings was discussed--especially the matter of whether or not the piazzas should be restored with solid walls and stairways, as they were originally built, or open to allow public access and a view from Chestnut Street (the way they are today). The subject of the first floor interiors was also gone into. It was decided to go ahead with exterior restoration. By November of 1897 Stacy Reeves' workmen were pulling down Robert Mills wings, and Rogers was studying designs for reconstructing the offices of the 1730's. Mr. Rogers had as architectural consultants Prof. Warren Laird (University of Pennsylvania), Mr. Walter Cope (Cope and Stewartson), Mr. William Price (Price Brothers), Mr. George C. Mason and Mr. John T. Windrim. The work was done under the very close personal supervision of the Chief of the Bureau of City Property, Albert S. Eisenhower.

A copy of the architect's written specifications for the work has survived. It is interesting to note in the opening paragraph that the historic importance of this building was strongly emphasized. Only the best of materials could be used and the most careful and conscientious mechanics employed "the very best men--no

boys, under any circumstances." Interior woodwork, masonry and plastering were to be restored, the old paint burned off and replaced. The piazzas and the office buildings were to be rebuilt on their original sites. A steam heating system was planned to get fires out of the buildings. On July 4, 1898 this extensive program of remodelling was completed and dedicated. The newspapers went into its accomplishment in great detail. The architect appears to have become exhausted and stayed home that day. He was soon afterwards dismissed from all connection with the project.

The next month there was quite a public controversy between those who wished to remove the clock from William Strickland's steeple and reconstruct the out-size tall case (or grandfather) clocks which were shown on early prints to have been located at each of the main gables. This was never entirely carried out; at least only the lower parts of the west gable case as reconstructed remains today.

All were not happy with the work of Mr. Rogers, and the Philadelphia Chapter of the A.I.A. decided that it ought to have a "committee for the preservation of ancient Phila. monuments." The eminent New York Architect Charles McKim was called in, and charges and countercharges were aired. A long bill of particulars for ripping out and replacing much of the recent restoration (especially on the second floor) was prepared. But the Rogers restoration was to stand for a quarter-century.

The A.I.A. committee gathered strength and determination under the able chairmanship of Horace Wells Sellers. It expressed a dim view of Rogers' work, reporting that his "details were largely determined by individual fancy unrestrained--it would seem--by an

intimate knowledge of the architecture of the period to which the building belongs." Reports looking towards the re-restoration of the building were being prepared in 1916, and two years later the committee got a two thousand dollar contract from the City to make a set of complete and accurate measured records of the structure. A handsome set of ink-on-linen drawings resulted, and these were generously made available to the Park Service when it opened its offices here.

There followed in the 20's a great tearing out of woodwork, especially on the second floor. After examining the fabric anew the Committee completed a new set of plans by April of 1923. The work performed under these plans is probably detailed in a large set of files recently received by the Park from the City and still being arranged. By the end of 1924 it was believed that "during the past 10 years the buildings on Independence Square have been brought nearer their original appearance than at any other time since the close of the 18th century." This writer is inclined to believe that was true.

The National Park Service took over the care of Independence Hall in 1951. Two of the first improvements were the replacement of the old coal-fired boilers (underground near the East Wing) and connection to a central steam system and a general repointing of exterior brickwork. This was followed by a replacement of the entire electrical system, the old one being in a dangerous condition. In the period 1955-57 Park Service architects carried on an extended program of paint removal in the first floor rooms, which revealed the maze of patchwork that has accumulated through the years. Failures in the masonry behind the panelling were also brought to light. Repairs were made, and carved decorations were expertly

filled in where details had been knocked off through the years. A careful log was kept of day-by-day discoveries, with comments from literary sources worked in. These notes were posted longhand in five bound volumes.

Other chores resulting from delayed maintenance were attended to.

PRESENT CONDITION

Resident Architect Grosman reported to the writer that after some limited floor board removal, he had found a broken framing member in the second floor (ceiling of the Assembly Chamber) and that there is a suspicious deflection in the same area. The Ewing Company investigation--soon to be extended to Independence Hall--may be expected to determine the extent of any structural hazards now existing.

The first floor woodwork, cleaned off for study and repair, is in need of a paint finish.

ESTIMATE

The time of one architect-historian for twelve months is recommended for putting the story of the fabric together for Part II. The architects' files for the last sixty years are tremendously complicated. If a well-written essay can be secured, it should be published.

Charles E. Peterson

NPS/EODC
Philadelphia
December 15, 1958

OLD CITY HALL (SUPREME COURT BUILDING),

PHILADELPHIA

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT - (PART I)

ARCHITECTURAL DATA

The Old City Hall stands at the southwest corner of Fifth and Chestnut Streets. It is the newest of the buildings remaining on Independence Square. Plans were ordered in 1785 and the structure built in 1790-91.

Little is understood of the construction of this building except that it was done under the superintendence of David Evans, well-known Philadelphia master carpenter. The exterior was intended to--and did--reproduce Congress Hall at the other end of the block. The designer/^{of}the interiors is not known but Evans would doubtless have been able to do it.

There was some kind of a "new addition" to the building in 1793 but it has not been identified.

As it turned out, the U. S. Supreme Court used the Hall until the government moved to Washington in 1800. In the following years the City government and the Mayor occupied it. The cellar was rented out for storage. When the City offices moved to Penn Square various organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic inherited the use of it.

In 1916 the A.I.A. Preservation Committee, after examining the structure declared it to be "in an advanced state of decay and delapidation." The following year the interiors were torn up for a study of physical evidences and in 1918 the plans were completed. Restoration work was begun by Hurley Bros. on August 18, 1921 and

it was completed early the next year. A dedication was held on May 2, 1922.

PRESENT CONDITION

The building has been maintained in recent years at about the same level as under the City and doesn't seem to show any serious deterioration. One of the main trusses of the roof has tipped out of plumb and other problems may be revealed when the scheduled Ewing Company examination gets under way.

RECOMMENDATION

If a competent architect-historian is available, it is recommended that six months be allowed for him to prepare a Part II report tracing the evolution of the structure and completely illustrated by drawings and photographs.

Here again the A.I.A. archives and the City records probably contain the basis for a complete account of the restoration.

Charles E. Peterson

NPS/EODC
Philadelphia
December 15, 1958

CONGRESS HALL, PHILADELPHIA

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT, PART I

ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Congress Hall stands near the Southeast corner of Sixth and Chestnut Streets on what is now called Independence Square. It is the third oldest structure in the famous group.

There seem to be no surviving original drawings or contract documents for the first construction of Congress Hall. Reeder (1936) and Riley (1953) demonstrate that the building was authorized in 1785, begun in 1787 and completed in 1789. The date "1787" is cut in the marble belt course over the front door. The building was built for the functions of the County of Philadelphia but was used by the U. S. Congress in the period 1790-1800 until the seat of government moved to Washington.

In 1793 the building was enlarged to accommodate the increased membership of Congress. An interesting and detailed set of documents have survived in Harrisburg for the improvements of the middle 1790's. They show that John Gullen did the stonework, Jacob Souder the brickwork and Joseph Rakestrew and William Williams the carpentry. Vouchers cover the purchase and hauling of materials such as lumber, hardware, etc. and ending up with Indian River dressed shingles, copper downspouts, eight stoves, and a lightning rod.

The designer of the building is not known. L'Enfant was interested but arrived in Philadelphia after its first completion. It is not unlikely that William Williams (who advertised as an

architect trained in London) did the original design, too. Public opinion varied. Americans found it "neat and elegant" and "unnecessarily fine." An English visitor thought it "not very elegant but very convenient." It certainly shows the change of style in the half century since the building of the State House. For instance, the relatively larger windows resulting from the general improvement in glass manufacture and the consequent lower cost per square foot for glazing.

After the removal of Congress the building was used for court purposes until 1895 when it was taken over, at least in part, by various patriotic societies. Some architectural restoration was done at that time under a "Committee of Thirteen"—Elizabeth McClellan, Chairman, and George Mason, Architect.

In 1910 the A.I.A. appointed a committee to study the Hall and in the following year it was authorized by the City to prepare plans. Reconstruction of the interior followed and the building was rededicated on October 25, 1913. Certain features were re-restored in 1934 by the Civil Works Administration.

The structural evolution of this important building has never been comprehensively written up and even lately there has been controversy over it. Presumably the A.I.A. chapter archives and the records of the City contain the raw materials for a fairly complete account.

PRESENT CONDITION

The Park Service has maintained Congress Hall since 1951 without any major projects.

The further failure of the ceiling in the Senate Chamber causing a depression of its great coved surface became apparent some months ago. To support it temporarily a great I-beam from wall to wall on the second floor was installed.

On November 18, 1958 a contract for professional services was awarded to the George M. Ewing Co. of Philadelphia for a structural report on the Independence Square buildings. The first one studied was Congress Hall. The writer visited it with Architect McCarthy of EODC and Engineer Don Lewis of the Ewing Company. According to Mr. Lewis, the ceiling of the Senate Chamber was showing further movement. The roof trusses from which it is supported are in bad condition as the result of age and fire damage. The ceiling joists are losing contact with the trusses. Perhaps the design was not too good to start with. From what I learned, a complete new roof, including framing, may be needed. To make matters worse, preliminary test borings seem to show that the main walls are not very strong. Behind the facing brick there is evidence of inferior masonry that--we must hope--is not general.

ESTIMATE

To prepare a Part II architectural report, I believe that the complete physical history of this structure should be put together. I believe it should be well enough written to be published.

A historian also an architect (or vice versa) would be required.

I would allow six months in which to write it and prepare the necessary diagrams, etc. to illustrate it.

Charles E. Peterson

NPS/EODC
Philadelphia
December 15, 1958