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A HISTORY OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE HOUSE, 1816-1910

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The New Hampshire State House achieved its present-day appearance through an evolution that required almost a century. In the near-century since its final transformation, the building has changed little. Long touted as “the oldest state house in the nation in which the legislature still occupies its original chambers,” the New Hampshire State House embodies many other distinctions. Each building campaign—that of 1816-19, that of 1864-66, and that of 1909-10—introduced technological and artistic innovations and exemplified the finest expression of its respective era.

Capsule History: The New Hampshire State House was erected between 1816 and 1819. Built on land donated by the Town of Concord, and constructed of granite taken from Concord’s Rattlesnake Hill and supplied at the town’s expense, the State House provided a permanent home for a legislature that had met alternately in different towns. As the first substantial granite building in New Hampshire, the building stood as a showpiece for Concord’s nascent granite industry. It was built according to designs by Stuart J. Park, then New England’s foremost expert on granite construction, and its stone was split and hammered by inmates at the state prison. Its interior finish and furnishings were the work of many local craftsmen as well as artisans from Boston.

Because the granite in the original building was split from surface boulders that lay thickly on Concord’s Rattlesnake Hill, the stone does not have the flawless quality of granite that was quarried from deep in the earth. Close examination of the exterior of the building reveals the difference in quality of the original stone blocks of 1819 and the granite that was quarried from far below the surface when a third story and a rear addition were built in 1910.

By the beginning of the Civil War, the building of 1819 was too small for the functions of state government. In 1863, the legislature authorized the governor to procure plans for enlargement or replacement of the State House, and to invite any New Hampshire city with adequate rail facilities to submit a proposal for providing an adequate capitol building. The eminent Boston architect Gridley J. F. Bryant provided plans for enlargement of the old building of 1819, as well as alternate plans for an entirely new state house.

Long secure in its possession of the State House, the City of Concord suddenly found itself in competition with the prosperous City of Manchester for designation as the state capital. Manchester offered to build a new state house for \$500,000. Concord countered with an offer of \$100,000 to enlarge the existing capitol at no expense to the state. Ultimately, Concord's proposal was victorious.

As enlarged under Bryant's plan, the State House was provided with a large and imposing dome to replace its modest original cupola, with a two-story portico of monolithic granite columns, and with a then-stylish Mansard roof, which provided space for committee rooms above the original granite walls. Construction proceeded during the Civil War, with the State House temporarily losing its dome, and with new iron trusses and girders installed in its attic to support the massive new dome that surmounts the building today.

The building was again too small by 1900. In 1903, Governor Nahum Bachelder secured preliminary plans from the Boston architectural firm of Peabody and Stearns for enlarging the structure. Again Manchester strove to become the capital, offering \$1 million to build a new state house in that city at no expense to the state. Ultimately, the legislature declined Manchester's offer, voting to expend state funds to add a substantial fireproof addition at the rear of the old building.

The addition of 1909-10 houses the Governor and Council chamber and all the offices around it on each floor. This second remodeling replaced the Civil War-era Mansard roof on the older section of the building with a full third story, executed in Concord granite. To provide an adequate visitors' gallery for the House chamber, contractors had to cut away the solid masonry wall at the south side of Representatives' Hall. This wall supported the weight of the main roof and the large dome. Its removal required the placement of shoring from the basement upward, the temporary raising of the roof and dome by ½ inch, and the insertion of a 26-ton riveted steel plate girder, forty feet long and five feet high, beneath the superstructure.

The designers of the addition of 1909-10 were one of the most prominent architectural partnerships then practicing in the United States. The Boston firm of Peabody and Stearns received more than one thousand architectural commissions between 1870 and the death of both partners in 1917.

Robert Swain Peabody (1845-1917) was the firm's chief designer and was responsible for designing the handsome second State House façade that faces North State Street. He

graduated from Harvard and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, and served Harvard as a trustee and a lecturer in its architectural school. John Goddard Stearns, Jr. (1843-1917) supervised engineering and construction. He would have planned the difficult feat of shoring and supporting the massive weight of the State House dome while Representatives' Hall was deepened to the south and the third floor on that end of the building was transformed into the spectators' gallery. He graduated from Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard with a B. S. in engineering.

The new front of the Peabody and Stearns addition to the State House is a design of classical refinement, realized without the heavy granite portico seen on the older eastern façade. In place of the single, central entrance utilized by Gridley Bryant on the eastern front of 1864-66, the western front of 1909-10 utilizes two entrances that flank a projecting central pavilion and provide access, through interior vestibules, directly into the north and south corridors that pass through the new addition.

Each of the oak entrance doors is approached by a flight of granite steps enclosed between granite piers that terminate in paneled dies. These are surmounted by heavy cast metal light standards that are crowned with clusters of globes for electric lamps. Each entrance door is enclosed in an aedecule supported by a pair of engaged Roman Doric columns and surmounted by a granite entablature with enriched mouldings. The crown moulding of the cornice is interrupted at intervals by carved lions' heads. The entablature above each of the two doorways supports a granite balustrade that encloses the arched window directly above each door.

The central three bays of the 1909-10 front form a shallow, projecting pavilion that is differentiated in its wall treatment from any other part of the building. The first story of the pavilion is marked by rusticated granite ashlar. Above this story is a frieze, decorated with a wave moulding, that encircles the entire addition. The upper two stories of the central pavilion are articulated by four pairs of Corinthian pilasters that flank the three window bays. The three pavilion windows on the second floor light the new council chamber. They are differentiated from other window openings on the building by being set within projecting aedicules, each with a horizontal entablature above the keystone of the window arch.

Representatives' Hall: Although documentation for the original construction in 1816-19 and the enlargement of 1864-66 was apparently discarded by overzealous janitors, we believe that the speaker's rostrum in the original House chamber was placed at the west wall, not the north wall as we see it today. As it exists today, the elaborate ornamentation of Representatives' Hall derives from the building's enlargement during the Civil War. Boston architect Gridley J. F. Bryant was a master of classical design, and he embellished the House chamber, originally decorated in delicate federal-style plasterwork, with a rich architectural vocabulary that reflects a style of ornamentation that was dominant during the Renaissance in Europe.

The highly elaborate Corinthian capitals that top each of the pilasters around the walls of the room are decorated with leafy foliage. These capitals support the heavy entablature

or band that surrounds the room at the juncture of walls and ceiling. Composed of three major horizontal zones (each broken up into smaller elements), the entablature supports a vaulted ceiling. In keeping with European precedent, the ceiling is subdivided by heavy ribs that frame coffers or recesses, a few of which have ventilating registers. All these elements are executed in carefully molded plaster.

As it was redesigned in 1864-66, Representatives' Hall was equipped with long, curved, continuous wooden desks or benches that faced the speaker's rostrum, which was relocated to the position of the present speaker's desk. At close intervals behind these benches were swiveling wooden chairs, each supported by a cast iron column that was fixed to the floor.

When these hard, uncomfortable seats were first installed in 1866, a reporter noted that

the chairs, to a man of moderate length, seem a little lofty, and the extremities of the short-legged members will, very likely, hang dangling in the air unless they have some sort of cricket [footstool] to support them. If the rural members, who can scarcely sit out an hour sermon on a cushioned pew on Sunday, don't conclude by the last of June that their hoeing is more necessary than legislation, and if the hard oak chairs don't ache under them by 12 o'clock every forenoon, we shall despair of any contrivance for a short session ever succeeding.

The uncomfortable benches and wooden seats of 1866 were discarded in 1901 and replaced by opera chairs similar to those in the room today. (The current seats date from 1958.)

As remodeled in 1864-66, Representatives' Hall was lighted by a large gas chandelier. Ventilation was provided by open windows on the east and west walls, and by ceiling registers connected to ventilating windows in the dome.

As noted above, the remodeling of 1910 entailed cutting a huge opening in the south wall of Representatives' Hall to create a visitors' gallery in a third-floor area that had formerly been occupied by offices. At the completion of this work, the new opening was framed by pilasters and an entablature intended to repeat the design of architectural features elsewhere in the room, which date from 1866. Yet the newer details do not match exactly, and by comparing the Corinthian capitals nearest the visitors' gallery with those deeper in the room, we can differentiate work of 1866 from detailing of 1910.

The remodeling of 1910 saw gas lighting replaced by a number of electric chandeliers and wall sconces. Ventilation was provided by electric blowers connected to ceiling registers.

Council Chamber: The council chamber that served before the addition of 1909-10 was located in the first story right-hand (northeast) corner of the State House. This room still

retains an ornamented gesso cornice that apparently dates from the remodeling of 1864-66.

The enlargement of 1909-1910 provided an entirely new council chamber, along with a suite of associated rooms and offices, on the second story along the rear elevation of the enlarged building. The southernmost of the three main rooms, now occupied by a receptionist for the governor, was originally designated an anteroom. The room at the opposite end of the central council chamber, fitted with built-in mahogany bookcases, was originally the governor's office.

At the center of the suite of rooms, the new council chamber was finished with selected dark mahogany wainscoting, casings, and cornice, with plastered walls painted in a contrasting light color. The mahogany wainscoting that surrounds the room is paneled and has a high moulded chair rail. In the center of the eastern wall of the council chamber, facing the central window, is a fireplace that is surrounded by jambs and a lintel of variegated green Vermont marble. The mantelshelf, like the cornices above the doors and windows of the room, is supported at each end by a carved mahogany console. The plastered walls of the room are divided in panels by applied mouldings. At the top of the room is a full classical cornice executed in mahogany. The margins of the ceiling are marked by a shallow plaster beam that defines the center of the ceiling as a broad, flat coffer.

In a description of the council chamber and its flanking rooms written in 1910, Fred Leighton, the city editor of the *Concord Evening Monitor*, described the original treatment of the council chamber. The room was dominated by two colors: the dark brown of the mahogany, and various shades of green. The plastered walls were painted green, with the projecting wall mouldings painted in a lighter shade. Except at its edges, the quartered oak floor was covered with a green carpet. The sliding mahogany doors at each end of the room were originally accompanied by curtains or portieres at each side, made from green velvet. Each of the three windows of the room was fitted with curtains of the same material, suspended from lambrequins or pelmets bearing the state seal at their centers. Leighton describes the mahogany furniture that was designed for the room:

The massive furniture is all in mahogany. The large table to be used by the council in the transaction of business is placed in the center of the room. Around it are the chairs of the councilors, with the governor's chair at the head, all in mahogany, upholstered in Spanish leather, and each bearing on its back in colors the seal of the state in [a] shield. Between the council table and the windows are placed the desk and chair of the secretary of state, while the remainder of the furniture is grouped around the room. . . . In the governor's office and anteroom the furniture, finishings, fittings and decorations are of the same general description as those in the chamber, while in the former there are two large bookcases of mahogany, built into the walls of the room. The window sills in all of the departments are of Tennessee marble.

As we see it today, the State House remains essentially as redesigned in 1909. The building has served the state well since that time, although the growth of state government has caused more and more functions to vacate the building for larger quarters, beginning with construction of the State Library and Supreme Court building (now serving as the State Library alone) in 1894, and the State House Annex in 1939.