



The full story of the "President's House" that never housed a President, has not hitherto been told. Dennis C. Kurjack, Supervising Park Historian of the Independence National Historical Park Project and author of the Historical Handbook on Hopewell Village, has delved into some newly-discovered sources to shape for us this curious episode out of Philadelphia's past.

THE "PRESIDENT'S HOUSE" IN PHILADELPHIA

BY DENNIS C. KURJACK

THE White House in Washington, but for the vital working of chance in American history, might never have come to fulfill its exalted role as the official home of our Presidents. That role once seemed indicated for another building, in another city.

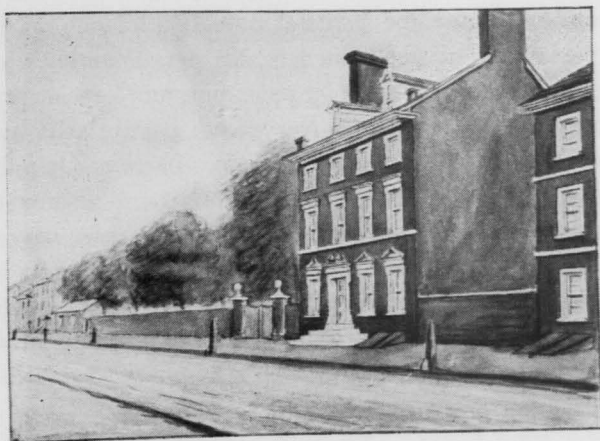
The "President's House" in Philadelphia, conceived and erected earlier than its successful rival, and the first house so called, was intended for the accommodation of President Washington and his successors in office—an executive mansion in what was hoped to be the permanent capital of the United States. But with the removal of the Federal government to Washington in 1800, it became instead a forlorn symbol. The history of the President's House, which no President ever occupied, is a part of the story of Philadelphia, the early seat of Federal government—a story, it may be added, still largely unwritten.¹

Ostensibly the executive mansion was planned because Philadelphia had no building suitable to serve the President and his official family.² Since the Federal Constitution made no provision

¹ Elsewhere in this issue Edward M. Riley makes an important contribution to the subject.

² The Episcopal Academy (later Oeller's Hotel) near the State House on Chestnut Street, once seriously considered as a possible residence because of its size and convenient location, was found unsuitable in other respects. Minutes of Common Council (MS, 1789-1793), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 299.

for a dwelling for the President, Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania felt justified in following New York's example.³ In point of fact, however, there was a house which could and did serve, although it may not have approached the ideal as the home of the Chief Executive. Robert Morris' house on High (now Market) Street, although the finest mansion in the City and conveniently located to the Hall of Congress, had the disadvantage of standing on a noisy street and also of being rather small for Washington's large official family.



THE ROBERT MORRIS HOUSE

190 High Street, Philadelphia, residence of Presidents Washington and Adams. Early nineteenth century water color by W. L. Breton.

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

³ New York also had its problem of finding suitable accommodations for the President. Washington first lived at 3 Cherry Street next to Franklin Square, a house owned by Samuel Osgood. Finding it too small and inconvenient, he next moved into Alexander McComb's new house on Broadway, the residence of the French Minister. The State meanwhile appropriated £20,000 for the construction of the magnificent "Government House" at the foot of Broadway facing Bowling Green, which however was not completed until after the Federal government moved to Philadelphia. For details, see: John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Bicentennial Edition, 39 vols., Washington, 1931-1944), XXXI, 15, 122-123, 122n, 153; Lucretia Perry Osborn, *Washington Speaks for Himself* (N. Y., 1927), 207; I. N. Phelps-Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan* (6 vols., N. Y., 1915-1916), II, 381-382, 417-418, 441-445, and plates 55b, 63, and 66; and *Gazette of the United States*, March 6, 1790.

But as a temporary residence, until the President's House could be erected, it would do. More space was provided by additions and alterations to suit the President's immediate needs. And so, the Morris house was leased by the City for a period of two years, until October 1, 1792, when the official residence was expected to be completed.⁴ As events developed, however, Washington was to remain in this house until his retirement from office in 1797; Adams also was to use it as his residence until the Federal government moved to Washington.⁵

The other reason underlying the building of the President's House was of course the political one. If Philadelphia hoped to remain the capital of the United States permanently, what better way to achieve that end than by providing ample accommodations and comfort for the Federal government; particularly, an elegant mansion for its Chief Executive? It must be remembered that although the Residence Act called for the establishment of the permanent capital on the Potomac in ten years, many believed not unnaturally that the Federal government would never leave Philadelphia.⁶ The site of the future Washington was then hardly more than "two hills separated by a morass," while Philadelphia had the reputation of being America's first city.⁷

The need for a President's House was first expressed in the summer of 1790 by Pennsylvania's delegation in Congress when they suggested to the Mayor and City Councils of Philadelphia, among other projects, the construction of a house for the President of the United States.⁸ The latter promptly adopted the sug-

⁴ Minutes of Common Council (MS, 1789-1793), 305, 308, 311-312, 314-316, and 341. Report on subject by Committee of City Councils dated November 22, 1790, is in Etting Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; copy of agreement with Robert Morris is in Division of Public Records, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, under "Public Improvements, Buildings in Philadelphia, 1790, President's House" (hereafter referred to as the President's House Papers). The most important sources of information on this subject are to be found in the Public Records Office.

⁵ For description of interior and subsequent changes to accommodate President Washington, see Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, XXXI, 110-113, 148-149.

⁶ Edward M. Riley discusses this point in his article.

⁷ Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen, Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (N. Y., 1942), 363; S. E. Morison and H. S. Commager, *Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols., N. Y., 1942), I, 311.

⁸ See Minutes of Common Council for July 19, 1790.

gestion and memorialized the State Legislature.⁹ In the following spring the Pennsylvania House of Representatives appointed a committee to bring in a bill to appropriate funds for the purpose.

There was considerable enthusiasm in some quarters for the Federal buildings plan. "Every dictate of sound policy," observed one newspaper, "is in favor of making such provisions as may inspire the minds of foreigners with proper sentiments of respect toward us, and evidence the veneration of the people for their own government."¹⁰ Sentiment focused particularly on the need for an official residence for President Washington to accord with the dignity of his office and the respect entertained for his person. But complete agreement on the necessity of a Presidential mansion was lacking. Many Pennsylvanians, it developed in the course of the legislative debates, evinced small concern after all as to the eventual location of the permanent capital. Moreover, the economy bloc in the House led by Albert Gallatin, never anxious to spend large sums of money for public buildings, decided to economize by "cutting corners."

Perhaps the most disturbing element was Washington's apparent distaste for the project. The President strongly intimated, upon learning that supporters of the bill were using his name and former dissatisfaction with the Morris house as arguments, that he did not approve of such use of his name.¹¹ His enlarged quarters, Washington let it be known, were now perfectly satisfactory; he had no desire to move again; indeed, would not unless compelled.¹² It must be added that Washington, in fact, was an ardent advocate of the Potomac site and consequently feared what was becoming increasingly evident: that all this solicitude for the comfort of the Federal government was actually a concerted plan to prevent it from ever wanting to leave Philadelphia again.¹³

In short, Washington's coolness and the economy-mindedness

⁹ *Ibid.*, 291-293, 297-299. The memorial was read in the Assembly on August 27, 1790 (*Minutes of the Assembly of Pennsylvania*, Feb. 2-Sept. 3, 1790, 288).

¹⁰ *Gazette of the United States*, March 30, 1791.

¹¹ See his letter to Tobias Lear, September 5, 1791, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, XXXI, 110.

¹² Tobias Lear to Samuel Powel, September 20, 1791, and Washington to Lear, September 26, 1791, *ibid.*, 372-374, 376-378. See also, Washington to Lear, October 2, 1791, *ibid.*, 380-382.

¹³ See, for instance, his letter to David Stuart, November 20, 1791, *ibid.*, 419-423.

of many of the legislators were not happy auguries for the future of the proposed edifice. Nevertheless, the majority of the Legislature remained stubbornly optimistic and on September 29, 1791, it finally forced passage of the "Federal Building Bill." Governor Thomas Mifflin signed it the next day. The Act authorized £20,000—approximately £17,000 for the construction of an executive mansion, and the remainder to reimburse the City and County of Philadelphia for expenses incurred in providing "temporary" accommodations for the President and Congress.¹⁴

A week following passage of the enabling act, Governor Mifflin appointed Colonel Francis Gurney, Richard Wells, and Jacob Hiltzheimer—members of the House—as commissioners to superintend the construction of the President's House. They were authorized to contract for materials, pay "all necessary artists and workmen," and carry out other duties incident to completion of the building.¹⁵ Two days later, the Governor entered into an agreement of purchase with owners of twelve lots on the west side of Ninth Street between High and Chestnut Streets.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter a loan was negotiated with the Bank of North America, to be repaid out of revenues arising from public auctions.¹⁷

Approximately two-thirds of the block bounded by Ninth, Tenth, Chestnut, and High Streets had been originally patented to Abraham Markoe, a wealthy merchant engaged in the West Indian trade.¹⁸ This area was then in the outskirts of the City; there were few houses west of Ninth Street even as late as 1795. The site of the President's House was chosen for reasons of economy and also to encourage development of this section of the City, in the direction of the Schuylkill.¹⁹ The twelve lots measured in the aggregate 202 feet along Ninth Street and 151 feet in depth.²⁰

Actual construction did not begin until late in the spring of 1792. Squabbles over financing caused the most serious delays. Al-

¹⁴ *Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania*, XIV, 181-183.

¹⁵ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ninth Series, I, 239.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241. A plan of these lots is in the University Papers, XIII, University of Pennsylvania Archives.

¹⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ninth Series, I, 255-256.

¹⁸ Joseph Jackson, *Market Street, Philadelphia, The Most Historic Highway* (Phila., 1918), 147.

¹⁹ *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, September 24, 1791.

²⁰ Measurements from a ground plan in "Report of the Committee Appointed to provide for the payment of the President's House, &c" (pamphlet published by Z. Poulson, Jr.), facing p. 10, University Papers, XIII, Univ. of Penna. Archives.

most at the outset it was discovered that the actual cost of building the edifice would exceed the amount authorized by the Legislature.²¹ Why this should have been the case, hardly more than a month following passage of the enabling act, is mystifying. Possibly the Legislature took its cue from the State of New York in estimating the cost at £20,000, for that State had appropriated the identical sum for its "Government House" three years earlier.²² At any rate, additional funds were not to be voted until 1794.

Members of the Legislature and others may have felt that the prospect of the Federal government remaining in Philadelphia indefinitely was still most favorable. Certainly, at this time the "Federal City" on the Potomac was making little headway, thanks largely to Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant's bickering with the Commissioners there. "A feather will turn the scale either way," Washington wrote to David Stuart, one of the Commissioners for the Potomac site. "Every advantage will be taken of the Majors dereliction . . . [If] inactivity and contractedness should mark the steps of the Commissioners of that district, whilst action on the part of this state [Pennsylvania] is displayed in providing commodious buildings for Congress &ca. the Government will remain where it now is."²³

Had the Legislature pressed the advantage at this point, displaying more liberality with funds which in the end had to be voted anyway, valuable time might have been saved and conceivably the scale permanently tipped in favor of Philadelphia's hopes. But the President's House was not to be completed until 1797.

A provocative problem in telling the story of the President's House is the identity of its designer.²⁴ Neither the identity of the designer nor the basis for the design are definitely known. In October, 1791, Governor Mifflin invited Major L'Enfant, then at Alexandria, Virginia, to prepare a plan;²⁵ and in the following

²¹ A. J. Dallas to Wells and Gurney, November 4, 1791, President's House Papers; *Penna. Archives*, Ninth Series, I, 272.

²² *Gazette of the United States*, March 6, 1790.

²³ Letter of March 8, 1792. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, XXXI, 503-508.

²⁴ This section, reworked and condensed here, was first published under the title, "Who Designed the President's House?" in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XII (2) (1953), 27-28, and is used again by courtesy of Editor J. D. Forbes.

²⁵ Dallas to L'Enfant, October 11, 1791, in *Penna. Archives*, Ninth Series, I, 242.

month he also requested the Commissioners to submit one, together with estimates of the cost of construction.²⁶ That there were two plans is borne out also by the Governor's report to the Legislature made early in the following year.²⁷ But these plans have not yet come to light.

To offer a conjecture, one of them may have been L'Enfant's. An Englishman who visited Philadelphia in 1795 wrote that the "original plan" was drawn up by a "private gentleman, resident in the neighborhood of Philadelphia."²⁸ L'Enfant lived in the City until the spring of 1791 and returned to it in the latter part of the year on two occasions. Nor is it without interest that the lavish scale of the Presidential mansion was reminiscent of the taste of that erratic genius who liked to do things *en grande*.

Whether or not the plan adopted was L'Enfant's, assuming that he submitted one, it appears to have been altered by the Commissioners. They conceived that it could be improved upon and among other changes "reversed the position of the upper and lower stories, placing the latter at the top, so that the pilasters, with which it is ornamented, appear suspended in the air."²⁹ The President's House as completed was an imposing three-story structure of brick trimmed with marble, and a facade in the new classical style of Robert Adam. It measured 102 feet by 105 feet, including a bowback.³⁰

The actual redesign of the building, credited to the Commissioners, may have been the work of Colonel William Williams, one of the two builder-architects entrusted with the construction; and Williams may have obtained his ideas from a builder's manual.³¹ He was, in the 1790's, perhaps the best practical architect in

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 272; Dallas to Wells and Gurney, November 4, 1791, President's House Papers.

²⁷ February 25, 1792. *Penna. Archives*, Fourth Series, IV, 223-224; *Journal of the House of Representatives of Pennsylvania* (1791-1792), 174.

²⁸ Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America* . . . (2 vols., London, 1807), I, 10.

²⁹ Weld, *Travels*, I, 10. He states that the "committee also contrived, that the windows of the principal apartments, instead of opening into a spacious area in front of the house, as was designed at first, should face towards the confined back yards of the adjoining houses."

³⁰ University Papers, VIII, 53, Univ. of Penna. Archives.

³¹ For a floor plan strikingly similar to that of the President's House, see for instance Abraham Swan, *A Collection of Designs in Architecture* (2 vols., London, ca. 1757), II, Plate 19.

Philadelphia.³² Williams had studied architecture in London as a young man, returning to Philadelphia in 1772 to "carry . . . on the business of House carpentry in the most useful and ornamental manner."³³ During this period the style of architecture of Robert Adam and his brother was very much in vogue in England, and quite probably the training Williams received abroad leaned heavily in this direction.³⁴

Construction of the President's House may be divided into two stages. The first, ending when funds authorized by the original grant became exhausted, progressed apace. Ground was broken on April 23, and on May 10 amidst ceremonies the cornerstone was placed. Jacob Hiltzheimer noted in his *Diary* that the "Governor ordered sixteen dollars worth of drink, with bread and cheese for the people present."³⁵ Governor Mifflin and each of the Commissioners "gave the stone a stroke with the mason's hammer, and directed the hammer be put in the stone."³⁶ The inscription on the cornerstone reads:

This cornerstone,
of the House to
accommodate the President
of the *United States*
was laid
May 10, 1792
when PENNSYLVANIA
was happily out of Debt;
THOMAS MIFFLIN,
then *Governor*
of the State.

³² Report of the Commissioners to Governor Mifflin, November 28, 1795, in President's House Papers. Indicative of his reputation is the fact that, in 1793, he and another practical architect were chosen to pass on the merits of Thornton's and Hallet's respective designs for the National Capitol, and their choice of Hallet's was readily accepted by both Washington and Jefferson (Jefferson to Washington, July 17, 1793, in Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital* (National Park Service Source Book Series No. 4, Washington, 1946), 185-186; Washington to Commissioners of the District of Columbia, July 25, 1793, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, XXXIII, 29-30).

³³ *Pennsylvania Packet*, January 4, 1773.

³⁴ For a good account of the architectural tastes of the period, see Arthur T. Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam (1758-1794)* (2 vols., London, 1922).

³⁵ Jacob C. Parsons, ed., *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, 1765-1798* (Philadelphia, 1893), 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 175-176; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 16, 1792. The cornerstone is now in the foyer of the main library of the University of Pennsylvania.

Conspicuously absent from the scene, it appears, was the Federal government. Congress had adjourned two days earlier and the members were probably on their way home. Washington, possibly as a coincidence, set out for Mount Vernon on the very day of the ceremonies.³⁷

We can follow the progress of the building in the almost daily entries in Hiltzheimer's *Diary*.³⁸ May and June were taken up with the hiring of skilled workmen and contracting for materials. In July construction work began in earnest. On the second day the carpenters were "putting down the floor." The basement was covered just in time for the Fourth. On that day at noon Hiltzheimer "went down to the President's House and opened it to allow the gentlemen of the artillery to go in out of the rain, until they fired the salute of fifteen guns in honor of Independence day." Three days later at six o'clock the carpenters, bricklayers, and stonecutters were treated to a round of beef, ham, and punch to celebrate "putting down of the first floor."

The second floor was "down" by the first week in September and the third by November. On each occasion the workmen were treated to refreshments. In between these stages of progress, it may be added, the men celebrated with stronger refreshments at the "Yellow Cat" tavern nearby.³⁹ The fourth floor and some of the rafters were in place by December 1, and the occasion called for an even more elaborate celebration. The "raising" supper was attended by 180 people, including such notables as Mayor Clarkson, Judge Biddle, and Gunning Bedford.⁴⁰

By May 3, 1793, a tally of construction data indicates that a total of 1,373,000 bricks and 1,157 perches of stone had been laid. The roof which was covered in the course of the following month had required some 50,000 shingles. Then work stopped. All funds had been spent or obligated.⁴¹

The structure was about half finished, and it appeared evident that a grant equal to the first would be required to finish it. But thanks to the reluctance of the Legislature, characterized by Albert

³⁷ *Gazette of the United States*, May 12, 1792.

³⁸ Hiltzheimer *Diary*, 177, 179, 182, 184.

³⁹ J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia* (3 vols., Phila., 1884), II, 985.

⁴⁰ Hiltzheimer *Diary*, 185.

⁴¹ Hiltzheimer *Diary*, 191.

Gallatin's suggestion at one point in the debates that the lots and unfinished structure be sold "as is," almost three years passed before the necessary appropriations were made.⁴² First, on April 22, 1794, \$25,000 was voted.⁴³ Even with this additional money the building was not to be completed. More than half of the Federal government's allotted ten years in Philadelphia was over when on March 23, 1796, a further appropriation of \$30,000 was voted by the Pennsylvania Legislature.⁴⁴

Work on the edifice resumed early in 1795 but without the services of its principal builders, Colonel William Williams and Joseph Rakestraw. Both had died the year before. Their successors, John Smith and Robert Allison, however, were experienced master carpenters.⁴⁵ The exterior was completed under their direction in February.⁴⁶ By September 16, "John Smith [had] twenty-three men at work on the circular stairs."⁴⁷ Work on the interior proceeded throughout the following year and into the next. In December, 1796, the Commissioners reported that the building was in "great forwardness but several parts remaining incompletion."⁴⁸

More than twenty-nine skilled craftsmen in addition to other labor worked on the structure at one time or another, including carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, stone and marble cutters, stucco workers, turners, carvers, and composition workers. Almost 100,000 board feet of lumber of various kinds, from white pine to mahogany, were used in the construction in addition to the other material mentioned earlier; and the windows were glazed with more than 1,100 lights of best crown glass imported from Bristol, England.

In the spring of 1797, finally, after almost five years of work and the expenditure of over \$110,000, the President's House was completed. But, in contrast with the beginning, there was no celebra-

⁴² *Ibid.*, 189; *House Journal* (Dec. 6, 1791-Sept. 1793), 197-199.

⁴³ *Statutes at Large of Penna.*, XV, 169-170.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

⁴⁵ Report of the Commissioners to the Governor on "Expenditures on the House for the Accommodations of the President of the United States under the two grants . . ." dated November 22, 1797, in President's House Papers.

⁴⁶ Voucher No. 55, Accts. of Benj. Taylor and Wm. Preston, Feb. 5, 1795, President's House Papers.

⁴⁷ Hiltzheimer *Diary*, 219.

⁴⁸ Report of the Commissioners to Governor Mifflin, December 5, 1796, President's House Papers.

tion to mark the end, no refreshments for the workmen; even the day of completion remains unrecorded.

Conceived on a grand scale, the structure was one of the largest buildings in the City—larger than the State House or the first Bank of the United States. Three views of the building are extant: a Birch engraving of 1799,⁴⁹ a wash drawing by William Strickland, ca. 1818-1820,⁵⁰ and an engraving of George Strickland's drawing, ca. 1828.⁵¹ From them one gains an excellent idea of the exterior.

In style the President's House might be described as "Late Georgian," "Federal," or "Early Republic." The facade resembled that of two other buildings in Philadelphia completed in the last decade of the eighteenth century: William Thornton's Library Hall on Fifth Street with its two-story marble pilasters contrasting with red brick, and David Evans' "Center House" of the Pennsylvania Hospital. But the prototype of many of the details of the building could be found in the country houses of England, built in the last thirty or forty years of the century. The trend toward "new classicism," which began in England with Robert Adam, became pronounced in Philadelphia after the Revolution; and the President's House was one of the most striking indications of this trend. Overlaid with Italian influences characteristic of that school and possessed of a certain dignity, it lacked the simple charm of more typically eighteenth-century American architecture. It was designed to impress.

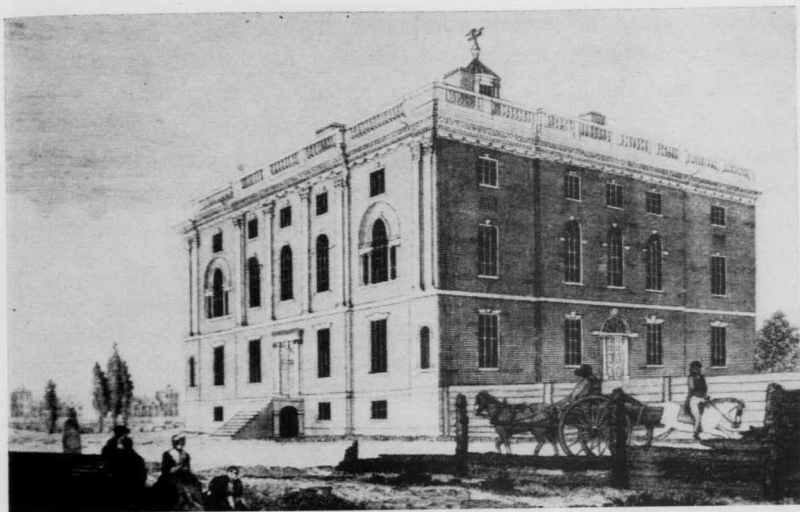
A massive, almost square structure, its hipped roof was pierced in the center by a glass dome and cupola, surmounted by a carved and gilded eagle. Full entablature with a modillion-cornice and frieze, crowned by a balustrade, ornamented the top. The impressive features of the facade were the twin Palladian windows and a group of eight Corinthian pilasters rising from the projecting marble belt between the first and second floors. A flight of marble steps led into a spacious hall on the first floor.

The first floor was high ceilinged, evidently intended for official

⁴⁹ Published the following year as plate 13 in William Birch's famous albums, *The City of Philadelphia*, one of which is in the print collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁵⁰ Print collection, Hist. Soc. of Penna.

⁵¹ Engraved by J. W. Steel and published by C. G. Childs; a copy is in the print collection, Hist. Soc. of Penna.



THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE, 1799
 Drawn and engraved by Wm. Birch & Son.
Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

and ceremonial occasions. It contained seven large rooms, including two ball or assembly rooms twenty-six feet by sixty-seven feet; an oval or "bow" room on the west end thirty-two by forty feet; and a domed circular hall in the center fifty feet in diameter. The latter without a doubt formed the most prominent feature of the interior. From it a flight of double stairs led to the circular gallery high above. The gallery was supported by eight fluted Corinthian columns and gave access to what were intended to be the Presidential apartments on the second floor. These as well as the apartments on the third floor, about fifteen rooms in all, could also be reached by another staircase in the north "angle."⁵²

Unfortunately, no contemporary sketch of interior details seems to have survived. The description given here was pieced together largely from original construction accounts still extant, preserved in the Division of Public Records in Harrisburg.⁵³ These indicate

⁵² Letter of December 29, 1800, B. Henry Latrobe to Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, detailing plans for altering the President's House for use of the University (University Papers, XIII, Univ. of Penna. Archives); construction accounts (President's House Papers).

⁵³ President's House Papers, especially vouchers Nos. 29 to 131 (1795-1797) and final report, "Expenditures on the House for the Accommodation of the President of the United States under the two grants . . .," November 22, 1797.

an extravagant, impressive interior—highly suggestive of some English mansions of this period. The details of cornice and frieze, ceilings, capitals, and panels, were apparently a mingling of contrasting motifs; conventional acanthus leaves and natural foliage, festoons of fruits and flowers, classical heads, harvest figures, vases and urns with eagles, horns of plenty, and frames of plain bands—all vying with each other in an intricate pattern of natural and artificial forms.

The woodwork was painted white, except the staircase details, the gallery railing, and a few other features. Double architraves surmounted the deeply-recessed Venetian windows which reached to the floor. Fireplaces with marble hearths and fluted mantels adorned all the rooms. Eight niches in the circular hall, with fluted pilasters and soffits displaying urns and figures, a profusion of columns and pilasters with Corinthian capitals and high surbases, along with other architectural features, surely must have combined to produce what was intended by the builders—a highly elaborate effect.

On March 3, 1797, on the eve of John Adams' inauguration, Governor Mifflin formally tendered the building to the new President.

As the building will be completed in the course of a few weeks, permit me to tender it for your accommodation; and to inform you that, although I regret the necessity of making any stipulation on the subject, I shall consider the rent for which you might obtain any other suitable house in Philadelphia (and which you will be pleased to mention), as a sufficient compensation for the use of the one now offered.⁵⁴

The somewhat curt tone of the offer does not suggest that the Governor had any expectation of an affirmative answer. Possibly he knew that the new President's frugal habits and simple tastes would not permit such a luxury. Then, too, he might have come to the conclusion that the political implications forbade its acceptance at this late date. But the offer had to be made, and its apparently studied tone seemed to be the least embarrassing way

⁵⁴ *Penna. Archives*, Ninth Series, II, 1228; Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (10 vols., Boston, 1850-1856), VIII, 530.

out for all concerned. At any rate, President Adams declined on constitutional grounds.

The respect to the United States intended by the legislature of Pennsylvania in building a house for the President, will no doubt be acknowledged by the Union as it ought to be. But as I entertain great doubts whether, by a candid construction of the Constitution of the United States, I am at liberty to accept it without the intention and authority of Congress, and as there is not time for any application to them, I must pray you to apologize for me to the legislature for declining the offer.⁵⁵

Thus a building designed as the center of a republican court was summarily rejected, foreshadowing the doom of Pennsylvania's hope that Philadelphia would remain the Federal capital. The President's House was never to house a President, and for several years was to have no more substantial tenants than the ghosts of the unfulfilled dreams of its builders.

Because of its size and interior arrangement, the building was wholly unsuited for most purposes. The small salary of the Governor of Pennsylvania rendered it impractical as a Governor's mansion, and a plan once considered to convert it into a hotel did not materialize.⁵⁶ Useless and unwanted, the building remained vacant—prey to the elements and vandalism. The only recorded use of the abortive "President's House" before 1800 was on January 19, 1798, when a committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives met there to consider a memorial from fifty-one subscribers for a charter to build a bridge across the Delaware at Trenton.⁵⁷

The question of what to do with the building became of increasing concern as time and weather took their toll. By 1800 the State government was already ensconced in Lancaster and the Federal government had just removed to Washington. The possibility that the building might yet serve some expanding governmental function disappeared. In that year, however, the solution appeared from an unexpected yet highly appropriate quarter.

The growing University of Pennsylvania had been incorporated

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁵⁶ Weld, *Travels*, I, 10; Edward P. Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1740-1940* (Phila., 1940), 181.

⁵⁷ Hiltzheimer *Diary*, 251.



THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

right, as part of the University of Pennsylvania. Wash drawing by William Strickland, circa 1818-1820.

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

on September 30, 1791, the very day that the enabling act for the President's House was passed by the Pennsylvania Legislature. Partly as a result of the incorporation, moreover, the University had been in need of new quarters ever since. By 1800 the old buildings had become wholly antiquated and inadequate to the needs of the institution.⁵⁸

So, on July 15, at a public auction held at the old City Tavern, the Trustees of the University bought the mansion, together with the twelve lots, for the bargain price of \$41,650.⁵⁹ In 1802, following some alterations, all college classes transferred to their new home. Eventually both the Academy and the Medical School also moved in.⁶⁰ The President's House thus became the second home of a great institution, achieving thereby some renown from another direction by serving a most worthy purpose. In 1829, finally, it was demolished to make way for the new twin buildings designed for the University by William Strickland.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania*, 180.

⁵⁹ Report of Commissioners to Governor M'Kean, August 12, 1800; Account of Commissioners with Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, August 29, 1800; and report of David Jackson for Commissioners to Comptroller-General, September 10, 1800, President's House Papers.

⁶⁰ Cheyney, *History of University of Pennsylvania*, 180-182, 213-214; William L. Turner, "The Early Buildings of the University of Pennsylvania," *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, LIII (1950), 14-16.

⁶¹ Minutes of the Trustees, VII, 231, 273, Univ. of Penna. Archives; Cheyney, *History of the University of Pennsylvania*, 180-182, 213-214.