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EVOLUTION OF A SHRINE

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HOW an abandoned State House became the Independence Hall we know today, is the theme which this brief paper will attempt to develop.¹ It is the story of the transformation of a workaday building into a hallowed shrine.

The evolution of Independence Hall as a shrine falls easily into four overlapping periods of roughly a quarter century each: first, a period of almost complete neglect from 1799 to 1824; followed in turn by another quarter century of awakening interest; then, from 1846 to 1876, a period of intense emotional regard, prompted in part by the difficult war years and the approaching centennial of the Declaration of Independence; and, finally, a fourth rather tranquil period of realization and reconstruction.

It has sometimes been maintained that people have an instinctive regard for scenes of great events. If this is true, it was strangely inoperative in the early post-Revolutionary period of Independence Hall. Although patriotism and pride in national independence was evident from the first, as witness the annual observance of Independence Day as prophesied by John Adams in 1776, and the increasing veneration for Washington, the building which was the scene of so many significant events barely survived. Indeed, the problems considered in relation to it prior to 1824 seemed to be

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¹This is part of a comprehensive study of the Independence Hall group of buildings, research for which was carried out earlier by the History and Interpretation branch of the Independence National Historical Park Project, under the direction of Dr. Edward M. Riley, Chief Park Historian. For the history of the Independence Hall group, see Edward M. Riley, "The Independence Hall Group," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, XVIII (1), 7-42.

those of utility rather than patriotism. The building was altered freely to meet the demands of expediency. For example, in 1781 the badly-decayed wooden steeple of the State House was removed,



THE STATE HOUSE IN 1781

The wooden sheds adjoining the wing buildings were used during the Revolutionary War to store ammunition. The steeple (see cover of this issue) was removed in 1781.

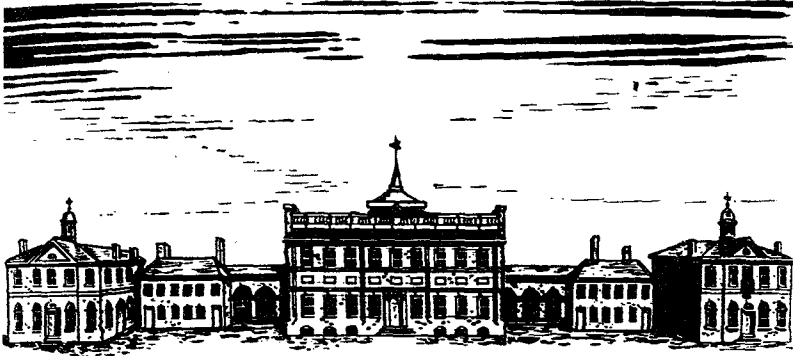
Courtesy National Park Service

and in 1812 the State Legislature permitted the City of Philadelphia to tear down the arcades and wing buildings and also the Committee Room, to make way for "modern" office buildings of Robert Mills' design. In this period, too, an ornate, inharmonious doorway replaced the chaste colonial entrance on the Chestnut Street side of Independence Hall. Worst of all, the paneling in the old Assembly Room, the room in which took place all the great events from the Declaration of Independence to the Federal Constitutional Convention of 1787, was ripped out. Describing this change, an English visitor wrote some years later: "Some Goth in office modernized the room for the purpose, so I am informed, of giving his nephew a job, and tore down all the old panelling . . . and substituted a coating of plaster and paint. It is a matter of surprise to me that the inhabitants even permitted such a profanation, being generally proud of their revolutionary relics and deeds of arms."²

The very survival of the building was threatened in 1816 when the Legislature authorized its sale along with State House Square to realize funds for the proposed capitol building in Harrisburg.

²E. T. Coke, *A Subaltern's Furlough* (London, 1833), 37.

To enhance prospects of sale, the authorization decreed that the Square be divided up into streets and building lots. Fortunately, however, this radical provision was never carried out because another clause allowed the City of Philadelphia priority in purchase. The City acted promptly and acquired title in 1818 to the State House buildings as well as the Square.



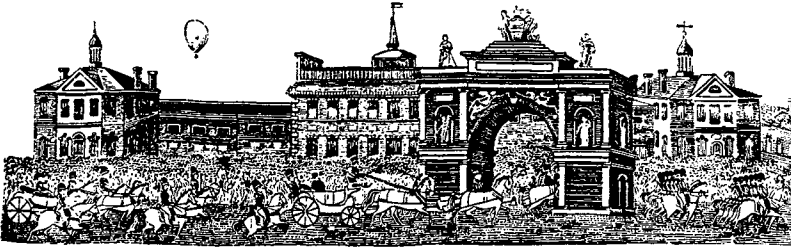
THE STATE HOUSE, 1791

The wooden sheds were removed to make way for the City Hall (left) and County Courthouse (right), completed in 1789 and 1791 respectively. From 1790 to 1800, when Philadelphia was the Federal Capital, the City Hall became the seat of the U. S. Supreme Court, and the County Courthouse became Congress Hall.

Courtesy National Park Service

Practicality and utility governed the use of the building for many years. From 1802 to 1828, Charles Willson Peale occupied the entire second floor with his privately-owned museum of natural history. Various municipal and Federal courts were the principal tenants until the second half of the century, when City Council moved in to take over the second floor.

In the 1820's, however, the second and more hopeful chapter opened for the old State House. The approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and with it a realization that complete national independence had been achieved, gave impetus to a new attitude—one of reminiscing, of looking back. In Philadelphia, John Fanning Watson, Samuel Hazard, and others already were gathering historical records; in 1824, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania was founded. And in that same year, Lafayette came to Philadelphia. His visit not only stimulated



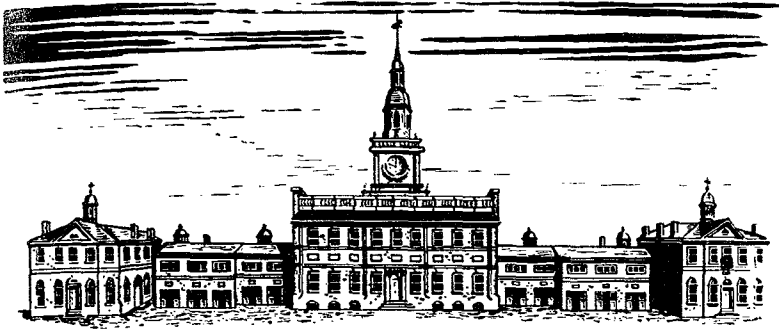
GENERAL LAFAYETTE'S ARRIVAL AT THE STATE HOUSE

*September 28, 1824**Courtesy Philadelphia Free Library*

greater interest in our national beginnings, but the elaborate arrangements made for his reception at the old State House focused attention on the building itself. In front, across Chestnut Street, a triumphal arch was constructed, while the Assembly Room was completely refurbished for the occasion with elegant furnishings and embellished with portraits of Presidents and Revolutionary heroes. Here, on September 28, the Nation's guest was formally received by the Mayor and distinguished citizens; and here, during Lafayette's week in Philadelphia, delegates thronged to pay their respects.

Lafayette's visit dramatically recalled the stirring events associated with the State House, particularly the Assembly Room, and thus provided the first real impulse toward the transformation of a utilitarian building into a shrine. Already many were referring to the Assembly Room as the "Hall of Independence." Then, as further indications of the new spirit, in 1826 an Act of City Council decreed that henceforth the State House Yard was to be known officially as "Independence Square." Two years later when a new steeple was erected on the tower in place of the one removed in 1781, it was intentionally an approximation of the original. This steeple, designed by William Strickland, is the one which adorns Independence Hall today. And finally, in 1832, what is believed to have been a duplicate of the original paneling was restored to the Assembly Room by John Haviland, the noted architect.

But if this activity indicated an awareness of the importance of Independence Hall as a structure, the problem of finding the most fitting use for the building remained unsolved. For Americans of



THE STATE HOUSE, 1828

The new steeple was designed by William Strickland.

Courtesy National Park Service

the 1830's could not yet justify the preservation of a building solely for its historical association. As a result, the precedence of using the Assembly Room as a "levee" room set by Lafayette's visit was to continue through the years. At other times it either remained closed or was rented as an exhibition room for paintings and sculpture.

In 1846, however, as the result of growing public interest, stimulated perhaps by the recrudescence of national pride in the wake of westward expansion, the room was finally opened to the general visitor as a museum. A few years later, the Liberty Bell, fast assuming a legendary character, became its principal attraction.

The third era, from 1846 to 1876, as we know, was one of emotional turmoil sweeping from impending crisis to Civil War to reconstruction and culminating in the centennial of the Declaration of Independence. Here amidst almost religious fervor the scene became identified with the document and the deed; the Assembly Room became a tangible symbol of the Declaration of Independence and American Freedom. Probably Edward Everett was expressing a popular emotion when, in what seems to us a grandiloquent manner, on July 4, 1858, from a platform on Independence Square, he said:

Let the rain of heaven distill gently on its roof and the storms of winter beat softly on its door. As each successive generation of those who have benefitted by the great Declaration made within it shall make their pilgrimage to

that shrine, may they not think it unseemly to call its walls
Salvation and its gates Praise.³

Three years later, on Washington's Birthday, from the same spot Abraham Lincoln said that all his political sentiments were derived from the sentiments proclaimed from that chamber in 1776.⁴

From 1852 on, the use of the Assembly Room was restricted to patriotic purposes. One of these purposes seemingly provided the room as a place where the nation's honored dead could lie in state. Between 1848 and 1865, the bodies of John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln, as well as a number of Philadelphia soldiers killed in the War, rested there.

The movement for the preservation of historic sites, which by the 1870's was already evincing itself in other places, notably in connection with Mount Vernon, Valley Forge, and other sites associated with George Washington, became personified in Philadelphia in the bustling energy of Colonel Frank M. Etting, a patriotic lawyer and Civil War veteran. Colonel Etting devoted himself wholeheartedly to the promotion of schemes for the restoration and preservation of the Assembly Room of Independence Hall—indeed, to some extent, of the entire building. In tune with the emotional climate of the time, Etting fostered a reverential, almost religious, attitude towards the Assembly Room which did much towards making Independence Hall in very fact a shrine.

With the approach of the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, patriotism rose to new heights as the Nation paused to review its past. In Philadelphia, with preparations for a Centennial Exposition in progress, the zealous colonel seized the opportunity to urge upon the City Fathers a major restoration of Independence Hall, in view of the expected influx of visitors from all parts of the country to the exposition. As a result, Colonel Etting was appointed chairman of a committee for the restoration of Independence Hall, and proceeded in his task with a patriotic zeal not always matched with historical accuracy. Under his direction furniture believed to have been used in 1776 replaced the collection of curios accumulated through the years, and the archi-

³ Cited in Riley, "Independence Hall Group," *Trans. Amer. Philos. Soc.*, XVIII (1), 35.

⁴ The Speech is quoted in full in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Feb. 23, 1861.

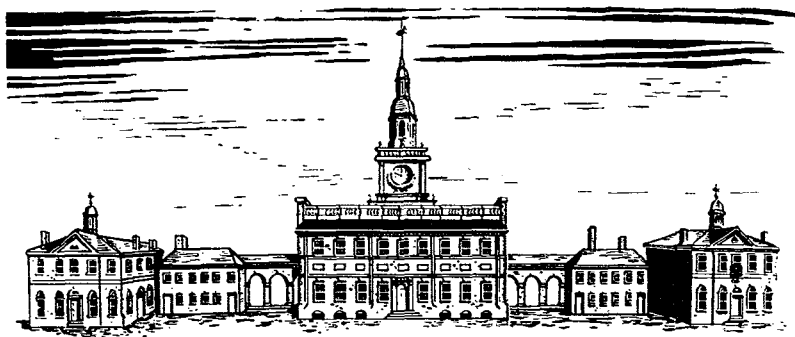
tectural features of the room itself were partially restored—a restoration which has remained substantially unchanged to this day.⁵ With the excitement of the Centennial celebration over, the third period of the evolution of Independence Hall closed, with restoration or at least preservation in the future seemingly assured.

The fourth period was by way of contrast one of relative quiet for Independence Hall, disturbed only by increasing visitation and by minor changes in the interior arrangement of the first floor. The old Supreme Court Chamber had become a museum, and the Liberty Bell, now firmly entrenched in legend, was established in the Tower Room. Thus the entire first floor was reserved for visitor use, although some offices of the City Administration remained on the second floor. And, perhaps most significantly, the building came to be referred to more and more in popular speech as “Independence Hall.” The Assembly Room, meanwhile, was evolving into the “Declaration Chamber.”

It was now almost inevitable that sooner or later the entire building would be set aside as a public monument to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, consciousness of our historic past had become so deeply ingrained in the national fabric that history and the preservation of historic buildings and sites became a subject of interest to many societies throughout the country.⁶ And so, in the 1890's, City Council vacated the second floor and at the same time the Mayor appointed a committee of City representatives as well as a commission of leading citizens to continue on an expanded scale the program of restoration begun by Etting, involving the entire building and the Square. As the first step in this ambitious program, the Mills buildings of 1812 were replaced by an approximation of the original eighteenth-century wings and arcades of Independence Hall. Then, in 1898, the Daughters of the American Revolution undertook the restoration of the second floor. Completion of the project, however, was interrupted by a number of factors, including two World Wars and the Depression.

⁵ See Etting's reports to the Mayor, published successively in 1873, 1874, and 1875, under the title *Report of the Committee on Restoration of Independence Hall*. Etting Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶ Ronald F. Lee, *United States: Historical and Architectural Monuments* (published by the Historical Commission of the “Instituto Panamericano de Geografía y Historia,” Mexico, D.F., 1951), 11-12.



INDEPENDENCE HALL, 1898

Wings and arcades have been restored, resembling those of colonial days (see cover of this issue). This is how Independence Hall appears today from Market Street.

Courtesy National Park Service

It was not finally resumed until January 1, 1951, when the City of Philadelphia transferred custody of the Independence Hall group of buildings to the United States Department of the Interior for preservation and development by the National Park Service as part of the Independence National Historical Park Project.

The survival of Independence Hall through two centuries of vigorous national growth, to become our foremost shrine, is justly a matter for patriotic pride. Even if this survival depended in part on chance, ever a vital force in history, it reflects the timely awakening of interest in the historic past and stands today as tangible evidence of our early beginnings—an inspiration to this and future generations of Americans.