The French Architect of the Allegheny City Hall*

By Emilie McCreery

Charles Antoine Colomb Gengembre, French architect and engineer, was born 1790 in Paris. A member of the Corps de Garde of the King of Westphalia, he was pronounced too delicate for active service and was honorably discharged from that organization.

In 1809 he built the Mint of the City of Cassel, France, and in 1814 competed in architecture for the Grand Prix de Rome, winning second place. With three fellow students Mr. Gengembre travelled extensively in Italy, reveling in its treasures of art and bringing back numerous sketches of palaces and monuments.

From 1820 to 1825 Mr. Gengembre, after considerable experimenting and many tribulations, succeeded in making the first illumination by oleaginous gas and established the heating and lighting of the Grand Opera.

In 1826 he undertook “at his own risk and peril”, building for the government the Port St. Ouen (at that time on the outskirts of Paris), often employing 1000 workmen at a time. After four years of strenuous work Mr. Gengembre was confronted by the Insurrection of 1830, July 27, 28, and 29 when Louis X was dethroned and Louis Phillipe, the Citizen King, was installed. Business was in such a chaotic condition that work on the Port was abandoned as also on the beautiful home which Mr. Gengembre had built here in the Italian style. As an eye witness of the Insurrection he had sustained a bayonet wound, as the military rushed by, nearly putting an end to his earthly career.

In 1831 Mr. Gengembre joined Londen relatives, spending one year there. During this period he took out patents for Stevenson’s first six wheeled locomotives; also made plans for Boulton’s Manchester and Liverpool Railroad.

In 1832 he became architect for a year at Charles Fourrier’s “Falensterre”—The Colony de Conde sur-Ves-

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gre, France. In 1833 he took his family to Indret on the Loire, becoming draughtsman for the Government. It was here for the first time that French war vessels were constructed and equipped with machinery "Made in France". This establishment was situated on the island of Indret, near Nantes and the estuary of the Loire. In 1834, Mr. Gengembre built himself a little steamboat, the "Marianne", a side-wheeler, 100 feet long, of 20 tons and only six horse power. With his wife, his young son as engineer, and a pilot, he started on a sea-voyage of about one hundred miles to Port Louis on the west coast of France. For four years the "Marianne", with engineer and "one hand" plied as passenger-ferry between Port Louis and L'Orient six miles out on the Bay of Biscay. Mr. Gengembre returned to Indret and the Government works. While there he supplied plans for the erection of an extravagant residence of a local nobleman; it consisted of nine courts, dome, and colonnades, the ensemble resembling an Oriental palace.

In 1841, Mr. Gengembre was nominated by the Minister of Marine as constructor of the Civil establishment of Indret; in this capacity he built huge machines for dredging works. As each district of France was now obliged to furnish its own public schools, Mr. Gengembre was for a time kept busy supplying plans for the Communal Schools. Feb. 26, 1848 came the Revolution, Louis Philippe being dethroned and the second Republic proclaimed. A staunch patriot, liberal minded and progressive, Mr. Gengembre became discouraged with the disorganizing upheavals and seeing no promising future before him, in company with one other family, prepared to leave his native land hoping to spend in the United States of America a peaceful old age. In the fall of the year of 1849 he came to Cincinnati, but subsequently settled in Manchester, Allegheny City, Pennsylvania. Here he built his first home, a tiny cottage on Beaver Avenue; with a roof over his head Mr. Gengembre straightway ordered an exquisite Steinway Pianoforte from the firm of Henry Kleber, Wood St., which order Mme. Gengembre weepingly rescinded, on account of lack of house room. The Gengembre family promptly found its place among the cultured people of Pittsburgh. They resided later in the fashionable Colonnade Dome on Federal Street, Allegheny City. A daughter, Mrs. Anderson,
a gifted artist, exhibited her work in London successfully and resided for sometime in the Island of Capri, with her husband who was also an artist. Mrs. Anderson painted portraits of many of our early citizens, notably the Algeo, Pressley, McCance, and Kennedy families. Landscapes from the brush of Mr. Gengembre, who was also an artist, adorn the halls of old drawing rooms in this city. He left his mark on society here and his words are still quoted; his advice to young married people as to their budget was to make a list of all those things they thought they needed, then go over the list striking out everything they could do without. Addressing a beautiful woman, Mrs. Dr. Thomas Dale, he assured her he found her very homely, indeed, meaning domestic and devoted to her family.

Mr. Gengembre supplied the plans for the present City Hall of North Side, which was built in the period between 1862 and 1864. He had planned to inscribe the ten Commandments in a blank window space, probably on the west side of the building, now covered by an addition. Before this could be done, some of the Powers-That-Be approached Mr. Gengembre with an offer of a share in the loot which seems to be inseparable from such operations. He had come to America like so many others thinking morals of all lucky enough to be here to be unimpeachable; he was now thoroughly disillusioned, having supplied the architectural plans without remuneration. He thereupon vowed he would never again speak one word of English and is said to have kept his word.

The family of Gengembre never had been able to hear the name pronounced to their satisfaction, so they took the family name of Mme. Gengembre,—Hubert. Soon after the death of Mr. Gengembre in 1863 who is buried in Uniondale Cemetery, North Side, one son Philip Hubert went to New York City where he claimed to have built the first sky-scraper there, thirteen stories high, which seems to have been the Spanish Flats on West 58th Street. The other members of the family went to California, where they still reside.

As to the merits of the architecture of Allegheny City Hall, I take pleasure in quoting from letters received from several of our most brilliant Pittsburgh architects. The first letter is from R. U. Trimble, Fellow of the Amer-
ican Institute of Architects, a past President of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the A. I. A., and recently appointed by President Hoover to serve on the "Committee on Design" of the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. Mr. Trimble says:

"The City Hall of Allegheny is a good example of the architecture of the period in which it was built; the period when good taste in design was more common than in the years immediately succeeding; the days when economy was imperative and a wide choice of materials did not exist.

The building is simple, dignified and well proportioned and with its gabled pediments and pitched roof, is a charming composition. The design clearly sets it apart as a "Public Building" which gracefully adorns the small square in which it sits. The simple detail in plain brick and wood is well placed and very good.

The Federal Street wing with its long arched windows is imposing and clearly expresses the plan of the two storied Council Chamber, equal to two floors of offices in the rear wing. The projecting balcony over the Federal Street entrance is a fine architectural feature.

All in all I consider the building a fine expression of its time and purpose, a building I should be proud to have designed."

The second letter is from Mr. Harry Viehman, architect registered in Pennsylvania, member of the American Institute of Architects. Mr. Viehman says:

"The Allegheny City Hall is, in my opinion, a fine old bit of architecture whose beauty has been almost totally obliterated by the dreadful paint, probably prescribed and applied during the gay nineties. The rear wing is undoubtedly an addition as evidenced by vertical construction joints in side walls of rear wing where they join main building, and I mention it first to get it out of the picture, with its skinny pilasters imitating those of the original structure, its many stupid combination flat and circle top windows with clumsy keyblocks and its ill looking rear pediment. It cannot be the work of the same architect as the front portion.

The main building facing Carnegie Library and formerly with front and rear facades probably nearly alike is really excellently done and in good scale. Its charm lies in its inexpensive simplicity; its openings are well placed and of pleasing proportions even to the sash divisions. The motif with base, pilastered shaft, and cornice is quite truly classical.

Intrigued by its handsome exterior I started inside ready for a treat and was not disappointed in the vestibule with its modest doorscreen, but beyond this there were monstrous stairs, atrocious metal ceilings, dirt and dinginess. Up the creaking steps I found more ruins of former splendor in the front but again a quite inferior rear portion.

I cannot but be incensed at the stupidity of a municipality with the reputed intelligence of Pittsburgh that permitted this relic of bygone days to be altered by an inartistic engineer or incompetent architect, to be smothered under a coat of hideous paint, and to be maltreated and ruined by undiscerning occupants and caretakers, when the exercise of just a little respectful comprehending care could preserve it as a thing of beauty, without affecting its utilitarian value one iota."
The third letter is from the pen of Mr. Frederick Bigger, President of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Architect and Town-Planner of the Citizens’ Committee on City Planning. Mr. Bigger says:

"The Allegheny City Hall is not a costly structure. There was probably great difficulty experienced in raising the money for its construction, the majority of citizens probably holding that ornamentation and beauty of design was aside from the purpose in building."

Mr. Bigger thinks, considering the difficulties, the City Fathers might be congratulated on this design, immeasurably superior to many others west of the Allegheny Mountains at that period.