

The State Houses
of Rhode Island

The State Houses of Rhode Island

*An Architectural
and Historical Legacy*

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Artillery drill about the turn of the century. Courtesy of Robert A. Votolato.

Foreword

Rhode Island holds a place in the architectural history of the United States far out of proportion to its modest size. More than ten thousand of our historic buildings and sites have been put on the National Register of Historic Places. That's about one-twentieth or 5 percent of all the historic buildings and sites in the country. Among those buildings deserving attention for their architectural and historical significance are the public buildings that have housed the legislature and general officers of Rhode Island for more than two centuries.

The six buildings that are the subject of this book stand as monuments to a unique and significant part of our history as a colony and state: the era when Rhode Island's legislative sessions would revolve between different locations. That Rhode Island at one time had as many as five state houses in use simultaneously is attributable to one of our particular characteristics – the desire to keep government close at hand and accessible.

Just as important, in the design and siting of these buildings we can glimpse the determination by leaders at different times to foster civic pride in one of government's most important symbols. From Newport's Colony House to the current Rhode Island State House, the seats of Rhode Island's government have been among the grandest public buildings of their day.

If we have focused on the legislative branch more than the executive or judicial branches, we are merely expressing a bias rooted in fact and history. Until 1935, the General Assembly, comprising the House and Senate, was the chief

engine of Rhode Island government. The governor, who now occupies a more dominant role, was a figurehead until that date, and originally sat only as a member of the upper house with a single vote. Similarly, until the state constitution of 1843, the judiciary was controlled directly by the legislature, which, in the colonial era, functioned itself as a supreme court.

Consequently, the story of this book is largely that of the General Assembly and the buildings it has used to conduct the people's business. It is fitting, then, that the impetus for this volume stemmed from a bill in the General Assembly, submitted by former State Senator Robert J. McKenna of Newport, and that subsequent support for the project came from both Speaker of the House Matthew J. Smith and Senate Majority Leader John C. Revens, Jr. The interest of both these leaders in preserving the state's heritage has been reflected not only in their support for this publication and the recent Heritage Bond issue but in long-term commitments to records and historic preservation.

In addition to the General Assembly's generous support for the research and photography for this book, we are indebted to the Rhode Island Bicentennial [of the Constitution] Foundation, chaired by Dr. Patrick T. Conley, for funds to complete the project.

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The Era of the Rotating Legislature



Verso: Captain George Baxter, just returned from England, presents the royal charter of 1663 to the freemen of Providence Plantation and Rhode Island assembled at Newport in November 1663. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi X3 5419).

Rhode Island Political Circles: State Government During the Era of the Rotating Legislature, 1644-1901

The focus of this book is Rhode Island's five county courthouses – its seats of government where once the legislature convened, the governors presided, and courts deliberated – and the present State House, home of the General Assembly and the executive branch since the beginning of this century. That these physical symbols of the era of a rotating legislature have all survived is fortuitous and a cause for celebration as the state observes the 350th year of its existence.

The essays that follow give each of these citadels of governance the historical and architectural recognition it deserves. This introductory essay, however, attempts to sketch the political environment in which these buildings functioned, because government is more than just a seat or a locus, no matter how physically imposing. In Rhode Island, government consists also of an electorate, a basic law, an executive branch, a legislature, a judiciary, political parties, pressure groups, and politicians who are energized at various times by such invariables as dissent, independence, bigotry, enterprise, social concern, reformist zeal, or the simple lust for power.

Creating the "Lively Experiment"

If we disregard the tribal organizations of Narragansetts, Wampanoags, Niantics, Nipmucks, and Pequots (as do most American historians, to their discredit), government in Rhode Island began when religious exile Roger Williams and about a dozen disciples founded Providence in the spring of 1636. During the town's early

months, civic affairs were conducted by a fortnightly meeting of "masters of families," or "householders," who considered matters relating to the "common peace, watch, and planting." As the number of settlers increased, a formal government became necessary, so Williams and the initial settlers drafted articles of self-incorporation in 1637. Then these "masters of families" entered into a mutual compact creating a "town fellowship." The major features of these first governmental agreements, the fundamental papers of Providence town government, included the vesting of administrative control in a majority of the householders and the all-important proviso that such control was to be exercised "only in civil things." This latter clause reflected Williams' desire to establish a colony based on the then revolutionary principle of religious liberty and the separation of church and state.

Other dissenters soon followed Williams to the Narragansett Bay region, and two additional towns took root: Portsmouth (1638), founded by William Coddington in concert with Antinomian preacher Anne Hutchinson, and Newport (1639), established by Coddington after a squabble with the fiery woman the Puritans called the "American Jezebel."

Legal title to the lands on which the early towns were planted rested only upon deeds from the Narragansett chiefs, or sachems, because Williams had been so bold as to declare that the king of England's authority to grant these New World lands to English colonists rested upon "a solemn public lie." This view, though just, was unacceptable to the neighboring colonies of Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and New Haven. The



Little is known of Newport's earliest colony house, pictured above, constructed prior to 1723 on the same site as its 1739 successor. The earlier building was moved to allow construction of the Old Colony House. Photograph courtesy of the Newport Historical Society.

more orthodox Puritans of those colonies, angered by the defiance of Rhode Island's religious outcasts, began to cast covetous eyes upon the beautiful Narragansett Bay region, which, they said, had been transformed by Williams, Hutchinson, Samuel Gorton, and their kind into "a moral sewer."

To unite the towns against this threat, to thwart Coddington's political designs, and to secure parliamentary protection for his holy experiment, Williams journeyed in 1643 to England, then on the verge of civil war, to secure a patent that would unite the settlements of Portsmouth, Newport, and Providence into a single colony and would officially confirm the settlers' claims to the lands they held by Indian purchase. Williams obtained the desired patent from Robert Rich, earl of Warwick, and his parliamentary Committee on Foreign Plantations. Significantly, the patent lacked the royal seal, for King Charles I had already begun to lose power and control over the parliamentary opposition. Still, Williams' patent of 14 March 1644 became the first legal recognition of the Rhode Island towns by the mother country.

In 1642 volatile Samuel Gorton – another freethinking and quarrelsome religious leader – had succeeded in developing to the south of

Providence a mainland settlement which he eventually called Warwick. Here, as in Providence, liberty of conscience prevailed. Although his new town was not mentioned in the patent, Gorton sought and eventually secured its inclusion under the patent's protective provisions, despite the vigorous attempts of Massachusetts to annex the Warwick settlement.

The two island towns of Portsmouth and Newport also embraced the legislative patent, and representatives of the four communities met initially on Aquidneck Island in November 1644. Under this patent Rhode Island began its unique system of rotating its legislative sessions. At one such meeting, held at Portsmouth in May 1647, the colony's lawmakers drafted a famous legal code. According to Charles McLean Andrews, the leading historian of colonial America, "the acts and orders of 1647 constitute one of the earliest programmes for a government and one of the earliest codes of law made by any body of men in America and the first to embody in all its parts the precedents set by the laws and statutes of England."

The 1647 assembly elected officers, established a system of representation, and devised a legislative process containing provisions both for local initiative (repealed in 1650) and popular referendum. Then it enacted the remarkable code, an elaborate body of criminal and civil law prefaced by a bill of rights. Finally, for the administration of justice, the productive assembly established a General Court of Trials with jurisdiction over all important legal questions. The president, who was the chief officer of the colony, and the assistants, who represented their respective towns, were to possess the jurisdiction heretofore exercised in matters of minor and local importance.

The code and the court system of 1647 would serve as the cornerstones of the judicial establishment of both the colony and state of Rhode Island. Thus did the four original towns and their inhabitants combine to create a fairly systematized federal commonwealth and deal a temporary blow to the forces of decentralization.

Stormy seas still lay ahead for the Rhode Island ship of state, for no sooner had a semblance of internal unity and stability been created than two external dangers arose, one of which

menaced the colony's landed possessions and the other its very existence. The first danger resulted from the claims of the Connecticut-based Atherton land company to much of present-day Washington County; the second and greater threat arose from the restoration in 1660 of the Stuart dynasty to the throne of England. The Restoration rendered doubtful the legal validity of the parliamentary patent of 1644 and placed Rhode Island in a precarious position because of her close ties with the anti-monarchical Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell.

Fearful for its legal life, the colony commissioned the diligent John Clarke of Newport to obtain royal confirmation of its right to exist. After an exasperating delay stemming from Rhode Island and Connecticut's conflicting claims to the Narragansett Country, Clarke, with the assistance of Connecticut agent John Winthrop, Jr., secured from Charles II the royal charter of 1663. This coveted document was immediately transported to Rhode Island, where it was received by the grateful colonists in November 1663.

The sixty-five-hundred-word instrument had the legal form of a corporate or trading company charter. It devoted relatively brief space to the organization of government, but it did provide for the offices of governor, deputy governor, and ten assistants. The original holders of these positions were named in the charter itself, but their successors, called magistrates, were "to be from time to time, constituted, elected and chosen at-large out of the freemen" of the colony (or "company"). The charter also provided that certain of the freemen should be "elected or deputed" by a majority vote of fellow freemen in their respective towns to "consult," to "advise," and to "determine" the affairs of the colony together with the governor, deputy governor, and assistants. It entitled Newport to six of these "elected or deputed" representatives; Providence, Portsmouth, and Warwick received four each; and two were to be granted to any town which might be established in the future. Though an equitable apportionment in 1663, this provision would become a source of grave discontent in the early nineteenth century.

The governor, deputy governor, assistants, and representatives (or deputies) collectively were

called the General Assembly. Each member of this body had one vote. The Assembly, with the governor presiding, was to meet at least twice annually, in May and October. The only charter-imposed qualification for members was that they be freemen of the colony.

Rhode Island's legislature was endowed by the charter with extraordinary power. It could make or repeal any law, if such action was not "repugnant" to the laws of England, set or alter the time and place of its meetings, and grant commissions. Since there was no separation of powers, it could exercise extensive control over the judicial affairs of the colony, prescribe punishments for legal offenses, grant pardons, regulate elections, create and incorporate additional towns, and "choose, nominate and appoint such . . . persons as they shall think fit" to hold the status of freemen. In comparison, the governor was weak and the mere executive agent of the Assembly.

The royal charter mandated annual elections for all at-large officers of the colony (the posts of recorder, sergeant, treasurer, and attorney had been created earlier by statute); provided for the raising and governing of a militia; and established acceptable boundaries (which included the Pawcatuck River as the western line of demarcation). Further, the document asserted, with language not unknown in other colonial charters, that inhabitants of the colony "shall have and enjoy all liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects. . . as if they. . . were born within the realm of England." This clause and its alleged violation would cause the mother country serious difficulties a century hence.

Finally, the charter's most liberal and generous provision bestowed upon the inhabitants of the tiny colony "full liberty in religious concerns." The document commanded that no person shall be "molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any differences in opinion in matters of religion" that "do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony."

This guarantee of absolute religious liberty was a vindication of Williams' beliefs and royal recognition of the fundamental principles upon which the Providence Plantation was founded — absolute freedom of conscience and complete separation of church and state. As Williams

observed, this liberality stemmed from the king's willingness to "experiment" in order to ascertain "whether civil government could consist with such liberty of conscience." This was the "lively experiment" upon which the government of Rhode Island was based – an experiment that prompted some to observe that Massachusetts had law without liberty but Rhode Island now had liberty without law.

Survival and Growth

In the period from 1663 to 1681, the practice of governmental rotation ceased temporarily. During these early years of the charter regime, all sessions of the legislature were held in Newport, often in private homes. Rotation resumed in 1681 and followed a very irregular pattern. Newport remained by far the most frequent site, but occasional sessions were held in Providence, Warwick (until 1741), and Portsmouth (until 1739). Kingstown (not divided into North and South until 1723) hosted its first meeting in 1698, but it did not become a regular site until a 1733 law directed the Assembly to convene in South Kingstown every other October.

From 1696 onward, the colony began to achieve a measure of stability. In that year the General Assembly developed more systematic and workable procedures and formally became bicameral, dividing into the House of Magistrates, or Senate, and the House of Deputies (Representatives). In imitation of the English Parliament, the deputies assumed the task of preparing the tax bill and choosing their own speaker and clerk. Two years later, in 1698, Samuel Cranston was elected governor. During his twenty-nine year tenure, by far the longest of any Rhode Island governor (he died in office on 26 April 1727), Cranston established internal unity and brought his colony into a better working relationship with the imperial government in London.

During the Cranston regime, the colony's western boundary dispute with Connecticut was resolved in Rhode Island's favor. A second important territorial development, with a direct impact on Rhode Island's network of colony houses, was the creation of the county system in 1703. By that date the Assembly had incorporated five towns in addition to the original four: Westerly (1669), New Shoreham (1672), Kingstown (1674), East Greenwich (1677), and

Jamestown (1678). The five mainland communities were assigned to the County of Providence Plantations, while the four island settlements were included in Rhode Island County (later called Newport County). From the outset, however, these counties were merely militia districts and units of judicial administration, not separate layers of government as they are in nearly all other states.

In 1729, six years after Kingstown was divided into North and South, King's (later Washington) County was created, with South Kingstown its seat. The readjustment of the colony's eastern boundary with Massachusetts in 1746 brought Tiverton and Little Compton into Newport County and Cumberland into Providence County. It also prompted the creation of Bristol County from the former Massachusetts communities of Bristol – which became the county seat – and Warren, which then included present-day Barrington. This new judicial unit of less than twenty-five square miles became, and remains, America's second smallest county. The General Assembly did not include Bristol in its rotation scheme until December 1797.

Rhode Island's fifth county, Kent, was set off from the southern tier of Providence County in 1750. A 1759 statute mandated annual meetings of the legislature in East Greenwich, the new county's shire town. That community had first hosted a session of the Assembly in February 1735.

Governing from the Five Colony Houses

The five counties created between 1703 and 1750 influenced the operations of Rhode Island's government for more than a century. Each of these governmental units prompted the construction of a county house in which the General Assembly could meet and the courts deliberate. Because the legislature rotated its sessions from county seat to county seat, each of these buildings became, in effect, a colony house and each county seat became a capital. On the first Monday in May, each newly elected legislature convened and organized at the Newport Colony House, the largest, oldest, and most imposing of these citadels of government.

More frequently and for a much longer duration than they served as seats for the colony's legislative and executive branches, Rhode Island's county facilities housed its judiciary as



A celebration at the Old Colony House in the 1850s.

well. By the charter's general charge to the legislature "to appoint, order and direct, erect and settle, such places and courts of jurisdiction, for the hearing and determining of all actions, cases, matters and things. . . as they shall think fit," the basic law of 1663 did not fundamentally alter the judicial structure of 1647. The General Court of Trial was retained, and in 1664 the Assembly ordered that its sessions be held semiannually with the governor or deputy governor and at least six assistants presiding. From time to time several inferior courts were also created.

Because legislative and judicial functions were for a time combined in the same body of men (namely, the governor, deputy governor, and assistants), the General Assembly often exercised functions now considered the exclusive domain of the judicial branch. Almost any part of the judicial process was open to its inspection and possible correction.

The rearrangement of the court system in 1729, through the use of three counties (Newport, Providence, and King's) as units of judicial administration, was a change of primary importance. The lowest tribunal in this county-based structure was the local court of the justice of the peace. This agency, in continuous session, had original jurisdiction in minor matters and bound over more serious offenders to the higher courts of general sessions of the peace and the courts of common pleas. The former, established in each county, were conducted semiannually by all the local justices of the peace or any five of them, and they were empowered to try all criminal cases, capital crimes excepted. Their decisions could be appealed to the highest court. They in turn exercised appellate jurisdiction over all petty offenses originally triable by a justice of the peace.

The courts of common pleas were civil courts conducted by "judicious" persons chosen by

the Assembly from their respective counties. These appointees, upon their selection, were elevated to justiceship of the peace. The jurisdiction of these courts, which was both original and appellate, extended to the trial of nearly all civil actions arising in the county. They conducted business semiannually together with that of the courts of general sessions.

The General Court of Trial, renamed the Superior Court in 1746, sat at the apex of the county system. Held at Newport, it consisted of the governor, deputy governor, and assistants. The Superior Court possessed original jurisdiction in certain major cases, but its primary function consisted in reviewing appeals from decisions of the courts of general sessions and the courts of common pleas. Petitions from decisions of the Superior Court, however, were often entertained and acted upon by the General Assembly, and occasionally appeals from the court's verdict were accepted by the king in council.

In February 1746, the governor and assistants were removed from the bench of the Superior Court and replaced by one chief justice and four associates, but this change did not significantly diminish legislative influence. Judges could still be members of the Assembly, so those deputies or assistants appointed to the bench usually retained their legislative posts. Furthermore, the Assembly annually appointed all judges. During the session preceding the 1746 Superior Court Act, the legislature established a formal procedure for receiving, "hearing and determining" petitions praying relief from court decisions, thus strengthening and reaffirming its appellate powers, which were similar to those possessed by the English House of Lords. These practices endured for the remainder of the colonial period. In fact, the petition process and the system of annual appointment persisted until the establishment of the state constitution in 1843.

The development of executive power under the charter of 1663 was comparable to growth of judicial autonomy: both were repressed by the powerful legislature. Apart from making the governor the presiding officer of the General Assembly and granting him the right to convene special sessions of that body, the charter bestowed upon him few exclusive powers of

significance. He had no appointive power, for that important prerogative resided in the legislature, and even the governor's charter-conferred position as commander in chief of militia was carefully circumscribed by the Assembly.

Radical Colony to Reluctant State

Because of its history and circumstances, Rhode Island played a leading role in the American Revolutionary movement. Having the greatest degree of self-rule, it had the most to lose from the efforts of England after 1763 to increase her supervision and control over her American colonies. In addition, Rhode Island had a long tradition of evading the poorly enforced navigation acts, and smuggling was commonplace.

In April 1775, a week after the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, the legislature authorized raising a fifteen-hundred-man "army of observation" with Nathanael Greene as its commander. At its organizational meeting on 4 May 1776, the Rhode Island General Assembly, sitting in Providence's colony house because of the presence of a British fleet hovering off Newport, became the first colonial legislature to renounce allegiance to King George III. Meeting again in Newport's colony house, the English threat having temporarily subsided, on 18 July the Assembly voted to substitute the word *state* for *colony* in the royal charter, and two days later it ratified the Declaration of Independence.

The Revolution did not alter Rhode Island's governmental structure (even the royal charter remained intact), but it did prompt some legal and political changes, including legislation affecting Catholics and Negro slaves. Whatever anti-Catholicism existed in Rhode Island was mollified by assistance rendered to the struggling colonials by Catholic France and by the benevolent presence of large numbers of French troops in Newport under General Rochambeau, some of whom remained after the struggle ended. Thus the General Assembly in February 1783 removed the arbitrarily imposed disability against Roman Catholics (dating from the 1719 code) by giving members of that religion "all the rights and privileges of the Protestant citizens of this state."

The emancipation act of 1784 was the most significant of several statutes relating to blacks. Its preface invoking Locke's sentiments that "all men are entitled to life, liberty, and property," the manumission measure gave freedom to all children born to slave mothers after 1 March 1784. As the site of such momentous revolutionary measures as the renunciation of allegiance, the Catholic equality law, and the emancipation statute, Providence's Old State House well deserves (but has not been accorded) the designation as Rhode Island's "Liberty Hall."

Following the emancipation act, Rhode Island reformers – particularly the influential Quaker community – mounted a concerted effort to ban the slave trade. They succeeded when the General Assembly, sitting in the Little Rest (Kingston) county house of the recently named Washington County, enacted a measure in October 1787 which prohibited any Rhode Island citizen from engaging in this barbarous traffic. The legislature called the trade inconsistent with "that more enlightened and civilized state of freedom which has of late prevailed."

In 1778 the state had quickly ratified the Articles of Confederation, with its weak central government, but when the movement to strengthen that government developed in the mid-1780s, Rhode Island balked. The state's individualism, democratic localism, and tradition of autonomy caused it to resist the centralizing tendencies of the federal Constitution. This opposition intensified when an agrarian-debtor revolt in support of the issuance of paper money gave rise to Rhode Island's second party system (the Ward-Hopkins factionalism of the pre-Revolutionary decades was the first) and placed the parochial Country party in power from 1786 through 1790. This political faction, led by South Kingstown's Jonathan Hazard, was suspicious of the power and cost of a government too far removed from the grassroots level, and so it declined to dispatch delegates to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, which drafted the United States Constitution. Then, when that document was presented to the states for ratification, Hazard's faction delayed (and nearly prevented) Rhode Island's approval.

In the period between September 1787 and January 1790, the rural-dominated General

Assembly rejected no fewer than eleven attempts by representatives from Rhode Island's mercantile communities to convene a state ratifying convention. Instead, the Assembly defied the instructions of the Founding Fathers and conducted a popular referendum on the Constitution. That election, which was boycotted by the supporters of stronger union, the Federalists, rejected the Constitution by a vote of 2,708 to 237.

Finally, in mid-January 1790, more than eight months after George Washington's inauguration as first president of the United States, the Country party reluctantly called the required convention. Still, it required two separate sessions, one in South Kingstown (1-6 March) and the second in Newport (24-29 May) before the Federalists secured a favorable vote. The ratification tally – 34 in favor, 32 opposed – was the narrowest of any state, obtained only because four Antifederalists either absented themselves or abstained from voting.

Toward a New Constitutional Crisis

Rhode Island's economic transformation during the five decades following Samuel Slater's cotton textile venture of 1790 had a profound effect on the state's politics and intensified the demand for constitutional reform. During this era, the production of cottons, woolens, and base and precious metals steadily expanded and came to dominate the state's economic life. Simultaneously, agriculture declined, many farms reverted to forest, and many rural towns experienced substantial out-migration.

Industrialization and its corollary, urbanization, combined by the 1840s to produce an episode known as the Dorr Rebellion – Rhode Island's crisis in constitutional government. The state's royal charter, nearing its 180th anniversary without a change or blemish, gave disproportionate influence to the declining rural towns, conferred almost unlimited power on the General Assembly, and contained no procedure for its own amendment. State legislators, regardless of party, insisted upon retaining the old real estate requirement for voting and officeholding, even though it had been abandoned in all other states. As Rhode Island grew more urbanized, this freehold qualification became more restrictive. By 1840 about 60

percent of the state's free adult males were disenfranchised.

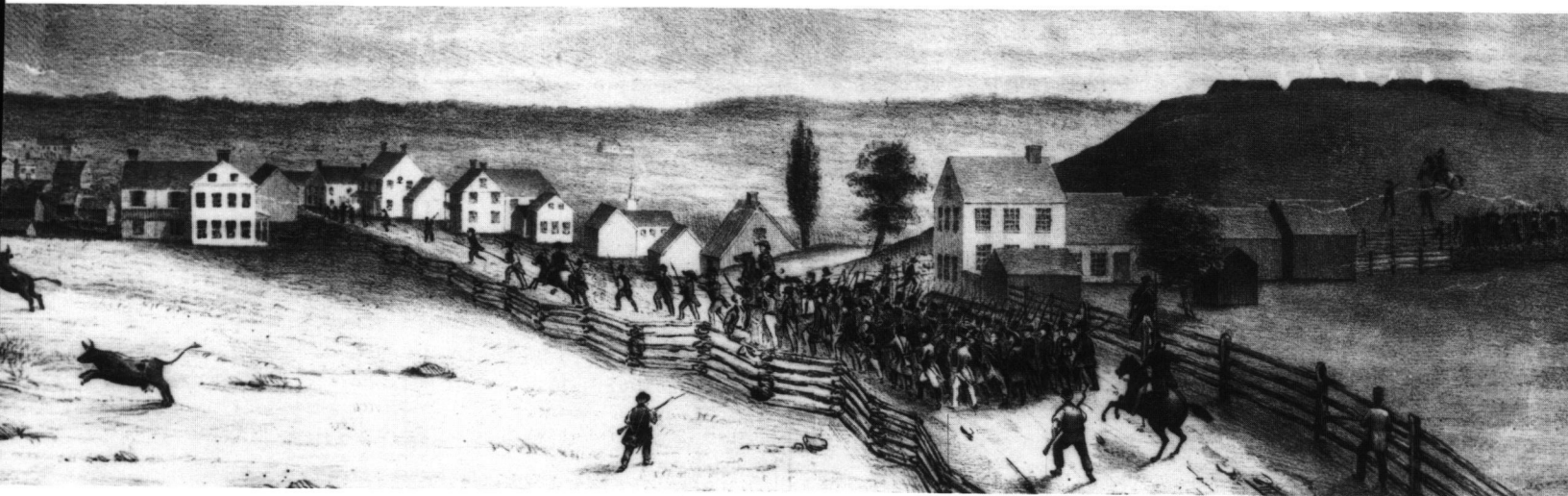
Because earlier moderate efforts at change had been virtually ignored by the General Assembly, the reformers of 1840 – 1843 decided to bypass the legislature and convene a People's Convention, equitably apportioned and chosen by an enlarged electorate. Thomas Wilson Dorr, a patrician attorney, assumed the leadership of the movement in late 1841 and became the principal draftsman of the progressive People's Constitution, ratified in a popular referendum in December 1841. Dorr was elected governor under this document in April 1842, while the charter adherents reelected Whig incumbent Samuel Ward King of Johnston in separate balloting.

With the two rival governments preparing to assume power on 3-4 May, the Suffragists pre-faced their accession to office by staging a colorful parade in Providence from the Hoyle Tavern in the West End to the Providence state house on North Main Street. The entourage featured the Providence Brass Band, members of the People's government, and a strong military contingent including the sixty-member Dorr Troop of Horse – the insurgent governor's personal guard. Only the eventual setting for the People's Legislature diminished the luster and triumph of the occasion. Since the Charterites had locked the state house – which contained the state's seal, archive, and other

symbols of sovereignty – the Suffragists were forced to retreat to a preselected alternative site, an unfinished foundry building on Eddy Street near Dorrance, to conduct their legislative deliberations.

Dorr unsuccessfully opposed such timid acquiescence. Later he ruefully observed “that it was here that the cause was defeated, if not lost.” In chiding his more moderate associates, Dorr contended that “the period for decided action had now arrived.” A valid government, he said, “was entitled to sit in the usual places of legislation, to possess and control the public property, and to exercise all the functions with which it was constitutionally invested. A government without power, appealing to voluntary support, destitute of the ability or disposition to enforce its lawful requisitions, was no government at all and was destined to extinction.” Had the Providence state house been seized, lamented Dorr, “right would have been confirmed by possession, the law and the fact would have been conjoined, and the new order of things would have been acquiesced in by all but a minority” of powerless reactionaries. In Dorr's view, therefore, the failure to possess the state house as a symbol of legitimacy loomed large in deciding the unhappy fate of the People's party.

The reformers were resisted by a “Law and Order” coalition of Whigs and rural Democrats led by Governor King and a council of advisers.



The Law and Order army marching to the village of Chepachet in search of Dorrites on 27 June 1842. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RH1 XC3 107).

Operating from the Newport state house, they authorized the use of force and intimidation to prevent the implementation of the People's Constitution. When Dorr responded in kind by unsuccessfully attempting to seize the state arsenal in Providence on 18 May 1842, most of his followers deserted the cause, and Dorr fled into exile. When he returned in late June to reconvene his so-called People's Legislature in Chepachet, a Law and Order army of twenty-five hundred marched to Gloucester and sent the People's governor into exile a second time.

The turmoil and popular agitation against the charter which produced the Dorr Rebellion forced the victors to consent to the drafting of a written state constitution. Their Law and Order coalition held its officially sanctioned convention in Newport's state house during September 1842. This conservative gathering, presided over by James Fenner and Henry Y. Cranston, produced a draft constitution and adjourned until November to allow delegates to discuss the document with their constituents. In early November the convention reconvened in East Greenwich at the United Methodist Church and quickly sent its handiwork to the General Assembly, then sitting in the nearby Kent County state house.

Arthur May Mowry, the first major historian of the Dorr War, calls this instrument "liberal and well-adapted to the needs of the state" because it improved House apportionment, contained a comprehensive bill of rights, and removed the real estate requirement for native-born citizens. Mowry's appraisal, however, neglects one important item: the 1843 constitution established a 134-dollar freehold suffrage qualification for naturalized citizens, and this illiberal restriction, not removed until 1888 and then only as a political maneuver, was the most blatant instance of political nativism found in any state constitution in the land. Other defects included the stranglehold on the Senate which the document gave to the rural towns (there was to be one senator from each town regardless of its population), cumbersome amendment procedures that made constitutional reform a very difficult task, and the absence of a secret ballot.

This constitution made the legislative rotation process part of the state's basic law. With Newport still accorded primacy, Article IV, Section 3,

decreed, in somewhat confusing fashion:

There shall be two sessions of the general assembly holden annually: one at Newport, on the first Tuesday in May, for the purposes of election and other business; the other on the last Monday of October, which last session shall be holden at South Kingstown once in two years, and the intermediate years alternately at Bristol and East Greenwich; and an adjournment from the October session shall be holden annually at Providence.

Overwhelmingly ratified in November 1842 by a margin of 7,024 to 51, this document became effective in May 1843. Despite the margin of victory, the turnout was meager, for there were more than 23,000 adult male citizens in the state. That the opposition, in mute protest, refrained from voting explains in part the constitution's apathetic reception and the lopsided vote.

Nativism and the Rise of a Republican Machine

The Know-Nothing or American party was formed during the early 1850s in many north-eastern states to curb the recent heavy influx of Catholic immigrants (mainly Irish) and to delay the citizenship applications of those already here. This secret organization swept town, city, and state elections in Rhode Island in the mid-1850s. Its candidate, William W. Hoppin, captured the governorship in 1855, and another standard-bearer, James Y. Smith, won the Providence mayoralty. Some of the party's more zealous adherents even planned a raid on St. Xavier's Convent, home of the "female Jesuits" (the Sisters of Mercy), but the angry mob dispersed when confronted by Bishop Bernard O'Reilly and an equally militant crowd of armed Irishmen.

The rise of the American party was a by-product of the disintegration of the second national party system (Democrats vs. Whigs) and the emergence of a third. By 1854 the Whig party split nationally over the issue of slavery into Cotton and Conscience Whigs – fragmented locally. Those who considered the spread of slavery to be the country's greatest evil embraced the newly formed Republican party, while those who saw Catholic immigration as the main menace joined the American party, at least temporarily.

Rhode Island Democrats also divided. Reform-oriented followers of Thomas Dorr and his uncle and ally Governor Philip Allen (1851-54) maintained their party allegiance, but many rural Democrats who had supported the cause

of Law and Order during the Dorr Rebellion affiliated with the Know-Nothings. When that one-issue party also declined after 1856, both these rural Democrats and nativist Whigs gravitated toward the rapidly growing Republican party, bringing with them their anti-Irish Catholic attitudes. In 1856 Know-Nothing Governor William Hoppin became the state's first Republican chief executive, and American party Mayor James Y. Smith served as GOP governor from 1863 to 1866. From the birth of the Republicans until the 1930s, the Democrats were consigned to the position of Rhode Island's minority party.

During the turbulent 1850s, two notable governmental changes occurred in addition to the rise of the modern party system. The quaint but cumbersome custom of rotating General Assembly sessions among the five county seats was abolished in November 1854 by Article of Amendment III to the state constitution. This revision stated "there shall be one session of the General Assembly holden annually on the last Tuesday in May at Newport and an adjournment from the same shall be holden annually at Providence." The smallest state thus progressed from five capitals to only two.

In 1856 the landmark case of *Taylor v. Place* clarified the nebulous language pertaining to the independence of the judiciary. Chief Justice Samuel Ames once and for all rejected the power of the General Assembly to review or reverse decisions of the highest state court.

During the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth, the GOP skillfully maintained its political dominance. Such party stalwarts as U.S. Senator and *Providence Journal* publisher Henry Bowen Anthony (1815-84) and his protégés Charles Ray Brayton (1840-1910) and U.S. Senator Nelson W. Aldrich (1841-1915) consistently deflected attempts by Yankee reformers and Irish Catholic Democrats to dislodge the GOP.

For a quarter-century after the archnativist Anthony's death in 1884, Aldrich and Brayton ran the Rhode Island GOP. Of this dynamic duo, Aldrich was "Mr. Outside," operating for thirty years on the national stage in concert with John D. Rockefeller, Sr., J.P. Morgan, and other giants of business and finance. Officially, he was majority leader of the United States Senate;

unofficially, he was by common estimation "the general manager of the United States." Brayton, on the other hand, stayed home. As "Mr. Inside," he took charge of the nuts and bolts of GOP organization and discipline.

The Republican organization of the Brayton-Aldrich era owed its ascendancy to many factors, not least of which was the political system established by the state constitution of 1843. That document, carefully drafted by the Law and Order coalition of upper-class Whigs and rural Democrats that vanquished Thomas Dorr, was designed to prevent the old-stock industrialists and the Yankee farmers from succumbing to the numerically superior urban proletariat, especially those of foreign birth and Catholic faith. When the Republican party formed during the 1850s in response to the slavery issue, it revived the Law and Order coalition of the preceding decade, and, adopting that group's nativistic posture, it determined to use and preserve the Law and Order party's constitutional checks upon the power of the urban working class.

Included in those checks were: (1) a malapportioned Senate which gave a legislative veto to the small rural towns; (2) a cumbersome amendment process to frustrate reform; (3) no procedures for calling a constitutional convention; (4) the absence (until 1889) of a secret ballot; (5) a General Assembly that dominated both the legislatively elected Supreme Court and the weak, vetoless (until 1909) governorship; and (6) a real estate voting requirement for the naturalized citizen. This last-mentioned check was eliminated by the Bourn Amendment (Article VII) in 1888, but it was replaced by a \$134-property-tax-paying amendment for voting in city council elections. This requirement had the practical effect of preventing those at the lower socioeconomic levels from exercising control over the affairs of the cities in which they resided. Though all electors could vote for the mayor, who had very limited powers, only property owners could vote for the councils, the dominant branch of local government, controlling both the purse and the patronage.

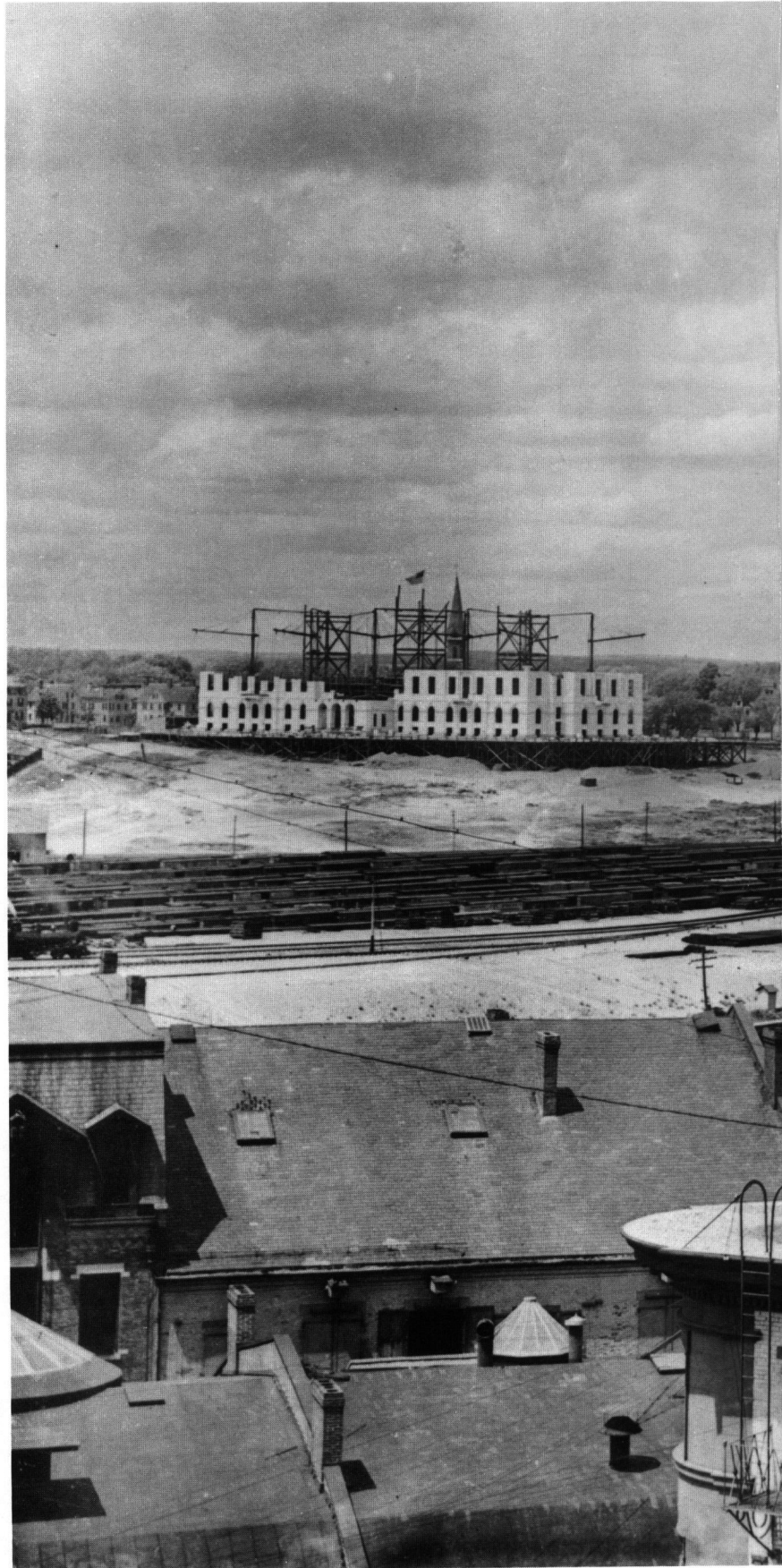
As if constitutional checks were not sufficient, in 1901 "Boss" Brayton for good measure engineered enactment of a statute designed to weaken the power of any Democrat who might

back into the governor's chair by virtue of a split in Republican ranks. With a few limited exceptions, this "Brayton Act" placed the ultimate appointive power of state government in the hands of the Senate. In the aftermath of its passage, a governor could effectively appoint only his private secretary and a handful of insignificant state officials.

Apart from its bold provisions, the Brayton Act is noteworthy in another respect. It was debated and passed in a different setting – during the first Assembly session held in the majestic new state house in Providence. With the completion of that structure in 1900, the state constitution was amended (Article IX) to mandate that an annual session of the General Assembly convene at Providence beginning on the first Tuesday of January 1901 – an enactment that left Providence the state's sole capital from that date onward.

Rhode Island's legislature had settled in; but politics did not settle down. Three and one-half decades later, Democrats would rise to power, repeal the Brayton Act, vacate the existing membership of the Supreme Court, and reorganize state government into its present departmental form during a tumultuous January 1935 coup, now called the Bloodless Revolution. But the twentieth century constitutes another story – one that proves the old French adage: "The more things change, the more they are the same." To paraphrase Justice Holmes: Man's governmental systems change; his political instincts remain!

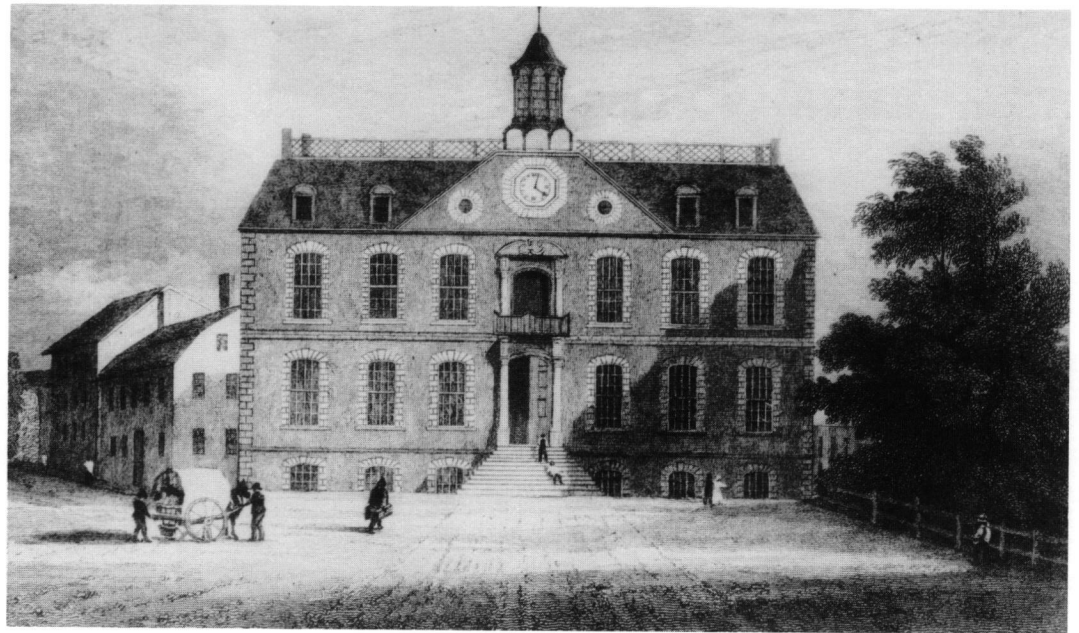
PATRICK T. CONLEY



The Rhode Island State House under construction. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHI X3 4862).



Newport Colony House





Newport Colony House (1739-1743)

Newport's Colony House, the fourth oldest state house still standing in the United States, has long been recognized as an outstanding public building of the colonial era and valued as the site of many significant historical events. Less apparent but equally interesting are the various alterations that have been made to respond to evolving uses and needs. These contribute to the Colony House's rich and diverse architectural character and record changes in politics, government, and artistic taste in Rhode Island.

The Colony House was built to replace Rhode Island's first government building, a smaller wooden courthouse which had been erected in Newport between 1687 and 1690. The decision to construct the first courthouse here reflected Newport's status as the chief town in Rhode Island before the Revolution. With its excellent harbor, Newport was one of the major seaports of the British colonies, a center of wealth, culture, and political power. Rhode Island's charter of 1663 confirmed the town's preeminent position, giving Newport the largest representation in the General Assembly, and specifying that the installation of officers and representatives take place here each May.

Its builders intended the Colony House to be a dignified and conspicuous civic building symbolizing the colony's political authority and Newport's prosperity and cultural sophistication. In the act authorizing construction, the General Assembly ordered that "a new colony house be built and made of brick, where the old one now stands, consisting of eighty feet in length, and forty in breadth, and thirty feet stud; the length whereof to stand near or quite north



and south.” At the time Newport was a community of compact houses nearly all built of wood. The choice of brick and the building’s ample dimensions immediately set this edifice apart from its surroundings. Set at the head of Queen Street – now Washington Square – on a line with Long Wharf and flanked by the landscaped Parade or Mall, the Colony House terminated a vista extending from the wharf through the town’s central square. This dramatic placement of an architectural monument at the end of an axis was influenced by ideas for planning outdoor space developed in Europe during the Baroque period.

The building committee selected Richard Munday, the carpenter-architect responsible for Newport’s other great colonial landmark, Trinity Church (1726), to draw plans for the Colony House. Benjamin Wyatt, a carpenter who had collaborated with Munday on earlier projects, was also hired as master builder. Construction started in 1739 and, except for some interior work, was completed by 1743.

Munday’s design for the Colony House follows the period’s standard format for domestic architecture, though the treatment is grander than that of an average dwelling. The building is a contained rectangular mass with distinctive Flemish-bond brick walls, rusticated brownstone trim, and segmental-arch door and window openings. Its symmetrical facade centers on an elaborately ornamented entranceway and balcony of white-painted wood. This central focus is reinforced by the truncated front gable, outlined with cornice moldings like a classical pediment, and an octagonal cupola atop the truncated-gable roof. The composition emphasizes the front, though there are secondary entrances in the north and south ends. Similar to country houses and small civic buildings erected in the outlying regions of England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Colony House also bears a remarkable resemblance to some of the small town halls of seventeenth-century Holland. These sources have been recognized by critics who have characterized the building as a provincial example of English Late Baroque architecture, influenced by the work of Sir Christopher Wren. The design had a tremendous impact locally and served as the model for the





later state houses at Providence, Kingston, and East Greenwich.

The Colony House's interior plan accommodated a variety of functions related to its role as a capitol and courthouse. As originally conceived, the first floor, known as the Great Hall, was left as a single open room for large public gatherings such as town meetings, military drills, receptions and dinners, and even religious services. A staircase in the southeast corner leads to the second story, which originally contained three rooms in addition to the stair hall. The Middle Room was a broad hallway running the width of the building, with the door to the balcony at its west end, flanked on each side by a window. To the north of the Middle Room was the Chamber of Deputies; to the south the Council Chamber where the Assistants or Magistrates met. These chambers were used for meetings of the legislative bodies, and the deputies' room also housed court sessions. This plan continued a practice common in English town or guild halls, which often had a council chamber above a large space or an open marketplace on the ground floor. The Colony House's basement eventually was finished and leased to



local businessmen. At different times the cellar served as space for shops, storage, weaving, and manufacturing.

In subsequent alterations each legislative chamber was enlarged until the Middle Room disappeared from the plan. Today the Council Chamber is the building's least altered room. Except for a few filler panels added during an 1857 alteration, its magnificent interior finish is original, dating from about 1740. The raised panels with heavy bolection moldings and the composite pilasters in the corners are typical of the interior treatment for important public buildings and dwellings in the early to mid-eighteenth century, and constitute one of the finest examples of colonial woodwork in America.

The Colony House soon became a center of community life. Though the legislature met in other towns around the state, the Colony House was the chief seat of government. The most important political event of the year took place here each May, when the election returns were counted, the General Assembly convened, and the officers inaugurated. During "Lection Week" visitors from all over Rhode Island flocked to Newport to participate in or witness the proceedings, which included victory celebrations, political negotiations, partisan squabbles, and common brawls, all accompanied by consumption of liberal doses of rum. The custom of holding a May session of the General Assembly at Newport continued until the new State House in Providence opened in 1901.

As Rhode Island's primary seat of government before independence, the Colony House was the scene of many historic events associated with the Revolution. The death of George II and accession of George III were proclaimed from its balcony in 1761. Here Governor Stephen Hopkins and the Council ordered the artillery to fire on the British warship *St. John* in 1764, one of the earliest acts of armed resistance leading to the Revolutionary War. Two years later a jubilant celebration in and around the building commemorated repeal of the Stamp Act. A royal commission met at the Colony House in 1772 to investigate the burning of the British cutter *Gaspee* by a band of colonial conspirators. On 20 July 1776, Major John Handy



read the Declaration of Independence from the building's front steps after ratification by the General Assembly. Handy reenacted his role for a celebration on the fiftieth anniversary of Independence Day in 1826.

During the Revolution, the Colony House's function changed with the fortunes of war. Throughout the British occupation of Newport from 1776 to 1779, the Colony House served as a barrack for the king's troops. Following liberation, the French army used the building as a hospital. In 1780, a French chaplain celebrated the state's first public Roman Catholic mass in the Great Hall. The following year, General Rochambeau gave a banquet in the same room to honor George Washington.

Badly damaged during the war, the Colony House was boarded up and the courts and General Assembly met temporarily at Touro Synagogue. The Colony House was refurbished extensively in 1784-85. The Great Hall took its present form at that time. The six posts in a row down the center of the room were encased to create the present square piers. Originally the supports for the second floor were cylindrical columns, each carved from a single tree trunk. The board coverings are hinged on two of the pillars, and open to reveal the columns inside. Upstairs, the Council Chamber was painted a gray-green "stone color" and the Council of Deputies chamber was enlarged a second time, taking in the door to the balcony.

In 1790 a convention to ratify the federal Constitution assembled at the renovated Colony House but had to move to the Second Baptist Church because the crowd of spectators was too large for the building. Later that year, after Rhode Island had become the last state to adopt

the Constitution, President Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson visited the state and attended a reception in the Colony House's Council Chamber. Ten years later the General Assembly commissioned two portraits of Washington, one each for the state houses at Newport and Providence, to be painted by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), a Rhode Island native and one of the most important American artists of the Federal period. One of these portraits hangs today in the Council Chamber where Washington was entertained.

The Colony House underwent a number of alterations in the nineteenth century. The brick and stone exterior walls were painted some time between 1800 and 1822. Partitioning of the Great Hall, about 1854, created several private offices on either side of a central courtroom. Enlargement of the former Council Chamber, now Senate Chamber, in 1857 eliminated a narrow lobby, all that remained of the original Middle Room. The most important changes occurred in 1841, when the Senate Chamber's paneling was repainted and grained to simulate a variety of expensive woods, and the former Deputies Chamber was remodeled to resemble the recently completed Hall of Representatives in the Providence state house. These renovations were designed by Russell Warren, a prominent nineteenth-century Rhode Island architect whose other works include the Arcade in Providence (in collaboration with James C. Bucklin) and the DeWolf-Colt mansion, Linden Place, in Bristol. Today the Hall of Representatives, which survives almost exactly as it was completed, is an important example of an early Victorian period interior. The coffered ceiling, shutters, and tiers of benches with turned cherry wood spindles date from this renovation, as does much of the furniture in the room. The present multicolor paint scheme is a re-creation of the original interior treatment.

Consolidation of state offices at the new State House in 1901 ended the Colony House's service as a capitol, but the building remained in use as

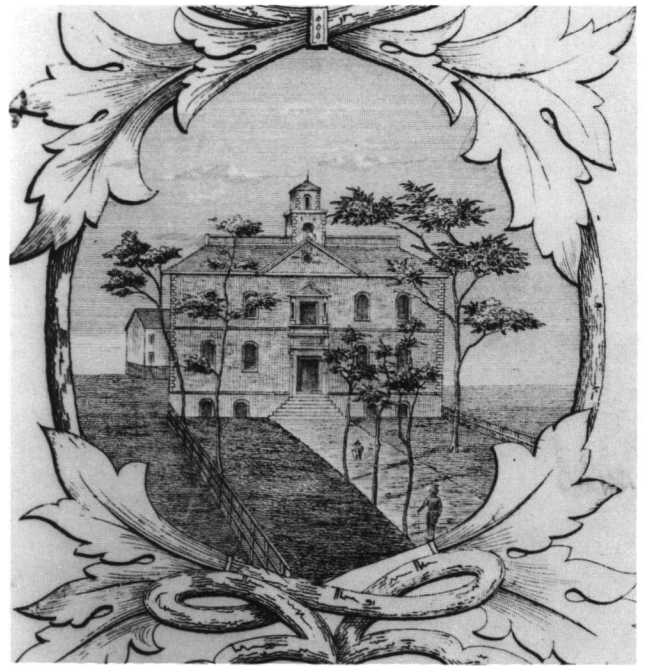
Newport County's courthouse. The building also began to draw the attention of historians and antiquarians. In 1917, Norman M. Isham, a Rhode Island architect and pioneer in the field of historic restoration, published an analytical study of the Colony House for the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. He supported a proposal for the construction of a new courthouse, which would relieve the old building from the demands of everyday use and allow it to be restored as a historic shrine. After the present Newport County Courthouse opened in 1926, Isham supervised a modest restoration of the Colony House, completed in 1932. At that time the partitions cluttering the first floor were removed and the exterior paint stripped from the brick and stone. Some members of the restoration committee wished to have the nineteenth-century Hall of Representatives ripped out and the Middle Room and Chamber of Deputies reconstructed. Isham believed that it was better to retain an authentic room from a later period than to attempt a restoration without any evidence of the second floor's original appearance, a radical notion at a time when the Victorian era was looked upon with disfavor. Thanks to Isham's view, the Colony House stands today with two beautiful adjoining rooms constructed exactly a century apart, each representing the decorative taste and workmanship of its own period and each equally significant. Together they provide a fascinating contrast and offer an interesting perspective on the evolution of historic preservation theories and practices in the early twentieth century.

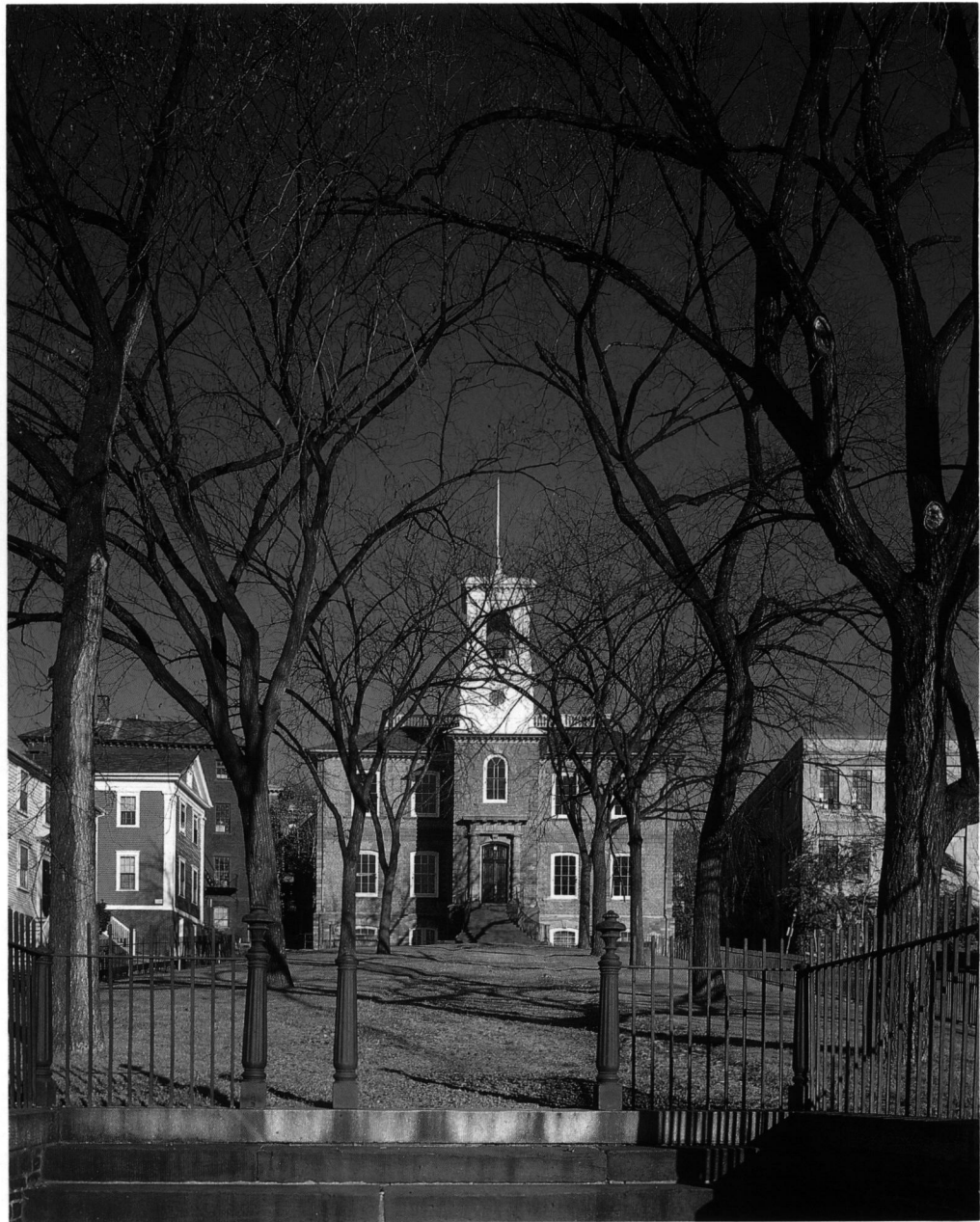
The Colony House was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Since then additional restoration projects have been carried out by the state under the supervision of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. An ongoing program of restoration and maintenance will ensure the Colony House's place in Rhode Island's future.

ROBERT OWEN JONES



Old State House





Old State House (1760-1762)

If Newport's Colony House embodies the spirit of Rhode Island's colonial era, the Old State House in Providence represents the state's social and political experience in the nineteenth century. Here Thomas Wilson Dorr and the People's Convention precipitated the constitutional crisis that finally forced the legislature to abandon the charter of 1663. The constant struggle to squeeze an increasingly complex governmental bureaucracy into this – by nineteenth-century standards – modest facility symbolizes the conservatism of Rhode Island's governing elite and its reluctance to face the consequences of urbanization and industrial growth. Known at various times as the Providence Colony, Court, County, or State House, it assumed the popular appellation "Old State House" following completion of the new capitol on Smith Hill.

When, in 1729, the General Assembly divided Rhode Island into three counties – Newport, Providence, and King's – it also ordered that courthouses be constructed in the two mainland counties. Providence's first county house was erected between 1730-31. It was a two-story wooden structure located on Meeting Street on the lot now occupied by the Brick Schoolhouse. A fire destroyed this county house on Christmas Eve, 1758.

The following February, the General Assembly ordered construction of a new brick courthouse. After some time, the building committee chose a new site north of the previous one. The long, narrow lot extending from Main Street to the newly completed Benefit Street recalled the formal axial approach of the Newport Colony House and provided a setting that would add to

the building's grandeur. Lotteries had been planned to raise part of the funds needed for land acquisition and construction, but one was canceled and the other did not sell as many tickets as expected. At one time the colony printed money to help finance construction. Work on the new Providence colony house began in 1760 and was completed substantially by 1762, though Assembly proceedings include appropriations for finishing the structure as late as 1771. Among the scant information about the building's construction is an anecdote that the builder went ahead without permission and made the structure larger than the building committee had intended. This story has never been substantiated, but several committees were appointed to examine the structure and audit accounts, suggesting some sort of controversy associated with the building's construction.

Altered extensively over the years, the Old State House originally appeared very similar to the Newport Colony House. It too was rectangular, built of brick and rusticated brownstone with segmental-arch windows, and included a central entranceway ornamented with classical detailing, a front gable, and a central two-stage cupola. Some elements of the Providence building differed slightly in form: for example, its triangular front gable, hipped roof, and square rather than octagonal cupola. The arrangement of doorways also differed from that of the Newport structure. The sloping site made end-wall entrances impractical; instead, the builders included a central entrance in the rear, facing Benefit Street.

The interior plan of the Providence colony house repeated that of its Newport counterpart. The first floor was an open hall containing a staircase in the southeast corner. The second floor had a stair hall connecting to a central hallway between the Chamber of Deputies on the north and the Council Chamber on the south. Today, the former Council Chamber, with its raised paneling, bolection moldings, and corner pilasters, is the only room that retains its original finish.

Like the Newport Colony House, the Old State House played a prominent role in the Revolution and its aftermath. On 4 May 1776, while meeting in Providence, the General Assembly



voted to renounce the colony's loyalty to King George III by repealing a previous act of allegiance to the crown. That date is now celebrated as Rhode Island Independence Day. At the Providence session of February 1783, the Assembly repealed a regulation that restricted the voting rights of Roman Catholics, and a year later the legislature passed an act providing for the gradual emancipation of slaves.

The Old State House also hosted great ceremonial occasions, including two visits by George Washington. In 1781, a dinner and ball at the Old State House highlighted General Washington's stay in Providence following his meeting in Newport with General Rochambeau. Nine years later, President Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson came to Providence to commemorate Rhode Island's ratification of the federal constitution. The visiting dignitaries and their entourage paraded through town. At night, lighted candles were placed in the windows of public buildings and homes in honor of the distinguished guests. Records show that in some cases the town supplied candles to families too poor to provide their own. The festivities concluded the next day with a banquet at the Old State House.

The Marquis de Lafayette's visit in 1824 occasioned perhaps the most impressive celebration staged at the Old State House. The Revolutionary War hero's return to America sparked a wave of nostalgia and patriotic fervor that swept the country. Upon his arrival in Providence, Lafayette was escorted to the state house in a grand procession. He marched up the long front lawn of the Parade between a double line of two hundred young girls dressed in white, who sprinkled flowers in his path. Inside, local



officials greeted him at a splendid reception in the Senate Chamber.

Though constructed in the colonial era, the Old State House is more closely associated with Providence's emergence as Rhode Island's economic and political center after the Revolution. By the mid-eighteenth century, Providence had begun to rival Newport for status as Rhode Island's chief town. The construction of the Providence colony house itself, so closely resembling the one at Newport, can be seen as an attempt to demonstrate Providence's comparable importance to the island seaport down Narragansett Bay. The British occupation of Newport during the Revolution ended that town's supremacy in Rhode Island's economic and political life. Also, Providence was better suited geographically to capitalize on the industrial development and growth that began in Rhode Island in the 1790s and accelerated rapidly through the nineteenth century. The four major river systems near Providence provided excellent sites for early waterpowered factories. Development of a network of turnpikes and railroads radiating from the city enhanced these natural advantages by connecting Providence to a hinterland larger than Newport's.

As we see it today, the Old State House is in large part a product of nineteenth-century alterations and additions that reflect the changing scope and structure of state government. Although the Assembly continued the custom of rotating sessions to different locales, the departments and commissions that it created established their offices in Providence. This placed a tremendous burden on the Old State House, which had to accommodate the courts in addition to an ever-expanding bureaucracy. Agitation for a new state house began in the 1840s and recurred several times throughout the nineteenth century. Conservative legislators rejected all suggestions for a new capitol, choosing instead to rent office space and construct additions to the 1762 building. Several proposals for major changes would have obscured the original structure, including at least two separate plans for a huge block added onto the west front.

Although none of the more destructive schemes was ever carried out, the Old State House underwent several major alterations during the

nineteenth century. Many of the earlier changes were destroyed in succeeding phases of renovation, but some of the projects left their mark on the building to this day. As early as 1810, the General Assembly ordered that the first floor be partitioned into offices, but it appears that this work was not done. In 1823, the legislature passed another resolution to subdivide the first floor into offices and paint the building's exterior. Some old bills exist for work done on the building in 1835-36, including first-floor offices, but the extent of that project is unknown. An important renovation occurred in 1840. The original double-hung windows with twelve panes in each sash were removed and replaced with new six-over-six windows. The central hallway on the second floor was eliminated to enlarge the Representatives Chamber, and the coved ceiling over this space was probably installed at this time. Both chambers also were redecorated. The Representatives room was furnished with tiers of built-in, semicircular benches ornamented with spindlework, and the paneling in the Senate Chamber was painted and grained to imitate different types of wood. This project must have made a great impression, for the Newport Colony House underwent similar changes in 1841. Though bills for the Old State House work have not been found, the project was probably executed by Russell Warren, the Providence architect who performed the Newport renovations.

Shortly after the completion of this refurbishing, the Old State House figured prominently in some of the most important events leading to the Dorr Rebellion. On at least two occasions, reformers seeking to replace the archaic and inequitable charter of 1663 met in the Old State House as the People's Convention. Though the ensuing insurrection failed to legitimize the actions of the People's party, the movement ultimately prompted the adoption of a state constitution in 1843.

The new constitution confirmed the practice of holding legislative sessions at the five county seats, and also contained a provision to apportion the House of Representatives on the basis of population. This new proportional system allowed for an increase in legislators, which would later affect the adequacy of the Old State House's accommodations.



In 1850-51 a major renovation was carried out following designs made by Thomas A. Tefft, a talented twenty-four-year-old architect who received his training in the office of James C. Bucklin. This project changed the plan and usage of the building. The ground around the foundation was excavated so the windows could be enlarged to light new offices placed in the basement. The first floor was converted into a large Hall of Representatives, with some space at the north end that could be closed off into rooms by folding partitions. The old Representatives Chamber was given to the Senate, and the former Senate Chamber became the Secretary of State's Office. The most radical change involved the removal of the old staircase and construction of a front tower containing a new staircase. Tefft's design harmonized so well with the old building that succeeding generations thought the tower was part of the original structure. A partition was built to re-create the second-floor center hallway and a new flat ceiling was probably installed at this time, suspended below the coved ceiling. In 1854 the remodeled building became one of only two seats of the state government.

A decade after Tefft's renovation was completed, the state consulted with three Providence architects – Clifton A. Hall, Alpheus C. Morse, and James C. Bucklin – concerning yet another Old State House addition. As a result, the large wing on the Benefit Street side of the building was erected in 1867 according to plans drawn by Bucklin. As his protégé, Tefft, had done, Bucklin took great care to relate the new to the old, using the brownstone trim from the original rear windows in the addition and duplicating the cornice detailing. To provide more space on the third floor, this new section received a stylish mansard roof, and the old building was reroofed so it would tie in better with the addition. Part of the original building's old roof is still visible today in the attic beneath the 1867 roof structure. The new wing contained rooms for the court, juries, and legislative committees; a law library; and sheriff's and judge's offices.

Within five years the enlarged state house was again overcrowded, and a special committee produced a study for a new capitol in 1872-73. However, this report was soon shelved after the county courts moved to the new Providence

County Courthouse (built 1875-77, demolished 1926) at the corner of Benefit and College Streets. Removal of the courts from the state house left more room for other branches of government. Between 1877 and 1885 the building was extensively refurbished under the supervision of the Providence architects Stone & Carpenter. The northern partition of the second-floor center hall was removed together with the lowered ceiling over the hall and Senate Chamber, restoring the coved ceiling, and two small lobbies were built in the southern corners of the Senate Chamber. The tiny room next to the Secretary of State's Office, the location of the original stairhall, was made into the Governor's Office, a telling indication of the low status accorded to that office before the present century. The project culminated in 1885 with the restoration of the Secretary of State's Office – the eighteenth-century Council Chamber. Workers repaired paneling, laid a new floor, and built a Colonial Revival fireplace. However, space limitations still forced many state offices to locate in rented space in various buildings around the city, among them the cast-iron Elizabeth Building at One Hundred North Main Street.

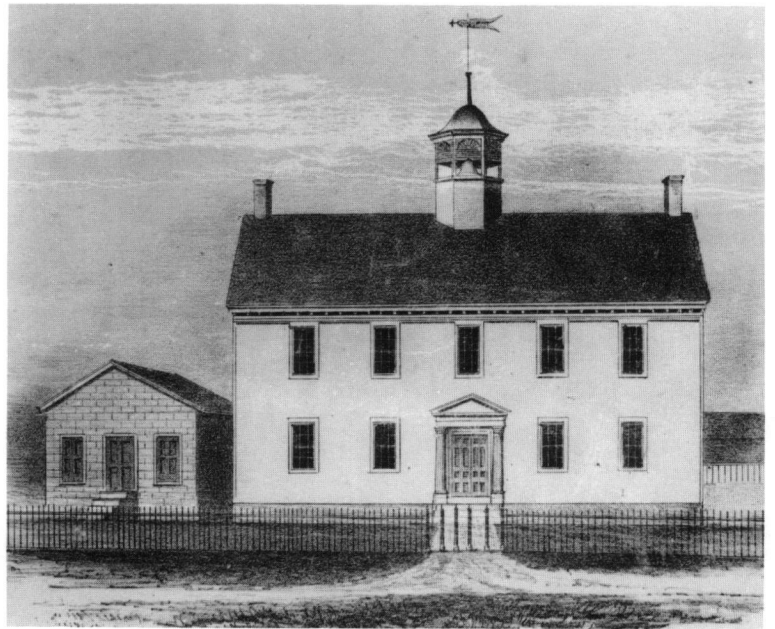
In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the General Assembly finally recognized both the practical and symbolic need for an efficient and commodious state capitol that would pay homage to Rhode Island's prosperity and civic identity. Following the opening of the current State House in 1901, the Old State House became the home of the Sixth District Court. In 1906 the Providence architectural firm Banning & Thornton executed the building's last major alteration, which gave the building the appear-

ance that it retains today. The exterior paint was removed from the brick and stone. The architects preserved the former Council Chamber, the only room approximating its original condition, and the mid-nineteenth-century coved ceiling in the adjoining chamber. The rest of the interior was stripped and extensively refurbished in the Colonial Revival style. In the new first-floor courtroom, the massive, classically detailed beams contain steel girders installed to correct structural weaknesses. The girders replaced a row of pillars in the middle of the room which had been added in the 1870s to shore up the second floor. The alterations included the installation of combination gas and electric light fixtures, which are still located in some of the rooms.

In 1975 the Sixth District Court moved to temporary facilities on Harris Avenue while awaiting completion of the Garrahy Judicial Complex on Dorrance Street. The Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission then occupied the Old State House. Since then a restoration program has been implemented which has included repair of the belfry, reconstruction of the roof balustrade, and refinishing of the old Council Chamber. In 1988 repainting of the first-floor courtroom, stair tower, and hallways in historic colors was underwritten by the National Decorating Products Association and the Painting and Decorating Contractors Association. Two hundred and twenty-five years after its construction, the building continues to serve the state as headquarters of the Heritage Commission, the Historical Preservation Commission, and the Film Commission.

ROBERT OWEN JONES

King's County Courthouse





King's County Courthouse (1775-1776)

A casual glance at the Kingston Free Library's belfry-topped tower, bracketed cornice, and mansard roof may lead the observer to count this building among Rhode Island's many fine Victorian structures. In fact, these alterations mask a Revolutionary-era building that once served as a courthouse and state house. As originally completed, the King's County Courthouse had similarities to Newport's Colony House, and later underwent changes that seem to be modeled after features of the Old State House. Comparison of all three buildings today makes an interesting study and helps to give a better picture of how each once appeared.

A courthouse for the Narragansett Country was planned as early as 1687 but apparently never constructed. After King's County was created in 1729, a courthouse was erected the following year at Tower Hill. At that time the settlement at Tower Hill, centered on Tower Hill Road between Torrey and Saugatucket Roads, was the most important community in the area. By the mid-eighteenth century it was rivaled by the village of Little Rest, later renamed Kingstown. Several influential residents petitioned the General Assembly to move the county seat to Little Rest, where they promised to construct "three good taverns" to cater to those attending legislative and court sessions. A second courthouse was built at Little Rest in 1752, on the south side of Kingstown Road. This relocation of the county seat increased the importance and prosperity of the village.

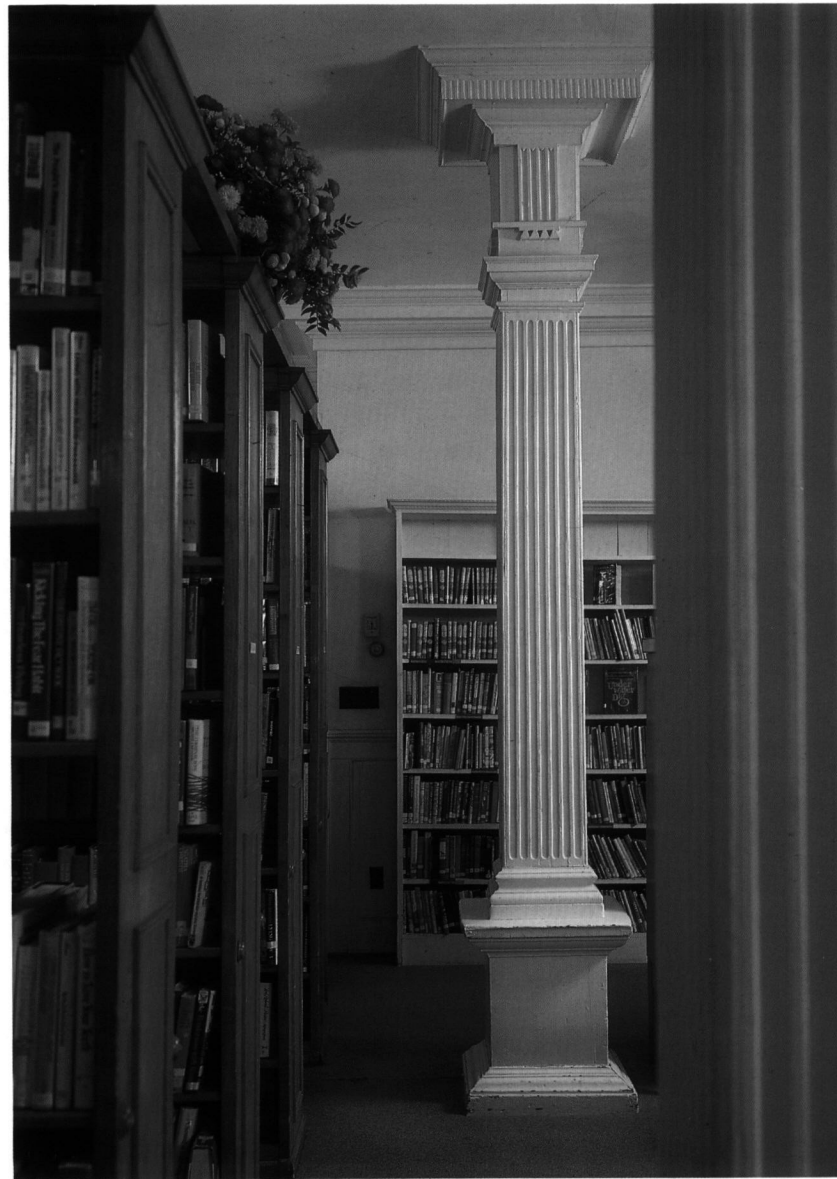
In 1773 the General Assembly ordered the preparation of plans for a new courthouse for King's County. William Potter, appointed in 1774 to arrange for the building's construction,



advertised in the *Newport Mercury* and *Providence Gazette* for workmen “as shall appear skillful, and will undertake the Business upon the best Terms.” The third courthouse was constructed in 1775 and 1776 on a new site on the north side of Kingstown Road, and the old lot and building were then sold.

An old lithograph shows the courthouse as originally completed, a rectangular, gable-roof structure topped with a central octagonal cupola. The front door was framed by pilasters and a triangular pediment. The facade has since been altered, but the side doors still have their pilaster and pediment trim. The arrangement of front and end-wall entrances is copied from the Newport Colony House. Inside, the row of pillars across the middle of the first floor and the staircase in the right-rear corner of the building are other elements adopted from the design of the Newport Colony House. In light of these similarities, it seems reasonable to suggest that the floor plan of the Kingston structure originally had a large hall on the first floor and two second-floor chambers, perhaps with a corridor between, as in the Newport and Providence buildings. It is interesting that plans for the reference of bidding contractors were kept on file at both Kingston and Newport. The capitol building on Aquidneck was no doubt familiar to the builder of King’s County Courthouse.

The General Assembly first met in this building in March 1777. Four years later the county was renamed in honor of George Washington. A convention met at the Washington County Courthouse in March 1790 to consider ratification of the federal constitution. By then the twelve United States had threatened sanctions if Rhode Island refused to join with them, but in spite of the warnings, the Antifederalist faction blocked passage at this meeting. A favorable vote was obtained at a session of the ratifying convention held at Newport the following May. The frequency of Assembly meetings at Kingston in subsequent years is unclear. In 1840 legislators approved an act ordering the rotation of legislative sessions among Newport, Providence, East Greenwich, and Bristol. Three years later, the new state constitution reinstated



meetings of the Assembly in South Kingstown. The legislature last met here in 1851.

Information about alterations to the Kingston courthouse is limited. The handsome wrought-iron fence around the lot was installed in 1853, and the nearby records building of stone was erected in 1856-57 to provide a safe repository for court documents. The addition of a stair tower to the center of the facade and a mansard roof to increase space at attic level radically changed the building's exterior appearance in 1875-76. The tower recalls the one added to the Old State House twenty-five years earlier. In its present form the Kingston structure appears as a combination of the Newport and Providence state houses.

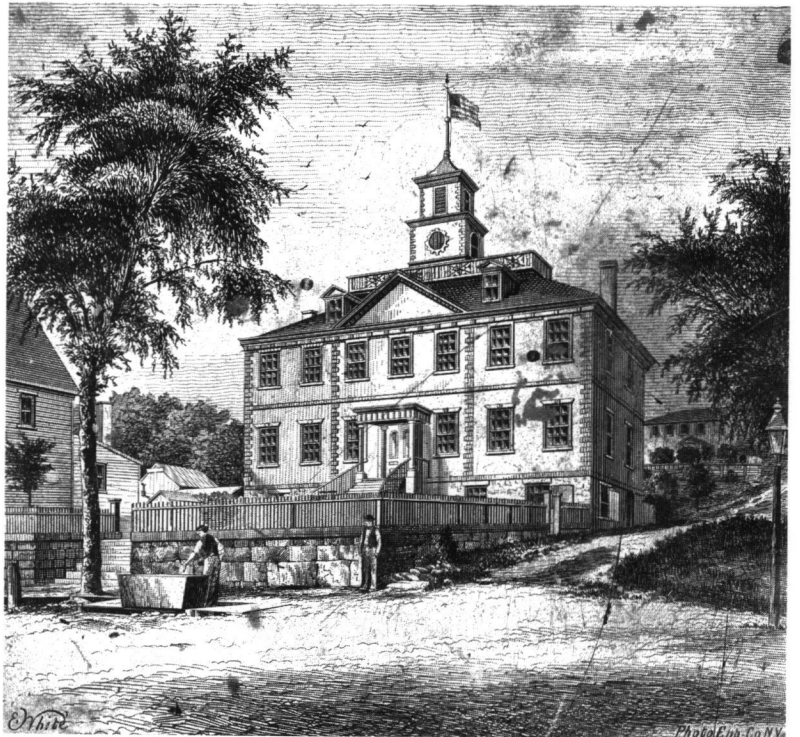
The state moved the courts to a new structure erected in 1893-94 at West Kingston, which was located more conveniently near the railroad station. The Kingston Free Library, chartered in 1891, subsequently petitioned the General Assembly for use of the abandoned courthouse, citing its advantageous location near the newly founded Rhode Island College of Agricultural and Mechanical Arts, now the University of Rhode Island. The state initially granted the library association a perpetual lease to the building. The General Assembly finally transferred title to the old courthouse to the library in 1959. A number of alterations have been made to accommodate the library's functions, among them the remodeling of the second story into an auditorium in 1951.

The former state house at Kingston was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Two years later the building was restored with funding from the Kingston Free Library, the town of South Kingstown, and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. This work included repainting of the exterior in a two-tone color scheme to enhance the building's Victorian-era appearance. The Kingston Library has taken great pride in this landmark structure, and its thoughtful custodianship over the years has saved an important part of Rhode Island's heritage.

ROBERT OWEN JONES



Kent County Courthouse





Kent County Courthouse (1804-1805)

In many ways the second Kent County Courthouse perpetuates the design tradition evinced in the other old courthouses at Newport, Providence, and Kingston. It bears a striking resemblance to the Old State House as the latter building appeared before it was altered in the mid-nineteenth century. However, the exterior detailing of Kent Courthouse, in contrast to that of the Newport and Providence buildings, has a lightness and delicacy characteristic of the contemporary Federal style. In addition to its historical significance, the Kent County Courthouse is architecturally interesting for the transitional quality of its design and the insights it offers into the Old State House's original appearance.

In 1750 the General Assembly ordered that Kent County be set off from Providence County, with East Greenwich as the county seat. This move was contingent upon the construction of a courthouse built at the expense of the county's citizens. The building required by the act was raised at the southwest corner of Main and Court Streets on a lot donated for the purpose. The first courthouse was a two-story wooden structure with a central belfry topping the roof.

By the end of the century this building could no longer accommodate the courts and Assembly. In 1799 the legislature appointed a committee to devise plans for a new courthouse. The old building eventually was sold, dismantled, and moved away, and contractor Oliver Wickes erected a new structure on its site in 1804-5. The cost of construction far exceeded the two thousand dollars originally appropriated, and additional funds were cautiously doled out to the building committee by the Assembly, which



required that a bond be posted to ensure proper spending and accounting.

With its quoins, hip roof, triangular front gable, and square two-stage cupola, the East Greenwich courthouse mirrors the original configuration of the Old State House as pictured in period engravings. Other details, however, differ entirely from the relatively weighty and elaborate Baroque-derived ornamentation of the eighteenth-century Providence structure. Here the window trim, with splayed lintel caps, and flat-board stringcourse are simpler, and the cornice is decorated with delicately scaled coved dentils and a fretwork band instead of modillions and bulbous reverse-curve moldings. The roof is topped by an airy balustrade of slender sticks with cross patterns worked into it. The lighter, flatter quality and greater simplicity of the Kent courthouse design are partly a result of its wooden construction – and perhaps of the building committee’s desire to limit expenses – but reflect also the rise of new aesthetic standards. The Federal style of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drew its inspiration not from Christopher Wren, as the Colonial style had done, but from a younger generation of British architects led by Robert Adam. The Kent County Courthouse exhibits the influence of this new architectural taste adapted to a traditional building form.

The interior of the East Greenwich courthouse has been totally reconstructed, leaving no evidence of the original floor plan. A description written in the 1920s states that the building had a central hallway connecting front and rear entrances, with a Representatives Chamber on the north side and a Senate Chamber on the south. It seems more likely, however, that the plan was closer to that of the other courthouses, with a large hall on the first floor and chambers



above. An act passed in 1823 to fit out two rooms for offices on the lower floor gives some indication that the first story may once have been a large open space.

The General Assembly held sessions at the Kent County Courthouse from 1806 to 1854. Thereafter, it was used only by the courts. The building underwent a major program of renovations and repairs in 1908-9. The project was planned by the Providence architectural firm William R. Walker & Son and executed by Vinton I. Reynolds, a Pawtucket contractor. Once work began they discovered that the building's framing had deteriorated severely and included many rotted timbers and loose joints. Workers gutted the courthouse and reinforced the structure with iron straps, ties, and beams. They constructed an entirely new roof and rebuilt the interior in the Colonial Revival style, as had been done a few years earlier at the Old State House in Providence. The most striking alteration was a new two-story courtroom with a handsome groin-vaulted ceiling. This lofty space contained an impressive judge's bench backed by elegant paneling with an elaborate broken-scroll pediment on top.

The courthouse was enlarged slightly in 1931-32 by constructing a one-story, flat-roofed brick addition on the rear. However, increased court business and traffic congestion on East Greenwich's Main Street spurred removal of the courts in 1974 to a modern structure near the Warwick-West Warwick city line. Today the Kent County Courthouse, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, contains the office of the local Chamber of Commerce and serves as an occasional meeting hall for civic groups.

ROBERT OWEN JONES



Bristol County Courthouse



Bristol County Courthouse (1816-1817)

The Bristol County Courthouse differs markedly from the state's other former legislative buildings. It breaks from the architectural format devised for the Newport Colony House and repeated with minor variations for the state houses at Providence, Kingston, and East Greenwich. The Bristol building reflects the new approach to design embodied in the early nineteenth-century Federal style. Though it contrasts with its counterparts, it does bear similarities to other buildings in the region. This is especially interesting in light of the mystery that surrounds the identity of the building's architect.

The area of today's Bristol County was once part of the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts. Conflicting land grants in the charters of Plymouth and the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations led to a long-running boundary dispute in the territory east of Narragansett Bay. The controversy was resolved in 1746 when the king's privy council transferred the present communities of Little Compton, Tiverton, Bristol, Warren, Barrington, Cumberland, and eastern Woonsocket from Massachusetts to Rhode Island. Bristol, founded in 1680, had served as a county seat since 1685, in accordance with a privilege stated in the settlement's Grand Deed. The town continued to serve this role as seat of a smaller, newly established Bristol County, Rhode Island.

Bristol's first courthouse was probably built shortly after the community became a shire town in 1685. In 1766 the General Assembly ordered the construction of a new courthouse in Bristol "in the same Place where the old Court-House now stands." The building was



erected in the middle of State Street, half way between Hope and High Streets. A turn-of-the-century photograph shows it as a modest two-and-one-half-story, gambrel-roof wooden structure with a symmetrical five-bay facade containing a central entrance. Though distinguished by flush-board siding on the front, which was scored to look like blocks of stone, the building was wholly domestic in scale and character.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Bristol became a prosperous seaport enriched by privateering and slave trading. The creation of an independent Bristol customs district, including neighboring Warren, in 1801 attests to the town's growing importance. Throughout this period the community's fortunes were linked closely to the mercantile activities of the wealthy and powerful DeWolf family, who dominated the town's economic and civic affairs.

In 1809, when Bristol was at its peak, local residents petitioned the state for a new courthouse. Four years later the General Assembly ordered the disposal of the old building. It was sold and moved to Bradford Street, where it was converted into a dwelling and subsequently demolished after a destructive fire in the 1920s. Both Bristol and Warren sought to be selected as the site of the new courthouse. Residents of Warren argued that it was more centrally located, and the town of Barrington endorsed moving the courts to Warren. The town of Bristol objected, however, pointing out its right to be the county seat by virtue of the provision in its Grand Deed. Furthermore, the majority of the county's inhabitants lived in Bristol, which paid a greater share of taxes than Warren or Barrington. In addition, the residents of north-

ern Bristol, though they lived closer to Warren center, preferred to have the courts located in Bristol.

Bristol and Warren each offered a building site on its town common. The state finally accepted Bristol's more generous offer of a forty-thousand square-foot-lot on High Street, centered on the west side of Bristol Common. This had been the site of the town's first Congregational meeting house (built 1684, demolished 1784) and was occupied at the time by the Mount Hope Academy (1791). The town also agreed to finance construction of the new building and be reimbursed by the state.

As Bristol's most prominent family, the DeWolfs may well have been deeply involved in the courthouse project. James DeWolf (1764-1837) was an extremely powerful figure in the General Assembly. Given his position, it seems unlikely that the legislators seriously considered moving the courts to Warren. DeWolf oversaw the sale of the old courthouse and was proprietor of the Mount Hope Academy, which was moved to make way for the new courthouse. Though not officially on the building committee, James DeWolf undoubtedly influenced the group's decisions.

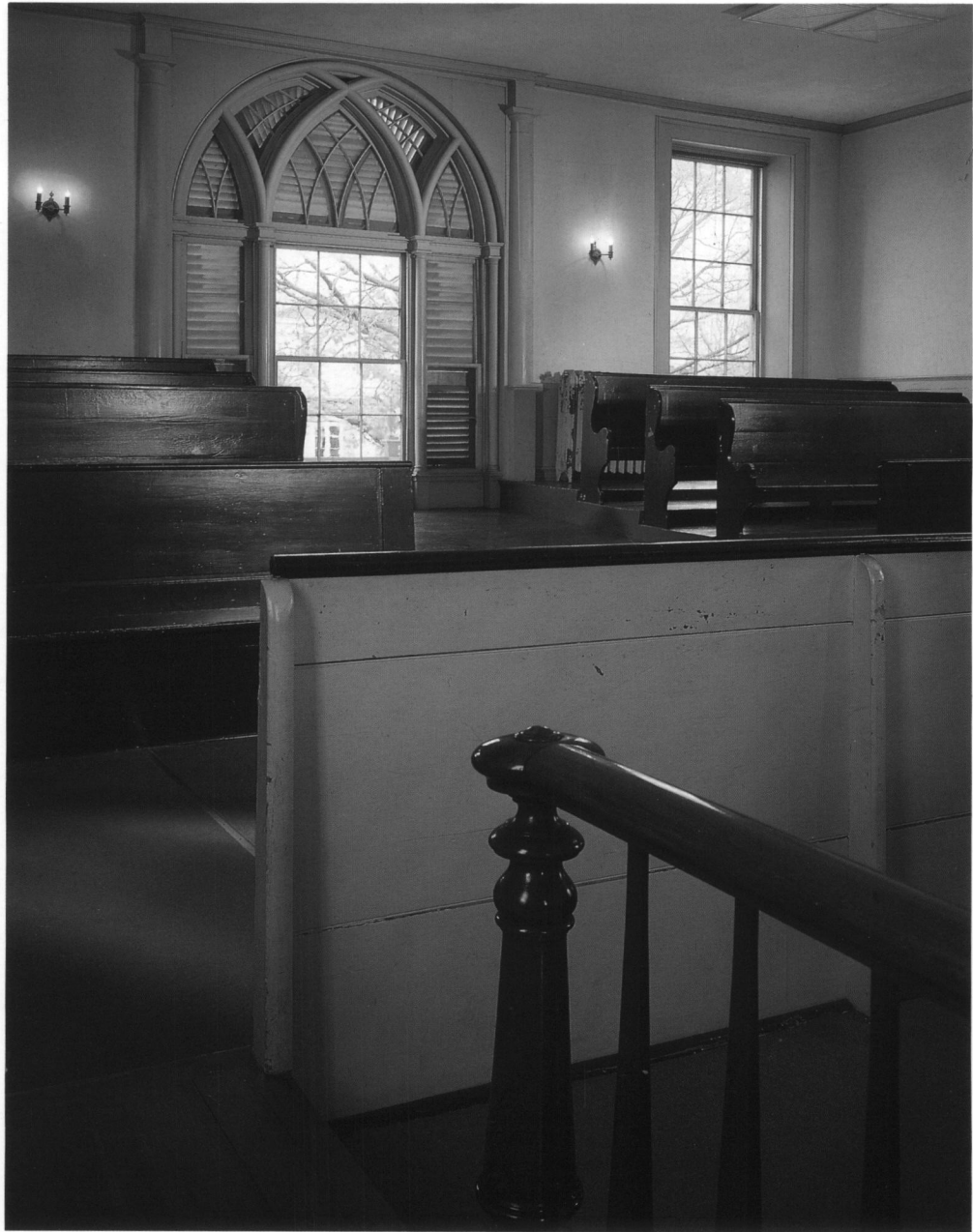
Bristol Courthouse was erected in 1816-17 by two local contractors, Charles Shaw and Isaac Borden. Its most distinctive feature is the massing of the main block, which comprises a three-story, gable-roofed center section flanked by two-story, hip-roofed wings. Another two-story, hip-roofed wing extends from the rear, giving the structure an overall "T" plan. The gable roof is topped by a central tower composed of two square stages surmounted by an octagonal belfry with a flaring conical roof.

Most of the building is of brick-faced rubble-stone, now covered with stucco, trimmed with stone quoins and lintels. The sides and rear of the third story and the tower are wood. Tall windows that originally contained triple-hung sashes mark the second story as the main floor. A large arched window with rusticated trim and Gothic-arch tracery occupies the center of the facade, set above a portico sheltering the main entrance. The present portico is a later replacement for the original one with classical columns and a cross-patterned stickwork roof balustrade.

Although the names of the builders are known, and records specifically refer to the involvement of an architect, no evidence has yet been discovered that identifies the designer of this unusual building. The basic format of the courthouse – a three-story central section flanked by two-story wings – is identical to that of the Sullivan Dorr House (1809) in Providence, constructed by John Holden Greene, that city's preeminent builder-architect of the early nineteenth century. The combination of classical and Gothic forms in the Bristol Courthouse is also reminiscent of Greene's work at the Dorr House, St. John's Episcopal Cathedral (1810), and the First Unitarian Church (1816), all in Providence. However, some scholars have attributed the courthouse's design to Russell Warren, an important carpenter-architect who then lived in Bristol, and produced four elaborate houses there for members of the DeWolf family. The house that Warren built for Benjamin Bosworth (1815-16, demolished 1961) had a three-story central block with two-story flanking wings, and though its detailing lacked the "Gothick" flavor evident in both the Dorr House and Bristol Courthouse, it did have tall triple-hung windows like those of the courthouse. Given his connection with the DeWolfs and his residency in the town, it seems likely that Russell Warren served as architect of the Bristol Courthouse, though the design lacks the boldness and opulence characteristic of other Warren works, such as Linden Place and the Bosworth House.

There is limited information about the original configuration of the building's interior and subsequent changes. On the second floor, a large courtroom occupied all of the central





section and rear wing. Each side wing contained a single jury room. The courtroom had a fireplace on the east wall and judge's bench on the north. The fireplace is now gone and the judge's desk is set along the east wall. The courtroom, lighted by the large "Gothick" window on the west facade, has some horizontal-board and flush-panel wainscoting which are probably part of the original finish, together with compound billet moldings that resemble the profile of Gothic colonettes. The raised platform with benches at the west end and the handsome mahogany turned-baluster railings were added sometime in the nineteenth century. The cast-iron and bronze chandelier, now electrified, probably dates from the installation of gas lighting in 1855. The former jury rooms retain their original fireplaces framed by thin classical colonettes supporting the mantel shelves, but the use of these spaces has changed. The south room is now outfitted as a judge's chamber, while the north room serves as a stair hall. The present staircases are not part of the original structure, but were installed at a later date. The earliest information pertaining to the first floor appeared in 1836, when the *Bristol Phoenix* reported plans to outfit this space as a town hall. The work must not have been finished at that time, for the General Assembly ordered its completion in 1841. Today, in addition to the entranceway and hallway, the first floor contains offices in the side wings and a large assembly or meeting room directly below the courtroom.

Over the years the courthouse has undergone a number of alterations. A major renovation in 1836 probably included some of the interior changes noted above. The chief addition at that time, however, was the stucco coating applied to the exterior. The stucco was scored to imitate ashlar masonry and painted a sand color with a darker trim, a typical mid-nineteenth-century color scheme popular for early Gothic Revival

or Italianate buildings. The General Assembly continued to meet here until 1852. Thereafter the building was used only by the county courts. An 1871 renovation included construction in the two interior corners at the intersection of the rear and side wings, replacement of the first- and second-floor sashes, and purchase of a new weathervane for the belfry. In 1934-35 the building was refurbished as a PWA project under the direction of Wallis E. Howe, a Bristol resident and partner in the Providence architectural firm Howe, Church & Prout. The original Tuscan-columned portico was replaced with the present one, designed in the "Gothick" mode of the early nineteenth century to harmonize with the window above. The portico's ball frieze detailing was copied from an early Bristol house, Hey Bonnie Hall (1808, demolished 1944), by Russell Warren. The building was repainted in a Colonial Revival color scheme of cream yellow with white trim and green shutters.

Bristol Courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. Six years later a plan was formulated for restoration of the building. At that time the exterior, then painted white with tan trim, was repainted in colors approximating those first used when the stucco was put on the building.

The Bristol County Superior Court moved to Providence in July 1980, but biweekly sessions of the state traffic court still convene in the courthouse. The sheriff of Bristol County maintains an office here, and the building serves as the occasional meeting place for several of Bristol's political and civic organizations. Though now in limited use, Bristol County Courthouse survives to commemorate an illustrious phase of the town's past, and awaits other appropriate activities that will enhance its role as a center of community life.

ROBERT OWEN JONES

Rhode Island State House





SENTIRE-QVAE-VE



Rhode Island State House (1895-1901)

Prominently sited atop Smith Hill at the center of Providence, the white marble Rhode Island State House is a landmark highly visible from many quarters of the city as well as to travelers along the interstate highway or the railroad. In the tradition of Rhode Island's earlier state houses, the building's eminent location reinforces its position not only as the legislative and administrative center of state government but also as a key monument in American architectural history. Much admired since its preliminary design was published in 1892, the Rhode Island State House well deserves the praise it has accrued as one of the finest and most important buildings of the late nineteenth century. Further, its genesis, construction, and completed form symbolize much of Rhode Island's – and the country's – position politically, culturally, economically, and architecturally at the dawn of the twentieth century.

In his first Governor's Message in January 1890, Governor Herbert W. Ladd noted the cramped conditions in the Old State House and the inefficient and unsafe practice of using rented quarters for important state documents. Ladd included two illustrations of the Benefit Street state house that "Rhode Island has so long put up with" and – enticingly – illustrations of twelve other state capitols, including the Massachusetts State House, then scheduled to be enlarged. Ladd noted that while the Massachusetts building was "in its condition no way comparable to that from which this State government suffers," the state of Massachusetts did "not hesitate to make improvements where improvements are demanded." He urged the legislature to make construction of a new state house "the one thing which should receive

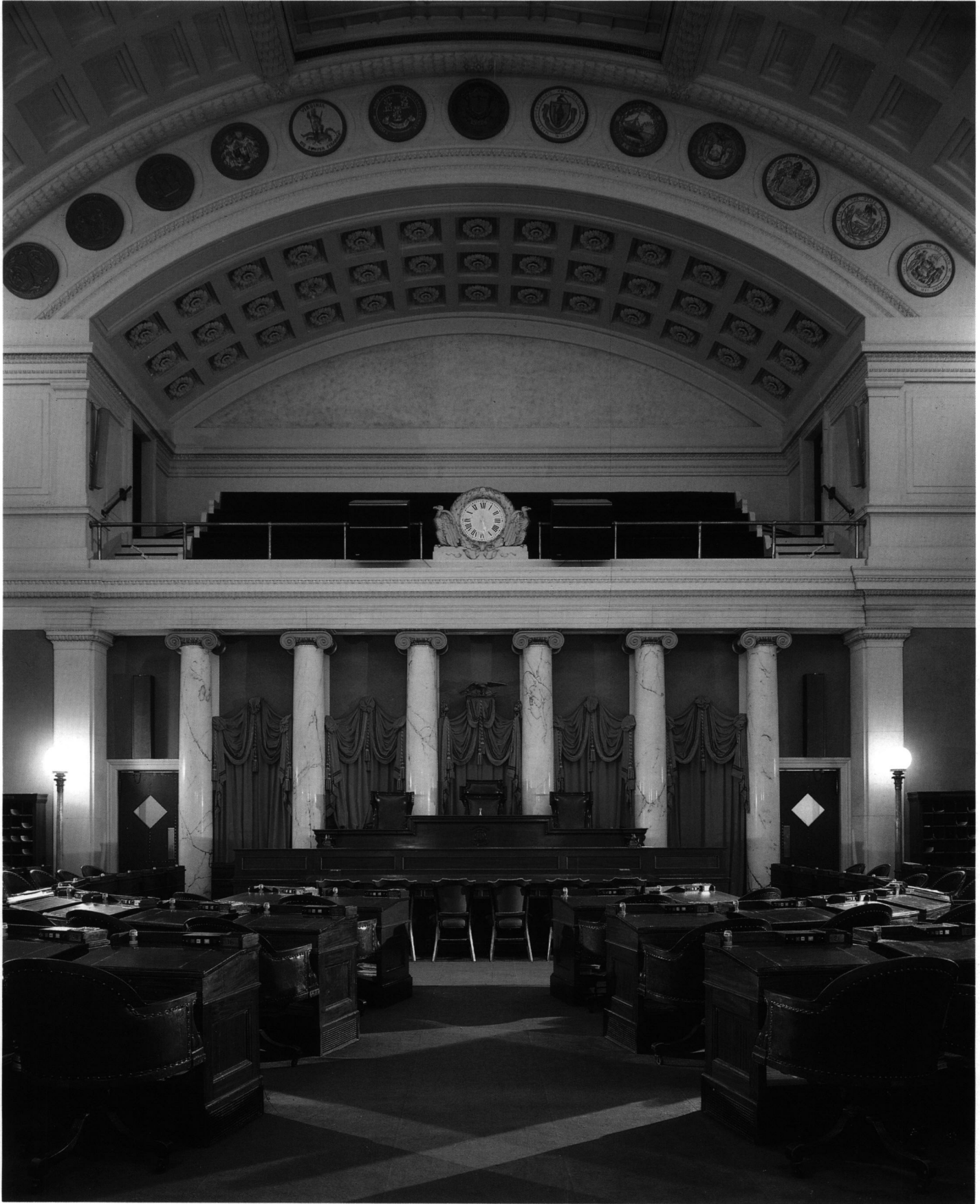


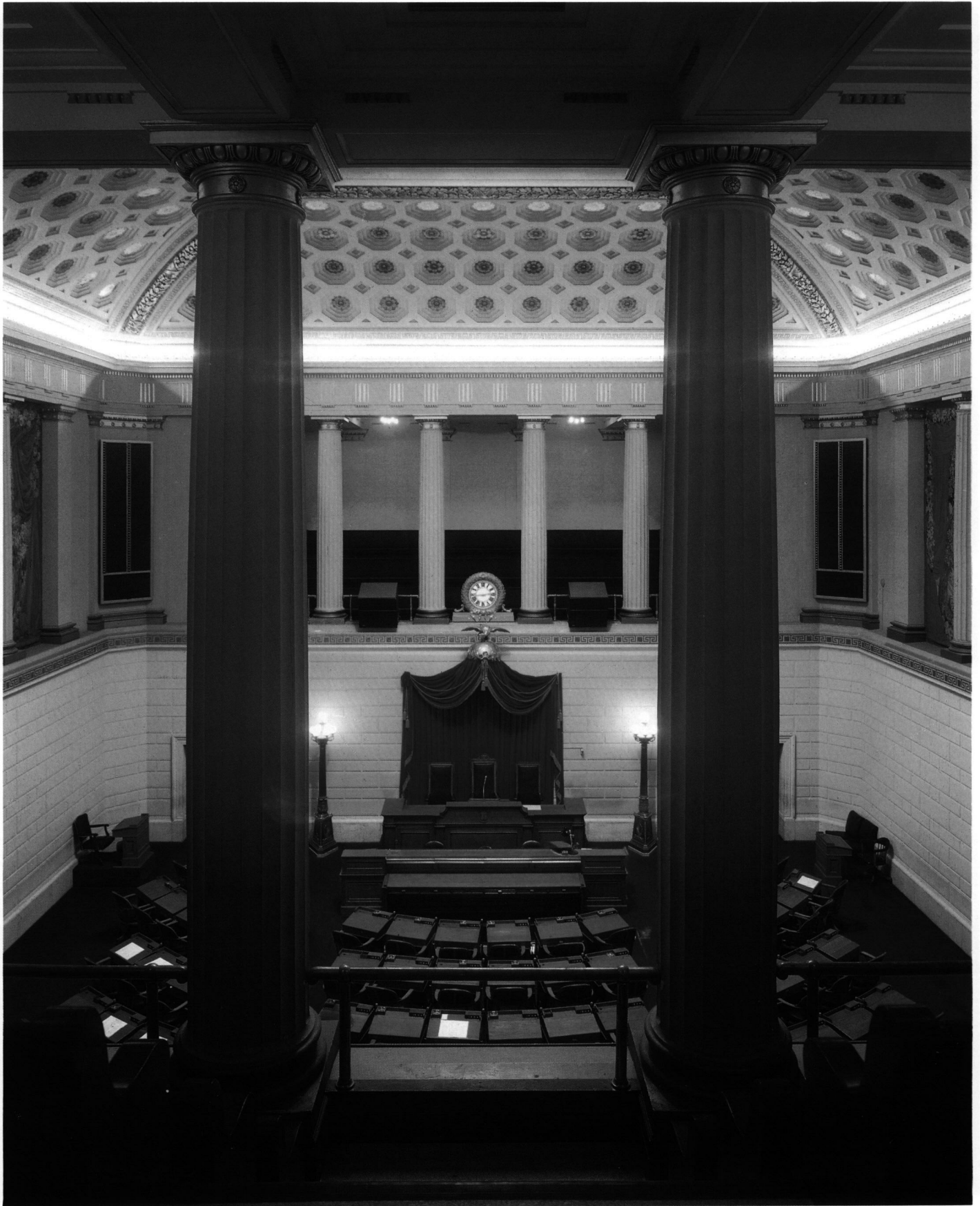
your attention and be acted on at once." Ladd's persuasive, if somewhat shaming, arguments found a receptive audience in the legislators of this prospering industrial state. A State House Commission was soon appointed to oversee a competition among architects for the building's design as well as its construction.

The State House Commission included a group of civic-minded professional and business leaders, most of them with some political experience. More important, the commission comprised individuals with wide business and social connections in the northeast and an interest in and understanding of architectural patronage. Chief among them were Governor Ladd, Providence lawyer Edward Glezen, former Governor George Peabody Wetmore, and manufacturer and businessman Rowland Gibson Hazard. The presence of these four men on the commission virtually ensured the selection of a prominent architectural firm to build a high quality, highly visible capitol. Soon after its members were appointed, the commission turned its attention to major architectural commissions then underway. They visited New York to inspect plans for Grant's Tomb, the product of a well-publicized national competition, and to confer with several architects. They visited Boston to view the public library then under construction and the plans for the addition to the Massachusetts State House. This activity coincided with the beginning of an elaborate two-stage competition that required more than fifteen months to complete.

Though competitions were a common means of selecting an architect and a design for major public buildings of the late nineteenth century (including those for the Providence's county







courthouse and city hall in the 1870s), the State House Commission's two-tiered selection process was unusual. The first round of entries, limited to Rhode Island architects, opened in November 1890 and closed in February 1891; the three successful entrants from the first competition then competed with invited architects from Boston and New York.

This elaborate scheme was devised ostensibly to ensure the representation of local talent in the competition, but the commission's choice of the New York architectural firm McKim, Mead & White seems almost inevitable. Governor Ladd corresponded confidentially with the firm during the fall of 1890. Hazard had employed the firm to build the Narragansett Casino in the 1880s and would again hire them in 1892 for his own house in Narragansett. As architectural advisors, the commission engaged Richard Morris Hunt, the dean of American architects and a close friend of McKim, and Professor A.D.F. Hamlin of Columbia University, formerly of the McKim, Mead & White office. These relationships and McKim, Mead & White's office policy of refraining from building competitions strongly suggest that their selection was destined from the beginning.

Five architectural firms entered the first competition. Stone, Carpenter & Willson; William R. Walker & Son; and Hoppin, Read & Hoppin gained entrance to the second competition; Gould & Angell and the Newport firm of George C. Mason & Son were eliminated.

The second stage of the competition opened in August 1891 and closed in February 1892. In addition to the three Rhode Island entries, the commission considered schemes by the New

York firms J.C. Cady, Carrère & Hastings, and – of course – McKim, Mead & White. The only Boston entrant was Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, the successor firm to H.H. Richardson. All of the entries fell within a generally classicizing mode but varied considerably from the seventeenth-century French chateau inspired design by Carrère & Hastings to the simple Italian Renaissance inspired schemes by Stone, Carpenter & Willson and McKim, Mead & White.

The selection of McKim, Mead & White for the Rhode Island State House commission solidified the firm's position as the leading architectural firm of the day. Its principals were Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909), William Rutherford Mead (1846-1928), and Stanford White (1853-1906). At a time when professional architectural training in this country was rudimentary, they brought to their practice perhaps the most comprehensive architectural backgrounds in the country as well as an extraordinary amount of talent. The Newport Casino of 1879-80 established the firm's preeminence in the shingled mode popular in the 1880s, particularly for suburban and resort architecture; among the best of these are a number of Rhode Island projects in both Newport and Narragansett. By the mid-1880s, they looked increasingly to Italian Renaissance architecture for their growing number of urban commissions, like the Boston Public Library (1887-95), much admired by the State House Commissioners. This chaste granite box represented a startling break with the elaborate, colorful, and picturesque Gothic and Romanesque-inspired buildings then still common. Controversial at the time of its construction, the Boston Public Library represented the first statement in American public architecture of Renaissance classicism.

The Rhode Island State House was a further development of this mode, and its design coincided with the firm's involvement in the planning of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. The glimmering "White City" on the shore of Lake Michigan, an ensemble of classically inspired buildings carefully sited around a court, transformed popular and academic taste in architecture and city planning. Providing a new vision of the American city, the White City established classical forms for urban structures and gave birth to the City Beautiful movement. The Rhode Island State House and Columbian Exposition were coeval, related projects that catapulted McKim, Mead & White into national prominence.

The State House competition drew national attention among members of the architectural profession, and the entries were published in the 13 February 1892 issue of the prestigious trade journal *American Architect and Building News*. The winning design prompted accolades from the professional community. Eugène Létang, professor of architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, proclaimed it "a beautiful and noble building of which R.I. will be proud in general and lovers of architecture in particular." Popular reaction was likewise favorable: the *Providence Daily Journal* called it "a splendid example of composition, according to the purest ideas of the Renaissance."

The competition specified no particular site for the new state house. The commission considered five locations around the city, but Smith Hill was the only site given any serious thought. It provided the most dramatic setting for the new building and offered great potential for a

comprehensive planning scheme linking the building to Downtown Providence. The Public Park Association actively promoted this site and published a pamphlet outlining a scheme with a grand boulevard which passed under a new Union Station connecting the State House and Providence City Hall. The location must have appealed to the architects' interest in urban planning, and their deliberations included meetings with Stone, Carpenter & Willson, architects for the new Union Station, to discuss the relationship of the State House to the Station. These elaborate plans were only partially realized, but the site selection process introduced city planning to Providence and illustrates an early realization of the City Beautiful concepts put forth at the World's Columbian Exposition.

Construction of the new State House did not begin until the fall of 1895. A bond issue to allocate not more than one and one-half million dollars for the building passed on 8 November 1892. Land acquisition took most of 1893 and 1894. Design refinement continued through 1894. This process was complicated by the commission's decision in October 1894 to increase the building's length by sixty feet; for the sake of proportion, it was widened and the height and diameter of the dome also increased. In all, McKim, Mead & White made three separate floor plans, two complete exterior designs, and numerous schemes for the main entrances. The final design was approved on 14 November 1894, and much of 1895 was occupied with final construction drawings. During 1895, the commissioners also considered building materials. McKim, Mead & White had conceived the building as a white marble structure – a choice influ-

enced by their work at the Chicago fair – but concern over cost and durability led to considerable discussion. The commission retained Brown University Professor of Chemistry Alpheus Packard to test various stones; Georgia marble, abundantly available, was selected as the strongest and least susceptible to corrosion. On 26 August 1895, the state signed a construction contract with Norcross Brothers of Worcester, Massachusetts. The Norcross firm produced buildings of exceptionally high quality, and McKim, Mead & White turned to them frequently for important commissions. Finally, on 16 September 1895, over five and one-half years after Governor Ladd called for its construction, the new Rhode Island State House had its groundbreaking.

Construction continued from late 1895 to 1904. Foundation work occupied the first year. The cornerstone was laid on 15 October 1896 in great ceremony: former governor Herbert W. Ladd, chairman of the commission, and Governor Charles Warren Lippitt spoke; several bands provided music; a time capsule was placed in the cornerstone; and the Masons in full regalia performed their rites. The building rose over the next three years. The one major change to the building during construction was the decision in 1898 to increase the height and diameter of the dome; this was done to outstrip that on the Minnesota capitol (Cass Gilbert, architect) then being built in St. Paul. In 1899, a statue of the *Independent Man*, sculpted by George Brewster of New York and cast locally by the Gorham Manufacturing Company, was placed atop the structural marble dome. The secretary of state first occupied the building in late 1900, followed by the General Assembly in 1901. Interior finish work and landscaping con-





tinued until 1904. As completed, the building stands 330 feet long, 180 feet wide, and 235 feet from the terrace to the top of the statue on the dome. Materials include 327,000 cubic feet of white marble, 15 million bricks, and 1,300 tons of steel beams. The final cost – including land, building, and furnishing – came to just over three million dollars, about twice what was anticipated in 1890.

The new State House that appeared atop the crest of Smith Hill served as a shining centerpiece of a thriving metropolis of 199,000, then ranking twentieth among the cities of the nation. Though separated somewhat from Downtown by the new Union Station and its extensive freight yards, the building was nevertheless part of it, visible as it is from the large open place (now known as Kennedy Plaza) created by the removal of the 1848 Union Station in front of City Hall. This space, with its dramatic view of the State House, is part of the City Beautiful scheme envisioned by the architects and park association. In all directions from the State House spread dense or rapidly filling residential neighborhoods accessible by electric trolley cars. West of the State House along the Woonasquatucket River and north along the Moshassuck River, textile, base-metal, machine-tool, and rubber plants were turning out woolens, silks, stoves, engines, locomotives, screws, lathes, calipers, and tires – their great stacks spewing steam and smoke into the sky daily. The bright white-domed building at the center of this bustling activity crowned a thriving city, the economic and political center of the nation's then most industrialized state.

The State House follows the form established for bicameral legislative buildings by the United States Capitol in Washington. This generic type employs a rectangular block with highly articulated entrance pavilions – usually one centered on each of the long sides – and a prominent dome centered on the building. This exterior format reflects the basic interior organization: circulation space under the dome and legislative chambers flanking the central space, with offices filling the exterior wall space around the legislative chambers. By the early years of the nineteenth century, state capitols had begun to use this format, which

remained in constant use throughout the century in various stylistic guises. Even the elaborate High Victorian Gothic, Second Empire, and Romanesque Revival capitols of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s generally followed this format.

What set the Rhode Island State House apart from the other state capitols was not a deviation from this format but the strength and clarity of the architects' interpretation of it, rendered crisply in white marble and set on a high base overlooking the city. The success of this abstract design owes a great deal to McKim, Mead & White's organization of Renaissance- and Georgian-inspired sources into a tight, focused composition whose plan and exterior articulation are closely related. More important, the building projected the emerging American Renaissance, a new vision of urban America as the cultural inheritor of Ancient Greece, Republican Rome, and Renaissance Italy. That vision first found expression in the temporary structures of the World's Columbian Exposition, and the Rhode Island State House gave permanent form to the architectural and planning precepts introduced at the fair. This spirit of the American Renaissance in architecture appealed both visually and emotionally: it broke with the elaborate, ornamented buildings of the preceding decades and did so just as the United States was emerging as a world power politically and economically. Both by design and siting, the Rhode Island State House served as a symbol of this strength and vigor.

The exterior is a dynamic interpretation of the capitol format. The building is composed of five distinct parts: a prominent central section which projects beyond the wall planes of the wings and is capped by a high drum and dome surrounded by four subsidiary lanterns, recessed hyphens flanking the central section, and two flanking wings with low hip roofs capped by low saucer domes. The central section has an emphatic verticality. It appears to thrust up and out as though squeezed by the large wings at either end of the building. The restrained use of ornamental detail reinforces the strength of this design.

The interior is particularly distinguished in its organization of space. The architects manipulated the basic capitol format, its proportion,



and its detail to create a fresh interpretation of a standard plan. A visitor to the building enters on the north or south through somber, trapezoidal-plan vestibules wider on the exterior and narrower on the interior. A short flight of splayed steps and a screen of Doric columns separate the vestibules from the east-west corridors that run the width of the building on either side of the rotunda. This focused plan subtly funnels the visitor into the building, up the steps into the principal horizontal circulation spaces, and ultimately into the area under the dome, the principal vertical circulation space. Doric columns screen the east-west corridors from the central area under the dome. Unlike most buildings of this type, the space under the dome is not handled as a circular room. The large piers that support the dome truncate the space into an octagon, and the area is given over to the main staircase, which rises on increasingly narrower steps from the north and south half a flight from the first-floor level and turns ninety degrees to reach the second floor east and west. From the landing at the center, the four principal public rooms of the second floor are visible: the House of Representatives Chamber (west), the Library (north), the Senate Chamber (east), and the Reception Room (south). The wall colors in this central space approximate those used originally, including the Pompeiian red wall panels with ochre trim and the dark green and gold in the coffered ceilings. On the interior wall of the dome is a mural illustrating the settling of Providence designed by James Allen King and painted in 1947.

Treatment of the public rooms on the principal floor – the second – varies. Both legislative chambers are quite severe. The square-plan House has rusticated walls below a Doric-column screen around the periphery of the room, and a coved, coffered ceiling with a translucent skylight at the center. Visitors' galleries overlook the floor from the east and west, and pastoral tapestries from William Baumgarten & Co. of New York fill the intercolumnar spaces on the north and south walls. The House retains its original stone-colored paint scheme with gilding in the cornice and the coffering. The half-round-plan Senate has a coffered, half-dome ceiling. The wide, rough-plaster frieze

here may well have been intended to take a relief sculpture, a companion, perhaps, to the seals of the thirteen original states in the arch above the visitors' gallery on the east wall. At first painted green, the Senate Chamber was blue from the mid-1920s until 1988, when it was restored to its original state. The trim was originally to be gilded, but in 1901, Charles McKim "suppressed the gold altogether depending on the white marble [of the columns behind the speakers' rostrum] and the green to do the trick." Furniture in both chambers either is original or based on original designs and replaced or added as legislative membership increased: that in the House Chamber is oak; in the Senate, mahogany. Beyond the legislative chambers – on the west and east sides of the building respectively – are the House and Senate Lounges. Used for meetings and conferences, these rooms retain their original furniture of oak and mahogany like the legislative chambers. Their paint colors are modern pale tones replacing the green of the Senate Lounge and the chocolate brown of the House Lounge.

The Library is dark and restrained. Its gilded, coffered ceiling features seals of Renaissance printers and bookmakers, an embellishment in keeping with the general Renaissance character of this cubic room as well as with the American Renaissance spirit of the building. The prominent electric light bulbs in the cornice are typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when electrical technology was relatively new and held an appeal to architects for its decorative possibilities.

The Reception Room stands out as the most lavish of the public rooms. Decorated in a Louis XIV mode with marble pilasters lining the walls, the room was described by McKim as "too much pink, white, and gold, too liney, and too ball-roomish, but this I think will be overcome by the introduction of grey in the panels and stiles and rails." Original furniture in the Reception Room includes gilded chairs and marble-top tables and tall bronze torcheres. Over the marble mantel is the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington commissioned by the state for the Old State House and moved to the new building upon its completion. At the end of the reception room several portraits honor Rhode Island's early military heroes. Gari Melchers'

portrait of General Nathanael Greene, Rhode Island's most prominent Revolutionary patriot, was painted in 1900 as a companion piece to Stuart's portrait of Washington. Melchers also painted the portrait of Oliver Hazard Perry, a Rhode Island son who served with distinction in the War of 1812; the portrait of Esek Hopkins, commander of the First Continental Fleet in the early days of the Revolution, is by Wilfred I. Duphiney.

To the west of the Reception Room, the formal focus of the Executive Chambers, the governor occupies a series of connecting rooms on the south side of the building's second floor.

Beyond a small anteroom, one enters the governor's large and handsome office, suited to formal meetings and conferences, and an attached private office. In 1901, this space – anteroom, meeting room, and private office – proved sufficient for a governor whose duties were largely ceremonial. Today, however, as the chief executive has assumed a more central position in Rhode Island's government, the executive department occupies the entire southwest wing of the first and second floor.

In addition to the State House's governmental and architectural significance, it also serves as a museum for some of the state's important cultural artifacts. The east-west corridors on the three principal floors are lined with portraits of the state's governors. Outside the entrance to the Senate floor is an original copy of Rhode Island's royal charter, granted by Charles II in 1663. In the Reception Room is the early twentieth-century silver service from the battleship *Rhode Island*, a part of the U.S. Navy's Great White Fleet, a gift from the people of Rhode Island. The service was designed and cast by the Gorham Manufacturing Company of Providence and presented in 1907.

At the time the State House was completed, Rhode Island was one of the richest, most densely populated, and most heavily industrialized states in the nation. Its extensive network of textile mills produced hundreds of thousands of yards of cotton and wool fabric annually, and its large factories turned out the "Five Industrial Wonders of the World," including the Corliss Steam Engine and the Brown &

Sharpe Universal Milling Machine. It was the summer playground for the country's wealthiest and most prominent citizens, who built large, stylish houses in Watch Hill, Narragansett, Jamestown, or Newport. Even politically, Rhode Island had perhaps reached its apex, represented as it was in the United States Senate by Nelson W. Aldrich, the "General Manager of the United States." The state was very much in the mainstream of the eastern establishment that dominated American economic, political, social, and cultural events at the turn of the century and its new State House vividly asserts that position.

In architectural circles, the Rhode Island State House represented a major statement of the return to classicism at the turn of the century by one of the best and most prolific firms of the day. It appeared just as public and academic enthusiasm for the American Renaissance reached a climax: had it appeared earlier, it would have seemed avant-garde; later, it might have been unremarkable. It was the most important of public buildings in the American Renaissance mode at the time of its construction and its effect was striking, particularly on the design of new state capitols such as Minnesota, Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky, Washington, Montana, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Idaho, and Utah and additions to existing state houses in Virginia, Florida, and Alabama.

Ultimately, the Rhode Island State House symbolized the pride and optimism of the citizens responsible for its construction. The state's economy and government were growing rapidly, and state leaders saw fit to erect a state house that would serve its needs and, in the words of the Public Park Association, stand as an "ornament" to the city and state reflecting "its wealth, its culture, and its thrift." The notion of thrift is consistent with a lasting perspective on the building, as one of fine design and high-quality construction that would long serve the state. Indeed, the building's attributes – strength, dignity, and confidence – apply to those who called for and created the latest Rhode Island state house.

WM McKENZIE WOODWARD





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Warren Jagger is an architectural and commercial photographer with a studio in downtown Providence. A 1975 graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, his clients include nationally known interior design firms, architects and real estate developers, as well as advertising agencies and state and federal governments. His photographs have been published in such magazines as *Interior Design*, *Architectural Record*, *Interiors*, and *Antiques*. He employs two full-time photo assistants, Robert Brewster and Kenneth Arsenault, who also contributed to this project.

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