

FEDERAL HALL NATIONAL MEMORIAL, Interior Rotunda, 15 Pine Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1842; architects Town & Davis, Samuel Thomson, and John Frazee.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 43, Lot 6.

On February 25, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Federal Hall National Memorial, Interior Rotunda, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including a representative of the National Parks Service. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Rich in historical associations, the Federal Hall National Memorial occupies the site of New York's second City Hall, begun in 1699 and demolished in 1812. That building, which later became the State House in 1785, was remodeled in 1788-89 by Major L'Enfant as "Federal Hall," finally serving as the State Capitol from 1790-97, prior to demolition. It was here, on the balcony of Federal Hall, that George Washington took the oath of office as first President of the United States on April 30, 1789. The stone slab on which he stood during the inauguration ceremony is preserved in the center of the rotunda of the present building on the site, the Federal Hall National Memorial.

Federal Hall National Memorial was begun in 1834 and completed in 1842 as the New York Custom House, during a period of rapidly expanding economic activity which established New York City as the leading commercial center in the nation. From 1862 to 1920 the building served as the New York Office of the United States Sub-Treasury, whose function was similar to that of the Federal Reserve system today. Of the six sub-treasuries established during the administration of President Martin Van Buren, New York's was the most important, handling 70 per cent of government monies. After 1920, a number of agencies occupied the building until 1939, when it became a National Historic Site. In 1955 it was designated the Federal Hall National Memorial and is a museum devoted to the history of New York City, administered by the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. The building was designated a New York City Landmark in 1965.

The building admirably expresses, in architectural form, the ideals of Greek democracy and of the Roman Republic which inspired the Founding Fathers of this country. The rotunda, modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, is one of the most impressive interiors in the City. Soaring Corinthian columns with beautifully carved foliate capitals support a deep entablature which forms a solid base for the low dome. The polished marble floor, the panels of the dome and the handsome ironwork combine to produce an interior which is exceptionally elegant and refined.

The history of the design and construction of the Custom House--one of the most ambitious Federal projects of the time--is extremely complex since it was carried out by several successive architects under instructions from the Secretary of the Treasury, the Collector of Customs of the Port of New York and subject to the supervision of commissioners specifically charged with carrying out the project.

Early in August 1833, Town & Davis, the best known New York architectural firm of the time, was awarded the prize for the winning design of the proposed new Custom House. Ithiel Town was called to Washington, D.C., to discuss the plans for the building with the Secretary of the Treasury. The Town & Davis design called for a classic Greek temple, in the image of the Parthenon, but crowned by a low central dome in the Roman tradition, visible from the street. The imposing Wall Street facade, above a broad flight of stairs, was designed with a monumental

colonnade of eight Doric columns carrying a classical entablature and pediment with acroteria, with a second, smaller hexastyle colonnade in antis behind it. The Pine Street facade was similar, though simpler. The side of the building facing Nassau Street was dominated by a stately series of two-story high, engaged square columns separating superimposed windows. The interior was to be cruciform in plan, with square colonnaded entrance halls leading into the central domed area.

At the suggestion of Ithiel Town, Samuel Thomson was appointed Superintendent of Construction of the Custom House. Thomson had just completed the Administration Building at Sailors' Snug Harbor in Staten Island and was a well-known architect-builder. The commissioners soon began to find fault with the Town & Davis plan, which they felt would not provide sufficient interior space to absorb the ever-increasing volume of business. In addition, they were skeptical of the ability of the building as designed to carry the weight of the dome, so they ordered alterations to the original plan. In addition to Thomson, recent research indicates that an English architect by the name of William Ross--the New York correspondent for a prominent British architectural magazine--is thought to have been associated with the revision of the plan.

The most important modifications to the original Town & Davis plan included the replacement of the externally visible dome by a low one hidden beneath the roof, the added interior space gained by the elimination of the hexastyle colonnades on the Wall and Pine Street ends and the subdivision of the interior into two principal sections. The central dome proposed by Town & Davis, with foundations suitably reinforced, was to be shifted to the Wall Street end of the building, while the Pine Street end was to have a central hallway flanked by offices. Thus, the plan of the rotunda as it is today was largely the creation of Thomson or, possibly, Ross.

Friction soon developed between Thomson and the commissioners regarding his responsibilities and salary and, finally, in April 1835 Thomson resigned his post, taking with him all the plans and drawings for the Custom House.

In July of that year, John Frazee, a noted sculptor and one of the founders of the National Academy of Design, was appointed Architect and Superintendent of the Custom House. By this time, the foundations had been laid and marble, cut according to the original plans, was arriving daily. Without having access to the original plans, Frazee proceeded to make further alterations to the design of the building. The major change by Frazee was the addition of a third floor, which he accomplished without raising the height of the building. Originally, this space had been intended merely for storage, but Frazee converted it to office use, a function it still performs admirably today. Based on surviving evidence, we may assume that most of the exquisite ornamental interior detail of this building was designed by sculptor-architect John Frazee, who as superintendent was ultimately responsible for the fine quality of masonry construction.

This classical rotunda displays the restrained elegance characteristic of the Greek Revival style. The most striking feature of this great interior space is the circular colonnade of Corinthian columns and pilasters which support a handsome deep entablature and low dome. The four columnar sections with recessed bays behind them alternate with narrow wall areas flanked by pilasters. The east and west bays have simply enframed windows at the outside walls, with rosettes set between them. The principal entrance to the building is set in the south bay, while the entrance to the main hallway is in the north bay. These wide doorways are handsomely enframed by decorative moldings and surmounted by richly ornamented cornices carried on console brackets.

The saucer dome, which Thomson had originally intended to be coffered, has narrow panels which taper toward the structural ring supporting the skylight. These panels are enhanced by anthemion motifs, top and bottom, with end profiles following continuous zig-zag patterns, providing a vibrant contrast to the classic design. Above the panels a series of raised rosettes adorns the ring beneath the skylight.

Attractive and conspicuous features of the rotunda are the gilded iron balcony railings in the bay sections. The skirt beneath these balconies is again embellished with the Greek anthemion motif, while the railing is ingeniously supported by a series of slender caryatids with flared skirts and delicate floral ironwork. Four tall openings at balcony level have decorative metal grilles and are set between the pilasters in the wall areas. An added note of enrichment is provided by a number of smaller paneled and gilt doors, opening onto the rotunda area, which have ornamental enframements quite similar to those of the principal entrances.

The construction of the masonry dome was a great engineering feat in its day and, although it is set beneath the roof and does not extend above it--as originally intended by Town & Davis--it still has to carry its own not inconsiderable weight. Vaulting may also be seen above the side balconies where penetrations from both sides form groins as they meet the longitudinal barrel vaults. What we marvel at today is the ability of American architects of the early 19th century to create such magnificent fireproof interiors of stone--at a time when iron was not generally available for structural purposes--and at how light and airy these interiors were made to appear.

The marble floor reflects the circular shape of the rotunda with its concentric rings of alternating cream-and gray-colored marble worked into interlocking pyramidal designs. These floor patterns lead the eye to the central feature--the stone slab upon which George Washington stood, when taking the oath of office as the first President of the United States in 1789.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Federal Hall National Memorial, Interior Rotunda has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Rotunda is an interior space of imposing grandeur, that it is an outstanding example of the most advanced type of stone construction of its period, that this use of stone was an early solution to the problems of fireproofing, that the refined Greek Revival workmanship and detail of both the stone and the ironwork is outstanding and that the interior and the exterior of this building express, in architectural form, the ideals of Greek democracy and of the Roman Republic which inspired the Founding Fathers of this nation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Federal Hall National Memorial, Interior Rotunda, 15 Pine Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 43, Lot 6, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.