Charleston County Historic Courthouse

Historical References

● From 1756 to 1788, the Statehouse was the seat of the Royal British Governor and the central meeting place for South Carolina politics. Discussions held in the building included those about national sovereignty, the Declaration of Independence and constitutional ratifications.[1]

● The Statehouse served as a beginning and ending point for many ceremonial parades. Such rituals honored the proclamation of a new governor or monarch, for example, and included formal processions of various dignitaries.[1]

● Struck by fire in 1788, the two-story Georgian-style structure was destroyed just prior to South Carolina's Convention for Ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Ironically, the fire came just after the state had decided in 1786 to move the capital to Columbia. The state government operated out of temporary facilities in Charleston until construction of a Statehouse could be completed in Columbia.[4]

● Early 1790s: Although still in an unfinished state, the building was visited by President George Washington as he searched for architectural examples he could use as a pattern for the White House. While in Charleston, Washington met James Hoban, who worked as a local professor of architecture. Hoban would become the architect of the original White House, built in 1792. White House architectural historians have theorized that Hoban's work in South Carolina influenced his White House design, noting that "the similarity between the Charleston statehouse and the first design of the White House is too strong to dismiss."[3]

● With the building's construction nearing completion and the Statehouse's move to Columbia, the United States District Court began meeting in the new building in December 1792.[1]

● S.C. General Assembly records indicate the Courthouse was greatly damaged during the Civil War bombardment of the city, and later occupied by Union Forces. The building sustained damage to the roof and all furniture and pictures in the Courthouse were destroyed.[4]

● Over the years, the Courthouse has housed the Sheriff for the District, Prothanotary, Register of Mesne Conveyance, Register in Equity, all courts for the District, Comptroller General, State Treasurer, Circuit Solicitor, Charleston Library Society, the Library of the Medical Society and the S.C. Bar Association.[4]

● During restoration in 1999, workers uncovered what archaeologist believe are parts of the original fortification of the walled city of Charleston. Four red cedar pilings were revealed approximately eight feet below street level. The pilings, which are square and hand hewn, run on a diagonal and predate the construction of the South Carolina Provincial Statehouse. An historical find, the pilings help answer the question of where the original gates to the walled city were located.

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Structural History

●   1753: The original Statehouse/Courthouse was constructed as South Carolina's first and only colonial statehouse, and included some material believed to have been imported from Great Britain. The Governor and his Council along with the Commons House of Assembly moved into the building in 1756.[1]

●   Struck by fire in 1788, the two-story Georgian-style structure was destroyed just prior to South Carolina's Convention for Ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The foundation and some exterior walls were preserved and used in the rebuilding effort that started in 1790. The Courthouse structure was expanded to include a third floor and additions to the east and west ends of the original Statehouse.[1,2]

●   1792: First official use of the Courthouse. However, financial shortcomings prevent the completion of the building until about 20 years later.[1]

●   1825: Additional work is bid to apply imitation stone as a finishing element to the building's facade, in addition to painting and glazing of the interior.[1,4]

●   1860: The first major addition to the Courthouse was planned, but never completed. Plans for the proposed 62-foot by 50-foot, three-story addition to the northwest corner of the building were halted two months after their announcement when delegates from across the state formally signed an Ordinance of Secession from the Union and attentions were directed toward the war.[1]

●   1883: Major remodeling took place; the main entrance was moved from Broad to Meeting Street.[2,4]

●   The 1886 earthquake left the building severely damaged, with the west wall completely shattered, the north and south walls spread apart about four inches, damage to the east wall and need for the south pediment to be rebuilt.[4]

●   1926: A two-story addition was built on the Courthouse's northern face, extending to the full depth of courthouse yard and requiring the demolition of an eighteenth-century privy in the north-west corner of the yard. The nearby keeper's house was spared, however.[1]

●   1941: The building was doubled in size with the extension of the 1926 addition across the remaining portion of the courthouse yard and the addition of a full third floor. The addition's exterior was matched to that of the original structure.[1]

●   1968: Courtrooms were reintroduced to the original structure and interior renovations included the installation of new elevators, fire stairs and other electrical upgrades.[4]

●   1989: Hurricane Hugo caused severe damage to the building. High winds tore a portion of the roof off the Courthouse and subsequent interior water damage caused the building to be evacuated. It has remained vacant since.[1]

●   1990-2001: Restoration efforts return the building to its 1792 appearance, honor its judicial history and preserve its rich heritage for future generations.

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1792 Restoration Efforts

● 1989: Architects and historians assess existing condition of the Courthouse following damage from Hurricane Hugo.

● 1990-1996: Intense historical study of the building leads to the discovery of the original 1753 walls, an 1883 photograph and other documentation. This structural information is explored to match the Courthouse's original design from 1792.

● 1991: The Friends of the Courthouse urged and supported restoration of the Courthouse to its 1792 appearance through two resolutions.

● 1993: All additions on the north side of the building are demolished.

● 1996: Restoration bids of $12-13 million rejected as being over budget.

● 1996: Restoration objectives are set -
  ➢ Restore exterior appearance to 1792
  ➢ Restore building's use as a functional courthouse
  ➢ Bring the building up to code, including seismic improvements
  ➢ Restore specific interior, historic spaces to an 18th century style based on archival records
  ➢ Repair the building to reduce long-term maintenance costs
  ➢ Reduce restoration costs below previously rejected bids

● 1997: County Council voted for the completion of the project by 2001, with a project budget of $9.3 million. To date, restoration costs have been under budget.

● 1997: A phased restoration of the Courthouse begins while the project is value engineered. Phases include:
  ➢ Civil engineering improvements, i.e. sidewalks and drainage
  ➢ Structural bracing and stabilization
  ➢ Exterior restoration plan
  ➢ Interior restoration plan

● June 28, 2001: Grand Re-Opening of the restored Charleston County Historic Courthouse.

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Building Components and Statistics

● Originally built as an unreinforced masonry structure with walls three-feet thick at the base and a timber frame roof, the 50-foot by 100-foot, 60-foot tall structure contains 15,000 square feet of heated space. Present-day structure includes portions of some exterior and first floor walls that date back to the original 1753 Provincial Statehouse of the Colony of Carolina.

● Containing two non-jury courtrooms, a law library and one conference room, the Historic Courthouse will regain its significance as an architectural, historical and judicial centerpiece for the community.

● The Friends of the Courthouse, a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the restoration of the Courthouse, set a goal to raise $1.2 million to provide authentic and appropriate period portraits, fixtures and furniture. Other objectives of the organization include the provision of a space for public interpretation of the building and to seek National Register or National Landmark status for the completed structure.

● Lobby/Entrance hallway: Architecturally, this room has been restored as much as possible to its original appearance in 1792. The woodwork over the east and west doors matches the fragment found in the first examination of the building and the cornice and other details are either documented or typical of the period in Charleston, save the wainscot which was an addition. The original floor was a light grey flagstone, replaced with a limestone of similar composition and laid in a typical eighteenth century pattern. The Venetian window was restored to its original location. Furnishings depict the entire history of the building from its use as the Statehouse to its rebuilding as the Courthouse. Particular attention is made for the placement of paintings known to have hung in the original Statehouse that represent the pre-Revolutionary government of South Carolina.

● Second floor non-jury courtroom: This space restores a room that served successively as the Governor's Royal Council, the South Carolina Senate, the U.S. District and Circuit Courts and the Court of Errors. The chandelier in this room is a replica of the original hanging in the U.S. Capitol Building. Congressional permission was granted for use of the chandelier's blueprints, which were scaled down to create an appropriately-sized chandelier in this courtroom.

● Law library and reception area: During the 18th century, these rooms served as offices for the housekeeper and Secretary of the Colony, and later as sheriff and prothonotary offices. As little is known about the original design of these rooms, they are furnished in the style of club rooms and gentlemen's libraries of the 1820-30s, with overtones of the Library Society and Medical Society rooms on the third floor of the Courthouse in the 19th century.

● Architects for the project include: NBBJ Architects (exterior and overall project coordinators), Goff D'Antonio (interior), Glenn Keyes (architectural details) and consultations by the Historic Charleston Foundation and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Engineers include: Paul C. Rizzo and Associates (structural/civil engineers) and Epic Engineering (mechanical engineers); the General Contractor for construction: Hightower Construction; and Security provided by Newcomb and Bond.

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Reference Materials Cited

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4. Historical research materials and reports provided to Charleston County