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## THE FIREPROOF BUILDING: A PROJECT IN PRESERVATION \*

By ALBERT SIMONS †

Back in 1958 a question of preservation of national scope aroused heated controversy in the public press and in the halls of Congress. The issue arose over a project to extend the east front of the central and oldest part of the Capitol building in Washington 32½ feet further into the east court. The cost was estimated at ten million one hundred thousand dollars. This undertaking would wipe out all that was then left of the work of Thornton, Latrobe and Bulfinch, gifted architects who had well served the Founding Fathers in the early days of the Republic. The American Institute of Architects, The Society of Architectural Historians, "The Committee to Preserve the National Capitol," and other related organizations memorialized the Congress to delay action until the matter could be more thoroughly studied.

Today this new facade, executed in marble, is well advanced towards completion. One of the justifications put forward for the demolition of the old front was that the sandstone brought from the nearby Aquia Creek quarries in the 1790's for the construction of the Capitol was now crumbling and disintegrating in places. This, though true, was not a problem that modern building technology had not already learned to solve.

As a minor but significant epilogue of the destruction of the work of Benjamin Henry Latrobe in Washington, the preservation of the work in Charleston of his pupil Robert Mills stands in contrast.

The Charleston County Council, acting as the custodians for the people of the county, realized that the "Old Fire Proof Building," though shabby and in disrepair, was still a useful building as well as an historic monument of national importance. They therefore rejected the idea of simply giving it another coat of paint of limited duration and inadequate protection. Instead, at their request comprehensive specifications were prepared<sup>1</sup> covering the restoration and waterproofing of the exterior of

\* See Helen G. McCormack, "The Fireproof Building: New Home of the South Carolina Historical Society," this *Magazine*, XLIV (1943), 205-211.

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<sup>1</sup> Contributed by Simons, Lapham and Mitchell, Charleston, S. C.

the building in all parts, the repair of the roof, and the waterproofing of the inner faces of the parapets. Bids were received from three experienced and reliable waterproofing companies, and a contract awarded to the lowest bidder.<sup>2</sup>

Work was then started and carried forward under careful supervision.<sup>1</sup> First, the residue of many coats of old oil paint was sandblasted from the exterior surfaces until the basic materials were completely disclosed. It was then known what had previously been only surmised: that the basement story was faced with blocks of brown sandstone and that the same material had been used for the caps of columns as well as the entire entablature above the columns and the cornice around the rest of the building. The columns and exterior wall surfaces of the second and third stories as well as the parapets and pediments were of brick faced with stucco. A third material, a harder stone of a light pinkish-gray color, appeared at the quoins of the basement story and at the mullions of the triple windows in the center of the east and west sides.

The exterior steps, a later replacement, are of granite and except for some cleaning required only to have the mortar joints refilled. The brown sandstone had been cut, perhaps at the quarry, so that the stratifications of the stone were set vertically instead of horizontally and with the penetration of moisture had spalled off in thin layers. The surfaces of all this brown stone had to be gone over inch by inch and all loose and crumbling parts removed, then the surfaces built up in four successive operations, finally reproducing the color and texture of the original stone.

The pinkish stone, though harder, seemed to be more brittle and had disintegrated to a greater depth, requiring the inlay of new pieces of limestone colored to match after being set in place.

It is doubtful whether the roof drainage of this building ever consisted of anything more than scuppers through the parapets emptying on top of the cornice and thence dripping to the ground. In later times ingenious roofers had attempted to correct this deficiency by setting down spouts in the two recessed corners of both the east and west sides and connecting the scuppers to the down spouts by curved sheet metal leaders that leapt around the cornice with all the sinuous vivacity of over sized measuring worms. These architectural solecisms were corrected by drilling holes through the cornice above the four down spouts and making direct connections to them from the scuppers.

<sup>2</sup> Palmetto Waterproofing and Sealing Co., Rowesville, S. C.

To make sure that the contours of mouldings and other details were accurately preserved where replacement was necessary, frequent reference was made to the reprints of the measured drawings of this building in the archives of the Charleston Library Society. The drawings were made by Charleston architects during the Depression some years ago under the auspices of the Historic American Building Survey.

In the responsible custodianship of historic buildings these guiding principles are now generally accepted: "Better preserve than repair, better repair than restore, better restore than construct."<sup>3</sup> County Council and County Manager are to be commended for successfully carrying out a project of careful preservation and thorough repair.

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to the late Fiske Kimball.

## EXTRACTS FROM THE SCHIRMER DIARY, 1861

(Continued from October)

*January 1. Fire 1 O'C PM* proved to be the residence of G. W. Williams in George St. It originated in the Garret, and the roof all burnt off and the splendid furniture very much ruined.

9. *Star of the West* this Steamer with a reinforcement for Fort Sumter appeared off our Bar early this morning. Our troops were ready for her and commenced a fire from Morris Isld and Fort Moultrie. After several shots she turned around and retreated, it is said two Balls struck her one of which went thro' her we have since heard she has returned to New York.

*Accident* a Mr. Weeks an Edgefield Volunteer fell out of a window at the Arsenal and carried to the Hospital and died from the Injury and another Mr. Gray from the same was accidentally shot in the Thigh.

*News* Our political excitement continues unabated, great preparations are making round about Fort Sumter having every appearance that ere long we must have a battle, it is estimated that now nearly 3000 Men are now on duty around the city. On the [?] a large Flag Staff and a Colors hoisted in front of the Courier Office—Vessels have been sunk on our Bar. . . .

*February 25. Floating Battery* this affair built by Marsh was launched this morning at 8 O'Clock—went off handsomely.

*March 4. President Lincoln* inaugural address reached us this Afternoon. As was expected quite an excitement, its tone and temper by no means as pacific as it was Supposed it would have been.

*March 10 . . .* We went to Circular Church being 50th Anniversary of the Bible Society, Address was delivered by Mr. Ralph Middleton and Revd. Mr. [Henry J.] Van Dyck of Brooklyn, N. Y.

19. *Snow* this morning . . . at daylight was a beautiful scene, everything covered thick. . . .

*March 30. Excursion* Today all the delegates of the convention now in session were invited by Genl. Beauregard to visit all the various Fortifications in the Harbor, and returned in the Evening very much pleased with the improvements.

*Remarks . . .* Genl Beauregard has taken full command, Fort Sumter is still in status quo. . . . Nearly all the Houses on Sullivan's Island has been taken possession of by the Soldiers, Martial Law now there, and no one can go the Island without a permit from Genl Dunovant. The Floating Battery has been finished and carried to some point of the coast of which we have not heard. . . .