

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COURTHOUSE

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House was constructed in 1904-08 as the city's third Federal building. Designed by the local architectural firm of Clarke & Howe, it was one of the few federal buildings of the period to be contracted to a private firm under the provisions of the Tarnecy Act. It is an exceptionally well-conceived example of the classical Beaux Arts style design favored for monumental public buildings: at the turn of the century. In its day it was considered one of the finest federal buildings to be found outside of Washington, D.C. Its design and siting are also noteworthy for their impact on the urban expression of Exchange Place as the civic center.



Serious discussions about the need for a new building in Providence to house the Post Office, Judiciary, Custom Service and other Federal offices began in the late 1890's. The great industrial and economic expansion of the city in the late 19th century, the attendant population growth, and incipient efforts at city planning prompted business and political leaders to begin lobbying for replacement of the overcrowded Weybosset Street building. At the turn of the century, Rhode Island led the nation in the production of jewelry and woolen goods, and by 1904, the City of Providence alone produced \$200 million in manufactured goods. By 1912, Rhode Island's per capita wealth had risen to second in the nation. Between 1865 and 1910, the city's population jumped from just more than 50,000 to almost 220,000 (Woodward, Sanderson, 1986: 56-61). The city's pride was bolstered by elegant new buildings that reshaped the character of the downtown. Exchange Place (now known as Kennedy Plaza), a formerly undeveloped 250' by 1200' strip of central city land, defined by the Second Empire-style City Hall (1874) on the south and the Classical Revival-style Union Station (1896) on the west, was to become the focus of the civic center. Early efforts to gain a new federal building that would reflect the city's achievements met with little success. Some residents felt that Providence was being ignored because Rhode Island, as the smallest state, did not carry sufficient weight in the national political arena. (Journal, 7/15/06: S4-8) The debate finally took sharp focus when it was linked with efforts to improve Exchange Place, which needed the definition of another monumental public building on the east. For a federal building, this site also had the logistical advantage of proximity to both the railroad on the north and the existing Federal Building on the south.

On February 7, 1900, a committee of the City Council was appointed to confer with the Rhode Island congressional delegation and Washington officials on the subject of a new federal building, and to offer the east end of Exchange Place as the site. At this time, Representative David Mercer, Chairman of the professional Committee on Buildings and Grounds, visited Providence to examine the city's postal needs and declared, "You need a new post office building, you need it badly, and you will get it." (Board of Trade Journal, 2/1900: 69) Congress was finally convinced to appropriate \$1,000,000 on June 6, 1902, with the condition that the city donate the Exchange Place site. The City Council authorized transfer of the site to the Federal Government on July 7, 1902. (Journal, 11/23/08 :3) The timing of the Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House approval was also significant within the context of federal building practices noted earlier as it coincided with Passage of first omnibus public building law in 1902. According to local sources, only New York and San Francisco received larger amounts than Providence in this mess appropriation. (Manufacturing Jeweler, 1908: 934) The local firm of Clarke & Howe was unanimously selected as architect in the fall of 1903. The national design competition, which attracted ten competitors, was judged by James Knox Taylor, Supervising Architect of the Treasury, as well as practicing architects Arnold W. Brunner and William A. Boring of New York, and R. Clipston Sturgis and Robert O. Andrews of Boston. In selecting Clarke & Howe, the jury noted that their submission was "an artistic building, excellently planned for its purpose, which will be an ornament to the city of Providence." (Providence Board of Trade Journal, 11/1903: 442) At the time this prestigious project was awarded, Clarke & Howe was a young firm known primarily for residential commission. (Providence Board of

Trade Journal, 1/1903: 442) Senior partner Prescott Orlott Clarke (1858-1935) was a native, educated at Brown University and M.I.T.'s School of Architecture. Clarke began practice in 1895 with the firm of Clarke & Spaulding and in 1901 was joined by Wallis Eastburn Howe (1868-1960). From 1903-1928, the firm was known as Clarke & Howe, except from 1910 to 1913 when Eleazer B. Homer was a partner. Clarke retired in 1928, while Howe continued in practice with Samuel Church, Earle Prout, and E.O. Ekman until his death in 1960. Design of the Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House established the reputation of Clarke & Howe and led to many other important commissions. (Withey, 1970: 123; Woodward, Sanderson 1986: 263-265) Harvey W. Corbett is noted as the designer. (Woodward, Sanderson 1986: 193)

Other buildings designed by Clark & Howe In Providence include: the Church of the Redemer, 655 Hope Street (1915-17); Rochambeau Branch Library, 708 Hope Street (1930); St. Elizabeth's Home, 109 Melrose Street (1915-16); The People's Savings Bank, 27 North Main Street (1913); St. Martin's Episcopal Church, 60 Orchard Avenue (1916, 1925, 1945); Wanskuck Branch Library, 233 Veazie Street (1926-28); New England Telephone and Telegraph Company Building, 234 Washington Street (1917, 1931); Providence Gas Company Building, 100 Weybosset Street (1924); and three buildings for Brown University designed between 1903-1927. (Woodward, Sanderson, 1986: 263-64; Withey, 1970: 123-24) The Boston firm of Norton & Hemenway, which maintained offices in Providence, was selected as general contractor on December 22, 1904. (Manufacturing Jeweler, 1008: 934)

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House was under construction for four years, and was the subject of two separate contracts, both awarded to Clarke & Howe as architects and Horton & Hemenway as general contractor. The architects produced separate sets of drawings and specifications for each phase. Newspaper articles at the completion of the project noted that it had been completed on schedule, within budget, and revealed high quality workmanship throughout. The first phase, which involved site preparation, steel framing, and construction of exterior walls, began on December 22, 1904. Site preparation included relocation of the General Ambrose Burnside statue and some nearby railroad tracks, as well as the creation of Post Office Square on the east side of the site.



Additionally, the Providence River had to be bridged, and the problem of digging the basement to four feet below meant high water level had to be solved. (Journal, 11/23/08: 3) By November 6, 1905, it was noted that the frame was up 60' and had been topped by two large derricks used to hoist the beams into place. Wagon loads of brick were being hauled onto the site, and workmen were busy setting the granite basement. (Journal, 11/5/05: 36) The November, 1905, "Journal" article was accompanied by a construction photograph. The exterior work was completed in October 1906 for a cost of \$489,500. (Manufacturing Jeweler, 1908: 934)

The contract for the second phase, which involved installation of interior finishes and mechanical systems, was awarded on March 5, 1907. The work was based on a new set of 50-60 drawings which was approved by Washington in January, 1907. (Providence Board of Trade Journal, 1/1907: 24) The work was completed on October 1, 1908, for a cost of \$355,200. The total \$1,000,000 authorization for the building was reached through change orders and additions which included such essential items as elevators and furnishings. (Journal, 11/23/08: 3) Finishing of the fourth and fifth stories was not part of the initial contract. Four months after the start of phase two, some of the rough work had been completed including placement of conduits to carry the gas, electric and water lines, and fireproof terra cotta cladding over some of the steel frame. (Journal, 7/9/07: 3) Six months later, it was reported that one-third of the plastering, and one-half of the lobby stonework was complete; that window frames were in place; and that bids for two passenger and one freight elevators were out. Additionally, limestone was being dressed in Indiana, marble was being finished in Vermont, and woodwork

was being produced in Ohio. (Journal, 12/16/07: 3) The July article was accompanied by photographs of the central light well, above and below the skylight which crowned the large postal workroom.

It was reported that the following amounts of materials had been used in construction: 3,500,000 bricks; 1,465 tons of steel; 70,000 cubic feet of granite; and 80,000' or 15 miles of electrical wiring. Mahogany paneling came from Mexico; other woods including, pine, maple, oak and ash came from the Midwest; marble came from Tennessee, Vermont and Italy; granite from New Hampshire; and limestone from Indiana. (Journal, 11/24/08: 2) The heating and ventilating system cost \$43,000 and included four large (22' x 6') hot water boilers and high speed steam engines to run ventilating fans and pumps in the basement, as well as an extensive collection of electrical motors on the roof to assist in ventilation. (Journal, 11/23/08: 3) A vacuum cleaning system cost \$3,000. The electrical system, which included clocks, vault protection, telephones and lights, cost \$11,000. (Journal, 11/24/08: 2).

The project was closely supervised, which may account for its satisfactory completion. W. T. Robertson represented the architects, Louis E. Griebel represented the contractor and D. C. Ernest Laub represented the Supervising Architect of the Treasury. (Journal, 11/23/1908: 3) Additionally, contractors were required to forward monthly progress photographs to Washington, as well as samples of construction materials such as cement, sand, lath, flooring hardware, etc. (Providence Board of Trade Journal, 11/1907: 25) This close scrutiny of the construction process reflects Supervising Architect Taylor's commitment to quality materials and workmanship. The first official use of the building occurred on November 14, 1908, with a meeting of the United States Circuit Court grand jury. It was fully occupied and open for business on November 30, 1908. (Journal, 11/23/08: 3) The final cost of the building was approximately \$1,300,000, and it was generally regarded as one of the finest government building outside of Washington. (Board of Trade Journal, 5/1914: 362)

The building was turned over to the GSA in January, 1961, following completion of the nation's first automated post office elsewhere in Providence. At that time, the building was devoted primarily to judicial functions, and was renamed the Providence Federal Building and Courthouse. Reconfiguring of some interior spaces, most notably the former postal workroom, was accomplished at that time. The building was listed in the National Register in 1972, and subsequent renovation work has respected that status.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Federal Building and Courthouse is located between Fulton and Washington Streets on the north end of Kennedy Plaza (formerly known as Exchange Place) in downtown Providence. The building is a good example of the Beaux Arts ideal of architecture and urban design popular for civic buildings at the time of construction. The building is almost directly on axis with the old City Hall across Kennedy Plaza. By matching the massing and materials of old City Hall, Clarke and Howe established the nucleus of a formal "City Beautiful" composition. The building is seven bays wide and twelve bays long. It occupies all of its rectangular site, with the exception of a parking area at the north end of the site adjacent to the Woonasquatucket River. It is of steel frame construction, five stories above a full basement, clad entirely in grey granite. A mezzanine level, whose area is about half the building footprint, is located between the first and second stories. A large central light court provides illumination to the center portions of the top four floors. The main entry is located in the front elevation facing Kennedy Plaza. A more modest rear entry opens toward the river.

The interior was originally designed to house three functions: post office, customs offices, and federal courts. Custom and post office functions are now located elsewhere, and most of the building has been converted to courtroom and court administration uses. Despite the changes in use which the building has undergone, renovations have been sensitive to the quality of the original, and such of the original interior finish remains, particularly in the principal interior spaces such as the entry lobbies and main stair, and the two major third floor courtrooms.