

FEDERAL BUILDING AND UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

Providence, Rhode Island



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Cover photograph courtesy of Roger Cole, U.S. District Court, District of Rhode Island

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Building and United States Courthouse in Providence, RI, originally designed as the Providence Post Office, Court House and Customs House, represents the finest in federal architecture of any era. It was constructed in 1904-08 as the city's third federal building. Designed by local architectural firm Clarke & Howe, it was one of the few federal buildings of the period contracted to a private firm under the Tarsney Act.

At its opening in 1908, it was regarded as one of the grandest federal buildings found outside of Washington D.C. Today, the building remains largely unchanged, except for the removal of the first story postal workroom and its crowning skylight and the addition of modern technologies and energy-saving features. Over one hundred years later, the building continues to represent an exceptionally well-conceived example of the Beaux Arts style favored for monumental public buildings at the turn of the twentieth century.

History of Federal Building Construction

- In 1852, the Office of the Supervising Architect was created within the Treasury Department and given responsibility for all architectural design and construction supervision, as well as the development of standardized building types to house customs houses, post offices, and courts.
- In 1892, Congress passed the Tarsney Act, allowing the Treasury Department to hire private architects.
- The Tarsney Act was implemented in 1897, followed by the passage of the first omnibus public buildings law in 1902.
- Construction of federal buildings quickly increased: from 399 in 1899 to 1,126 in 1912. Over two hundred of these buildings were post offices.
- James Knox Taylor, a graduate of M.I.T., served as Supervising Architect from 1897-1912, and was the single major force in federal building construction during this period. He preferred the highly articulated Beaux Arts style popularized by the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, and exemplified by the Providence Courthouse.
- The Tarsney Act was repealed in 1912 returning the responsibility of federal building design to the government.

HISTORY OF THE PROVIDENCE COURTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION

Serious discussions about the need for a new building in Providence to house the Post Office, Judiciary, Customs Service, and Internal Revenue Service began in the late 1890s. 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. Between 1865 and 1910, the city's population jumped from just over 50,000 to nearly 220,000. 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-foot by 1200-foot strip of central city land, defined by the Second Empire-style City Hall (1878) 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. 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.

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. Congress was finally convinced to appropriate \$1,000,000 on June 6, 1902 on the condition that the city of Providence donate the Exchange Place site. The City Council authorized transfer of the site to the federal government on July 7, 1902. The local firm of Clarke & Howe was unanimously selected as architect in the fall of 1903.

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House was under construction for four years. During the first phase of construction, site preparation included relocation of the General Ambrose Burnside statue (now located in Burnside Park) and railroad tracks, as well as the creation

of Post Office Square on the east side of the site. Additionally, engineers bridged the Providence River, and solved the problem of digging a basement to four feet below mean high water level.

Work was completed on October 1, 1908 for a cost of \$355,200 (about \$7.8 million in 2010 dollars). The total \$1,000,000 authorization was reached through change orders and additions, which included essential items such as elevators and furnishings. Work on the fourth and fifth stories was not part of the initial contract.

It was reported that the following amounts of materials had been used in construction of the building: 3,500,000 bricks; 1,465 tons of steel; 70,000 cubic feet of granite; and 80,000 feet or 15 miles of electrical wiring. The materials came from domestic and international sources: 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.



An antique postcard of the "New Post Office"

1893

Passage of the Tarsney Act permits the federal government to hire private architects through competitions.

1900

Providence City Council meets with Rhode Island's congressional delegation and Washington officials to discuss need for a new federal building.

1902

Congress appropriates \$1,000,000 for construction, and the City Council transfers the site to the federal government. The first omnibus public buildings law is passed.

1903

Competition design by Providence architectural firm of Clarke and Howe is unanimously selected.

OVERVIEW

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Federal Building and United States Courthouse is located between Fulton Street and Washington Street on the northeast end of Kennedy Plaza (formerly known as Exchange Place), and has long been considered a key element of the Downtown Providence National Register Historic District. The public entrance faces Kennedy Plaza and a modest rear entry opens toward the river.

The building is seven bays wide, twelve bays long and reaches five stories above a full basement. A mezzanine level is located between the first and second stories. The structure is steel frame construction faced entirely in grey granite. A large central light court provides illumination to the center portions of the top four floors.

The building is a fine example of the Beaux Arts and City Beautiful ideals of architecture and urban design popular for civic buildings at the time of its construction. In the early 20th century, advocates of the City Beautiful movement believed that architectural improvements and the beautification and reorientation of city centers would make urban areas more appealing places to visit, establish American cities as equals to European cities, and help combat many of the social problems believed to be affecting American cities at the time. The building furthers these ideals with its placement on almost a direct axis with the old City Hall across Kennedy Plaza. By matching the massing and materials of the old City Hall, a Second Empire structure built in 1878, Clarke and Howe established the nucleus of a formal City Beautiful composition.

1904 - 1908

The Providence Post Office, Court House and Custom House is constructed.

1961

The building is turned over to the U.S. General Services Administration and renamed the Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse.

1972

The building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

LATE 1970s

Interior renovation and restoration work complete.

1999 - 2006

Building modernization includes systems replacement, courtroom renovation, parapet seismic retrofitting and restoration work.

2008

The building celebrates its centennial.



Site Plan
Exchange Place is now called Kennedy Plaza.

DISTINCTIVE INTERIOR ELEMENTS

FIRST FLOOR

Original Design and Purpose

Providence's surging population created the need for expanded access to federal services, most notably the post office. As a result, the building's first story was originally devoted to postal functions. It was dominated by the large open space of the workroom, which was lit by a huge skylight and ringed by a system of look-out galleries at the mezzanine level. Service windows opened off the west end into the main lobby.

Special departments with service windows open to the rear lobby were located on the east side. On the north was a mailing vestibule that served as the receiving area, and an adjacent freight elevator. A large registry workroom with service windows in the main lobby occupied the corner while offices for the Postmaster and Assistant Postmaster took up the northeast corner. Spaces for stamp sales, mail orders and a cashier, along with restrooms and vaults, were located on the south wall. The swing rooms, where workers gathered between shifts, were relegated to the east side of the mezzanine and to the basement.



Courthouse circa 2007. Photograph courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith



Main Lobby. Photograph courtesy of Gilbane, Inc.

Main Lobby

The main lobby and stair form one of the building's most distinguished interior spaces. The lobby is made up of two principal elements. The entry immediately inside the entrance doors is formed of spherical vaults on piers. Beyond these spherical vaults is the large barrel vaulted lobby, whose axis lies parallel to the front elevation. Smaller cross vaults corresponding to the building bays intersect the main vault, creating openings opposite the entry which originally lit the central post office work room. At that time, these openings were filled with bronze and glass counters and screens. They are now filled with a combination of ornate millwork and black glass with brass framework designed to simulate the original postal service windows. In 1937, the original marble floor was replaced by the present marble and terrazzo, and bronze entry vestibules replaced the original wood revolving doors.

The Clerk's Office reception counter is situated in the location originally occupied by service windows for a large postal registry workroom.

Lighting

Many of the glass-globed ceiling light fixtures located at the intersection of the primary and secondary vaults appear to be original. The brass torch-shaped wall sconces,

which were originally equipped with glass globes, have been refitted with up-lights. The globe lights at the top of the spherical vaults, while in keeping with the architecture of the building, are not original.

Main Corridor

The main and rear lobbies are connected by a main corridor. Originally the corridor contained bronze and glass office windows or bronze post office boxes serviced from the work room at the center of the first floor.

As in the main and rear lobbies, the millwork and painted surfaces on either side of the corridor were designed to simulate the original postal service windows.



Main Stair: Photograph courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

Jury Assembly Room

Added in 2000-2001, the Jury Assembly Room now occupies most of what had originally been a large open postal work-room. With its drop-down projection screen and full electronic-presentation system, this room is used for a variety of court-related functions in addition to serving as the jury assembly area.

SECOND FLOOR

Original Design and Purpose

Originally, the second story served Treasury and Judicial functions. It was arranged with offices along the outer walls and on the east and west sides of the light court. The west end included offices for the U.S. Attorney and a grand jury room. The south side was occupied by the Customs Division, the east side by the Civil Service, and the north side by the Internal Revenue Service.

Two new courtrooms and chambers have been added on the second floor which either retain some of the original finishes or reflect the original design in the new finishes.

Original Corridors and Stairways (Second - Fifth Floors)

The corridors linking all spaces throughout the building display much of their original character and finish. Most office doors are the original one- or two-panel oak doors



Main Corridor. Photograph courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith



Jury Assembly Room

with original brass hardware. Many doors and transom lights are glazed with glue-flake patterned glass.

The portraits of virtually every United States District Judge appointed to the District of Rhode Island bench hang on the walls of the third-floor corridor. They are arranged chronologically, based on the date of the appointment.

THIRD FLOOR

Original Design and Purpose

The third story was originally devoted to the Judiciary, and included some of the most elaborately finished spaces. It was arranged with rooms along the outer walls and on the east side of the light court. The major space was the District Courtroom on the west front overlooking Exchange Place. The main judge's chamber and anteroom opened off the court on the north. The law library and two judges' chambers occupied the remainder of the north side. The Equity Courtroom was placed on the east side, with a Petit Jury Room directly opposite it on the light court. Clerks' offices and a record room were located on the south wall.

Historic Law Library

The library is finished in mahogany paneling and shelving. The eight-foot oak tables at either end of the library are antiques; they are the original counsel tables from the District and Equity Courtrooms, and are still used today. Some of the law books on the shelves are original to the room.

Original Judges' Chambers

The two major courtrooms and their associated judges' chambers form an important series of interior spaces that have been modified little since construction. The chambers consist of two judges' rooms, each with its associated anteroom and robing room, an historic library and several lesser offices. Finishes in the judges' rooms were originally the same, consisting of quartered oak wainscot, paneled plaster walls and cornice, and plaster ceilings. Each room is furnished with a fine Italian marble mantel that frames a fireplace. In all rooms, the original lighting, which appears to have been pendent incandescent, has been replaced.

Historic Law Library.
Photograph courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith



Courtroom 1 - "District Courtroom"

The District Courtroom has the most impressive interior in the building and occupies a prominent location above the entrance, looking out over the plaza. The room appears to be essentially unchanged since initial construction. This is considered to be one of the most beautiful and impressive trial courtrooms in the country. The room is nearly square in plan, with the Judge's bench on a raised platform in an elliptical pattern opposite the major public entry door. A brass spectators' railing curves toward the entrance, answering the shape of the Judge's bay.

The elliptical stained-glass skylight, which is set in the center of the ceiling, contains a U.S. shield with foliate and floral surround and is set in a fish scale-patterned opalescent field. The skylight was originally lit naturally, but is now lit from above by artificial lighting.

Due to the room's historic status, care is taken to preserve the original features whenever renovation and restoration work is performed on the Courthouse.

The original lighting, which appears to have been pendent incandescent, has been replaced with incandescent-efficient fixtures.

Courtroom 2 - "Equity Courtroom"

This courtroom, the second major original courtroom, is located behind the central pavilion in the rear of the building. This room is double height and has been changed very little. The room is rectangular in plan, with a raised judge's platform at one end and public entry through three side doors. A straight brass spectators' railing separates the public from the trial participants.



Have you wondered why there is an oar behind the judge's bench in the District Courtroom? The oar symbolizes the admiralty jurisdiction of Federal Courts, and since Rhode Island is the "Ocean State," many admiralty cases have been filed in this court since its creation in 1790.

Renovations

Over the past two decades, significant renovations were made to both original courtrooms. In the District Courtroom, this included the restoration and preservation of the skylight, as well as the surfaces in the room. The ceilings were stripped



Courtroom One.
Photograph courtesy
of Carol M. Highsmith



and painted in a manner that highlights the room's ornate details. While the paint colors in the room are not the original colors, historically compatible colors of the period have been used, and the carpeting was designed to complement this new color scheme. State-of-the-art courtroom technology was added. Lighting was also upgraded and expanded throughout the room.

In addition, eight-foot oak counsel tables closest to the bench were added, which are reproductions of the original, now antique, counsel tables. (The original tables from both the District and Equity Courtrooms can be found in the Historic Law Library and in other locations in the Courthouse.)



Courtroom Two (above)
and Wall Detail (left).
Photographs courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith

In the Equity Courtroom, the most significant changes have been the addition of a jury box and witness box, likely added after a second district judgeship was created in 1966. During the most recent renovation, care was taken to keep the historical details of the room accurate. State-of-the-art courtroom technology was added. All of the woodwork was cleaned and restored. The ceilings were painted in the original colors and the carpeting was designed to complement the color scheme and the ornate details of the room.



State-of-the-Art Courtroom Technology

One major element of renovation is the integration of state-of-the-art technology into the historic fabric of each courtroom. As part of the integration, each jury box was completely rebuilt.

- Flat screen monitors were imbedded in the jury box.
- Two large speakers were mounted on either side of the bench in the District Courtroom to provide sound amplification for the room.
- The attorney's podium in front of the bench contains a variety of evidence-presentation equipment that broadcasts images to flat-screen monitors for trial participants.
- Videoconference capability has also been added to allow remote viewing of attorneys, witnesses, and evidence.

Courtroom Two. Architect's photo.

DISTINCTIVE EXTERIOR ELEMENTS

JOHN MASSEY RIND SCULPTURES

John Massey Rhind (1860 - 1936) was the creator of the two magnificent sculptures located at the front corners of the building. Rhind was born in Scotland, trained as an artist in Paris, and worked in New York City. These sculptures were installed in 1908. They are carved limestone and are each approximately 13 feet tall.

The group on the left is “America” portrayed by a seated female figure representing Sovereignty, flanked by figures representing Justice and Law and Order. Sovereignty is crowned with an olive branch wreath and holds a bough of laurel in her left hand and a globe with an eagle perched on top in her right hand. Law and Order, a kneeling male figure, marks a page in a book with his index finger. Justice, a kneeling female figure, holds a balance on her lap and the sword of Justice in her left hand.

The group on the right is “Providence” represented by a seated female figure, Independent Thought, with Industry and Knowledge kneeling by her side. Independent Thought holds a maple leaf branch

in her right hand and an open book in her left. Dressed in work pants and shoes, Industry, a kneeling male figure, holds a hammer in his right hand, and his left hand rests on a pulley block. Knowledge, a shrouded kneeling female figure, is accompanied by an owl reading an open book and symbolizing wisdom.



John Massey Rhind Sculptures. Photographs courtesy of Carol M. Highsmith.

GENERAL FACTS

The Providence Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse is the home of the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island. It is located between Fulton Street and Washington Street on the northeast end of Kennedy Plaza (formerly known as Exchange Place) in downtown Providence.

In January 1961, following construction of the nation’s first automated post office in a nearby federal building, the U.S. General Services Administration assumed management of the courthouse. With the relocation of postal functions, the building was then devoted primarily to judicial functions and renamed the Providence Federal Building and Courthouse. In 1972, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and subsequent work to the building has respected that designation.

Owner
U.S. General Services Administration

Architect
Clark and Howe

Construction Dates
1904 - 1908

Location
Kennedy Plaza, Providence, RI

Landmark Status
Listed in the National Register of Historic Places

Architectural Style
Beaux-Arts

Size
143,350 Gross Square Feet

Materials
Granite

Prominent Features
Three-story Corinthian columns in central pavilions on east and west facades; allegorical statues at main entrance

Sustainability:
Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the U.S. General Services Administration received funding to modernize the federal building inventory with more energy-efficient technology. New sustainable features were added to the Courthouse including energy control systems, advanced metering systems and a “cool roof” that mitigates the urban heat island effect.



U.S. General Services Administration

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