

United States Custom House
423 Canal Street, between North Peters and Decatur
New Orleans
Orleans Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1109

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

UNITED STATES CUSTOM HOUSE

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Location: 423 Canal Street, between North Peters and Decatur, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana. The United States Custom House is located in Square No. 5, Vieux Carré. The entrance faces southwest on Canal Street, which is the main street of New Orleans and is also the southwest boundary of the Vieux Carré.

Present Owner and Present Use: The building is owned by the Government of the United States and administered by the General Services Administration. Unlike the United States Branch Mint, which is the other important building in the Vieux Carré owned by the Federal Government, the Custom House has been in continuous use since its construction. In addition to housing the United States Customs, the building presently accommodates several other Federal facilities: a branch Post Office, Coast Guard administrative offices, recruiting offices for the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard.

Statement of Significance: The structure is architecturally significant, not only because of its monumental size, but also because of the unusual foundation system on which it rests. This system was quite common in the mid-nineteenth century in New Orleans. Notable also is the main business room, the Marble Hall, regarded as one of the finest Greek Revival interiors in America. Several important architects of the time were connected with its construction.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This is the fourth custom house to occupy the site which was formerly Custom House Square. A portion of the site is part of the former Fort St. Louis, built in 1794 and razed sometime after the American occupation. It was preceded by the old Spanish Custom House, demolished in 1807; the first United States Custom House designed by the noted architect, Benjamin H. Latrobe, and demolished in 1819; the next preceding Custom House was designed by the French architect, Benjamin Buisson. All of these earlier buildings shared the site with a Mariner's Church.

Although the first United States Custom House was erected on this site, the City of New Orleans claimed the land and it was not until January 18, 1848, that deed to the site was transferred to the United States under pressure from the Federal Government.

Actual excavation for foundations was begun October 23, 1848, and the cornerstone was laid February 22, 1849. This cornerstone is not visible today since the building has settled some 30" and the street level has been raised 3'-0". Among other articles which were placed in the cornerstone is the President's message to the 30th Congress and General Taylor's medal from Louisiana.

The actual history of the Custom House was compiled by Stanley C. Arthur for the Work Projects Administration. [Stanley C. Arthur, A History of the United States Custom House, New Orleans (New Orleans: Survey of Federal Archives in Louisiana, 1940.) Reference to this publication furnishes a complete chronology of the building and the architects who were involved with it.

The structure was designed by Alexander Thompson Wood; however, Mr. Arthur quotes James Gallier, Senior's claim in his (Gallier's) autobiography that Wood had plagiarized the design from models and plans submitted by Dakin and Gallier. [Arthur, A History . . . New Orleans, page 8.] After Wood's suspension in 1850 and a three-month interim appointment of one of the foremen, James H. Dakin served as architect from August 1850 to September 1851. Dakin began a series of changes in the original design "to see that the building should be arranged and constructed in the best and most convenient manner to meet the wants and purposes designed." [Arthur, A History . . . New Orleans, page 35.]

Controversy between Dakin and Wood, who was in Washington, resulted in Dakin's resignation in September 1851 and in November, L. E. Reynolds was appointed acting architect, with Wood being again sent from Washington to see that construction continued according to his original drawings. A controversy between Reynolds and Wood ensued, resulting in the appointment of Thomas K. Wharton in September 1852 as acting architect pro tempore and general superintendent of construction work from November 1852 to May 1853, under the orders of the Custom House Commission. In May 1853, General P. G. T. Beauregard was ordered to take charge of the work. He resigned in 1860 to become Commander of the United States Military Academy. He later achieved fame as one of the outstanding generals of the Confederacy. In January 1861, Wharton was made the superintendent. His diary, which is preserved in the New York Public Library, contains many interesting details and sketches concerning the construction of the building.

Mr. Arthur's history also presents the highpoints in the chronology of the construction which extended over a number of years. The first floor was completed in 1856 when the Collector of Customs moved in under a temporary roof, and by 1860 the walls were up 75 feet. Work was discontinued during the War Between the States until 1871 when construction was resumed under modified plans. The second story was completed in 1879 and the third story in 1881. The fourth story has remained unfinished; however, plans were begun in the summer of 1963 to convert this story to 80,000 square feet of office space.

There is a bound copy of plans and other drawings of the Custom House in the office of the Building Manager, General Services Administration, New Orleans. This book contains 21 plates, 11 of which have been copied to accompany this report. It was prepared by the Secretary of the Treasury in 1857.

Inspection of the original drawings and the structure as it stands today indicates that many features were changed, even from the beginning. The side entrances and stairs have been omitted and the first flight of the main entrance stairs is not curved as shown originally. The building also was originally intended to be four stories, but settlement during construction necessitated changes in design and in the structure of the roof. Also a large dome over the central business room and a heavy granite cornice on the exterior were originally contemplated. The problem of settlement again necessitated the omission of the dome and the substitution of a cast-iron cornice.

The original plan did not provide for elevators; hoistways (open hatches) were provided to move the goods between floors. The current (1963) renovation plans call for these hoistways to be sealed. The first freight elevator, installed in 1883, was hydraulic and was replaced in 1901 with an electric elevator. At that time, two electric passenger elevators were installed in the open area of the main stairway; and these, in turn, were replaced by modern manual-operated lifts in 1939-1940. In 1960, they were converted to automatic and extended to the fourth floor. Also in 1939, the freight elevator was relocated to operate in the well of four flights of granite stairs in the North Peters Street side of the building.

In 1901 (?), a new plumbing system was installed and in 1915-1916 the entire building was renovated without disturbing too much the original design. In 1961, the building was completely refloored with vinyl asbestos tile, except for the marble floors in the entrance and the central business room. There has been a continuing program by General Services Administration to renovate the interior (according to Federal Standards) for efficient use as office space by the installation of temporary partitions, lowered ceilings, and fluorescent lighting.

Records disclose that several notable figures in American history have been associated with the Custom House. One of the prominent spectators at the cornerstone-laying ceremonies was Henry Clay. The cornerstone was laid by Denis Prieur, Collector of Customs and former Mayor of the city. Following the capture of the city by Union forces in April 1862, General Benjamin F. Butler established his headquarters in a suite of offices facing Canal Street, and the unfinished upper story was used as a prison for captured Confederate soldiers (Federal Prison No. 6).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The monumental scale of the Custom House is emphasized by the starkness of the granite walls, which rise 81 feet above the pavement. It is unadorned except for the four gigantic columns with the Egyptian-like lotus capitals that emphasize the main entrance. This motif is repeated on the central axis of the remaining three facades where entrances were originally planned. The character of the interior is Classical Revival with Corinthian columns, coffered ceilings, and classical architraves and cornices.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, except for the roof, which will be replaced soon (1963); otherwise, well maintained.

B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building has a frontage of 337 feet on Canal Street, a depth of 309 feet on North Peters Street, 297 feet on Decatur Street, and 252 feet on Iberville Street.
2. Foundations: The foundation system, typical for the period, is one of the most notable features of the structure. Its value has been proved by the long life of the building to date. Trenches were dug to an average width of 18 feet for the exterior walls and 10 feet for the interior walls. The average depth was 7 feet. When the bottom of the trench was leveled, a course of 3-inch by 12-inch cypress planks was laid transversely across the trench. On top of this, a course of 12-inch square cypress timbers was laid longitudinally, well bolted, leaving 6 inches to the edge of the planking on either side. This was then crossed by a second course of 12-inch square cypress timbers, 14 feet long, laid at a distance of 2 feet apart and intersected by 3-inch by 12-inch supports placed equidistant from the center of the timber course, and 7 feet 3 inches apart. This formed a boxing to receive concrete. The whole grillage was spiked together with iron bolts. The formwork was then filled with concrete composed of hydraulic cement, shells, and granite chips, and carried one foot above the grillage. The brick foundations were then started at a width of 4'-11 1/2" upon which was built a plinth course of granite backed with brick. It should be noted that when the cypress grillage was uncovered and inspected in 1926 the timbers were found to be sound with no sign of decay. Mr. Arthur quotes [Arthur, A History . . . New Orleans,

pages 43-44] the amount of settlement of the building during construction as reported by Major Beauregard. On October 14, 1856, maximum settlement to that date was 16.99 inches and the report of October 16, 1858, gives the total settlement as 20.88 inches. The last report, October 26, 1859, advised that maximum settlement during the previous year was 2.63 inches. By 1885, settlement had reached 28 inches. (The original plans allowed for 2'-0" settlement.) A study of foundations in the New Orleans area conducted by W.P.A. in 1937 reports that there is no further record of settlement after 1885. [Some Data in Regard to Foundations in New Orleans and Vicinity, a Project of Works Progress Administration of Louisiana, Vol. I, 1937, page 258.]

3. Wall construction: The exterior walls are of Quincy granite, measuring from three to four feet thick, including the brick backing. Through all the walls at intervals of about two feet vertically, there are iron bands 1/4-inch by 3-inch built into the longitudinal joints of the brickwork. This probably accounts for the fact that there are no serious cracks in any of the masonry walls, despite the settlement mentioned above.
 4. Chimneys: There are only three chimneys remaining.
 5. Openings: None of the doors or windows appear to be original. The original drawings indicate that the window sash and frames were to be cast iron.
 6. Roof: The roof pitches from the four outside edges towards the great skylight penthouse in the center. It is framed by iron trusses built of iron rails and wood purlins, approximately 3" x 6", 14" o.c.; it is covered by built-up tar and gravel on diagonal sheathing, which appears to be original. (As mentioned earlier, the original roof design was not executed.) General Services Administration is presently contemplating an entirely new roof design. There is a cast-iron cornice which was substituted for the granite cornice originally planned.
- C. Technical Description of Interior: Much of the interior space in the Custom House has been altered throughout the years. The stair hall and the General Business Room, however, have retained their original character. Therefore this description will be restricted to these two important public spaces.

The main entrance from Canal Street consists of one large marble-paved hall, extending the entire height of three stories. Immediately to the right and left are doors leading

to offices. On each wall just beyond these doors is a straight flight of marble stairs with cast-iron railings. At the rear of the hall are the two elevators, which were installed in 1901, and a door leading to an interior driveway. The two stairs lead to a common landing, which extends the full width of the hall and from which the stairs continue as one broad flight up to the level of the General Business Room, known also as the Marble Hall.

Stanley C. Arthur tells us that this room was known as the finest business room in the world. In terms of monumentality, it has hardly been surpassed. It is 95 feet by 125 feet and 54 feet high. The floor is laid with squares of white marble bordered with black marble. The ceiling is one expanse of glass skylight set in an iron and wood frame. Although the original plans for a domed rotunda were not carried out, the effect could hardly be more impressive. This ceiling is supported by 14 lofty Corinthian columns, set on Attic bases. Cut from Italian marble, the columns are 41 feet high and 4 feet in diameter. Each column consists of 5 sections approximately 6 feet in length. Arthur states that the columns were carved in Boston and shipped by sea to New Orleans at a reported cost of \$15,000 each. Incorporated in the capitals are alternating male and female heads representing Mercury and Luna, the crescent on the brow of the latter being an allusion to the crescent bend in the Mississippi River at New Orleans. Square beams, 15 feet long, rest on the Corinthian capitals and support the iron frame of the glass ceiling. These beams, which form a coffered effect, are treated in a classical manner with simple architrave and frieze, dentils, moulded cornice, and antefixes. Also according to Arthur, the architect Wood stated in a letter, dated February 20, 1849, to the building commission that the examples of the work there were "from the choragic monument of Lysierates."

The walls of this room are also of marble set in even courses. Doric pilasters divide the walls into bays. Window and door openings in these bays are framed with heavy classical architraves and modillions supporting a pediment. At the river end of the hall is a huge marble bas-relief of the great seal of the State of Louisiana, flanked by two panels of life-size figures of Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, founder of the city in 1717, and General Andrew Jackson, defender of the City in 1815. Beneath the seal is another bas-relief panel depicting the plow of agriculture, the mechanical cog-wheel of industry and the two principal crops of Louisiana, casks of sugar and bales of cotton. Around the perimeter of the room is the work space divided from the public space by paneled wood

counters and wickets. In addition, there are two large circular counters on either side of the principal axis. These furnishings have the character of another era.

- D. Site: The building covers the whole square and dominates the immediate surroundings at the lower, or river end, of Canal Street. It is surrounded by shops, bars, and warehouses typical of waterfront activities.

Prepared by Woodrow W. Wilkins, Architect
National Park Service
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