

Arcade Building
(Commercial Trust Building)
Fifteenth and Market Streets
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1493

HABS
PA,
51-PHILA,
676-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ARCADE BUILDING

HABS No. PA-1493

HABS
PA,
SI-PHILA,
GEG-

(Commercial Trust Building)

Location: Fifteenth and Market Streets, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

This report, which was written in 1962, describes the characteristics of and outlines the construction history of the Arcade Building. The building was demolished in 1969. It had been owned by the Commercial Trust Company for most of its existence. The report was written by D.B. Myer, a staff member of Historic American Buildings Survey.

The Nineteenth Century structure is located at the corner of Fifteenth and Market Streets. It runs along Fifteenth Street from Market Street to South Penn Square, -- along South Penn Square from Fifteenth Street to Broad Street-- and along Broad Street, across the street from the City Hall, from Penn Square halfway to Market Street

Built by architect Frank Furness in 1902, the Arcade Building is basically U-shaped with a flat roof. The structure is built on the sidewalk line with the center of the "U" to the interior of the block. The exterior walls are of dark stone and the trim, which is wood, is painted a dusty dull red. There is an open arcade over the sidewalk running along the Fifteenth Street and South Penn Square sides of the building. The ground floor of the City Hall side of the structure has no arcade, but is lined with shops. The upper floors of the structure contain offices. The building is in good condition at the present time, but the shop fronts and the main lobbies have modern finish.

The concept of an arcade building, though used in such places as the Doge's Palace in Venice, is rare in the United States. In Philadelphia, however, the Arcade Building, the City Hall and the Widener Building show an interest in pedestrian traffic. The building was completed in 1906 except

ARCADE BUILDING
(Commercial Trust Building)
HABS No. PA-1493 (page 2)

for the twenty-one floor tower across from City Hall which was built in 1913. Aside from the unique sidewalk arcade, the Arcade Building was also distinguished for its bridge across Market Street to the now removed Broad Street Station of the Pennsylvania Railroad*. The whole then permitted sheltered access from the railroad station to the shops and the offices of the Arcade Building, and pedestrian cover down one block of Fifteenth Street.

The Arcade building dominates its block with only a few other small structures to its northeast. Across Market Street to the north was formerly the Broad Street Station. To the west and across Fifteenth Street is the Harrison Building, of similar height and materials. To the south and across South Penn Square is a series of small row house-type shops. To the east and across Broad Street is the Philadelphia City Hall. At the present time across Market Street, on the former site of the Broad Street Station is some Twentieth Century Urban renewal structures.

The Arcade building is thirteen floors high on the Fifteenth Street, the South Penn Square, and half of the City Hall sides. The northern half of the City Hall side is twenty-one floors high. The building is divided into horizontal bays of twelve or fourteen feet. The two ends of the U-shape, which face Market Street, are both two bays wide. The Fifteenth Street facade is twelve bays wide. The South Penn Square side is six bays wide and the City Hall side is seven bays wide.

* demolished 1953

The entire structure is rather simple and boldly massive. Being constructed primarily of square stone with a lack of ornament and simple "punched out" windows. The building has a powerful geometric character. A striking horizontality is achieved through slightly projecting spandrel lines. Texture is given the facades by the use of very simple, and practically flat, wide pilasters, of single floor duration, which give the walls the slightest bit of projecting articulation. The ground floor on the arcaded sides of the building has piers supporting the bays with low sprung arches. These arches are flat with simple linear moldings and slightly projecting flat keystones. The piers are covered with a brownish marble and have rounded corners without ornamentation. The windows on the ground floor vary a great deal due to the remodeling of the various shop fronts. Only those on the southern half of the City Hall side appear original. These are arched glazed bays, subdivided by small wooden sash. The first floor (above the ground floor) has windows slightly larger than those on the upper floors. These first floor windows have semi-circular heads with one piece of fixed glass above and one-over-one light double hung sash below. All of the upper floors of the structure have simple two-over-one light double hung wooden sash, painted dusty dull red.

None of the original exterior doors remain in the building. On the Fifteenth Street side of the building, the modernized entrances are not obvious. On the City Hall side of the building there are four swinging doors. These are wood with three vertical lights and are painted bright red.

On the flat roof of the building occur several triangular Greek temple-like pediments. Each of these has a semi-circular window with one vertical division, painted a dusty dull red like the other windows of the building. The semi-circular windows are flanked by various decorative stone details. The pediments occur as follows: one on the Market Street facade, one at each end of the Fifteenth Street facade, one in the center of the South Penn Square facade, and one at the south end of the City Hall facade. On the north end of the City Hall facade, surmounting the twenty-one story tower, the temple theme is used again. The top two floors of the tower are finished differently from the remainder of the building. This area is a horizontal rectangle with the center two-thirds slightly projected and ornamented with round pilasters, the only ones on the structure, giving a temple-front effect. This element is flanked on either side by a simpler element, which lacks the pilasters used on the lower floors. This general effect is achieved under each pediment in the building, save for the exclusion of the round pilasters. At the top of the tower on the sky line is a smaller tower surmounted by a square metal dome, which has been allowed to age to a light green.

A series of decorative balconies appears throughout the structure. The stone balconies are supported by large brackets and have thick posts surmounted by large stone balls. The balconies are located on the sixth and ninth floors--two under each pediment and two under the temple front of the tower. Obvious on the Market Street side of the Fifteenth and Market corner is the patch on the first floor, where the bridge formerly

connected the Arcade Building to the Broad Street Station. A small amount of exterior decorative iron work is located across the bottoms of the windows on the first floor. These guard rails are a much simplified version of the ironwork used on the interior of the building. The iron is painted to match the wooden trim on the building.

It should be mentioned that the various elements which articulate the exterior of the building, including the pilasters and the spandrel lines are seldom more than a few inches from the front surface of the wall. The balconies project about three feet out from the surface of the wall. The whole is strikingly rectangular, simple and consistent. Throughout the various finished elevations of the building, there are no indications of where the elements, which were built at different times, start and stop.

From the Market Street side of the Arcade Building, the interior of the U-shape can be seen, which is extremely utilitarian. This area is finished in a yellow-buff brick. The windows here have very slightly arched heads on the City Hall and Fifteenth Street sides. The South Penn Square side has flat heads. All are double hung and painted the dusty dull red. Another irregularity seen in the court, is the use of red brick in place of the yellow-buff on the northernmost three bays of the Fifteenth Street block. This change in brick color coincides with the change in elevation on the first floor of the Fifteenth Street block.

ARCADE BUILDING
(Commercial Trust Building)
HABS No. PA-1493 (page 6)

The interior of the Arcade Building is rather simple and utilitarian. The ground floor contains a variety of shops and the three main entrances. Most of this level has been extensively remodeled at one time or another, there being little harmony between the elements as they were changed. The upper office floors of the building have remained substantially unaltered.

The upper floors of the structure are all very similar to each other. They contain a single central longitudinal corridor running down the center of each rectangular block, flanked on either side by small offices. The bays inside are again twelve or fourteen feet square on the outside of the structure, with a narrow central bay about four feet wide used as a corridor. There are three prime vertical circulation areas, one over each of the lobbies. Two are on the Fifteenth Street side and one is in the center of the City Hall side. Each of these contains a stairway and elevators.

The finish of the lobbies in the Arcade Building is not original. They have wood paneling and modern black terrazzo flooring. From the first floor up, however, the vertical circulation areas are in original condition. The flooring is made of small white ceramic tiles. The stairways are exposed cast iron structure with marble treads, and

decorative wrought-iron rails. The two vertical circulation areas on the Fifteenth Street side of the building are the same, with that to the north being slightly larger. These have extremely ornamental ironwork both on the stairways and on the elevator cages. Both Fifteenth Street areas have three elevators, side by side. They run up an open well, separated from the halls by black wrought-iron grillwork. The grillwork runs from floor to ceiling and is backed up with a wire mesh that appears latter. The grillwork on the elevators and the stairways is perhaps the most interesting feature of the building. The elevators are original, with valve actuated hydraulic drive. The cars have grillwork clearstories which match the other grillwork in the building. Also interesting are the elevator floor level indicators, which are glass tubes about sixteen inches high and one inch in diameter. Colored liquid flowed to show the level of the elevator. The tubes are supported by ornamental brass brackets, which are similar in design to the knobs on the stair newel posts and the latches on the elevator doors. The walls and ceilings of the vertical circulation areas are all plaster, with four foot high marble wainscoting, some of which has been painted. The vertical circulation area on the City Hall side of the building is the same as that on the Fifteenth Street side except for the treatment of the elevators and the stairways. The City Hall side has four elevators, which are enclosed by glass cages with simple iron frames. The stairway here is also equipped with a wrought-iron railing which is more massive and simple than those used on the Fifteenth Street side.

The typical office halls on all of the floors also have small white ceramic tiled floors. There is plaster on the ceilings and the walls. Some marble wainscoting is used here also. Most of the marble in the building has been painted over. On the first floor in some areas, the

small ceramic tiles have been covered over with modern asphalt tile.

This asphalt tile is in poor shape.

The woodwork on the office levels is almost exclusively limited to the doorways and doors of the offices. The doors are of dark natural wood, each has an over-door glass transom. The top halves of the doors are one light and the bottom halves have four small, equal panels. In the center rails are brass letter slots.

The building has several attics, all of which are utilitarian in finish and are used by the maintenance crews. Up in these areas the tanks, valves, pipes and weights for the elevators can be seen. Few of the original plumbing fixtures remain. Most interesting of these is a typical powder room lavatory. This consists of a large rectangular marble top with an oval enameled iron basin, marble front and side pieces extending down about five inches, and a corner leg of ornamental iron. The walls and ceilings in the powder rooms are of plaster and the floors are of white one-foot square marble tiles.

The lighting of the building is by modern electric lamps, none of which appear to be original. Heating is by radiators.

From the existing surface evidence the sequence of construction of the various elements of the Arcade Building is not clear. One thing is certain, however and that is that the twenty-one floor tower element across from City Hall was added several years after the building was started. There is some indication that the Fifteenth Street and South Penn Square sections were built at different times and connected. The evidence for this is a series of interior windows on what might have been the original south wall of the Fifteenth Street block.

The existence of the small red brick area inside the U-shaped court of the Arcade Building and the asymmetry of the City Hall elevation, suggests that the building might have been designed with expansion in mind to form, eventually, a complete rectangle with a central court in the center. If this had been done, the building would have extended from the tower north to Market Street and then west to attach to the existing structure at Fifteenth and Market Streets, at the red brick. This would have placed the twenty-one floor tower in the center of the east facade. The fact that the building was added to, indicates that there was some thought given to its expansion, and perhaps there was a more extensive original scheme than is now apparent. Proper investigation may find that this building was most important for its inventive contribution to urban architectural development.