

Robinson Hall (formerly Brown Library)
Northeast corner Waterman and Prospect Streets,
Brown University
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-185

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
81C-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
ROBINSON HALL (FORMERLY BROWN LIBRARY)

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Address: Northeast corner of Waterman and Prospect Streets,
Brown University, Providence, Providence County,
Rhode Island

Present Owner: Brown University

Present Occupant: Brown University Department of Economics

Present Use: School offices and classrooms

Brief Statement of Significance: This large brick building, built in 1878 and originally used as a library, is one of the few large examples of post-Civil War "Victorian Gothic" in Providence.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Brown University.
2. Date of erection: 1878.
3. Architect: Welker and Gould.
4. Sources of information: John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, R.I.: The Book Shop, 1957), p. 168.
Henry Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture (Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), p. 53.
Welcome Arnold Greene, The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years (Providence, R.I.: J. A. and R. A. Reed, 1886), p. 166.
William R. Walker and W. Howard Walker, Architectural Portfolio, Wm. R. Walker and Sons, Architects, Providence, R.I. (Providence, 1895).

- B. Supplemental Material: The following is from John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, R.I.: The Book Shop, 1957), p. 168:
"The Library was erected. . . through the bequest of John Carter Brown and a gift of his widow. . . . The building was discontinued as the college library after the erection of John Hay Library in 1910. It later became headquarters of the Department of Economics and its name was changed to Robinson Hall."

William H. Jordy has listed the following descriptive characteristics of Robinson Hall in mimeographed course notes for Art 109 at Brown University:

- "a. Polygonal masses piled in a tall, angular, symmetrical pyramid. Outline is jagged and sharp.
- "b. Verticality of building heightened by stone basement, with relatively steep steps up slope of podium-like site and thence up into the projecting porch.
- "c. Mixture red brick, stone of various colors, terra cotta and a little wood and metal. Coloristic wall utilizes the natural colors -- reds, buffs, grays, browns -- of materials. Ruskinian tradition of "honesty" and colorism.
- "d. Hard surfaces: for all the contrast of materials there is little interest in surface texture. Polygonal complications of massing, moldings at roof lines, porch and window reveals create intense and violently irregular shadows with hard edges, softened only by shadows from trees and ivy tendrils which the building welcomes.
- "e. Except at the entrance, pointed-arched windows seem almost too small in scale for the wall -- doubtless dictated by the need for extensive wall areas in what was once the Brown library. They are related to the wall, however, by the coloristic banding. Large, traceried window in front echoes the void of the porch below, provides a dramatic entrance focus and heralds the tall, unified space within.
- "f. Ornament reveals Ruskinian dogma: flat abstract ornament freely disposed on wall surfaces, spotted with terra cotta insets of geometrical plant shapes and 3-dimensional plant-and-animal carvings at the entrance and the springing of window arches; all ornament schematized from naturalistic observation. Overall colorism with sculptural incidents here and there gives the building a visual inexhaustibility congenial to the "gathering" propensities of the 19th century. In its variety, abundance (perhaps Ruskin's word "redundance" is better) and hide-and-seek quality, the ornament recalls the middle ages, and thus, again, stands diametrically opposed to the easily perceived repetitions of the ornament on Manning Hall.
- "g. Although Robinson is certainly monumental in feeling as befits a college library, its massing is a bit too complex and its ornament a bit too abundant for so small a building to create the austere breadth of either Manning Hall or the Corliss House. Its monumentality is most apparent in the surprising unity and verticality of the interior space (note use of iron balconies), once painted in a coloristic manner which echoed the colorism of the exterior, but now inarticulate beneath a uniform, utilitarian color. The

"gathering" quality of the building would have seemed an appropriate manifestation of the 'gathering' quality of a library to the mind of the 1870's."

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a large brick building, cruciform in plan around a central octagonal tower, one of the few large examples of post-Civil War Victorian Gothic in Providence.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Cross-shaped building around an octagonal domed, center court, about 75' long on each axis, facing south with the corners of both sides and rear arms cut diagonally to form semi-octagonal ends. Appears two-and-a-half stories high on exterior, but second story on exterior disguises two stories on interior, central octagonal tower rises above the arms of the building in two, low stages.
2. Foundations: Random coursed ashlar.
3. Wall construction: Red brick, running bond, with brownstone belt courses, drip molds, window heads, engaged corner columns, parapet copings, eaves, and ornamental details, light tan and slightly darker gray stone, Gothic vocabulary.
4. Porches: Large Gothic entrance porch, brownstone walls, and piers, polished marble columns, steeply pitched roof, marble tile floor.
5. Chimneys: Three brick chimneys incorporated into gables on north, rear, wing.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doors: Large double entrance doors, lighted and paneled, in stone frame as part of entrance porch.
 - b. Windows: Tall narrow windows with pointed or arched heads, some with fixed, single panes of glass; some with operating sash; some with stained glass.

Large window over porch, pointed arch, Gothic tracery.

7. Roof: Hipped roofs with gables intersecting the principal faces. Tile in pattern of round and square butts.
8. Tower: First stage of tower: Triple windows, separated by marble colonettes, stained glass. Top stage of tower: Pairs of trefoil windows on each side.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Open central octagonal court, two balconies, classrooms and offices open off the central court.
 2. Stairways: Three cast iron stairways, off the central court, U-shape, open well, closed string, railings with Gothic ornamental motifs in iron.
 3. Flooring: Patterned stone tile floor in very light grey, dark grey, and red, in central court. Other floors have later asphalt tile.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster
 5. Doorways and doors: Two original doors apparently to offices at either side of entrance: four panel, wood doors, with complex carved and batten panels, fluted pilaster architraves with rossette corner blocks, doors varnished, light yellow natural wood color. Other doors apparently not original.
 6. Trim: Chair rail, baseboards, cornices, ceiling ribs and ornamental wall panels in central court, plaster, Gothic vocabulary. Balconies entirely of iron, very open ornamented railings. Some cast iron columns in the rooms have Gothic capitals.
 7. Hardware: Brass hardware on original doors.
 8. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures.
 9. Heating: Radiators.
- D. Site: Building situated at northwest corner of Waterman and Prospect Streets, lot slopes up slightly from corner, at north side of Brown campus. Small lawn with trees in front, parking lot in rear, low open iron fence with stone posts around south and west sides.