

Savannah City Hall
Bay and Bull Streets
Savannah
Chatham County
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2165

HABS
GA,
26-SAY
61-

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

NAME: Savannah City Hall

HABS
GA,

LOCATION: Bay Street and Bull Street. The building is bordered by Bay Street on the south side, and by the Bull Street Ramp to River Street on the northern side.

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PRESENT OWNER, PRESENT OCCUPANT, PRESENT USE: The building is owned by the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah. It is occupied by the administrative offices of the City government.

SIGNIFICANCE: Savannah's City Hall has served as the center of municipal government in this city since its erection in 1905. The building occupies a prominent position in the community.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. PHYSICAL HISTORY

1. The Savannah City Hall was built during the period of July, 1904 - December, 1905. Cornerstone laying ceremonies were held on August 11, 1904. The new municipal offices were occupied on December 20th & 21st, 1905. The first City Council meeting took place on January 2, 1906.
2. In May, 1903, the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah contracted with Mr. Hyman W. Witcover for the design of the new City Hall. See Appendix "A". FIELD RECORDS
3. The building was constructed by the Savannah Contracting Company for a bid cost of \$205,167.00. Metal furniture was provided by the Arts Metal Construction Company of Jamestown, N.Y. for a price of \$16,992.00. Clocks and bells for the dome were provided by the E. Howard Clock Company.

There are no records on the source of materials used on the exterior of the building.

The interior work required a number of skilled artisans who remain anonymous.

4. The City Hall's exterior has not been altered since its construction. Original ink drawings of the design and construction of the building are currently part of the permanent files in the City of Savannah's Engineering Department. A list of available drawings is included in Appendix "B". FIELD RECORDS

5. There have been no alterations or additions to the exterior of the building. However, substantial changes have been made to sections of the interior of the building.

In the 1960's an air conditioning and central heating system was added. Most ceilings were lowered to accomodate fluorescent lighting, and a number of spacious offices were subdivided to provide more office space.

In 1966 the copper dome was painted to halt deterioration caused by a local fertilizer plant.

No substantial changes were made in the rotunda or on the second floor of the structure. The second floor housed the Mayor's Offices, the Clerk of Council's Office, and the City Council Chambers.

B. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The building has served city government since its construction in 1905. The current structure replaced a circa 1799 City Exchange building which had housed City government for many years.

EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION OF SAVANNAH'S CITY HALL

Savannah's City Hall is a Renaissance Revival building with classic proportions and detailing. Each of its four facades fronts to a public street or park. The building's location, size, and impressive dome make it a fitting terminus for the series of public squares on Bull Street.

The building's base is of rough hewn granite blocks in a regular coursed pattern. Footings for the City Hall rest more than twenty-seven feet (27') below the sidewalk level on Bay Street. This space houses the basement and subbasement levels and can be seen from the River Street side. Stone steps lead down the east elevation from Bay Street to the Bull Street ramp and Factor's Walk.

It is at the Bay Street sidewalk level that the exterior material changes. The rough granite is replaced by the next level of rustication, a four foot (4') high skirt of polished granite, which provides the visual base for the building's Bay Street elevation. The northeast corner of the level contains the building's cornerstone, placing it approximately twenty feet (20') above grade, but readily seen from one of the pedestrian bridges spanning Factor's Walk.

The basic massing of the City Hall is a seventy foot (70') high block measuring ninety-two feet (92') wide by eighty-four feet (84') deep. The seventy foot (70') high dome rests on top of this block. The first two floors have floor to ceiling heights of 13'-6" and 16'-0" respectively. The third and fourth floors are both twelve feet (12') high. Each floor is separated by 1'-8" of construction.

Vertically, the building is divided into three major levels. The first floor constitutes the first of these levels and is of smooth granite with deeply recessed joints. The second and third floors make up the second level sheathed in sand colored limestone with matching terra-cotta trim. The fourth floor and parapet, constructed of the same materials, make up the final level.

The elevation is composed of three major bays. The outer two are bounded by limestone pilasters with terra-cotta capitals and bases. Within the taller second floor height are a pair of large double hung windows, topped by a transom lite and terra-cotta pediment. Above these are smaller double hung windows at the third floor. The

center bay is composed of two polished stone columns standing in front of three windows at each floor, stone balusters and rails run between the plinth of each column and the pilasters to each side. The eight foot (8') deep recess provides an exterior porch at the second floor. Windows between the second and third floor are separated by recessed stone panels.

Above the ionic columns and pilasters runs a five foot (5') band of terra-cotta cornice molding and another balustrade. Two statues representing Art and Commerce rest on four foot (4') bases above the two columns. This level of the building is divided into three bays by pilasters and punctuated by four foot by eight foot (4' x 8') double hung windows. A five foot (5') parapet completes the basic block of the building.

The dome construction rises another seventy feet (70') into the air. The first stage is a thirty-three foot (33') diameter, twenty-two foot (22') high drum. Like the rest of the building, the drum is load bearing brick masonry, clad with limestone. Within this space is the beautiful leaded, stained-glass interior dome. Eight narrow windows between as many pilasters provide the illumination for the inner dome.

Above the first stage of the drum is the more ornate clock level. Each of the four clock faces is topped by a decorative pediment and terra-cotta urn. The clockworks sit in the center of this level and turn the hands by use of long rods and linkages.

At this point, the basic construction method changes from traditional masonry construction to steel reinforced concrete. The hemispherical dome has eight ribs curving up to support a cupola of mostly copper cladding with an iron railing. At the top most part is the flag pole which penetrates the dome and cupola and is supported on steel beams at the top of the drum.

The entire dome and cupola are copper sheathed and for many years were left to weather naturally. Recently, air pollution caused deterioration of the copper and made it necessary to cover the dome with protective coatings colored to simulate weathered copper.

Initial designs called for sculpture groups of horses and chariots to top the two front corners. Budget considerations forced their deletions from the final plans, but can still be seen in the Architect's original rendering presently displayed inside Savannah's historic City Hall.

INTERIOR DESCRIPTION OF SAVANNAH'S CITY HALL

In plan, Savannah's City Hall forms a square with the middle section of each of its four sides recessed, delineating three bays in elevation. The four floors above grade at Bay Street house various public services while the two basement floors contain maintenance functions. Circulation occurs in the central bay and is flanked by offices and meeting rooms in the bays to the east and west.

One enters City Hall through a foyer that leads into a dramatic rotunda reaching four stories and peaked by a leaded glass dome of yellows, golds and blues. Eight equally spaced windows belonging to an outer dome provide natural light to the stained glass. White tile is used on the floors in both the foyer and the rotunda; however, different shaped tile and patterns are used to articulate each space. Irregularly cut, but roughly square, tile composed in a series of fan shapes has been laid in the foyer. The seal of the City of Savannah, located in the center of the room, in addition to floral embellishment at each corner, provide muted color. Light gray, polished marble covers the wall up to nine feet vertically. From that point the ceiling springs into a shallow vault, thirteen feet six inches in height above the floor. The same tile and corner motif as found on the floor has been used on the vault.

The next major space, the rotunda, serves as a point of focus for those functions of the building that directly serve the public. All circulation generates from this space. The four levels of the rotunda share the same finishes, however, each level is articulated somewhat differently in order to express the degree of prominence of that particular floor. The first level has received the greatest amount of embellishment. A circular pool, surrounded by a simple brass railing, is the central feature at this level. It is highlighted by a bronze fountain composed of four dolphins with backs arched so that their tails extend above their heads to support a cherub sitting upon four large scallop shells. In his hands rests a horn of plenty spewing water into the pool.

Each floor of the rotunda is finished with one inch round white tiles. At the first level, in addition, two narrow rings of color, one solid red and the other a combination of gray, yellow, white and red tiles, bound the space while fleur de lis, in an abstract pattern, have been placed at regular intervals in the area within the bands. At each level, eight equally spaced bays circumscribe the wall that surrounds the rotunda. Primarily, the bays are

cased openings leading to other spaces, but those required only to complete the geometry serve as niches. Each bay is cased with oak. Those bays belonging to the first two levels have elaborate casing trim of dentil work and several bands of molding. Those on the upper floors are of a simpler configuration. In addition, oak is used in the railing and balustrade that surround the balconies of the upper three levels. A four foot high wainscot of polished gray marble matching that in the foyer fills in the walls between the cased openings of the rotunda and in the cased recesses. Plaster extends above the stone and eventually forms a half vault that dies into the railing of the balcony above until, finally, at the fourth level the dome of stained glass is reached.

As previously mentioned, each level of the rotunda connotes the stature of that particular floor. It is followed through in other ways. Trim at door casing generally matches that found on the cased openings of the rotunda belonging to a corresponding floor. Doors are oak with a half light and bottom panels. One of the most interesting features of City Hall is found on the door hardware. At each door knob, a small brass replica of the seal of the city has been placed in the lower center of the escutcheon plate. This insignia is found on all doors leading from areas of circulation.

Vertical circulation is located beyond the rotunda at the rear of the building. It is achieved by means of an elevator and by an open stair that wraps around three sides of the elevator. The elevator was installed during construction and still retains its iron cage, although its cab has been updated and enclosed. The accompanying stair is a little over nine feet wide. The same marble used as wainscoting elsewhere make up the trends and landings to the stair.

Because of easy accessibility, offices on the first floor lend themselves to a great amount of daily interaction with private citizens. The tile flooring, similar to that found in the rotunda, has remained in tact, as have the fine oak wainscot and original service counters of oak panels. However, to accomodate better lighting, acoustics, and air conditioning, acoustical tiles have been suspended beneath the original plaster ceilings.

Those facilities found on the second floor have encountered the least renovation. The Mayor's offices, Council Chambers, and the office of the Clerk of Council occupy this level. All floors, except those in circulation routes, are parquet of oak and mahogany. Carpet covers the original flooring in the office for the Clerk of Council and in the Mayor's offices, but that found in the Council Chambers and in a small conference room adjacent to the Mayor's outer office is still exposed and in excellent shape.

The Council Chambers take up the western third of the second floor. It is the most elaborate and expensively finished space in City Hall. Other than its parquet floor, all woodwork is mahogany, including doors and window and door casing. Except for minor changes, such as converting existing lighting from gas to electricity and placing the councilmen's lecturns upon a shallow platform, the room has remained virtually in its original condition. The chamber consists of three bays, with the Mayor and councilmen located in the center and public seating situated on either side. A semi-circular railing and balustrade of mahogany further defines the space occupied by public officials. Massive pilasters delineate the three bays and are enhanced by appliqued columns of mahogany with composite capitals of Ionic volutes and egg and dart motifs. Wood paneled wainscoting stands three feet high around the room. Plaster was used on the remaining portion of the wall. The ceiling consists of three foot square coffers of plaster. A small globed light fixture occupies the center of each square. The coffers cover almost the entire ceiling but are interrupted by large beams that run between pilasters, further expressing the three bays.

Although the Mayor's private office has been completely renovated, the outer office is still very close to its original state. It is a large room that takes up the southeastern corner of the building overlooking Bay Street. Its walls are finished with plaster and oak wainscoting. As in the foyer below, the ceiling is vaulted and reaches a height of thirteen feet six inches. Although a different species, the woodwork in the room is very fine and is comparable in detail to that found in the Council Chambers. The finishing piece in this room is a magnificent converted chandelier of brass and glass spheres, varied in size. It is a large fixture and fits well with the scale of the room.

Except for the central circulation area, the third and fourth levels have undergone major renovation. Ceilings have been dropped and changed to acoustical tiles to accommodate modern requirements. An acoustical material has also been applied to the plaster walls. Vinyl asbestos tile has been placed over the original wood floor. Original elements such as windows, doors and trim have remained in tact. No major finishes or elements have been completely removed. Luckily, most changes have only been applied to existing surfaces. Hence, if a plan arises in the future to restore the building back to its original state it could be done with little difficulty.

C. SITE

City Hall is located atop a bluff, overlooking the Savannah River. The front of the building faces south, looking down Bull Street, the central avenue within the downtown section of Savannah. A small park is located both to the east and west of City Hall.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. All existing architectural drawings are located in the City of Savannah's Engineering Department.
- B. Early views of the building are included in ~~Appendix "C"~~.
- C. See Appendix "D".

FIELD
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