

Bell Tower
Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia

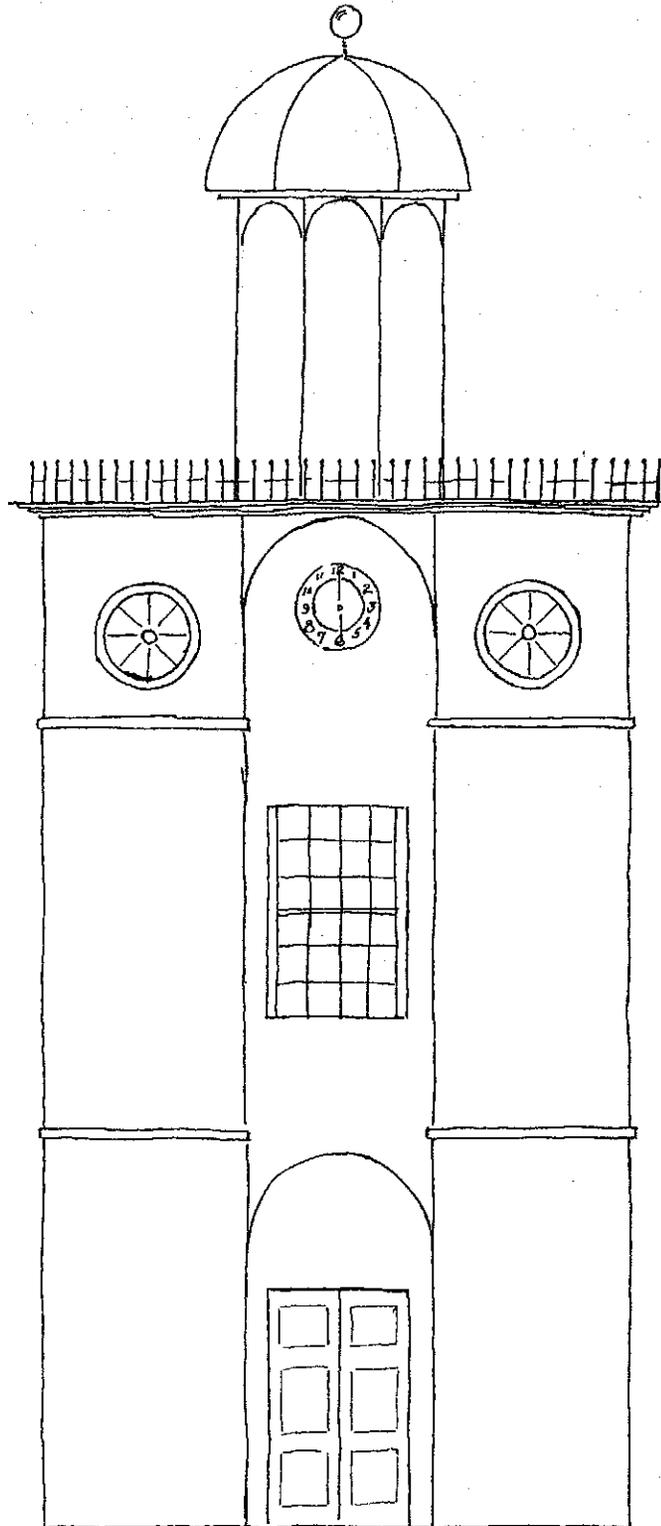
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey
Eugene Bradbury, District Officer
210 East Franklin Street, Richmond, Virginia

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From an old drawing with the date June 13, 1824
supposed to have been made as a design for the
BELL TOWER

BELL TOWER
Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia

Owner: Commonwealth of Virginia

Date of Erection: 1824

Architect:

Builder: Commonwealth of Virginia

Present Condition: The interior is in poor condition. In 1933 a new railing and entrance steps were built and other repairs made to the exterior.

Number of Stories: Three. The roof of the third story is surmounted by a belfry.

Materials of Construction: The walls are of brick, above the first floor level, laid in Flemish bond, with three stone belt courses around and a wood cornice, railing and belfry. The first floor is of brick, laid on an earth fill. The second and third floors are wood with wood stairs. The roof is covered with tin.

Historical Data: On the Bell Tower is a bronze tablet bearing the following inscription:

"The Tower was built in 1824, on the site of a frame building. It long served as a Guard House for the State Guard. The bell was a fire alarm and was also used to call out Local Defenders, notably on April 27, 1861 (Pownee Sunday) and on February 7, 1864."

Tower restored by the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1933. Bell donated by Commonwealth Chapter N.S.D.A.R.

The following is a report of Governor James Pleasants to the Speaker of the House of Delegates, dated January 6, 1825:

"Sir:

In compliance with resolution of the House of Delegates of the 5th instant, requesting information of the Executive how far the third section of an act, entitled "An Act Concerning the Lexington Arsenal and Other Purposes," has been carried into execution and etc. I have the honor to state that the Executive caused the house on the South-West corner of the Capitol Square to be sold at public auction, conformably to the provisions of the said act. The amount for which it was sold was only about sixty dollars. In further compliance with the said act the Executive entered into the contract with Levi Swain of this city for putting up such a house as is therein directed. This house was to have been done some time and the wood work in part. The workmanship is said by judges to be executed in superior style. Mr. Swain was to complete the contract for the sum of \$2700.

I have the honor to be
Your Ob. Serv.
James Pleasants"

In 1790 the directors of the public buildings were authorized to purchase at the public expense a bell for the use of the Capitol. This bell was hung in a small, unpainted wood building, which stood in front of the portico of the Capitol. This building, commonly known as the "Barracke," long served as a Guard House for the State Guard.

An enactment concerning the "Barracks" was passed by the Virginia Assembly on March 2, 1824, which reads as follows: "Be it further enacted, that the Executive be, and they are hereby authorized to have the house commonly called the Barracks now standing on the S.W. corner of the Capitol Square, sold at public auction and to have a small two-storied house, with a cupola for a bell, not exceeding 20 ft. square, erected, for the accommodation of the guard stationed for the protection of the Capitol, on or near the site of the said Barracks."

The report of the Superintendent of Public Edifices in 1828, showed the roof of the bell house to be in poor condition, and recommended a zinc roof as the most permanent and cheapest covering.

Document No. 17 in 1852, refers to the improvements of the Capitol Square. Desiring to remove the ill-contrived and unsightly bell house, they recommended the erection of a fire proof building, for the preservation and use of the elaborate and costly standard of weights and measures, which had been and were being distributed to the State of Virginia, under an act of the Congress of the United States. It was proposed that an imposing structure should be placed in front of the Capitol to answer admirably all the purposes of an imposing and handsome gateway. There was to be a room above the arches suitable for the standards, and another room above to be used as a guard room. The whole was to be surmounted by a clock and bell, which would substitute the present bell house by avoiding the necessity of having a guard to constantly stay on duty to strike the time upon a bell.

The bell was originally used to warn of danger from the Indians, or for the signal of troops to assemble. In the trying time of the War Between the States, the bell was a "Tocain of war." Its well-known three taps and a quick silence at intervals was the signal agreed upon to note the first command of war. On April 27, 1861, the alarm was a warning that the United States Steamer, "Pownee," which had done great damage to the Norfolk Navy Yards, was coming up the James River to bombard and capture Richmond. Of note was the signal on February 7, 1864, for the Home Guard to assemble when Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, Union cavalryman, made his planned attempt to raid Richmond. After the war, the bell was removed from the tower to the belfry of the Broad Street Fire Engine House, where it was used as a fire alarm. While in use, the bell cracked and was taken down. Later this historic old relic of by-gone days, passed into the hands of Tanner and Delaney, iron workers. As late as 1891, a small part of the bell was known to exist and was in the possession of a member of the Richmond Fire Department.

Richmond, Its People and Its Story by Mary Newton Stanard speaks of the Bell Tower as follows:

"The historic 'Old Bell' has served its purpose to the people of Richmond in time of distress: that of war and of fire. Today it stands, hoary with age and of little use, except as a monument of the by-gone days."

Recorded in the Senate Journal and Documents of the session in 1933 and 1934, is the report of the Virginia Art Commission on buildings, as follows:

"In connection with the restoration of old buildings the commission

has taken an interest in the Old Tower in the Capitol grounds and has endeavored to have the restoration conform as accurately as possible with the oldest obtainable records."

In 1933, the Old Bell Tower, the architecture of which has been described as "evidently taken from that beautiful specimen of art, a Dutch pig-stye," was partly restored, with W. C. Noland, Carneal, Johnson and Wright as architects, under the supervision of the State Commission on Conservation and Development.

On June 15, 1934, the Commonwealth Chapter of the Daughters of American Revolution presented in fitting ceremony a new bell for the Old Tower, which was accepted by Governor Peery, on the behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Bibliography:

Executive Letter Book No. 21, Archives Department of the State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

Acts of the Virginia Assembly in 1824, 1825, 1826

Document No. 17, Senate Journal and Document of 1852

The Capitol of Virginia and the Confederate States, by W. W. Scott and W. T. Stanard. Jamee E. Goode, Publisher, Richmond, Virginia, 1894

Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 31, 1933; January 23, 1934; June 15, 1935

Senate Journal and Documents, Extra Session 1933, Regular Session 1934.

The Trail of the Three Notched Road, by M. Ethel Kelley Kern. Copyright 1929, William Byrd, Inc.

Virginia Thompson
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Approved: June 27, 1936

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