

America's Watchtower

Saving the Old Post Office

It is "a monster Gothic derelict abandoned at midpoint on the most important avenue of the nation."

This remark, made by a federal government official in 1963, described the Old Post Office Building on Pennsylvania Avenue halfway between the White House and Capitol. Long a subject of derision, the Old Post Office survived nearly three quarters of a century of efforts to demolish it. This Romanesque landmark stands today as a remarkable effort at historic preservation and a reminder of a distinct period in American architecture.

In 1880, Congress approved the building of a new post office to handle mail service for a growing nation. The site for such a structure, however, was not easy to locate. Open public land in downtown Washington was hard to find. Reportedly, Senator Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University and chairman of the Senate Committee on Buildings and Grounds, and his secretary and newspaperman, John B. McCarthy, chose the post office site one day while on a carriage ride down the avenue from Capitol Hill. On June 25, 1890, Public Block 323 was approved by Congress as the new site for the post office.

Block 323, on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue between 11th and 12th Streets, was the location of numerous shops, saloons, a Masonic Hall, and the Franklin Fire Company. The process for purchasing the 30 separate parcels of land was to have it condemned and designated for government take-over. By October 3, 1891, the entire block was purchased at a cost of \$655,490.77.

The task of designing the Post Office was the responsibility of the architect's office of the Treasury Department. This office was responsible for the design of all post

offices, custom houses, and court houses. The supervisory architect of the Treasury Department as the building's construction commenced in 1892 was Willoughby J. Edbrooke. He is traditionally credited with the building's design, and his impact was significant. But during the seven years of the building's construction, five different supervisory architects made varying degrees of alterations to the original design. Each one of the supervisory architects was influenced by the work of architect Henry Hobson Richardson.

Richardson is considered to be one of the greatest architects in the history of American architecture. This opinion is based not only on the quality of his work but on his far-reaching influence. His best-known projects included the Trinity Church in Boston and Allegheny Court House and Jail in Pittsburgh. Richardson interpreted features of European architecture into a different and uniquely American style. Richardsonian Romanesque architecture was characterized by



Completed Post Office building in 1899. Photo courtesy Library of Congress.

Pennsylvania Avenue in 1928. Photo courtesy Library of Congress.



heavy, rough stone construction, round arches framing windows and doors that are deep and cavernous in design, and squat columns. Towers were often part of the plan. In Richardson's best examples, a single tower, massive and bold in design crowned the structure. Every characteristic of Richardsonian Romanesque, to one degree or another, was included in the design for the Post Office.

The Post Office's massive granite exterior was a product of the Bodwell Granite Company of Vinalhaven, Maine. Vinalhaven, a small island off the southeastern coast of Maine, was a major granite supplier in the United States in the last half of the 19th century. Granite from Vinalhaven's quarries supported the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, the interior of the Washington Monument, and other government buildings in Washington. Along with the importance of its stone, the Post Office was the first steel frame building in Washington, first federal building on Pennsylvania Avenue, and the first with its own electric power plant which powered over 3,900 lights. It was the largest federal office building in the city, and its great glass-covered 99' x 184' central courtyard placed it in a select category of monumental interior spaces in the nation's capital. The Post Office's imposing 315' clock tower was second in height to only the Washington Monument. The seven-year construction project, completed in 1899, cost \$3,502,165.

The completed structure was turned over to the Postmaster General in the fall of 1899 and officially named the Federal Post Office Department Building. The building became the home of the Washington City Post Office, located on the first three floors, and the Federal Post Office Department headquarters for the entire nation, on floors four through eight. The ninth floor was used for storage. The exterior of the

tower displayed a working clock on all four sides. City residents mentioned to Willoughby J. Edbrooke, during the building's early design phase, that the downtown area needed a clock so workers and visitors could look up at any time and see the current time. No Washington building had such a feature, and a clock added to the Post Office's uniqueness and importance.

As the 20th century dawned, the Federal Post Office Department Building's massive facade, imposing tower, and prominence on Pennsylvania Avenue was the gem of the Post Office Department. Despite the building's significance because of its design reflecting the influence of a master architect and its structural innovations, many federal officials called for the building's removal. The Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 introduced a neo-classical style of architecture, and the federal government quickly adopted it as the style for all new federal buildings. Richardsonian Romanesque had become obsolete—especially since the premature death of Richardson in 1886.

The Old Post Office Building's design was outdated even before its completion. One federal official called the new building, "an unfortunate production" that would "require dynamiting before it could be brought into harmony with its surroundings." Another review in the *New York Times* said it looked like "a cross between a cathedral and a cotton mill." Plans were discussed for the new building's demolition.

This began nearly a 75-year struggle between survival and destruction. Herein lies the real story of the Old Post Office. It survived at first because the Post Office had no other place to reside. The building's design left little room for expansion and it was quickly discovered the space would soon be inadequate for the city post office. In 1914, after only 15 years, city postal operations were moved to a new facility adjacent to Union Station. Thus, the moniker "old" became forever attached to the little more than decade-old building—"a not so subtle attempt to prove the Old Post Office's time had passed and was ready for the rock pile."

The Federal Post Office Department maintained residence in the building another 20 years. These were years of tremendous postal advancement which saw a number of improvements in service: rural free delivery (1902), parcel post, cash on delivery, postal insurance (1913), cars first used to deliver mail (1914), domestic air mail service (1918), international air mail (1927). By 1934, the Post Office Department, too, had outgrown the building and was relocated immediately across 12th Street in one of the new Federal Triangle Buildings.

The Federal Triangle had first been suggested by the Senate Park Commission in 1901. It was not until the 1920s that Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon made the project a reality. Federal agencies were scattered in rented space all over Washington. The idea was to build permanent federal buildings in the neo-classical style to house many government departments. The area bounded by Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues and 15th and 4th Streets Northwest formed a triangle where the buildings were to be built. All existing structures within this triangle were targeted for demolition. Occupying the center of the triangle was the Old Post Office. Long considered an architectural dinosaur, it was destined for removal. But the Great Depression saved the building; there was no money to have it torn down. Then World War II began, and every available office was needed for the war effort. After the war, a growing federal bureaucracy needed additional space to house offices that had no other place to go; the Old Post Office became a home for numerous overflow federal agencies.

At one time or another, between the 1940s and 1970s, the following shared residence in the building: Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Interior, Justice, General Accounting Office, Interstate Commerce Commission, Smithsonian Institution, United States Information Agency, and Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI had the longest association with the Old Post Office, having training and personnel offices there from the 1930s until 1975.

Despite the constant use of the building, no one agency felt ownership or responsibility for its maintenance. Consequently, the years began to

show on the interior and exterior of the structure. By the early 1960s this one-time jewel of the Post Office Department had become a monolithic disgrace.

The thoroughfare which the Old Post Office graced, Pennsylvania Avenue, was in much the same condition as its largest resident. Rundown shops and businesses covered both sides of the Avenue. In 1962, future Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated that Pennsylvania Avenue should be the example that all great city streets should follow. President Kennedy agreed and appointed a Pennsylvania Avenue Commission to investigate what should be done to improve America's Main Street. In 1964, among its many suggestions, the Commission suggested the Old Post Office be torn down to complete the Federal Triangle. Only the tower was to remain as a city lookout and reminder of a time long since gone. Once again the Old Post Office was targeted for removal.

The old Romanesque building had its supporters, who believed the entire building, not just the tower, should remain. Suggestions were made to turn the building into a hotel, a visitor center, a place for display of additional Smithsonian exhibits, or a shopping area that would revitalize Pennsylvania Avenue. The first step to preserve the building came in 1965 when all of Pennsylvania Avenue was declared a National Historic Park and both the Federal Triangle and Old Post Office Building were recommended for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places as Category II Landmarks. The definition of Category II Landmarks is: "Landmarks of importance which contribute significantly to the cultural

heritage or visual beauty and interest of the District of Columbia and its environs, and which should be preserved or restored, if possible."

The battle was on between preservationists and those who sought the Old Post Office's demolition in order to restore architectural continuity to the Federal Triangle. During the remainder of the 1960s, the National Capital Planning Commission, Commission on Fine Arts, Joint Congressional Committee on Landmarks, and General Services Administration all supported razing the building.

During 1970 and 1971 plans were drawn and permits obtained for the Old Post Office's removal and the Federal

The preserved Old Post Office stands today as one of the most prominent features in downtown Washington, DC. Photo courtesy Library of Congress.



Former National Endowment for the Arts Director (1969-1977), the late Nancy Hanks was instrumental in saving the Old Post Office. Photo courtesy Nancy Hanks Collection, Duke University Library,

Triangle's completion. Preservationists struck back. Calling themselves "Don't Tear It Down," they organized and petitioned responsible government agencies.

During this preservation struggle, the Old Post Office gained the attention of Nancy Hanks. Hanks, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, supported saving old buildings and involved the Endowment in the protection of others around the country. Besides, the Arts Endowment was living in rented space, and Hanks desired a permanent home for her agency.

To Nancy Hanks, saving the Old Post Office and finding a home for the Endowment seemed like a perfect fit. She traveled up to Capitol Hill when the building's fate was being debated and testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Buildings and Grounds. "Old buildings are like old friends," she said. "They reassure people in times of rapid change. They encourage people to dream about their cities—to think before they build, to consider alternatives before they tear down." She believed the Old Post Office could be a mixed use building; federal offices could occupy the upper floors while shops, restaurants and entertainment would attract visitors below. However, it was illegal for private enterprise to occupy the same space as government agencies. Hanks convinced Congress a new federal law should be passed, which led to the Cooperative Building Use Act (1976) allowing private business to occupy the same space as federal workers.

Hanks further testified that removal of the Old Post Office would cost over \$60 million as opposed to \$30 to \$40 million to have it restored. This got Congress' attention, and she gained their support which was further bolstered by the building's addition to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

The Old Post Office's nearly three quarters of a century battle for survival was nearly over. Plans were made to restore the old structure inside and out. The building's granite facing, blackened by years of city pollutants, was cleaned. The interior, covered with decades of dirt and grime and with its glass skylight covered with metal, looked like a dungeon. Washington architect Arthur Cotton Moore, long an advocate of saving the building, won a national competition for the interior design. Preservation began in 1978 and was completed in 1983.

The metal roof was replaced with glass. The first floor, where the city's mail was once sorted, was partially removed opening up the space for shops and restaurants. The remainder of the build-



ing was restored for federal office use. Each of the upper floors was designated for use by the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Institute of Museum Services.

In the interior northwest corner, a glass elevator was installed to ferry individuals to the tower's 270-foot outdoor observation area. In addition, 10 English Change Ringing Bells were installed in the tower. The bells, a bicentennial gift to Congress from the Ditchley Foundation of Great Britain, are replicas of those at Westminster Abbey.

On February 15, 1983, the United States Congress passed legislation renaming the Old Post Office and its surrounding plazas the Nancy Hanks Center. This same legislation assigned the National Park Service the duty of telling the story of the building and assisting people to the top of the tower. Unfortunately, Nancy Hanks never saw the completion of her work. She died in January 1983.

Today, the Old Post Office is a permanent feature on Pennsylvania Avenue and the city's skyline. No longer considered an architectural outcast, it is one of Washington's most attractive features. Watching over America's Main Street, as it has for nearly a century, the Old Post Office is a reminder that there are other alternatives to tearing down.

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