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Vermont's Second State House: A Temple of Republican Democracy Imagined Through Its Inventories, 1836–1856

Architect's drawings and daguerreotypes show what the Second State House looked like, but the partial inventories help us imagine how it functioned.

By T. D. Seymour Bassett

No lawnmowers appear on any list of supplies and property in the Second Vermont State House, 1841–1856, and no restaurant equipment, but there were as many as 222 spit boxes, six ballot boxes, and the wherewithal to serve drinks. Articles and icons found or not found on the annual inventories of the sergeant at arms and surveyor of public buildings, recently received at the State Archives from Madeline Farnham of Shelburne, tell a good deal about the conditions under which state officials, legislators, and their patrons operated in early Victorian Vermont. The volume came down from Mrs. Stanley Farnham's mother-in-law, born Lenora Rachel Stevens, descendant of Clark Stevens, Montpelier's first town clerk, Quaker minister, and father of Stephen Foster Stevens, sergeant at arms when the State House burned in 1857.

Architect's drawings and daguerreotypes show what the Second State House looked like,[1] but the partial inventories help us imagine how it functioned. Although an annual list was required, the sergeants at arms sometimes shirked the tedious job of including everything. For example, Cyrus Ware, the first sergeant at arms of the new building, 1836–1839,[2] never got around to entering any notes in the inventory, nor did his successor in 1840. Sometimes instead of a complete inventory, the lister simply wrote "same as last year" and "all that ever were there."

The men who kept this record had friends or relatives in high places whose influence got them their jobs. Most had clerical or mercantile skills. Edward H. Prentiss (1840) went on to become clerk of a U.S. district court. Sidney P. Redfield (1854–1856), local druggist and senior warden of Christ Church Episcopal, was Supreme Court judge Isaac F. Redfield's younger brother. William T. Burnham (1842–1847), Luther Cross (1848–1852), and David W. Keith (1853) were local storekeepers. Was Erastus T. Camp (1841) related to David M. Camp, lieutenant governor, 1836–1840?

Vermonters have tended to name all their buildings "houses," whatever their use, and so the term *capitol,* reminiscent of the Roman temple of Jupiter, has never won popular usage in Vermont. The conduct of state business for three to six weeks every fall had the same requirements in lighting, heating, storage, circulation of air and people, and space to work and to wash as did most other "houses," especially meetinghouses, which likewise had part-time use. Hence the inventories reflect mainly mundane indoor activities. The State House, however, was most importantly an outdoor advertisement of what Vermonters of every persuasion held sacred: a society dedicated to justice based on the law of classical Christian civilization, independence, curiosity, asceticism, and solid conservatism. Viewed from the opposite hill or from the road below and across the 325-foot depth of "yard," it combined the dignified elements of a Greek temple façade with a Roman dome to express plain integrity and pride in sovereign statehood.

Making the most of Montpelier's valley site, architect Ammi B. Young required blasting into the hill to extend the vista and maximize the majesty of the approach. Loyal Vermonters and curious tourists looked up to the compact pile without realizing the care with which the architect had calculated the proportions. Nonetheless, they felt from the result what Zadock Thompson described as simple, neat, pure, appropriate (i.e., functional), and built for the ages.[3] The copper-covered dome and roofs, oxidized to a green patina after a few seasons, blended into the pasture above it as its wooden base, painted and stippled a leaden gray, blended with the granite walls below.[4] Once inside the yard, which was enclosed by an iron fence like those framing most antebellum state capitol grounds,[5] a visitor walked up the path and the series of steps, feeling the building's classical vocabulary declare that godlike heroes dwelt within.

The inventory of the wood house, the capitol's only outbuilding, reveals the workaday aspect of the capitol grounds. Shovels for snow or dirt, a snow scraper and a roller, wooden and iron rakes, old hoes, pickaxes, a harrow and teeth, and a wheelbarrow suggest leftovers from con-

The Second Vermont State House, before 1857. Daguerreotype. This is one of three known photographic images of the building taken before it burned in January 1857.

struction as much as equipment for seasonal use. The sergeant at arms contracted out the hay cutting on the campus.[6]

Entering ceremonially through the imposing Doric columns of the portico or informally from either end or the rear, people used foot scrapers, umbrella stands and pans, and clotheshorses to hang up their coats. The design of the interior symbolized the importance of each element of state government. The basic form of a Greek cross suggested the marriage of classical and Christian culture. There was only one padlock on the 1841 inventory (no more ever again listed). Which room did it protect: the governor's? With only two clocks, one in each chamber, assemblymen depended on their pocket watches or their friends. A letter box in the Senate chamber, listed from 1843 to 1848, was a "convenience box" to accumulate solons' mail for transfer to the post office.[7] I suspect the first-termers in the back rows may have complained of cold drafts, so the sergeant at arms supplied the House chamber with the only State House thermometer. The secretary of state and the state treasurer had fireproof safes for their most precious documents.

This was the people's center—and still is, although modern conditions require security and locks. Anyone could walk in at any time, pick up a copy of the "State House laws" in the rotunda or vestibule, and behave according to its rules. It was probably an unoccupied shell most of the year because every state officer, from the governor down, did most of his work at home, except during the session.

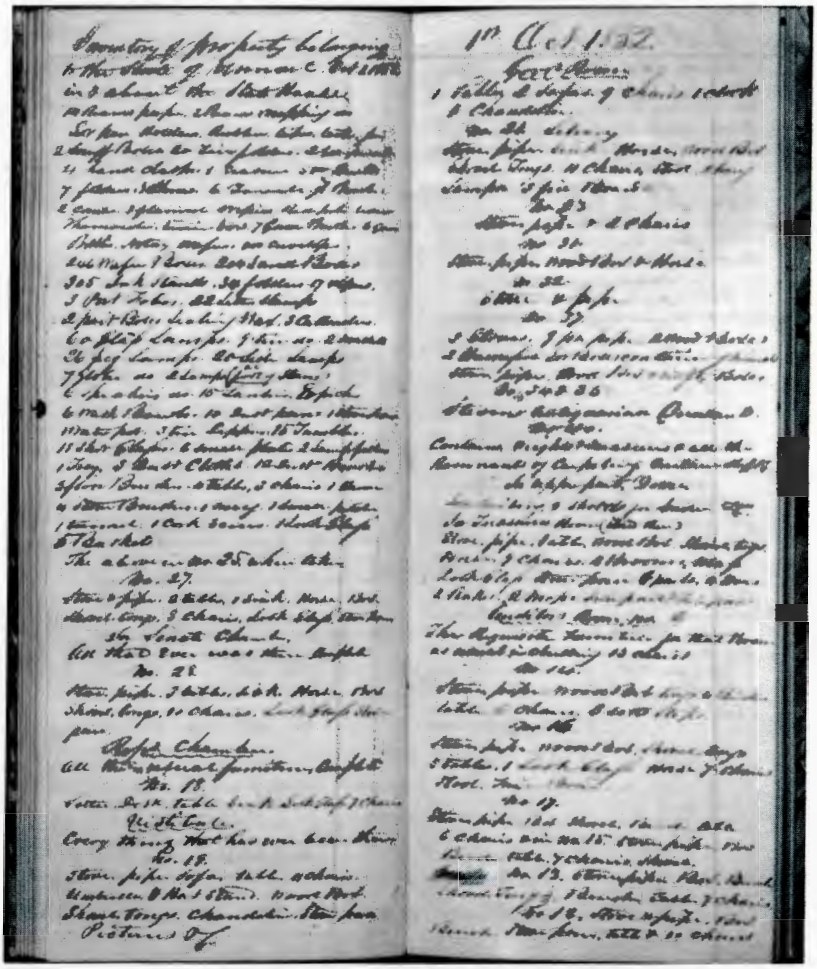
The dignity of the state called for special interior elegance in some cases, such as mahogany or black walnut furniture for the legislators, the governor, and the secretary of state, but it was simple and relied more on proportion than filigree. The flag did not become a necessary symbol of state and national unity until the Civil War. One flag on three inventories, identified as a state flag in 1855, was stored, not on display. The rooms of the secretary of state, treasurer, governor's secretary, and the library had wall maps.

For lighting through the dark days of late fall, we find listed the paraphernalia of lamps and lanterns: reflectors, stands, shades, wrenches for lamps, wicking, chandeliers for the two chambers and the governor's office,[8] an oil can and 18 gallons of whale oil in a barrel dangerously stored in the furnace room (candles not mentioned). Hanging globe and astral lamps lighted the library and the spaces where many congregated—the vestibule, rotunda, and legislative chambers—until gas lights came in 1855. One wag remarked that they could dispense with the gas company and light one match in the assembly room.[9]

Furnaces provided heat for the halls, legislative chambers, and important offices, and twenty-six wood stoves warmed the smaller rooms. Sessions in the fall, when there was less work to do at home and the roads were in better shape, used up less wood than winter sessions would have.

Washroom facilities consisted of a few looking glasses and movable washbowls, pitchers, mugs, tumblers, towels, and tin and copper dippers, although the treasurer's office had a "wash sink" in 1842. By 1851 even a few bars of soap show up on the list. Because the occupants had no "necessary" to relieve themselves, they probably used the woodshed or went to Mahlon Cottrill's Pavilion Hotel next door when they recessed for dinner.[10] As colonial houses of worship had "nooning houses" to which churchgoers resorted between morning and afternoon services, Cottrill's was the chief nooning house for people at the capitol.

Everyone working in the State House was literate and supplied with writing materials: inkstand; "best Opake quills"; desk knife for sharpening quills; sandbox for sand to blot the ink (replaced later by blotting paper); brushes to remove the sand; wax wafers—heat-softened and stamped—to seal letters; rules; rubbers (erasers); compasses; a variety of paper, including wrapping and ballot paper (but no toilet paper) and



"Inventory of property belonging to the State of Vermont, Oct. 1, 1852, in & about the State House." From a manuscript inventory of the State House, 1841–1856. Courtesy of the Vermont State Archives. The notation "Stevens' antiquarian documents, Nr. 40" designates the original collections of the Vermont Historical Society.

"1 Ream paper Broken good"; letter folders; bill folders; ivory folders; bone folders. Almost everyone wrote with quill pens, but the 1842 list also included "10 Steel Pens" and "2 Doz Led Pencils" (by 1855 there were fifty-seven).

The state library, exalted by its location on the upper floor with the

House and Senate chambers and the governor's suite, represented a potential for satisfying the needs of Vermonters, first those in state government and eventually all. The state librarian's reports appear in the inventories for 1841–1842 and 1844–1849. They show steady growth from 2,628 bound volumes to over 4,600, not counting unbound materials and notwithstanding the beginnings of international exchange of documents, which Vermont began by giving more than it received. Architect Young had designed an 18-by-36-foot space for 10,000 volumes.

The library was also an embryo museum, with specimens of Vermont wool, copper, money (both "Continental" paper and unspecified Vermont coppers or paper notes of the 1780s), and a medal. In 1841 the dome contained "some mineralogical specimens." Governor Silas Jenison favored a geological survey in 1837, but the legislature did not approve one until 1844. Professor George W. Benedict of Burlington supported the survey and may have given the rocks.[11]

For the curious antiquarian, there are enigmas yet to be solved. What were tin, ivory, and bone folders? *Sticks* of tape? Why did the librarian need "1 Bottle Gum Water," listed in 1845? How did stove boards work? Why does paper need to be "broken good"? Did the contents of the two fireproof safes survive the 1857 fire?

Most of the manuscripts laboriously assembled by Henry Stevens to document Vermont's Revolutionary past did not survive that holocaust. At the beginning of the 1850 session, Luther Cross described the contents of two rooms: "occupied by Mr. Stevens' collection of everything; no admittance. Furniture I suppose same as last year." The end-of-session list represents, perhaps, new friction with the collector: "Nos. 34 & 35 occupied by H. Stevens for his host of cholera. who keeps the keys for fear the disorder will spread. . . . In No. 36 there are boxes filld with Stevens' trash, don't know what. . . . In No. 28 is another lot of Stevens' trash." By 1851 Cross had reformed: he mentioned "Stevens' collections of old documents" in rooms 34 and 35.

Henry Stevens arranged to have two brass cannons—captured from German soldiers at the Battle of Bennington—refurbished, mounted, and given to the state of Vermont. He paraded them at Bennington's celebration of the battle on August 16, 1848. That fall they were in the vestibule; by October 1851 they had been dumped in the basement. No one yet felt the need to aim them symbolically south from the portico, against the slave power.

Icons inside consisted of three reminders of the War of Independence and two images of Vermonters. Not until late in the century did the Vermont Historical Society give some portraits of governors to hang in the State House. A copy of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington, behind the speaker's desk, was the first thing people thought of saving

Ammi B. Young's working drawing for the front elevation of the Second Vermont State House, 1831.

in the 1857 fire. The state library had three copies of the Declaration of Independence, one probably framed and hung, and one copy of Washington's farewell address.[12]

A portrait of Charles K. Williams and a bust of Elijah Paine graced the Senate chamber. Perhaps Paine's son Charles, who was governor from 1841 to 1843, gave the bust after his father's death in 1842. The Rutland County Bar Association commissioned Woodstock-born Benjamin Franklin Mason to paint the elegant full-length portrait of Chief Justice Williams on his retirement from the Supreme Court in 1846 and presented it to the state.[13] In the popular mind both these men were free from partisan politics and epitomized probity and justice. Both had links to early Vermont. Samuel Williams, the judge's father, an immigrant of the 1780s, was Rutland pastor, publisher, and first historian of Vermont. Paine's was the typical success story of a man with advantages who made good on the Vermont frontier. He speculated in Vermont lands in the 1780s, built a turnpike, invested in a broadcloth mill, and won appointment to the U.S. district court in 1801. The Williams portrait is now in the executive chamber, the Paine bust in the Supreme Court chamber.

The picture of the sergeant at arms we imagine from these inventories is of the idle occupant of a political sinecure who resents the job of inventorying. Except for this chore, continued through 1914, his only work is to tell his assistant to feed the furnaces and grudgingly interrupt his story or card game to tell visitors where the Senate is sitting. Incumbents came to realize that the State House could be the state's show window. Since 1987 David Schütz as curator of state buildings has kept an inventory of significant artifacts. Thus the role of janitor evolved into the roles of the modern receptionist, supervisor of the building, and curator, who keep the capitol looking spruce and welcome with pride those who work or visit there.

Notes

[1] The pictorial evidence is limited to the plans and images reproduced in Daniel Robbins, "Ammi Young's State House," *The Vermont State House: A History and Guide* (Montpelier: Vermont State House Preservation Committee, 1980), 18–27, and to a daguerreotype of about 1850 in the Vermont Historical Society's collections, reproduced here on p. 101.

[2] For a biographical sketch of Ware, whom he called an "old war horse," see Daniel P. Thompson, *History of the Town of Montpelier* (Montpelier, Vt.: E. P. Walton, 1860), 221–224.

[3] Zadock Thompson, "Vermont State House," *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil, and Statistical* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1842), pt. 2, 130–132, based on consultation with the architect.

[4] Henry R. Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the USA* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 106, assume that both dome and base were painted gray, but Thompson, *History of Vermont*, pt. 2, 130, reported the building committee's decision that "the roof and dome were to be covered with copper." The "Box Old Copper" listed in the dome in 1841 must have been left over from the sheathing.

[5] Hitchcock and Seale, *Temples of Democracy,* passim. A quarter ton of surplus fencing, listed in 1842, was stored in the dome. The wooden fence enclosed the green between the Pavilion Hotel and a north-south street east of the State House. See the copy of the daguerreotype, about 1850, and "Vermont's Second State House: A Letter from Ammi B. Young," introduction and notes by Lilian Baker Carlisle, *Vermont History News* 46, 1 (1995): 8.

[6] See T. D. Seymour Bassett, *The Growing Edge: Vermont Villages, 1840–1880* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1992), 110.

[7] Donald B. Johnstone of Burlington, postal historian, explained this service to me.

[8] One wonders if the unique chandelier of the First State House, recalled perhaps by former congressman E. P. Walton and cited in Mary Greene Nye, *Vermont's State House* (Montpelier, Vt.: Department of Conservation and Development, Publicity Service, 1936), 2, was installed in one of the legislative chambers.

[9] Bassett, *The Growing Edge,* 83.

[10] According to David Schütz, curator of state buildings, the first water closets were installed in 1888 in the State House with the construction of the annex, now the Supreme Court building. I am indebted to him for my references to the sergeants at arms after the Civil War.

[11] T. D. Seymour Bassett, *A History of the Vermont Geological Surveys and State Geologists* (Burlington: Vermont Geological Survey, 1976), 1–2. Other possible donors are Samuel R. Hall of Craftsbury or Zadock Thompson of Burlington.

[12] The notation is merely "1 Washington's address."

[13] Nye, *Vermont's State House,* 60; Robbins, *The Vermont State House,* 96–97. Both likenesses first appear in the 1847 inventory, although the lists for 1844–1846 do not even include Gassner's copy of Gilbert Stuart's Washington, which is listed in 1843, when the other two were not.