Landmarks Preservation Commission
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CITY HALL, First Floor Interior consisting of the Main Entrance, the Rotunda and its divided staircase, the encircling corridor and the portion of the east-west corridor between the Main Entrance and the Rotunda; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Rotunda and the circular gallery surrounding it; the dome of the Rotunda above the second floor, Broadway and City Hall Park, Borough of Manhattan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 122, Lot 1.

On November 25, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of City Hall, First Floor Interior consisting of the Main Entrance, the Rotunda and its divided staircase, the encircling corridor and the portion of the east-west corridor between the Main Entrance and the Rotunda; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Rotunda and the circular gallery surrounding it; the dome of the Rotunda above the second floor, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Rotunda of New York's City Hall is a sensitively designed and beautifully proportioned interior space, a notable feature in a building of great elegance and serene dignity. A designated Landmark since 1966, City Hall was begun in 1802 and completed in 1811. It has been, for over one hundred and fifty years, an architectural symbol of civic pride and authority.

City government was established on Manhattan Island by the Dutch in 1653. The old City Tavern, a masonry building on Pearl Street erected in 1642 for Governor Kieft, served as the first Stadt Huys (City Hall). By 1697 the building was in a serious state of decay despite attempts at repair and temporary quarters were used until a new City Hall was completed in 1700. This building stood at Wall and Nassau Streets and was renamed Federal Hall when New York became the nation's first capital. Washington was inaugurated there on April 30, 1789. Federal Hall National Memorial (formerly the Sub-Treasury Building) now occupies the site.

As early as 1776 New York's Common Council resolved that "in consequence of the ruinous situation of the Citty Hall" a new building was needed. The outbreak of the Revolutionary War naturally delayed plans for new construction and in the 1780s it was decided to simply repair the old structure. Work was carried out in 1784 by John McComb, the father of John McComb Jr., one of the architects of the present City Hall, and alterations were also made according to the designs of Major Pierre C. L'Enfant, the French engineer who formulated the plan of Washington, D. C.

In the spring of 1800 a committee was formed to assess the feasibility of constructing a new City Hall to replace Federal Hall which still required constant repairs. Two years later, the Common Council voted to build a new government center, one of which New York could be proud. Following the example of Washington, D. C., where architectural competitions were held in the 1790s for the new Capitol and President's House, the New York Council advertised a competition for the new City Hall on February 20, 1802. The building site had evidently already been chosen--the old fenced Common, now City Hall Park, which was at that time near the northernmost limits of the City's development. The plans were to include four courtrooms, six jurors' rooms, a Common Council room, eight offices, and City Watch and housekeeper rooms. Twenty-six proposals were submitted, the work of architects, builders and amateurs. The famed Philadelphia architect, Benjamin H. Latrobe, was among the competitors, but the first prize of $350 was awarded to the design of John McComb Jr., a native New Yorker, and Joseph François Mangin, a French émigré.

Actual construction of the building did not begin until 1803, since numerous objections to Mangin and McComb's design were voiced in the Common Council. Fears that the building would be too large, elaborate and expensive resulted in a long series of requests that McComb, who had been appointed special agent and supervising architect, submit plan revisions and detailed cost estimates. McComb formulated many new versions of the plans, all reducing the size of the building, and calculated the relative costs of using marble, brownstone or combinations of the two. He journeyed to quarries as far afield as Pennsylvania and Vermont and also investigated transport routes. A compromise was finally achieved, and it was agreed that City Hall would be built with shallower projecting wings on the front facade than those proposed in the original presentation drawings.

The cornerstone of the building was laid in an official ceremony presided over by Mayor Edward Livingston on May 26, 1803. Building progress was slow, primarily due to financial problems, but also owing to workers' disputes and a yellow fever epidemic. By 1807 the building had only reached the second story windowsill level. The formal dedication finally took place on Independence Day, 1811, but it was not until the following year that the building was actually occupied.

The total cost of construction was about half a million dollars. We know from the "Orders for Marble" book, carefully kept by McComb, that the marble alone cost $35,000. The expense of the interior decoration represented about one-fifth of the total cost. The workmen were paid a daily wage of between one dollar and a dollar and a half. John Lemair, hired in March of 1805 as the supervising stonecarver for the building, earned four dollars a day, while McComb earned the munificent salary of six dollars per diem.

City Hall ranks among the finest architectural achievements of its period in America. Talbot Hamlin characterized it as the first expression of New York's cosmopolitanism. Designed in the Federal style, modified by French influence, it was the successful result of the collaboration of an American and a French architect. John McComb Jr. (1763-1853), whose father is best remembered for his ecclesiastical work, such as the old Brick Church of 1767, was the leading architect in New York after the American Revolution. Trained in the builder-architect colonial tradition, he was a conscientious and competent designer, greatly influenced by British precedent. His name is associated with three designated Landmarks besides City Hall: Hamilton Grange on Convent Avenue, Castle Clinton in Battery Park, and the James Watson House on State Street, now the rectory of the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Seton. McComb also designed and built three lighthouses along the Atlantic seaboard, all still standing; the original Queen's College Building at Rutgers University; and Washington Hall at Broadway and Reade Street.

Considerably less is known about the life and career of Joseph Mangin. Very likely he was one of the many French émigrés who came to America in the wake of the French Revolution, although Latrobe, in a disparaging comment about City Hall written to his brother after the competition had been decided, called Mangin that "St. Domingo Frenchman." Mangin was appointed City Surveyor in 1795, and in 1797, in partnership with Casimir Goerck, he began preparation of an official City map which was published in 1803. Mangin and Goerck took this opportunity to name streets after themselves, now incorporated in housing developments between East Third Avenue and Grand Street paralled to the East River. The Park Theater of 1796-98 and the State Prison near Christopher Street have also been attributed to Mangin. Aside from City Hall his best known work is the designated Landmark, Old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street, one of the very earliest Gothic Revival churches in New York.

Apparently McComb and Mangin worked together only once--on the City Hall presentation drawings. McComb was responsible for the supervison of construction of the building and only his name appears on the cornerstone. Partly because of the often noted French characteristics of City Hall and partly because Mangin is an elusive historical figure, the contribution each architect made to the design has long been disputed. Opinions vary dramatically. Mangin has been referred to as a "simple draftsman" in no way responsible for the design itself, but he has also been assigned full and exclusive credit for it, as indeed, has McComb. On the other hand, McComb has been classified as an opportunist utterly incapable of producing such a masterful design. Probably the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. Hamlin's viewpoint, that McComb "deserves the

greatest credit--especially for preserving the delicate French refinement Mangin contributed to the original design" seems an entirely credible one.

In the specific case of the design of the Rotunda we again are presented with differences of opinion regarding primary responsiblity--Mangin or McComb--as well as stylistic precedent--French or English. Interesting parallels can be drawn with certain French stairhalls of the mid-18th century, notably that of the Hôtel de Ville at Nancy of c.1752-1755. The City Hall Rotunda has a general similarity of plan and shares a sense of elegant spaciousness and even certain details, such as the single first flight of stairs with curved handrailing. There exists, however, an even closer prototype for the Rotunda--the stairhall of Wardour House in Wiltshire by the architect James Paine, which was published in 1783 in his Plans, Elevations, and Sections of Noblemen and Gentlemen's Houses. It seems very likely that McComb knew this book since the plan of the adjoining octagonal rooms of Hamilton Grange appears to be closely based on Paine's plans for Kedleston Hall, published in the same book. The plan and spatial organization of the Wardour House stairhall is very similar to that of the Rotunda and both display an appreciation for ordered clarity and classical axial balance. Moreover, while the Rotunda as built is encircled by ten Corinthian columns, some of McComb's preliminary drawings show only eight, the exact number used in Wardour House. McComb executed a vast number of study and working drawings, and clearly the design of the Rotunda was for him a labor of love, the painstaking desire for refinement--an indication of the extent of his involvement. It is not, on the other hand, definitive proof that Mangin was in no way involved.

In any event, there can be no debate that the Rotunda and adjacent halls are a beautiful series of interior spaces. The entrance hall, from which one first glimpses the Rotunda, is entered through five handsome arched doorways corresponding to the archways leading into the vaulted central corridor which laterally bisects the building. Two pedimented doorways are set within arches at each end of the entrance hall. All the arches have scrolled keystones, echoing the detail on the exterior of the building, and are enframed by Ionic pilasters. The stone of the arch enframements and pilasters is Massachusetts marble from the quarries of Johnson & Stevens in West Stockbridge, the same as that originally used for the front and ends of the building. (In the 1950s, when the exterior of the building was restored, new veined Alabama limestone replaced this marble.) The chandeliers, here as in the Rotunda itself, are suspended from elegant acanthus rosettes of stucco. At first floor level, the Rotunda is encircled by a vaulted hallway with an axially placed vestibule and doorway at the back and arched openings at each side leading to the Rotunda proper. This hallway is the counterpart to the circular gallery of the second floor.

The Rotunda itself is a magnificent cylindrical domed space enclosing a grand double stairway. A single flight of stairs leads up to a central landing with two blind arches flanking an open one which leads down a flight of steps to the encircling hall and rear entrance. From this central landing the curving double stairway gracefully unfolds and circles up to a landing at the second floor. The exposed ends of the steps are adorned with delicately carved floral designs and bordered by an unusual vinelike molding. The floral motif is carried over to the iron handrailings which have rosette medallions set at the center of uprights with acanthus offshoots. At the second floor ten majestic fluted Corinthian columns support the great dome. These columns have capitals of great richness and are examples of the exceptionally fine craftsmanship which characterizes the entire building. Ten corresponding fluted Corinthian pilasters, set against broader unfluted pilasters of shallower depth with typically Federal style pineapple and scroll capitals, separate and define the vaulted bays of the gallery. Within the bays handsome pedimented doorways give access to the surrounding rooms and staircases. A floral frieze embellishes the entablature which is supported by the columns. A surmounting balustrade screens a second narrower gallery with doorways leading to the offices. (These rooms were originally used as the housekeepers' quarters.) The great dome has coffers with rosettes graduated in size which enhance perspectival diminution and, hence, the apparent height of the whole. The central oculus contains a delicate traceried skylight.

Light from the oculus subtly modulates the neutral colors of the interior, suffusing it with an unexpected warmth. The grandeur of the Rotunda is the product of these colors and light effects and of the impressively simple spatial organization--in a tradition which ultimately extends back to the Roman Pantheon.

City Hall, as the heart of city government and legislative meeting place, has received many important guests. It has been the site of numerous important ceremonies. On two solemn occasions, the Rotunda was the place where New Yorkers bade a final farewell to two United States Presidents, Abraham Lincoln who lay in state at the head of the stairway on April 24 and 25 of 1865, and Ulysses S. Grant on August 8, 1885.

On numerous occasions, City Hall has been seriously endangered, twice when the cupola and roof caught fire, first in 1858 just after a fireworks display in celebration of the laying of the Atlantic Cable, and second in 1917, when, ironically enough, repair work was being done on the roof. The building has been threatened with alteration, abandonment and demolition. As early as 1833, City officials considered selling City Hall to the Federal government and erecting a new City Hall in Union Square. In 1854 the Common Council again heard proposals for the building of a new City Hall. A competition was held and designs by architect Martin E. Thompson were selected for a new structure which was to stand in the park directly behind City Hall. Fortunately the project was abandoned, but in 1893 an elaborate new scheme threatened City Hall with razing. A great new building, to cost over four million dollars, was to be erected on the site of the present City Hall. To this end, an advisory committee was chosen including such eminent architects as Richard Morris Hunt, Napoleon Le Burn, and William R. Ware. An architectural competition elicited over one hundred design entries from which six were chosen for final consideration. A contemporary article in the Architectural Record reported the dismay of many New Yorkers". . . almost every association in the city that can be regarded as an organ of civilization made haste to enter its protest against demolition of the City Hall, a building that is not only beautiful, but venerable as antiquity goes in New York, and antedates every other edifice that is now conspicuous." In fact, feeling for the preservation of City Hall ran so high that the Tilden Trust even suggested moving it to Bryant Park in midtown and making it a museum and the Trust headquarters.

Although repeatedly saved from abandonment or demolition, the restoration and maintenance of City Hall was mismanaged in the 19th century. In the 1850s, for example, a central heating system was installed with pipes left exposed throughout the building. It was not until 1907 when Mrs. Russell Sage, whose husband had established the Russell Sage Foundation, became interested in restoration that a comprehensive plan was undertaken. To further this project she contributed $65,000 between 1907 and 1920. Grosvenor Atterbury (1869-1956)-best know for his housing schemes, of which Forest Hills Gardens was the most notable, and for his experiments in low cost housing prefabrication--was appointed architect for the interior restoration in association with John A. Tompkins and Stowe Phelps. They began work in 1907 in the Governor's Room and continued in 1912-13 with the Rotunda. The oculus at the top of the dome, which had been partially boarded up for many years was reglazed, once again flooding the Rotunda with light. Gilding was removed from the rosettes in the coffers and from the bases of the columns. Railings based on original sketches by McComb were installed. The fluted Corinthian columns needed only to be cleaned. In addition to this work Atterbury restored several other rooms in City Hall and also installed the doorway screens in the lateral corridors.

Today City Hall, beautifully restored and cared for, still stands within its park. Its scale and style provide a dramatic contrast to the buildings which have grown up around it in the course of a century and a half. An eloquent reminder of bygone times in New York history, City Hall is truly one of New York's finest architectural treasures.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission recognizes that the Entrance Hall, vestibule, Rotunda and staircase of City Hall must be able to function freely as an integral part of the activities conducted within City Hall. The Commission believes it has the obligation to cooperate with the representatives of landmark buildings whenever it my be essential to make changes to insure that these changes are harmonious and preserve the integrity of the landmark.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that City Hall, First Floor Interior consisting of the Main Entrance, the Rotunda and its divided staircase, the encircling corridor and the portion of the east-west corridor between the Main Entrance and the Rotunda; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Rotunda and the circular gallery surrounding it; the dome of the Rotunda above the second floor, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among their important qualities, the Main Entrance and the Rotunda of City Hall are part of one of the finest architectural achievements of the early 19th century in the United States, that the design by a French and an American architect is an early reflection of the cosmopolitanism of New York, combining French elements with the Federal style, that they constitute a superbly designed series of exceptionally beautiful interior spaces, that they are properly restored and maintained, and that the Rotunda has played a significant role in the history of the City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark City Hall, First Floor Interior consisting of the Main Entrance, the Rotunda and its divided staircase, the encircling corridor and the portion of the east-west corridor between the Main Entrance and the Rotunda; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Rotunda above the second floor, Broadway and City Hall Park, Borough of Manhattan, and designated Tax Map Block 122, Lot 1, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.