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The Old Executive Office Building

A BRIEF HISTORY

Just stop and look around you. If you're in the Old Executive Office Building, you're in "Mr. Mullett's architectural infant asylum." "The finest office building in Washington—magnificent," "Washington's worst eyesore—the ugliest heritage of the nineteenth century in America," "An epoch in American architecture," "A horrible example of . . . 'American ironic'," or, originally, the State, War and Navy Building. One of her engineers stood back with pride after her completion in 1888 and said, "She's plumb and she's square and, boys, she's purty."

The south wing was started in 1871 and completed in time for the State Department to move in July 1, 1875. The east wing was commenced in 1872 and completed seven years later, so that on April 16, 1879, the War and Navy Departments moved into that wing. The west and center wings were the last to be erected, work on them commencing March 31, 1883 and being completed January 31, 1888. When other buildings were provided for the War and Navy Departments, the building was occupied by the State Department. Congress at that time changed its name to the Department of State Building. The building presently houses functions of the White House Office, Office of the Vice President, Office of Management and Budget, and other agencies which are part of the Executive Office of the President. It is now called the "Old Executive Office Building."

This gray "birthday cake" has celebrated more than one hundred years as one of Washington's most controversial structures. The first criticism came as early as 1874 soon after the south wing began to display the intricate detail of its French Renaissance style. In the official opinion of the Justice Department, "The building stands today as the grandest among many other grand monuments of the artistic taste and skill of its official



designer." Its architect, A.D. Mullett, used French Renaissance as a basis and created (in one committee's opinion) a building that lends credit to the Government, an ornament to the city of Washington, and second in architectural importance and beauty to no building in the United States. Mr. Mullett, who was never paid for his services, committed suicide and is said to still haunt the halls of Congress demanding his money.

Construction required 17 years (1871-1888) and originally cost \$10 million, doled out in grudging amounts by Congress during the course of building. Curiously enough, Congress took a paternal interest in its construction and for one of the very few times in Executive-Legislative relationship crossed that line between executive and legislative to a greater degree of closeness than was ever attempted or permitted by either branch before or since. The Executive seemed to welcome this solicitude as it aided in the completion of the largest solid granite building in the world.

This immense granite structure epitomizes in many ways an epoch in American architecture. The transitory

taste for French neo-classicism, fostered by the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, has few more striking expressions. Its obvious lack of stylistic harmony with other administrative buildings in Washington has given rise to proposals for remodeling which, fortunately, have been postponed indefinitely.

In this masonry building, the heavy supporting walls have a use that is lacking in the later Federal buildings which are erected around steel cage construction. The lower floors of the exterior exemplify structural solutions characteristic of the dawn of modern building construction. A view of the building from any angle presents a confused impressionistic picture of broken lines and planes, of baroque gone frantic. This complex effect is produced by the broken lines of its central and corner pavilions, extended porches, towering chimneys, and dormer windows. At the center of each facade is a six-story pavilion, approached by a broad flight of colonnades. The four corner pavilions, also designed with superimposed colonnades, are adorned with small one-story porches or loggias. The numerous windows lining the walls

of the three principal floors are crowned with hooded pediments.

As is the case with nearly all of the Federal buildings in Washington, this monumental facade was secured by means of a scheme of interior courts entailing, in this case, a total of two miles of corridors.

The interior of the building is in the taste of the period, the marble halls, granite stairways with balusters of bronze, and antiquated fixtures recalling the grandeur of the 1870's. The immense and complex interior required the services of a large force of scrub-women to clean it nightly. In this connection it is interesting to note that during the Hayes Administration the cleaning force conducted the first strike of Federal employees. The occasion was an attempt to introduce machine-scrubbing equipment which worked something like a bicycle. With the machines, a dozen women could do the work 80 had been doing. The strike was successful.

All doors, window frames, trimming and baseboards are cast iron, cast in a foundry set up on the premises for that purpose. Also, all marble was cut on site. The only woodwork is in the elevator (present partitions excepted), window sashes, doors, and floors. Walls are granite, 4' thick for outside walls, 18" thick for inside walls. The garden vases outside were designed by a Captain Douglas MacArthur, sixth superintendent of the building.

There are 1,134 inside doors. GSA says these doors are not solid mahogany, but instead they have an oak core with a 1/4 to 1/2 inch mahogany veneer. The brass door knobs were cast on the premises and represent the three original services of the initial occupants; State, War, and Navy. Knobs cost \$25 each originally and would cost \$250 or more today to replace. Hinges are also brass and engraved, even on the inside. Staircase balustrades are of intricately designed oxidized bronze topped by a mahogany handrail. (These hundreds of bronze

posts caused the mutiny of the charwomen as well.) A heavy brass guardrail has been fastened as a precaution against accidents.

Glass domes on the north and south are designed like hugh stars. The two center domes are large and elaborate. On the east side, the dome covers two stairwells and is of stained glass with dark blue and red stars and blue stripes on a field of white. There are 23 border designs encircling this dome.

The marble for the black and white floor tiles was brought from Maine and Richmond, Virginia. Dennis Johnson of GSA points out that you can see the fossils in the black tiles. He notes that the white tiles have been scalloped out from foot traffic, but the black tiles didn't begin to show wear until they cracked under the spiked high-heels women began wearing in the 30's and 40's. Mosaic tiles in the Old Library and Indian Treaty Room were brought from Italy and put in by Italian laborers who came from Italy specifically for that purpose. GSA craftsmen have duplicated some of the tiles that have needed to be replaced so that the floors are in mint condition and some of the most beautiful to be seen anywhere.

The eight stairways of the building swing gracefully from floor to floor unsupported by beams or arches. Each step is made of solid granite and the stone is notched so that it fits over the upper edge of the step beneath it. The end of each step is tightly wedged 18 inches into the thick wall and forms a cantilever construction. Should one step give way, the whole staircase would fall.

Presidential press conferences, under Truman and Eisenhower, were held in the Indian Treaty Room on the fourth floor—ornate with marble and bronze and two stories high. No Indian treaties were signed in the Indian Treaty Room that have been documented. It is sometimes referred to as the "cupid room" because of the winged bronze angels which support light fixtures in each of the four

corners. Slabs of blackish marble are embedded in the walls and framed like pictures. Many legends abound about the stones; "One of the stones is from Solomon's Temple," "If you look at a certain stone (not identified) at a given point, light will radiate from it"; "Pictures of Lincoln, Roosevelt and scenes of American history are depicted in the marble slabs." None of these legends has been authenticated. There is one slab of marble with an authenticated past of historical significance. The serpentine marble over the entry came from the ruins of Pompey which were excavated in 1848.

The story (probably apocryphal) is told of President Coolidge's reaction to the building. He was reportedly given a full tour of the office and made no comment until he again reached the front entrance. Then he asked one question: "Is the building insured against fire or earthquake?" When the superintendent answered, "Of course, Mr. President," his only comment was, "What a pity." According to Mr. Santos, exsuperintendent, no government building is insured, on the assumption that guards and safety precautions are adequate and taxpayers would pay for reconstruction anyway. President Truman's ironic but trenchant opinion illustrates the next turning in the evolution of the public's attitude. The Washington Star of April 4, 1958 quoted him as saying, "They've been trying to tear this down for 20 years, but I don't want it torn down (with a chuckle). I think it's the greatest monstrosity in America."

A newer trend is illustrated by a commentary from an unidentified source: "The proposal to replace the Executive Office Building with another functional building is a bit like suggesting that the Egyptians tear down their unsightly pyramids and replace them with modern efficient tombstones." I'm certain the comparison is of structure not of use (tombs).

(Some excerpts taken from GSA publications)

8-18

revised
9/85

LOG OF PRESIDENT REAGAN'S TAPINGS: 1985 / 1986

January 7, 1985-- Audio only

Jan. 10-- A-V: RNC, "General Use Message"; National Association of T.V. Program Executives; Audio-only, Radio Marathon for Central America Fund-raiser; Inaugural taping for Committee; National Automobile Association)

Jan. 20-- Superbowl taping

Jan. 24-- A-V: U.S. Olympic Committee; Food Processing Machinery and Supplies Assoc.; L.A. Chamber of Commerce; National Religious Broadcasters; International Amateur Athletic Assoc.

Jan. 29-- A-V: American Trucking Assoc.; G.U. International Relations Assoc. (Model U.N.); Special Olympics.

February 26, 1985-- A-V: Tribute to Walter Annenberg; Juvenile Diabetes Foundation; Assoc. of General Contractors; Japan Society Dinner; National Red Cross; Japan Productivity Center

March 2, 1985-- Audio only: Harden and Weaver

March 14-- A-V: Second Chance Organ Donation Program; National Rifle Assoc.; Texas Sesquicentennial; Salvation Army; Young Republican National Federation

April 1, 1985-- A-V: Strong Memorial Hospital; Television Academy Hall of Fame; Senator Pete Wilson; Adam Walsh Missing Children

April 17-- A-V: Annual National Gallery Andrew Mellon Dinner; "It's Academic"; Armed Forces Day; Evangelical Press Assoc.; 173rd Airborne Brigade

April 25, 1985-- A-V: Horatio Alger Assoc. of Distinguished Americans; "A Tribute to Muhamed Ali"; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports; Council of a Black Economic Agenda

May 15, 1985-- A-V: College Republicans National Committee; Close-Up Foundation; WH News Photog. Assoc.; World Congress Otorhinolary; Paris Air Show; Cuban American National Assoc.

May 22-- Audio only: Cincinnati Reds

May 24th-- A-V: Christian-Jewish Meeting; World Games for the Deaf

June 13, 1985-- A-V: U.S. Savings Bonds Program; USIA Worldnet; Salvation Army; International Youth Congress; Baptist World Alliance; Right to Life; Generic Independence Day Message

June 29-- Audio only: Osmond Family/July 4th message

July 9-- A-V: Edd Hargett; The Elks; Tribute to Volunteers; National Aviation Hall of Fame; Paralyzed Veterans of America; FBI National Academy Retraining 50th Anniversary

September 16, 1985 A-V: President's Council on Physical Fitness; Tribute to Greer Garson; American Heart Assoc; WH Conference on Small Business;

United Way; Unknown Soldier

Sept. 19-- A-V: Operation Care and Share; American Portrait Series (CBS); National Federation of Republican Women; Radio America; Thanksgiving Armed Forces; Eagle Leadership Forum

Sept. 26-- A-V: Christmas Armed Forces message; DeMoss Foundation: "America You're Too Young To Die"; Sen. Bob Packwood; Aaron Spelling; Bryce Harlow

Oct. 2-- A-V: Honolulu Councilmen; Magazine Publishers Association

Oct. 16-- A-V: Statue of Liberty; Wyatt Durrette; Iowa Homecoming '86

Oct. 31-- A-V: Navy League Dinner; Public Relations Society of America; Ireland Fund/John Gavin

Nov. 6-- A-V: American Cancer Society; King Hussein; WTTW 30th Anniversary

Nov. 15-- A-V: Holiday Thanksgiving and Christmas messages; Red Cross; Ethics and Public Policy Center; WTVF Documentary on Aging

Nov. 26-- A-V: National 4-H Council; ~~George Burns 90th~~; ~~Tournament of Roses~~; National Republican Congressional Committee; Coach Ralph McKinzie/PM magazine

Dec. 6 -- A-V: Tournament of Roses; George Burns 90th B-day; Broadcast Pioneers Dinner; Afghan Relief dinner; C-Flig PSA

Dec. 19th -- Marine Corps Band; Martin Luther King Jr.; WDRC-BBC

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JAN. 8th 1986 -- National Retail Merchants Assoc. Convention; Inauguration of Governor & Lt. Gov. of Northern Mariana Islands; Jaycees Outstanding Young Americans dinner; Tribute to Irving Berlin

JAN. 15, 1986 -- Senior Bowl/75th Ann. Naval Aviation; 150th B-day National Theater; Red Cross; Lessons from Space/PBS; L.A. Chamber of Commerce; Newsweek

JAN. 30, 1986: ~~George Burns 90th~~; National Religious Broadcasters; Associated Builders & Contractors; General Budget; Hospice Dinner (National Hospice Month)

FEB. 28, 1986: USC Tribute to Virginia Rameo, Tribute to King Hassan (USIA), SPI Coalition Dinner

MARCH 8, 1986: → Luskenia - a - thon

MARCH 12, 1986: Assoc. General Contractors, Community College generic; Good Times Documentary; Women in Government Relations; Tribute to John Patrick; 1986 T.V. Academy Hall Fame; St. Patrick's Day Parade

MARCH 24: AP Radio; American Defense Preparedness Assoc.; Scripps Howard Foundation; Memorial Day Message & Armed Forces Day message; Olive View Medical Center; Pres. Council on Physical Fitness;

APRIL 10th: Carol Burnett; Ireland Fund dinner; ~~Smithsonian/Timo Inc. Hollywood Skit~~; Nat. Assoc. of Bank Women; NAB convention; ~~Charlton Bassett Golf Tournament~~; ~~Net. Assoc.~~ WST Convention

- April 21 Nevada Republican State Convention; Tribute to Catherine Shouse; Tribute to Dr. C. Rollins Hannon; Air Force Association Convention; Wide World of Sports 25th Anniversary; Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner; Harold Boel's Retirement Dinner; American Cancer Society; Prom Graduation (Mrs. Reagan)
- May 12 Local Ohio Centennial Celebration; Bicentennial of U.S. Constitution; Charley Boswell Golf Tournament; PSA for Children's Hospital Drama Season Campaign; World Trade Week; American Iron & Steel Institute; Bellvermont Space Program
- May 22 American Association of Retired Persons; Congressional Medal of Honor; National Travel Industry Assoc. Convention; PSA for Red Cross International; Rotary International; Young Voter Registration
- June 2 Kiroi Ballet; NBC Affiliates 60th Anniversary; Chicago Vietnam Vets Parade; National Right to Life Convention; Covenant House Dinner; Colorado GOP Convention; Tribute to Jimmy Doolittle
- June 18 NFL Player's Association Awards Banquet; ABC for LIFE's 50th Anniversary; Free Enterprise Man of the Year Award to Peter Grace; U.S.-Japan Cultural and Educational Conference; B'nai B'Rith Tribute to Walter Annenberg; USIA's International Visitor Program
- July 2 Lew & Edie Wasserman's 50th Anniversary; EXPO 86 World's Fair in Canada; Sandy Smoley Fundraiser; U.S. Olympic Festival
- July 14 National Law Enforcement Explorer Conference; National Aviation Hall of Fame
- July 21 Campaign for Penn State Dishes; AAU/USA Junior Olympics; Little League World Series; Productivity Improvement in the Federal Sector; Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod Upstate Gathering; Paralyzed Veterans of America.
- August 11th Danny Thomas' 50th Wedding Anniversary; Salvation Army Conference; PSA for Project Arterary USA; Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Award to Jim Brady; American Legion Convention; Political Spots for GOP Candidates

September 9 Health Distributors Assoc. Convention; National Basketball Players Assoc.; Campaign for Penn State Dinner (reopening); Telephone Pioneers 75th Anniversary Celebrations; United Way; Political tapings

September 25 Marc Buoninconti Fund; Vote America PSA, Bryce Harlow Foundation Awards; Disney World Bicentennial; USC Campaign; Eagle Forum Leadership; Political Donor Spots

October 2 Pacific Region Economic Conference; Holiday Messages for ~~Armed~~ Armed Forces; American Dental Assoc; US Attorneys Drug Program; Political

October 20 American Trucking Association Convention; Veterans Administration Volunteer Service Anniversary; Life and Health Insurance Medical Research Fund; Worldnet Conferences at the 38th World Medical Assembly; "Gazette of the Year" Award to John Ames; Museum of Broadcast Communication Gala

October 27

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10/27

National Housing Week

100th Anniversary of Statue of
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Washington Journalism Conference,
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White House Conference on
Partnerships in Education, 10/31

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Major Collective Bargaining, 10/27

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