

Bulfinch's Design for the Massachusetts State House

By HAROLD KIRKER

ALMOST seventy years ago, Ellen Susan Bulfinch, granddaughter of the architect of the Massachusetts State House, wrote that because of "a strong desire . . . to examine the original plans of the building, a diligent search has been made for them at various times, but without success."¹ The question was crucial in 1896 as that year a government committee had been appointed to arrange for the preservation of the Bulfinch building. The task of establishing the relationship between the existing structure and the original conception was given to Charles A. Cummings, who, like Miss Bulfinch, was convinced that the architect's plans had not been preserved. This assumption was incorrect; Bulfinch's "Elevation and plan of the principal Story of the New State House in Boston" turned up in the Phelps Stokes collection and is reproduced here for the first time with permission of its present owners, the Trustees of the New York Public Library.² Unfortunately, there is no specific information as to when or how Mr. Stokes acquired his drawing; nor is there any evidence on the drawing itself to indicate provenance. The actual date of the drawing is also uncertain, although it is assumed to be the design Bulfinch submitted in 1795 rather than the one he made shortly after returning from Europe in 1787.

The elevation and plan of the State House in the Stokes collection resolve most of the questions that have been raised regarding the original design. The

elevation shows the restoration to be substantially accurate; the plan demonstrates the correctness of the assumptions that galleries were not planned for the legislative chambers and what is now the Governor's office was formerly the Council Chamber. More important, the plan demonstrates the error of the generally accepted belief that the north or rear façade exactly duplicated the south front facing the common. The great portico was not specified for the north front but rather the motif of the main façade was repeated with pilasters and balustrades.

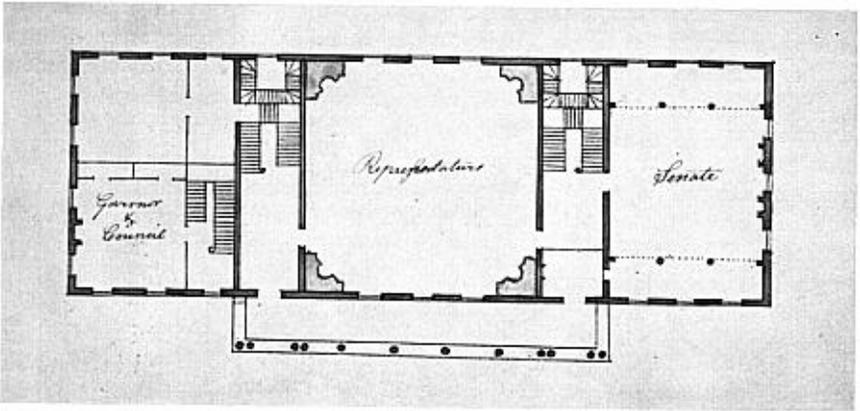
Despite the apparent loss of the architect's elevation and plan, Mr. Cummings had much material to aid him in the restoration authorized in 1896. The Massachusetts Archives contain papers relating to the designs Bulfinch submitted in 1787 and again in 1795 as well as tradesmen's itemized bills. There are contemporary press accounts of the building, numerous references in journals and early histories, and several paintings and prints dating from the early years of the nineteenth century. As the north front was impossible to restore and there was no question of exactly reconstructing the interior, the task even without the Bulfinch elevation and plan was not exceptional.

The earliest view of the State House is a water color of about 1805 by an unknown artist in the Bostonian Society.³ The rendering is crude but the view is noteworthy as the only one to show the main façade in relation to the Beacon Hill

Memorial Column Bulfinch designed in 1790 as well as the original fence and gateposts, topped with wooden urns and carved pine cones. As this earliest representation shows the lantern glazed, it is assumed Bulfinch's plan for an open cupola was scrapped at some time during construction. A copy of a slightly later water color by John Rubens Smith in the Boston Public Library shows not only the openings in the western rim of the drum

All these early nineteenth-century views show the State House before the construction of the basement above ground but after the dome was covered with copper by Paul Revere.

Perhaps the best pictorial source was the drawing made in 1827 by Alexander Jackson Davis of the main façade and the east end of the State House. Davis, a friend of Bulfinch and partner in the architectural firm of Town and Davis, de-



"PLAN OF THE PRINCIPAL STORY OF THE NEW STATE HOUSE IN BOSTON,"
BY CHARLES BULFINCH

Courtesy of The New York Public Library, I. N. Phelps Stokes Collection.

but, like the contemporary woodcut by Abel Bowen, gives clear evidence that there were five windows on the west end and that those on the third floor were cut into the entablature almost to the cornice.⁴ Charles Place found this "impossible to reconcile with Bulfinch's taste," even though there is precedent for it in Renaissance building and the practice became common with Greek Revivalists.⁵ The authenticity of the Bowen woodcut is testified to by the Philadelphia engraver William Wood Thackara, who visited Boston in 1820 and made a similar print.⁶

scribed his representation as "the finest specimen of lithography in the class of architecture yet produced on this side of the Atlantic."⁷ At any rate the Pendleton brothers were sufficiently satisfied to pay him \$225 for this and other drawings, and, after correcting his inaccurate treatment of the windows, proceeded to market what has become the most famous representation of the building. Evident in Davis' view are the granite "piazza" and wall built by Alexander Parris the year before the lithograph was made. These representations were the major

sources used by Cummings in the restoration, and given their general accuracy, it is difficult to understand why such deviations were permitted as the additional pilasters between the windows in the portico, the continuance of the balustrade around the roof, and the elimination of lunettes over the doors opening on to the porch.

The question of what the north front originally looked like was academic from the point of view of the restorers, for that façade had been changed first in 1831 when Isaiah Rogers constructed the "Fire Proof Edifice" and finally in 1889-1894 when Charles Brigham did the present wing in yellow brick to match the painted brick of the Bulfinch building. Still the scholars argued, most of them accepting the seeming evidence of the chromolithograph of 1855 by G. G. Smith, which shows the north front exactly duplicating that of the south façade overlooking the common. This opinion went largely unchallenged until twelve years ago when Leroy Thwing made a study of the construction of the State House from the detailed bills in the Massachusetts Archives.⁸ Finding bills for "12 large pilasters for the back of the house" but none for columns similar to those of solid pine stipulated for the south façade, Mr. Thwing correctly assumed that what was taken for a porch in the Smith view was in reality a repetition of the design of the main front in pilasters. Thwing was also right in questioning the authenticity of the pilasters in the porch on the south façade

because he failed to find a bill for them among the carefully itemized accounts. These are not shown in Bulfinch's elevation nor are they evident in the Bostonian Society water color. The Davis and Pendleton lithographs clearly define four pairs of pilasters at either end of the line of windows in the porch, but none of the old prints show the unfluted pilasters which someone has seen fit to tack up between the middle windows in the same range.

Not even the drawing in the Stokes collection settles the vexing question as to whether Bulfinch intended the brick surface of the State House to be plain or painted. The architect's personal preference for painted brick is evident in several earlier projects, such as the Tontine Crescent and his own house in Bulfinch Place. Unfortunately, the architect did not designate materials in his elevations by using the traditional colors but simply lined in his design with sepia ink on a light wash background. The problem is compounded by discrepancies in contemporary evidence. Thus the Bostonian Society water color shows the State House a plain, red brick, a fact attested to by the observation of a visiting Englishman around 1811.⁹ At the same time a fireboard of about 1812 in the Bostonian Society suggests the building was painted light yellow or gray, and this too is borne out by published testimony.¹⁰ So far as can be determined, sometime after 1825 the State House was painted yellow and it remained such until well into the present century.

NOTES

¹ Ellen Susan Bulfinch, *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect* (Boston, 1896), p. 112.

² This is one of two Bulfinch drawings in the collection and is listed in I. N. Phelps Stokes and Daniel C. Haskell, *American Historical Prints* (New York, 1932), pp. 61, 65. The other, the elevation and plan of the Joseph Coolidge House in Cambridge Street, is reproduced in Abbott Lowell Cummings, "Charles Bulfinch and Boston's Vanishing West End," *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, LII (Oct.-Dec., 1961), 45.

³ Reproduced in Harold and James Kirker, *Bulfinch's Boston* (New York, 1964), plate 10.

⁴ Bowen's woodcut is in Charles Shaw, *A*

Topographical and Historical Description of Boston (Boston, 1817).

⁵ Charles Place, *Charles Bulfinch, Architect and Citizen* (Boston, 1925), p. 79.

⁶ See *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, L (Jan.-March, 1960), 61.

⁷ Quoted in William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York, 1834), II, 409-410.

⁸ "The Bulfinch State House," *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, XLII (Winter, 1952), 63-67.

⁹ E. Mackenzie, *View of the United States of America* (Newcastle, 1819), pp. 103-104.

¹⁰ Caleb Snow, *A History of Boston* (Boston, 1825), p. 323.