

# The Boston Exchange Coffee House

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IN a journal entry for March 20, 1817, Ali Bey, the celebrated "Musulman traveler," described the Boston Exchange Coffee House as "a huge ill constructed edifice" of seven stories held together by a glass dome. "It's ill planned, dark, and inconvenient rooms," he concluded, "make one regret that so great expense and labor had not been better directed."<sup>1</sup> Although Ali Bey's travels in America are now known to be fictitious, having originated in the mind of Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, his account of the Exchange Coffee House is an early and accurate description of one of the most interesting and least-known landmarks of Federal Boston.

Until the Exchange Coffee House was completed in 1809, the town was without a proper hotel. The more fortunate travelers boarded with Mrs. Carter in the mansion Charles Bulfinch built five years before for the merchant Thomas Amory. This great house at the head of Park Street was hardly completed before the shifting maritime diplomacy of England and France rendered its owner bankrupt and brought building operations to a standstill. But in 1807, Samuel Brown, Crowell Hatch, and Andrew Dexter, encouraged by a temporary boom in the China trade, petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for an act of incorporation to construct "a building on an exten-

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Extracts from a Journal of Travels in North America, Consisting of an Account of Boston and Its Vicinity* (Boston, 1818), pp. 8-9.

sive plan, containing an Exchange, a Coffee-house, and different apartments for other uses, which will be conducive to public accommodation."<sup>2</sup> The act was passed with the stipulation that the value of the land and building could not exceed \$200,000. Despite this prudent restriction the actual cost of the project was more than one-half million dollars and it brought financial disaster not only to the proprietors but was "the means of ruining many of the mechanics who were employed in building it."<sup>3</sup>

Bulfinch is usually given as the author of the Exchange Coffee House. Even a casual examination of the structure, however, reveals an uncertainty of style and a clumsiness of execution quite at variance with the contemporary work of Boston's leading architect. Furthermore, the earliest published account of the building correctly assigns it to Asher Benjamin. Jonathan Whitney was the superintending mason and the chief carpenter was Samuel Jarvis, "to whose skill and unremitting attention [Benjamin] was greatly indebted."<sup>4</sup> He was also ably assisted by Solomon Willard, who later won fame as architect of the Bunker Hill Monument. The Exchange Coffee House was apparently Benjamin's first major commission in Boston, for in the several

<sup>2</sup> *Act of Incorporation of Exchange-Coffee-House* (Boston, 1807), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston* (Boston, 1901), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> *Omnium Gatherum*, I (Nov., 1809), 3.

years following his arrival in 1803 he was engaged only in church and house construction. Like most of Benjamin's early designs, this one shows the influence of the Adam brothers as learned from the executed work of Bulfinch. This debt Benjamin gratefully acknowledged in the preface of one of his later pattern books when, in rightly singling out the Tontine Crescent (1793) as the major source of inspiration to contemporary building, he added that with this project Bulfinch "gave the first impulse to good taste; and to architecture, in this part of the country."<sup>5</sup>

The Exchange Coffee House covered an acre of ground formerly occupied by Salter's brewery on Congress and State streets. It was planned in the form of an irregular triangle with the acute angle cut off: the north front measured ninety-four feet, the south extended an additional three yards, and the east façade stretched one hundred and three feet on Congress Street. Ali Bey complained that the latter front, although "evidently designed as a public ornament . . . is placed at a distance from any principal street and embosomed in other buildings."<sup>6</sup> This was accounted for by the plans of the proprietors to have the town open an avenue from Congress to Broad Street. Other critics thought the seven-story building of hammered granite and brick "too high and disproportionate."<sup>7</sup>

The architect seems to have been aware of the disparity in proportion and sought to compensate for it by placing the structure unusually far back from the street,

<sup>5</sup> Asher Benjamin, *Practice of Architecture* (Boston, 1833), p. iii.

<sup>6</sup> Knapp, pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Shaw, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston* (Boston, 1817), p. 230.

with a "spacious avenue" extending from the north front to State Street, on each side of which he planned to erect "elegant shops or offices, with a wide walk, sheltered by a colonnade, supported by Dorick pillars."<sup>8</sup> But like most of the building projects of the period, Benjamin's scheme was wrecked by the embargoes placed upon American shipping during the administrations of Jefferson and Madison.

It is questionable whether the north or the east front was considered the most important. Each had a basement of white marble and a broad belt of stone running below the upper stories; neither is remarkable for architectural refinement. The distinguishing feature of the north or State Street façade was a portico of six Ionic columns, "with an appropriate entablature," raised above a rusticated base and reached by a flight of stone steps. On the east front Benjamin carried six extraordinarily attenuated pilasters four stories before he broke them with a marble architrave. Into the center of this façade he squeezed a "Venetian window" much admired by contemporaries. A carriage entrance on the south side led from Salter's court to a spiral staircase which ascended directly to the ballroom. Even this convenience did not spare the ladies from the interested gaze of the townsmen, for an observer in 1809 noted that "it would be well to put up Venetian blinds, or lattice work, between the pillars of the colonnade, to secure the ladies from impertinent observation."<sup>9</sup>

While the exterior of the Exchange Coffee House struck some Bostonians as not in "the very best style of Architecture," the public rooms were universally

<sup>8</sup> *Omnium Gatherum*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

admired.<sup>10</sup> The most important was the Exchange—an enormous hall in the form of a parallelogram with five tiers of galleries rising eighty-three feet to where a “pillard dome, magnifick, heav’d its ample roof.”<sup>11</sup> A skylight and fifteen windows provided, according to Ali Bey, only the most fitful kind of illumination to the Exchange floor. The dome, which was one hundred feet in diameter, was covered with tin plates “after the method practiced in Montreal, from whence the tinnars were procured for that specific purpose.”<sup>12</sup> A telescope was mounted at the base of the skylight for the use of merchants searching out shipping in the harbor. On one side of the Exchange a large coffee room held a number of loges finished in mahogany and screened with scarlet curtains; on the other a reading room provided the newspapers of the day and a post office. In spite of these accommodations the merchants of Boston continued to transact their business in the streets and the Exchange was a financial failure.

A spiral stairway on the southern side of the building led to a dining room directly over the coffee room. This was the work of Solomon Willard, who, like

<sup>10</sup> Shaw, p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> *Bostonian Society Publications*, VIII, (1911), 123.

<sup>12</sup> *Omnium Gatherum*, p. 5. See also Caleb Snow, *A History of Boston* (Boston, 1825), *passim*.

Asher Benjamin, came to Boston from the western part of the state in the first years of the nineteenth century. The “grand spiral pile” rose from the basement to the roof, and according to one who saw the Exchange Coffee House in his youth, “there was no piece of joiner’s work in the country at that time which could compare with it, in spaciousness, architecture or finish.”<sup>13</sup> It was one of three principal staircases in the hotel and the main means of access to the hundred bedrooms scattered about the several top floors. Although dark and inconvenient, these rooms were well served with dining facilities, and in the absence in Boston of any comparable accommodations, they were generally occupied. The dining saloon and ballroom were also better patronized than was the Exchange. The former had Adam green walls and scarlet hangings; the ballroom was hung with yellow satin curtains, “figured and ornamented with a festooned drapery of purple silk, suspended from a bow and arrows, highly gilt,” and lighted by three domes and five crystal chandeliers.<sup>14</sup> In the latter room President Monroe was feted by the Bostonians during his visit in July, 1818. He was just in time, for the Exchange Coffee House burned to the ground that year and was not rebuilt.

<sup>13</sup> William Wheildon, *Memoir of Solomon Willard* (Boston, 1865).

<sup>14</sup> *Omnium Gatherum*, p. 7.