

Historic Rehabilitation Old State House Restoration Hartford, Connecticut



Working with Smith-Edwards Architects, AHS Historian/Architectural Historian Bruce Clouette, Ph.D., compiled a complete documentary history of Hartford's 1796 State House as part of a major restoration/renovation project. Using old views and photographs, archival records of the original construction and subsequent alterations, travelers' accounts, and other historical sources, the documentation, entitled *The Old State House: a Documentary History of its Construction, Furnishings, and Alterations*, provided the architect and client with a room-by-room, feature-by-feature chronology of changes over time.

As originally built, the Court House, as it was commonly known, featured an open arcade on the first level; the cupola and balustrade were not added until the early 1800s, at which time the entire building was painted white. Later on in the 19th century, when the building served as Hartford's city hall, the simple Adam-style interior woodwork and furnishings were replaced in line with Victorian tastes, and the exterior was painted yellow and brown. These changes were reversed in the period 1916-1920 by a Colonial Revival "restoration" that removed the exterior paint and installed woodwork thought to more in keeping with the building's dignity. The extent of change that the documentation uncovered posed philosophical questions common in historic restorations: which changes should be retained and which reversed? Should the building be restored to a particular date, and if so, which one? The exterior was particularly problematical, since prior to 1920 the Old State House had never simultaneously had both unpainted brick and the cupola, yet both were features cherished by the public.



The Old State House before the cupola and balustrade were added.



The project created a major new underground exhibition space, brought the building completely up to modern code, including ADA access, and renovated interior spaces to reflect several different periods in the building's history. Completed in August 1996, the project won a Special Achievement Award from Connecticut AIA. The Old State House staff continues to make use of the documentary history as a source of information.

Yellow and brown paint, ca.1905.