



Philosophical Hall and Library Hall:  
All the Difference in the World

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*People who do not respect their own age accept too easily counterfeits of the past, not realizing that the “little difference” they see between a well-preserved original and a modern copy is all the difference in the world.*

Lewis Mumford, 1957<sup>1</sup>

The predominant theme underlying the sagas of both Philosophical Hall and Library Hall is the issue of space. It's about neither having enough of it and about the American Philosophical Society's unending quest for more of it. The original Library Hall was the headquarters of the Library Company of Philadelphia. The reconstructed version is property of The American Philosophical Society and has much more in common with Philosophical Hall than simply the hunt for space. Both organizations were formed as offshoots of Benjamin Franklin's Junto in the early eighteenth century, each consider themselves among the nation's oldest scholarly societies, and both buildings were built in 1789 on Fifth Street just south of Chestnut Street, directly across from one another. Philosophical Hall sits on the east side of Fifth Street, where it has stood since its completion in 1789. On the west side sits Library Hall, a 1959 reconstruction of the Library Company of Philadelphia's 1789 building, which was demolished in 1884 to make room for the Drexel Building of 1888. This is a story of four buildings: one a survivor, two that met with the wrecking balls of development and renewal, and one that was born out of the destructive renewal that pervaded Philadelphia in the 1950s.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: Historic Philadelphia III," *The New Yorker*, April 1957, 138.

## PHILOSOPHICAL HALL

Benjamin Franklin formed the American Philosophical Society in 1743, after issuing “A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America.” This call for participation arose from his desire to assemble “Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the several Colonies, to be called The American Philosophical Society.”<sup>2</sup> In response, a group of scientifically minded men responded to Franklin’s call and formed the Society, primarily concerned with observational and experimental science. After sitting idle for nearly two decades, they re-formed in 1769 under the name “The American Philosophical Society Held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge” and embarked on a twenty-year quest for a permanent home.

The Society petitioned the General Assembly of Pennsylvania in 1769 for a lot of ground in the State House Square upon which they planned to build accommodations.<sup>3</sup> In March 1785, the Assembly gave the Society a 70’ x 50’ lot of ground on State House Square situated on the West side of Fifth Street, beginning ninety-six feet south of Chestnut Street. The lot was vested to the American Philosophical Society “to have and to hold forever” for the purpose of erecting a hall.<sup>4</sup> Construction began in 1785 and due to an initial shortage of subscribers it took four years for the building to be completed. In 1789, Master Builders William Roberts and David Evans finished the relatively unadorned two-story, five-bay brick building that was constructed

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<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 3* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1843), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Minutes of the American Philosophical Society, 20 May, 1769*, American Philosophical Society Archives, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

<sup>4</sup> William E. Lingelbach, “Philosophical Hall: The Home of the American Philosophical Society,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 43 (1953), 46.

in harmony with the State House.<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest buildings erected in the newly popular Federal style, the exterior is defined by its symmetry, with arched entrances on both Fifth Street and the State House Square, two chimneys and a single dormer on both the north and south ends, and two dormers on the east and west sides.

Having no need for all twelve thousand square feet, the Society rented space to numerous distinguished tenants from the time it was built through the 1930s. These included the University of Pennsylvania, the College of Physicians and the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. In 1794 Charles Wilson Peale rented most of the building and established the nation's first museum of natural history.<sup>6</sup> Later, artist Thomas Sully rented it for use as his residence and picture gallery.

The 1850s proved to be a period of unrest and uncertainty for the Hall, during which time it was sold to the Federal Government and in May 1859, put up for public auction. The building was soon returned back to the Society because of the limitations on the use of the property imposed by the Act of 1784, which originally granted the lot to the society. By the late nineteenth century the hall was overcrowded and had proven to have insufficient space for the Society's growing collections. A "Committee on Extended Accommodations" was appointed and voted to add a third story to accommodate the society's library. In 1890, the roof and chimneys were removed, and a sixteen-foot third story was added to the building. Twenty years after the addition, the issue of space surfaced once again when the expansion proved inadequate for the Society's needs and additional space had to be rented across the Street in the Drexel Building.

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<sup>5</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 173.

<sup>6</sup> United States Philadelphia National Shrines Park Commission, *Report of Philadelphia National Shrines Park Commission to the Congress of the United States* (Philadelphia: The Commission, 1947), 50.

The addition of the third story transformed a delicate Federal structure into a pseudo-Colonial Frankenstein's monster. It is apparent that it was designed with minimal attention paid to the architectural integrity of neither the building nor the effect on its neighbors on State House Square. The addition was blamed for destroying the individuality of the building and people found it to be both unfortunate and an intrusion.<sup>7</sup> This intervention violated all of the principles of conservation and reconstruction by destroying the original harmony of the buildings on the square.<sup>8</sup>

In the early twentieth century, a group of members pushed the Society to move to the as yet un-built Benjamin Franklin Parkway. At that time city authorities were trying to lure many of the city's cultural institutions to the Parkway, and within the next decade both the Art Museum and Free Library would be located there. In 1911, an agreement was made between the Society and the City to exchange Philosophical Hall for a lot on the Parkway in the vicinity of Logan Square. Distinguished architect Paul Cret designed the new building and the society began to solicit for funding for a "League of Knowledge."<sup>9</sup> They went as far as creating a exquisite folio volume entitled *When Aristotle Comes Again* which stressed the importance of collective intelligence and emphasized with pity that the old home could not be adapted to present day needs.<sup>10</sup> In the end, over one million dollars was raised, but the plan was abandoned in 1936 because of legal obstacles, cost, and sentiment for the old building.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Frederick Lewis, *A Plea for the APS and its Need of a New Building to be known as "Franklin House"* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1913), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Lingelbach, *Philosophical Hall*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> "\$1,000,000 Donated to Knowledge Fund," *New York Times*, April 3, 1930, <http://tinyurl.com/7pftmjr>.

<sup>10</sup> *When Aristotle Comes Again* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1929), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Greene "Franklin's Papers Go to Permanent Home In New Philosophical Society Library," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, November 8, 1959.

Independence National Historical Park was now in the early stages of development and it was the desire of the Park that all of the buildings on State House Square, including Congress Hall, Old City Hall, and Philosophical Hall, be restored to their pre-nineteenth century appearance.<sup>12</sup> In compliance with the Park's wishes, the Society voted to remove the third story in 1946 and correct the "mistaken act of temporizing."<sup>13</sup> The society employed Sydney Martin to supervise the project and in 1949, the third story was removed and the low-hipped roof and tall chimneys were recreated.

The removal of the third story of Philosophical Hall is a rare illustration of a suitable building restoration suggested by the Park. This intervention placed the Hall back into harmony with the surrounding buildings on the Square. The Quaker-like simplicity of the original building more accurately displayed the identity of the Society and its scholarly and scientific pursuits. The Society considered their decision to restore the Hall to its original appearance as physical evidence of their understanding of and cooperation in the rehabilitations and conservation of Old Philadelphia. The Society had "taken the lead by getting its own house in order" less with a "concern for the perpetuation of the American Heritage" and more with a desire to assure Philosophical Hall's survival.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Peterson, "Philadelphia's New National Park," *Eighteenth Annual Report* (Philadelphia: Fairmount Park Art Association, 1952), 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> William Lingelbach, "Old Philadelphia: Redevelopment and Conservation," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 93 (1949), 198.

<sup>14</sup> Lingelbach, *Old Philadelphia*, 188.

## LIBRARY HALL

This story of Library Hall is one of creation, destruction, and re-creation, and takes a much different path than its neighbor across Fifth Street. The Library Company of Philadelphia was founded in 1731 and formed the nation's first subscription library. The group spent fifty years meeting in various rented rooms until 1789, when the Company purchased a lot on the east side of Fifth Street facing Philosophical Hall. In that same year the building was constructed from the design of William Thornton, a young physician who later won the competition to design the Capitol Building in the District of Columbia. Built in the late Georgian style, its red brick façade, white window frames, stone pilasters, and classic pediment were harmonious with the Independence Hall group of buildings across the street. In 1794, the library merged with the Loganian Library (the notable library of James Logan) and the lack of space created by the merger necessitated the building of an annex and later the raising of the annex ceiling by eight feet.

In 1856, after the construction of an additional wing, the Library Company decided that they had outgrown the building and began soliciting subscriptions for a new building. The Company relocated to the Ridgway Library at Broad and Christian Streets, and later to a Frank Furness designed building at Juniper and Locust Streets. After a period of vacancy, the original building was purchased by financier Anthony Drexel in 1884 for \$105,000 and demolished.<sup>15</sup> Four years later, the ten-story Drexel building was constructed on the site of the former Library Company building. The Drexel building was an early marble-clad iron-framed skyscraper

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<sup>15</sup> "The Library Company," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 6, 1884, <http://tinyurl.com/7us6na8>.

designed by the renowned architectural firm Wilson Brothers & Company.<sup>16</sup> This massive building became the center of the city's financial district and housed the Philadelphia Stock Exchange, the banking and investment house of the Drexel Company, as well as over four hundred business offices.

In the early 1950s, just as the planning of the Park was underway, the American Philosophical Society was looking for more space and suggested the reconstruction of the Library Company's former building on its original site. The reconstruction would serve the Park as an "architecturally appropriate" structure and would serve the Society as its library conveniently located directly across the Street from its headquarters.<sup>17</sup> At no cost to the government, this proposed solution served as a great asset to the Park.

The once-modern Drexel Building did not reflect the "specified significant time period" of the new Park, and so history was repeated (once again) and the building was sold to the Federal Government for \$1.6 million in 1956 and demolished.<sup>18</sup> In 1959, a reproduction of Library Hall was built, with only the Fifth Street façade remaining true to the original building. This was due to a lack of architectural drawings or images showing anything other than the building's façade. The Society instilled meaning into the new building, rationalizing that it their obligation to preserve the library as a part of the cultural heritage of the American people.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph J. Korom, *The American Skyscraper, 1850-1940: a celebration of height* (Wellesley, MA: Branden Books, 2008), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Shryock, "The Planning and Formal Opening of Library Hall," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 104 (1959), 349.

<sup>18</sup> "Drexel Building Sold: Philadelphia Structure Will Be Razed for Park Project," *New York Times*, September 24, 1953, <http://tinyurl.com/6pyd2bm>.

<sup>19</sup> Shryock, *Library Hall*, 349.



They felt it would serve as a physical monument to Franklin and a fitting symbol of the tradition and of the aspirations of the organization.<sup>20</sup>

Architectural reproductions such as Library Hall are deceptive, particularly when not properly labeled as such. Today, Library Hall is indistinguishable as a facsimile and any didactic signage explaining this truth is nonexistent. If one were to look long enough, they might possibly locate the cornerstone stating in a muddled way that the building is a reconstruction. It is highly unlikely that tourists visiting Independence National Historical Park have any idea how many of the buildings that seemingly “fit” into the heavily designed streetscape are not genuine.

Architecture critic Lewis Mumford wrote in *The New Yorker* in 1957 that it was a meretricious proposal to house the Society’s collection in a reproduction of the original Library Hall as the original design hardly fit the modern library’s purposes. He suggested that the new building be a modern design and “a witness to the skill and taste of our time”, just as Carpenters Hall was to its own period. Although his approach would appear sensible today, it would have appeared farcical at the time of the park’s creation had a modern building been constructed on the site.

At the groundbreaking for Library Hall, Librarian William Lingelbach spoke directly to Lewis’ criticisms stating, “A great deal of time has been devoted to meet the objection that a historic building of the 18<sup>th</sup> century cannot meet the needs of a modern library...we are confident that the challenge can be met.”<sup>21</sup> Time has shown that Mumford was right. Since 1981, the bulk of the Society’s holdings are housed in Benjamin Franklin Hall (the former

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<sup>20</sup> *The American Philosophical Society Held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge Yearbook 1958* (Philadelphia: George H. Buchanan, Co., 1958), 206.

<sup>21</sup> *Yearbook*, 206.

Merchants' and Farmers' Bank) located one block away from Library Hall on Chestnut Street.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of space is clearly once again at the forefront of the organization, due in large part to the inadequacies of Library Hall. With the collection split between Library Hall and Benjamin Franklin Hall, most research done by visiting scholars at the Society requires staff to traverse Chestnut Street for retrieval of material.

The demolition of the Drexel Building for the purpose of constructing a facsimile of a Library Hall was unconscionable. This building was not only significant as an early skyscraper, but also a spectacular design by the Wilson Brothers & Company architectural firm. To quote Lewis Mumford, "Such faking seems to me inexcusable, no matter how careful the 'reconstruction.' Since so much that is historically genuine remains, why should anyone debase its value by minting and scattering false coin that the innocent will take as real money?"<sup>23</sup> Erecting reproductions debases genuine surviving buildings and does more to deceive than to inform.

A similarly ironic cycle of demolition and reconstruction occurred with the Pemberton House. The original Pemberton House was torn down in the 1840s and eventually replaced with Frank Furness' stunning Guaranty Trust and Safe Deposit Company. In the 1960s the Guaranty Trust building was torn down and a reconstruction of the Pemberton House was built on its original site. This misguided intervention was performed primarily so that the view down the street towards Carpenter's Hall more closely resembled the view experienced by Philadelphians in the late eighteenth century. Historian Constance Greiff wisely posited that there would never be another National Historic Park like Independence, as the National Park Service "can never

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Carlos Carter, *One Grand Pursuit: A Brief History of the American Philosophical Society's First 250 Years* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Mumford, *Historic Philadelphia*, 133.

again destroy so much of the historic fabric of a city in order to create an artificial vision of the past.”<sup>24</sup> The passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 assured that any future park projects would forbid the wholesale demolition exhibited with the Drexel Building and the Guaranty Trust.

At the time of its construction, William Lingelbach expressed that the reconstructed Library Hall stood as the most visible result of the Society’s efforts since the 1940s to promote the preservation and thoughtful development of the historic area. He felt that this reconstruction clearly showed an attempt to revive historic Philadelphia as a *live* area as opposed to a museum of historic buildings.<sup>25</sup> His assessment of the Society’s accomplishments completely misses the mark and fails to see the bigger picture of the *live* area that was displaced in the Park’s quest to recreate the eighteenth century streetscape.

In his Farewell Address to Congress in 1796, President Washington stated, “Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge.” He spoke these words from Congress Hall, just steps from Philosophical Hall and the original Library Hall, and was without question speaking of the organizations housed there. The American Philosophical Society was significant in the nation’s development as it provided a forum for the free exchange of ideas, and conveyed the conviction of its members that intellectual inquiry and critical thought are inherently in the public interest. It is impossible to separate it from its past – its history is an inevitably part of the Nation’s history. As the oldest building on the Square aside from Independence Hall, Philosophical Hall stands as not only a

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<sup>24</sup> Constance M. Greiff, *Independence: The Creation of a National Park* (Heritage Studies, Inc., 1985), 501.

<sup>25</sup> William E. Lingelbach, “Philadelphia and the Conservation of the National Heritage,” *Pennsylvania History* 20 (1953), 353.

witness to the history of the nation, but as an active contributor. Philosophical Hall is more than just a building; it is a genuine survivor that has endured amidst a sea of fakery and destruction, in part, because of the ideas, events, and people with whom it has been associated.

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