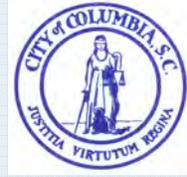


CITY HALL

1737 MAIN STREET



Original Name: United States Court House and Post Office (became City Hall in 1937)

Architect: Alfred Bult Mullett (1834-1890), Supervising Architect to the Treasury (1866-1874)

Construction Date: 1871-1875

Listings: National Register, 1973, Local Landmark with City of Columbia

Architectural Style: Renaissance Revival

Designed by Supervising Architect of the Treasury Alfred Bult Mullett in 1870, the new court house was to be a stately Renaissance Revival structure. Unlike any other building in Columbia, the unique stone structure was a continuation of the evolving styles drawn by Mullett, who was the Supervising Architect to the Treasury, and therefore reflected a national trend in architecture that was not prominent in the capital city. Built by the federal government just a few years after the Civil War, this structure was a new chapter in Columbia's history and its evolving streetscape.



As the host of both county and state government, Columbia has had a number of fine government buildings to grace its streetscapes, mostly along Main Street, which is interrupted by the grand state house. This proud thoroughfare was a bustling marketplace by 1857, when the federal government appropriated \$50,000 for a courthouse and post office in the capital city. Unfortunately, the Civil War left Main Street in ruins and the courthouse project on hold. As Columbians quickly recovered, rebuilding blocks along Main Street as early as 1866, the city was in a state of flux. By the end of that year, the street was a mixture of new buildings and old ruins.¹

Although the federal government seemed to have forgotten its 1857 appropriation for a federal building in Columbia, the capital city had not. In fact, despite the obvious animosity between the burned out city and the federal government, a group of South Carolina senators wrote Mullett on February 19, 1869 to inquire about the \$50,000 appropriation and if he knew whether a site had been chosen for its construction. In less than two weeks, Congress appropriated \$75,000 for the Court House and Post Office at Columbia, a remarkable feat that suggests Mullett was a man of quick action. Nonetheless, it was almost a year before thirty-five Columbians purchased a lot for the building on January 27, 1870 for \$2,500 and donated the land to the United States Government.



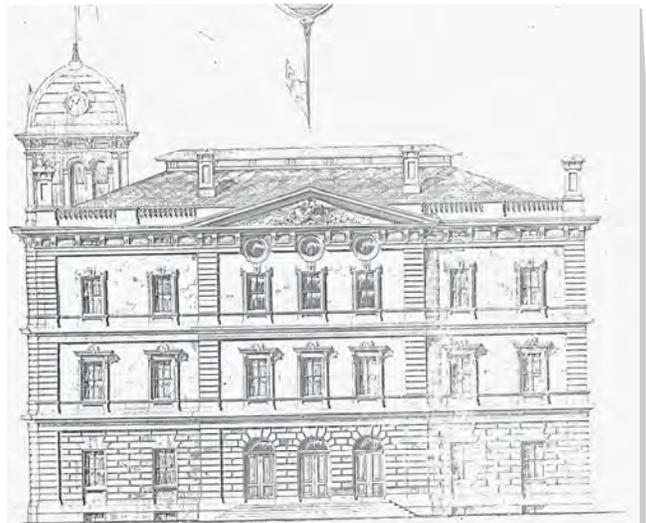
Above: Ca. 1900 image of the United States Court House and Post Office, from the National Archives

Left: Image of architect Alfred B. Mullett, from the United States Department of the Treasury

The building site was on the southwest corner of Laurel and Richardson (now Main) Streets. On a slight hilltop, the location was already home to a brick building that was soon razed, and it offered the advantages of both breezes and views toward the river on the west. Main Street was the site of the most devastation during the burning of the city during Sherman's 1865 march, but it had already undergone a building boom in the years after the fire. By the 1870s, the block to house the new courthouse, the 1700 block of Main Street, was at the northern end of a growing retail, banking and business district. The location was also six blocks north of the granite state house, a discreet enough distance so as not to compete with the large building.

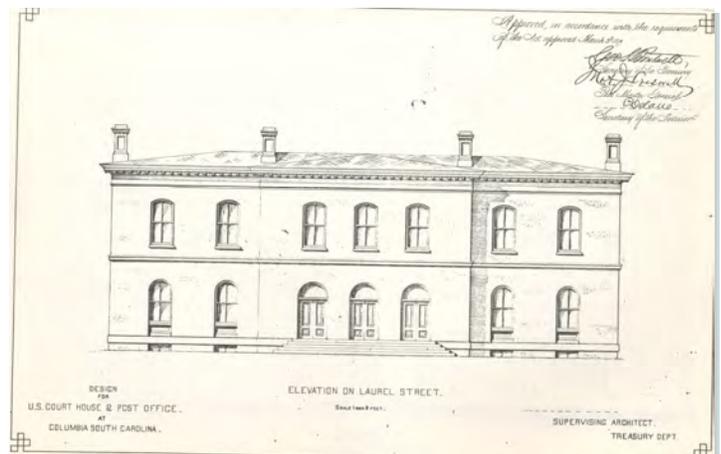
Within six months of the land donation for the court house, Mullett had its plans and specifications completed. His general description for the building indicated it would be three stories high, on a basement constructed of stone with a concrete foundation. The superstructure was to be built of brick, and faced on the exterior with cut granite, with grand ornamental embellishments such as rustication, a variety of window pediments, a heavy denticulated cornice and quoins. The entire building was to be "fireproof; the floors being carried on iron beams with brick arches between. The roof to be of iron covered with slate." Pine floors, oiled hardwood trim, doors, and windows with plate glass and iron stairs with stone treads would complete the interior, while the exterior would receive a handsome tower on the Main Street side, for a total estimated project cost of \$285,161.

Unfortunately, the delay of the project required the \$75,000 appropriation to be carried over from 1869 to 1870 and then again to 1871, when the language changed to state that the full cost of the building could not exceed the appropriation. Mullett soon created "Design No. 2" for the Court House and Post Office, which would cost \$74,706.95, just \$294.05 less than the allotted amount. His second design was decidedly modest. It was only two stories on a basement, which would be of rubble stone on concrete, with the superstructure built of brick "of perfectly plain character." The first floor would be fireproof, but the second floor interior walls and roof would be timber. The ornate stone cornice would be lost and replaced with a galvanized metal cornice covered with tin. Floors, doors, windows and trim would be pine timber, the windows glazed with "American glass" and all woodwork to be "painted and finished in a plain and substantial manner." Mullett's lack of enthusiasm about the second building is somewhat obvious in his matter of fact description, with the use of the word "plain" repeated several times. Considering Mullett's body of work, which often included heavily ornate buildings decorated on all four sides, this sparse "Design No. 2" must have been a rather unwelcome change.



Above: Original 1870 plan for the building, Laurel Street side. The tower was never constructed.

Below: The modest "Design No. 2" by Mullett, showing Laurel Street side.



Mullett must have sensed a potential to influence Congress, however, as he designed the basements of the buildings to be built the same way, except for the use of more elaborate materials. This design would allow the building site to be prepared and the basement to be constructed, allowing plenty of time for Mullett to push for a larger appropriation. In fact, Mullett commented that his desire had been to have a “first-class granite building,” but these plans “have been necessarily abandoned,” and a building designed that “will be entirely inadequate for the accommodation of the officers for whose use it is intended, for the proper transaction of the public business, and unsatisfactory to the citizens of Columbia, who gave the property under the assurance that a suitable edifice would be erected.” He further warned that it “will be not only discreditable itself as a Government building, but conspicuously so, in comparison with the magnificent though unfinished Statehouse in its immediate vicinity.” He strongly requested a repeal of the limitation on the cost of the building before the completion of its foundation. Mullett continued to request appropriations throughout the construction of the building and received enough to cover the completion of a “first-class granite building” through Congressional appropriations in 1872, 1873, 1874 and 1875.

The first order of business for Mullett was hiring a Superintendent Architect and a Disbursing Agent for the construction. They would both live in Columbia and work on site, with the former in charge of handling all practical aspects of construction and the latter handling all monetary transactions related to the building. Mullett found a steadfast Disbursing Agent in Cyrus H. Baldwin, who remained with the project from start to finish, but went through five different men for the Superintendent Architect position, beginning with T.H. Oakshott. Despite this ongoing personnel issue, work began on the site of the building by fall of 1871. Bids were opened for dimension granite, rubble stone, concrete and sand. The Fairfield Quarry, in South Carolina, sent a sample of their stone as part of their bid, which Oakshott described to Mullett as “very clear color, free and even in the grain and I think an excellent granite to work... The price however asked for the stone I think excessive.” The quarry used for the state house also put in a bid, but the architect described it as full of stripes and splotches, and also prohibitively expensive. Mullett’s request for bids for cut stone, sent out before Congress awarded additional appropriations, suggests that Mullett must have had some inside knowledge about forthcoming funds. He eventually chose the beige granite from Fairfield County.

By October 14, 1871, Oakshott completed excavation on the site and reported the finding of hard red clay mixed with sand, which could serve as a natural solid foundation if it was rammed or exposed and allowed to harden. Concrete and basement stone work were laid by late October or early November. Oakshott corresponded regularly with Mullett, who was in Washington, D.C., and appeared to be a very competent worker. Unfortunately, he was transferred to Charleston to become the Superintendent Architect of the new United States Custom House around December 1871, and was replaced by L.S. Kingsley. By January, the basement stone work was completed.

The site required at least the fifteen stone cutters at work in January, but they soon caused significant problems for the project. Brought in from other areas, most likely the northeast with at least one from New York, the stone cutters demanded a higher salary than local stone cutters, exactly fifty cents more than the \$4.00 a day salary of the locals. The lower wage earners were disgruntled with the difference in pay and apparently retaliated by doing inferior work. Kingsley recommended a raise for the workers but they held a strike. Despite the strike, work progressed, but Mullett disapproved of Kingsley’s handling of the situation, and on April 12, 1872 Kingsley resigned. Stone-cutters employed at the court house site were upset about more than just wages. Their hours were increased from nine to ten per day, despite the 1868 law allowing only an eight-hour workday for government employees. *The Daily Phoenix* newspaper in Columbia reported that the federal government had “a great number of stone cutters” employed at the site, who “formed a combination, stopped work, and were discharged.”

A group of them traveled up to Washington, D.C. in late March to protest their firing. They gained an audience with the President of the United States, General Ulysses S. Grant, who “promised to use his efforts to obtain pay for the extra work performed by these men.”² It was perhaps this presidential investigation that expedited the resignation of Kingsley.

Construction on the court house and post office reached a peak between May and October of 1872, with receipts for supplies and construction steadily increasing. The largest expenditures by far were for the granite cutting and the granite itself. Receipts for iron beams and iron castings in August 1872 suggest that work on interior floors began around that time, as Mullett’s design called for iron beams with brick arches to form the floor supports. Brick purchases in 1872 likely went for the first story while a second large order in 1873 probably marked the construction of the second story floor.



President Ulysses S. Grant, image from the U.S. Library of Congress

While Columbians undoubtedly had mixed feelings about the federal government building along Main Street, one prominent local businessman and neighbor, John Seegars, hosted a dinner for the stonecutters and blacksmiths employed at the site. Toasting the party of nearly 60 workers at his new saloon on October 3, 1873, German-born Seegars welcomed them with an abundance of cigars and beer, no doubt some of his own brew. He had long had a brewery nearby within the 1600 block of Main Street, which he ran with his son-in-law Christopher Habenicht. Robert Hall spoke for the workers and remarked that “although our profession is hard and cold, our hearts are warm.” He went on to toast “Harry and Chris” who were apparently the favorite bartenders of the workers during their time in Columbia. After rounds of songs and a bagpipe performance, the party finally broke up around midnight, after a splendid evening of “harmony” and “mirth.”³ Although it took a large workforce, the construction of the building left few clues as to the identities of these workers, who are referred to in receipts as simply “employees.” The identity of at least one stone cutter is known however; John Bulbert was from Brooklyn, New York and was working here as late as November 1873, but a later advertisement in the local paper sought any information about him, as his dying mother was trying to reach him.⁴ Perhaps Bulbert left the tumultuous position at the court house to find steadier work elsewhere. By December 1873, the stone cutters organized again against a new push to reduce their wages from \$4.00 per day to \$3.50 per day.⁵

By June 12, 1874, the building was ready for interior appointments, suggesting that by that time the roof and exterior walls were largely complete. By November 24, 1874, architect Alfred B. Mullett tendered his resignation as Supervisory Architect to the Treasury during a confrontation with the Secretary of the Treasury. Frustrated after years of fighting for appropriations and contracts and having repeated denials of requests for wage increases for his employees, Mullett reached the final breaking point during his argument with the Secretary.⁶

In May 1875 a United States District Court Judge visited the nearly complete court house and was both mortified and disappointed in the building. While the exterior was “all that good taste could desire,” internally it was a “failure.” Judge Bryan was irritated that the post office had the place of honor on the first floor, the Internal Revenue Collector and other office held the spacious second floor while one of the government’s “grand departments—the judiciary—has been stuck up in the cock-loft.” *The Daily Phoenix* editor Julian Selby went on to elaborate on Judge Bryan’s reaction by stating that the building was to be an “ornament to the town” and a representative of the federal government and that he sincerely hoped that the building would be corrected by the new architect, since Mullett was in “sweet retire-

ment.” Selby prophesied that “This building will last a thousand years, for it is constructed of our native granite,” and will suit the needs of the government for years to come. The Courts of the Union, he argued, “should occupy their dignified position on the second floor, and place the small fry up-stairs.”⁷ Surprisingly, not a word was mentioned about the postmaster, Charles Wilder, appointed in 1869 by President Grant and the first African-American postmaster in Columbia. According to Mullett’s drawings, he had a large office and a private room, occupying the southwest corner of the first floor. He held the postmaster position into the 1880s, long after Reconstruction was over.⁸



Postmaster Charles Wilder, pictured around 1868

Despite these protests to the interior arrangement, the building did not receive additional work or rearranging, and the grand court room of the third story remained in place. Work on the United States Court House and Post Office officially ended around July 4, 1875. The workers were installing the eagle-tipped flagstaff on the building, upon which flew the United States flag, and which, in an apparent surprise to *The Daily Phoenix* editor, caused no dissatisfaction. Ten years after the Civil War’s completion, the national flag’s installation, which was to be permanent, did not raise any admonition from Columbians. The workers gathered in the post office section of the building that day, resting on carpenters’ benches and tool boxes, and issued an “arrest” of Charles E. Kirk, the master mechanic at the site, and a former Confederate soldier for South Carolina. He had to appear and answer various complaints against him, and was sentenced “to wear through life a massive and elegant gold hunting watch,” which they had inscribed “Presented to C.E. Kirk by the mechanics of the United States Court House and Post Office, Columbia, S.C. July 4, 1875.”⁹

The court house in Columbia was Alfred B. Mullett’s only contribution to the city, but although his career with the federal government ended abruptly, Mullett expressed relief at the end of the stressful job. His physical and mental health were apparently suffering at the time, and he had been responsible for the design and construction oversight of 33 buildings during his tenure, as well as the maintenance, renovations and repairs of well over 100 federal buildings. He felt he had gotten every major federal building project either completed or well on its way, and all of the government buildings in good repair, largely thanks to his installation of regular maintenance at the buildings. By 1874 the State, War and Navy Building in Washington, next to the White House, was well underway, and is now recognized as among the best of Mullett’s designs. Mullett went into private practice with his two sons after his resignation from the government, but at age 56, in 1890, he committed suicide.

Mullett’s highly detailed designs have often been overlooked, but his use of traditional European influences exemplifies the Second Empire, Renaissance Revival style. Despite the apparent sturdiness of the many buildings Mullett designed, by the mid 1900s almost half of his buildings had been demolished in the name of progress. Fortunately for Columbia, when the building was threatened with demolition in 1932, Mayor L.B. Owens proposed a trade, swapping the land west of the building for ownership of the former court house. The City did not formally move into the building until 1937, after the federal government completed its new federal courthouse next door.¹⁰ During renovations in 1973, while working as a researcher for the S.C. Department of Archives and History, Florence Bacher Myers discovered the drawings of the Court House, which had been stored in brown paper wrapping in the building, and had not been seen in decades, apparently. The 43 drawings were given to the state archives, the building was

placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and Myers organized an exhibit of the selected drawings at the Columbia Museum of Art, with a guest lecture by Mullett expert Dr. Lawrence Wodehouse.

Many of the colorful drawings have been reproduced, framed and hung on the walls of the City Council chambers, on the third floor of the building. They show a great attention to detail, both interior and exterior, by Mullett. Essentially a rectangular plan, nine bays long and three bays wide, each elevation is distinguished by a central projecting pavilion. All four facades of the three-story building are treated equally, since the building was meant to be seen from all sides. Prominent belt courses separate the stories, with projecting cornices and a projecting string course running below the windows of the second and third stories. A widely projecting cornice below the roof parapet runs around each side of the building, with elaborately carved consoles. The pediments of the north and south pavilions also have rows of dentils and fluted freezes in the cornice. Keystones and radiating voussiors are above the first-story arched windows and doors, while the windows on the upper floors are square headed, highlighted by pediments on the second floor and molded surrounds on the third. Above the third-story windows on the north and south projecting pavilions are round openings, called oculi. The interior has undergone extensive renovations since 1875. The first and second stories have been altered significantly, though the third story chamber room retains a high degree of integrity, save for the dropped ceiling that now hides the skylight. The intricate plaster details of the interior walls in the chamber contrast with the wide hardwood trim.¹¹ Although the proposed tower in Mullett's drawings was never built, the building does not suffer from its absence. Truly an architectural and historical gem in the heart of the city, this building is a unique, visually stunning landmark.



ENDNOTES

¹ Please note that this report is generally a summary of a highly detailed and thorough thesis written in 1977 by Florence Bacher Myers, titled “Columbia Court House and Post Office: The Building and Its Architect, 1870-1874” for the University of South Carolina Humanities and Social Sciences department. Myers utilized letters from the architect, annual reports, receipts and a variety of other resources from the National Archives to document nearly every detail of this building’s conception and construction. Only resources not found in this document are noted in footnotes in the remainder of this report.

² The Daily Phoenix, 2 April 1872.

³ The Daily Phoenix, 3 October 1873.

⁴ The Daily Phoenix, 20 June 1874.

⁵ The Daily Phoenix, 10 Dec. 1873.

⁶ The Daily Phoenix, 24 Nov. 1874.

⁷ The Daily Phoenix, 11 May 1875.

⁸ John Hammond Moore, Columbia and Richland County, a South Carolina Community, 1740-1990 (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 226.

⁹ The Daily Phoenix, 7 July 1875; National Park Service, “U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865,” database online at www.ancestry.com, 2007, accessed June 2011.

¹⁰ Col. James W. Deloach, “Columbia’s Past—The History of City Hall,” Cityscape, Fall 1991. Article copy available from the City of Columbia research files.

¹¹ Robert P. Stockton, “Carolina Landmarks,” The State, undated copy of news article, available from the City of Columbia research files.