

Temple of History

THE STATE'S HISTORICAL SOCIETY PROUDLY CELEBRATES THE CENTENNIAL OF A BUILDING WHERE CRAFTSMANSHIP IS UNPARALLELED.

BY SUE HERTZ | PHOTOGRAPHY BY FIONA BOYD

For William Cleaves Todd, New Hampshire's glory did not lie in Franconia foliage, Squam Lake at sunset or even the craggy seashore. While he admired his native state's natural bounty, what Todd cherished above all was its history. For Todd, a Dartmouth man and a bachelor school principal, there was much to be celebrated in New Hampshire's role in the Revolutionary War (two-thirds of the soldiers at Bunker Hill hailed from the Granite State), in its production of famous men (Daniel Webster and Franklin Pierce), in its contributions to art (Thomas Cole's *Notch of the White Mountains*) and in its invention (the Concord Coach).

With such a passion for the past, it was fitting that Todd was a devoted member of the New Hampshire Historical Society, and that he would become the society's president in 1898, the year that he and the society celebrated their seventy-fifth birthdays. Dapper in his starched shirts and black ties, his thick white mustache perfectly trimmed, Todd presided over the annual June meetings. It was at the first meeting of the new century that he made the announcement that would change the society—and New Hampshire's architectural reputation—forever.

A crisis was brewing, he told his 170 members. Crammed with more than three thousand books and pamphlets, the society's headquarters—a former bank building on Concord's North Main Street—was too small.

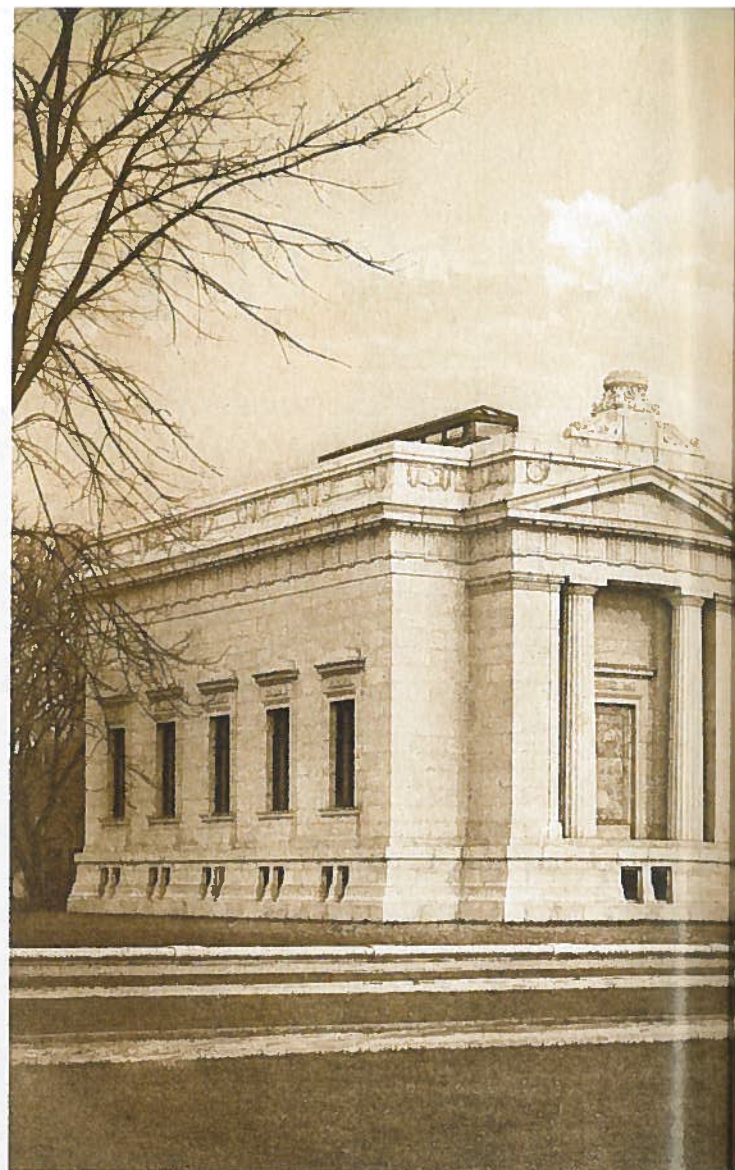
Worse, it was not fireproof; all of the society's treasures, which included volumes of Daniel Webster's unpublished letters, could be lost with the strike of a match.

A new home was needed, and needed fast. While the vision Todd proposed at that June meeting was modest—a fireproof addition to the former bank—his determination to create a home worthy of the organization he so cherished led to the creation of a building so grand, so sturdy, so rich in detail that it would still be celebrated a century later. Of all the artifacts collected by the society in its 188 years, the marble, granite and bronze edifice at 30 Park Street in downtown Concord is, without a doubt, the organization's greatest acquisition.

Below: The New Hampshire Historical Society's central rotunda's dome, surrounded by an intricate pattern of the marble ceiling, sheds natural light to the second and first floors. The dome's creation was so exacting and difficult that it became one of the sources of construction delay.



Facing page: The central rotunda, so large it once held—comfortably—an antique Concord Coach, is built of Old Convent Siena marble, which was mined by Italian monks. Cutting the marble to form the arches and rounded alcoves required extraordinary patience and skill.



ARTISTIC MAJESTY

In a neighborhood of noble stone buildings—including the New Hampshire State House and the New Hampshire State Library—the historical society’s building, or library as some call it, is imposing. It is not so much the size—although it does consume much of the block between North State and Green Streets—but rather the Greek influence with its Doric columns and cornices, the sweeping granite steps, the perfectly symmetrical lines. Yet beyond that, the reasons that this building is heralded as one of the finest of its kind in the nation and lauded by architects for the past century are the attention to detail and the adherence to quality. Look closely at the granite exterior; blue-gray, smooth and quarried from Concord’s Rattlesnake Hill, this is the same granite used to construct the Library of Congress. Note the heavy bronze doors, the massive bronze grills, the intricate sculpture within the pediment.

Enter the building and you are engulfed in marble. But not just any marble. The first floor rotunda is built of Old Convent Siena marble, the creamy yellowish stone quarried for centuries by monks in Italy. Siena marble walls. Siena marble ceilings. Siena marble arches leading to the grand staircase, which, like the ro-

tunda floor, is a French marble, paler, less veined, but smooth and cold and patterned with elaborate inlaid designs. Floors leading to the lecture hall to the right and the reading room to the left are Tennessee marble.

What isn’t marble is bronze—railings, light fixtures—or glass. Deep windows and skylights abound. But the most glorious light of all comes from the dome above the rotunda, drawing the eye up to the sky—past the second floor with its plaster walls painted and scored to resemble Caen stone and fluted columns bordering alcoves filled with sculpture.

“This building is our crown jewel,” says Bill Dunlap, executive director of the New Hampshire Historical Society. A crown jewel that will celebrate its one-hundredth birthday this November with a black-tie dinner and a public television documentary. The building, he says, was designed to last forever, to be fireproof, weatherproof and a delight to the eye. Or, as the society’s benefactor said at the November 23, 1911, dedication, the library should stand “in its perfection of artistic design and of material execution, a source of gratification and pride for all time to the people of New Hampshire.”

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Facing page: Bill Dunlap, the New Hampshire Historical Society's executive director, and Barbara Pitsch, the society's board president, hold the *Dedication of the Building of the New Hampshire Historical Society*, a volume detailing not only the history of 30 Park Street but also the speeches made at the November 23, 1911, formal dedication.

Left: Architect Guy Lowell, who also designed the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, gave the New Hampshire Historical Society's building a Greek character through symmetry, sculptural devices and detailed molding.

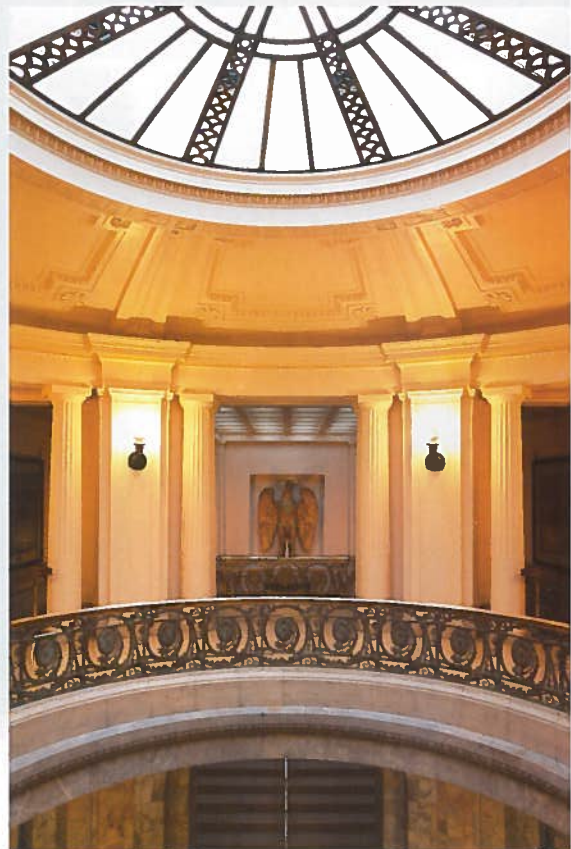


Six hundred men and women formed a procession on that November day in 1911 from the State House, where they were greeted by the governor, to 30 Park Street, where they would celebrate the opening of the New Hampshire Historical Society's new home.



At the landing of the grand staircase (left) is the gold eagle that once graced the top of the New Hampshire State House. Because of the building's open design, the eagle is also visible from the second floor (below).

Facing page: Built of French marble and adorned with brass light fixtures and railings, the grand staircase leads to the rotunda on the second floor. A bronze bust of Edward Tuck, the society's benefactor, is perched in the alcove at the second-floor entrance.



THE DRIVING FORCES

To best understand how such a temple came to Concord is to understand the forces that created the building. First there was Todd, who jumpstarted the fundraising by donating \$5,000. When he realized that the society's ever-expanding "cabinet of curiosities" would soon overwhelm a mere addition, he began lobbying for a new building. Massive funds were needed, and so he turned to a second force, Edward Tuck.

An Exeter native, Tuck had earned his fortune in finance and by marrying well. Although Tuck and his wife Julia, an heiress, lived in Paris, they remained loyal to New Hampshire, donating large sums to preserve open space as well as build and renovate hospitals, athletic facilities, museums and schools. In particular, Dartmouth benefited, receiving the endowment to create a business school

named after Edward's father—Amos Tuck, the New Hampshire congressman credited with creating the Republican Party.

Todd's first letter to Tuck piqued the philanthropist's interest, but it was Todd's second letter that others have credited with laying the foundation's granite blocks of the grand library to come. The year was 1902 and although that letter has been lost, we know that Todd's health was failing, that he wrote on his death bed in a quivering hand, that his final thoughts centered on creating a permanent home for his society, and that his passion moved Tuck to making a commitment.

Within months, Todd was dead at age eighty. The third force, Benjamin Kimball, stepped in and stayed in until the last stone was laid. For the next eight years, Kimball—a railroad executive only a decade younger than Todd—and Tuck worked together to



Thanks to a restoration project in the 1990s, the Reading Room looks much the same as it did in 1911 (inset photo) when the building opened. Books are contained in bronze cases in alcoves. Lighting fixtures are bronze, and mahogany reading tables line the center aisle.



create what Tuck hoped would be a "temple of history." Their mantra: only the best.

First, they hired architect Guy Lowell, who had designed buildings for Brown University, Harvard University and Phillips Andover Academy, and was just finishing the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Not one to rest on his laurels, Lowell plotted to create "the like of which does not exist in the United States." The building would be Greek in spirit, he said, but not archaic. He defined its purpose as "a library in character, an athenaeum in fact" and that it would also express "the dignity of a home for art and a meeting place for lectures and research."

Second, when Lowell submitted his drawings, Tuck and his wife Julia realized the lot the society had purchased was too small.

How much to purchase the brick building on the adjacent lot? asked Julia.

More than the society had, Kimball said.

So the Tucks bought it, and some other adjoining lots, too.

Third, only the best materials would be used. The exterior

would be granite, not brick. The interior would be marble, not concrete. The detail in the cornices, the moldings and the columns required keen craftsmanship, and to oversee that the work was done right, Kimball hired Timothy Sullivan, an Irish quarryman who had provided the granite for the Library of Congress from one of his New Hampshire quarries as well as served as inspector of the workmanship of the Senate Office Building and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. So exacting was Sullivan, and so difficult the work of cutting the Siena marble to curve to create the arches and walls, that the workmen repeatedly threatened to walk off the job. When the stonecutters found that the *guttae* (the multitude of little disks on the bottom of the flat block under the cornice) sheared off easily after being cut, they were reattached with brass screws. Tuck paid for the *guttae* to be recut.

The stonecutters "pushed the envelope with what was technically possible with shaping marble to make it work in the round rotunda," Dunlap says. "They'd break a lot of pieces."

For the grand entrance, Kimball and Tuck chose artist Daniel

Chester French, the New Hampshire-born sculptor whose work included the nineteen-foot seated Abraham Lincoln in Washington's Lincoln Memorial. For the society, French created from one block of Concord granite the sculpture representing ancient and modern history of two figures kneeling, their wings supporting the society's seal. The figure on the right, an aged woman symbolizing ancient history, cradles a human skull in one hand and an inscribed stone on the other. She gazes into the past. The figure on the left, symbolizing modern history, is a muscular youth examining a globe. An owl, representing wisdom, is perched above.

MOVING TOWARD THE FUTURE

In one hundred years, not much has changed in the building. An elevator—artfully placed so it blends with the mahogany woodwork—has been installed, and wireless Internet access has been added. The reading room on the first floor is still lined with mahogany tables and bronze bookshelves, containing tens of thousands of volumes on New Hampshire's history and its residents. Most of the 1,500–2,000 visitors to the building each year head to the reading room to pursue family genealogy. Others, such as filmmaker Ken Burns, use the library to research photos and newspapers for documentaries.

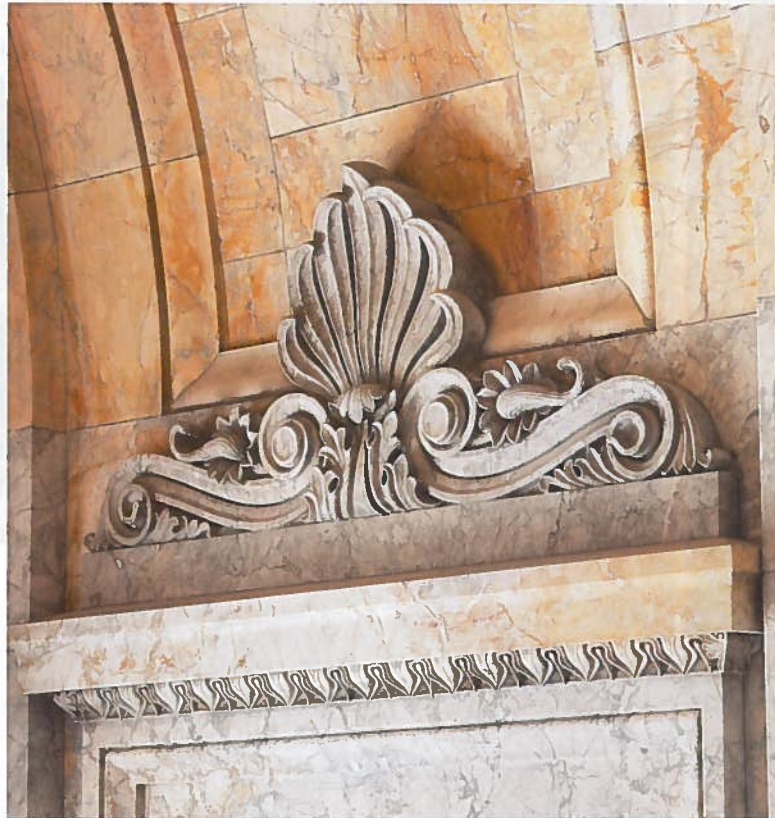
On the second floor is a small gallery of changing exhibits, most recently a collection of the society's portraits. The bulk of the society's treasures—including the Concord stagecoach and Daniel Webster's high chair—moved in 1995 to an historic stone building in Eagle Square that serves as the society's official museum. Remaining at 30 Park Street is a smattering of furniture (Franklin Pierce's desk), sculpture (bust of Edward Tuck) and artwork (portraits of the society's forefathers).

Stored in the basement are maps, newspapers and documents, including the papers of Supreme Court Justice David Souter, who requested that they not be made public until fifty years after his death. Souter, who is a society trustee, used to sneak into the building as a child until someone remembered that children weren't allowed and shooed him out. He told the staff his papers "were for the benefit of historians, not the media."

Yet history is about change, and change is happening subtly to 30 Park Street. Dunlap is hoping to raise \$10 million to digitize the society's collection, which includes fifty thousand printed volumes, two hundred thousand photographs and thirty thousand museum objects. Dunlap also hopes to make the building more energy efficient. One plan is to retrofit the skylights, which he says are beautiful but not particularly practical in the northern climate. The design he envisions will leave the viewer unaware that any change to the historic windows has occurred.

The society's mission, however, will not change. It is here to make history alive and available—just as William C. Todd intended.

"Places like the historical society preserve the DNA of our culture," says Dayton Duncan, a filmmaker who has worked with Burns. "They help us discover who we once were and therefore who we are as a people. If we forget or ignore our past, we have no future." ■■■



Much of the building's beauty lies in detail, such as this molding in the rotunda.

RESOURCES

DEDICATION OF THE BUILDING OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The New Hampshire Historical Society, Rumford Press, 1912

HISTORICAL NEW HAMPSHIRE ARTICLES

"The Education of a New Hampshire Philanthropist"
by Franklin Brooks

"From a Single Stone: The Portal Sculpture of the New
Hampshire Historical Society's Building" by James L. Garvin
"The Creation of 'New Hampshire's Temple of History,'
1900–1911" by James I. Garvin

THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

30 Park Street • Concord, NH 03301
228-6688 • nhhistory.org

THE UNWRITTEN HISTORY OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Charles Robert Corning
The New Hampshire Historical Society, 1920