

Custom House
Southwest corner Second and William Streets
New Bedford
Bristol County
Massachusetts

HABS NO. MASS-682

HABS
MASS,
3-NEBED,
16-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

CUSTOM HOUSE

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MASS,
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Address: Southwest corner Second and William Streets,
New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts

Present Owner: United States Government

Present Occupant: United States Government agencies

Present Use: Office building

Brief Statement of Significance: An early Federal building representative of governmental activity during a period when the Merchant Marine was growing rapidly.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: The Custom House was built for the Federal Government and it is still owned by the Government.
2. Date of erection: 1834-1835 [Ricketson, pp. 183-184],
1837 [Old Dartmouth, p. 307].
3. Architect: This building has been attributed to several architects:

Robert Mills [Hamlin, Greek Revival. . . p. 346, plates XIII, XCII].
Robert Mills [Gallagher, Robert Mills, p. 58].
Russell Warren [Old Dartmouth, p. 307].
Robert Smith [Ricketson, pp. 183-184].
4. Builders: Seth H. and William Ingalls, contractors and builders. William H. Taylor, superintendent of construction. Joseph Allen, builder of the main stairway. [ibid.].
5. Original plans: The Customs office was in a room 18' x 48' along the north side of the upper or principal floor; The Post Office was in a similar room below it, on the first floor. A description contemporary with the building is given below (in C: Supplemental material).
6. Notes on alterations and additions: At an undetermined date a cupola was added. Original steps and a stoop at the north doorway have been removed and the doorway boarded up. Handrails on the portico, and modern floor coverings have been added. A modern heating plant has been installed.

Apparently no really basic alteration has been made, however.

7. Important old views: (a) A woodcut about 4" x 6", vignetted at the corners, was published in 1837 in The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge (Boston: John L. Sibley, William D. Ticknor), III, 73. It shows the building when recently completed - east and north fronts. (b) An undated stereo pair, S. F. Adams, Photographer, New Bedford, Mass., titled "Post Office, Custom House," shows steps and stoop at north doorway, a small fence at the northeast corner of the lot, and 2/2 sash in the east front windows.
8. Sources of information: Daniel Ricketson, New Bedford of the Past (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903). This is essentially a book of reminiscences, with a good index. Worth, Palmer and Austin, "Old Dartmouth," a manuscript in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Johnny Cake Hill, New Bedford, Mass. This consists of photographs of houses and public buildings in New Bedford, Fairhaven, Acushnet, Dartmouth and Westport; photographs by Fred W. Palmer, introduction and notes by Henry B. Worth, "done into shape" by Emma C. Austin; dated September, 1907. Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944). H. M. Pierce Gallagher, Robert Mills (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

B. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: It is said that a year ago a number of old documents were sent from the New Bedford Custom House to the Coast Guard Academy at New London, Conn., and to the Peabody Museum of Salem, Salem, Mass. It is said that these documents may have included early drawings or plans of the building.

C. Supplemental Material: The following is quoted from page 73 of The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge (Boston: John L. Sibley, William P. Ticknor), Vol. III, 1837:

CUSTOM HOUSE, NEW BEDFORD

Agreeably to an act of Congress, a large building has been lately erected, for a Custom House, in the enterprising and flourishing town of New Bedford, Massachusetts. There are several elegant buildings in that place; two new churches are now being erected; and there are perhaps more spacious dwelling houses, than in any town, of similar extent, in the country. The navigation has much increased within ten years; and is still in a prosperous state. A Custom house was much needed. The business in that department was all transacted in a small chamber, where the collector, clerks, and merchants were much crowded, and great interruptions must have occurred to every one, whether merchant, or officer of the Customs.

The new building for the above purpose is on Second street, and within fifty rods of most of the wharves; and is on ground of about fifty feet elevation above the tide of the

harbor or river. The building is fifty feet in front, and fifty-two in the rear, exclusive of projections. The height is thirty feet. The portico is not entirely finished; but it is of hewn granite, with four columns, entablature, pediment &c of the same material. The whole building is of the Hallowell granite, the face is split jointed in regular course. The underpinning, pilasters, front doors, stiles, steps, platform, buttresses, cornices, &c. are of fine hewn work. Indeed, all the ornamental work is smooth-dressed granite. There are four chimneys running up in the centre of the roof, so as to form a square for an observatory, of about ten feet square, enclosed with an iron railing. The floors are all vaulted with brick groin arches, and the spandrells leveled with stone and mortar. On these are placed small joists, to which the floors are fastened; and the floors for all the building are of hard pine.

The upper or principal story is partitioned as follows: the hall of the Customs is forty-eight feet by eighteen; and the height of the story is sixteen feet. To this story there is a flight of stairs or steps of free-stone, the workmanship of which is not surpassed by any which we have ever seen. There are twenty-two steps. The rooms below are similar to those above. The Post office is now kept in the space below the large Custom house room, already described. The entry and stairway are spacious; and all the partitions are built with stone. The whole building is plastered with three coats on the stone wall and arches. The work is composed of the most durable materials; and the building may be justly said to be fire-proof. The basement is strictly so. The building is to be enclosed with a stone and iron fence. The precise cost, we are unable to give; but it is estimated at 30,000 dollars. The elegant mansion of G. T. Baker, Esq. included in this view, stands a little on the left, or south of the Custom house.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General statement

1. Architectural character: An austere Federal building of the 1830's, well planned for Customs and Postal use, virtually fireproof, with granite walls and brick vaulting.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; no indication of any weakness or deterioration.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 53'-3" x 51'-0"; portico 10'-2" projection x 32'-5" width. Two stories. Faces east.

2. Foundations: Granite ashlar above grade, smooth faced on north and east sides, rough faced on other sides. Somewhat random below grade.
3. Wall construction: Granite ashlar, rough faced, courses 15" to 16" high, pieces generally between 2' and 7' long. 1/2" mortar joints appear to have been pointed in recent times. Antae at corners are smooth faced.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: Portico of four Greek Doric columns, unfluted, of granite, two stories high. Full granite entablature with pediment. Granite steps and floor; large floor slabs span depth of portico, leaving basement room beneath. The architrave (lintel) is divided into inner and outer stones.

Faint marks can be seen on the wall alongside the north door, where a stoop was located formerly.

A wooden bulkhead affords access to the basement from the west side.

5. Chimneys: Four chimneys at interior partitions corbel toward each other to form the corners of a central cupola; their upper part has been extended at an undetermined date. A modern brick chimney outside the west wall now serves the heating system.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Main entrance at center of east wall, with simple moulded wood trim set inside masonry opening. Jambs are each of a single stone. A relieving lintel is located on the course above the door lintel. The door appears modern, with double leaves, each with two glazed panels and one panel below; they might have been adapted from older doors. There is a transom. South side door: Simple wood frame inside plain masonry opening, modern door with transom. North side door: Closed up.
- b. Windows: Simple masonry openings without trim. On the first story, the four east windows and the two north windows have smooth granite panels below the sills. The sill of the second story windows extends around the building as a belt course. Sash are modern wood double hung throughout; there are no shutters.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hip roof, gabled over the portico.

Present covering appears to be standing seam sheet metal coated with asphalt.

- b. Framing: 3" x 9" rafters spaced about 30" on centers. Some brick and stone partitions are carried up into attic space for roof supports.
- c. Cornice: The entablature of the Doric Order carries around the building as a cornice of granite; mouldings are simple. Round copper conductors at the corners.
- d. Dormers, cupolas: There are no dormers. A square cupola with a flat roof, and windows on all sides, rests on the center of the roof. It is an extension of the original observation platform, added at an undetermined date.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Structural system: Three rows of parallel brick barrel vaulting extend east and west, the middle one being narrower than the outer ones, supported on stone and brick walls and piers. This forms the support for the first and second floors. Intersections extending north and south give somewhat the effect of groined vaults.

The second floor ceiling, at least the part which can be seen at the center of the building, is of wood lath and plaster, hung by wooden strips from 3" x 9" joists.

2. Floor plans: All are essentially similar. A hall extends east and west down the center; on the north side of this is a single long room. At the center on the south side is a stair hall, leaving a square room on either side in the corner. This floor plan coincides exactly with the structural system of the building.
3. Stairways: The main stairway, from the first to the second floor, is of stone, with two flights. The lower flight is supported by a stone partition on both sides; the upper flight cantilevers out from a stone partition on one side only. Treads are 12", risers 7-1/2"; the surface of the treads is worn. There is a single wood handrail with 3/4" square iron balusters, two to each tread.

A stone stairway, with some winders, descends to the basement, under the lower flight of the main stairway; it has a small landing at ground level, forming an entrance from the south door.

There is a small wooden stairway to the attic, from the central hall, with winders and landing. The lower portion

open, with simple wood newel and handrail.

4. Flooring: A description of 1837 referred to all floor coverings as being hard pine. At present the first floor hall is paved with 12" x 12" marble blocks laid diagonally, alternately black and light gray. Offices are floored with modern linoleum coverings. A few places on the second floor show 4" matched boards. The basement floor is of flagstones and concrete.
5. Wall and ceiling finish: Plastered, except in the basement. All is painted, and maintained in good condition.
6. Doorways and doors: Four-panel, moulded; moulded wood trim. Formerly there were double doors between the hall and stair hall on the first floor.
7. Trim: Wide baseboards throughout, moulded. High wainscoting of beaded vertical boards - this may be of the late nineteenth century. Windows have no trim.
8. Hardware: Doors are hung on two cast-iron butts. Brass knobs and mortice locks may be replacements of late nineteenth century. Iron pintles in stone basement walls indicate that double doors were formerly hung on all openings there.
9. Lighting: modern electric system; no indication of original lighting.
10. Heating: On each of the main floors are four chimneys with niches and holes, indicating that stove heating was employed originally. In the lower part of some of these niches is a marble wash basin, with a wooden cabinet below for a drainage pail.

A modern central heating system is now used, with oil fuel, and auxiliary equipment for coal in case of emergency.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The building occupies the southwest corner of two business streets, near the waterfront. Formerly the water was nearer than today, so that the customs office was very conveniently located. A parking lot now adjoins the building on the south and west sides.
2. Enclosures: An 1837 woodcut indicates a fence along the north sidewalk line, to the rear of the building. An undated stereo photograph, perhaps of the late nineteenth

century, shows a small iron fence filling out the street corner, alongside the front steps, with a stone post at the corner.

There are no enclosures now.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
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