

Nott Memorial Library, Union College
Schenectady
Schenectady County
New York

HABS No. NY-3270

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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(Page 1)

Address: Schenectady, Schenectady County, New York.
Present Owner and Occupant: Union College, Schenectady, New York.
Present Use: At present used only for miscellaneous purposes.
Brief Statement of Significance: A late 19th-century building with fine architectural features.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Union College.
2. Date of erection: 1858-1876. [New York, A Guide to the Empire State (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 326].
3. Architect: Edward Tuckerman Potter [ibid.]
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: From physical evidence, it is obvious that the original building was open in the center from the first floor to the dome, with two galleries extending completely around the center.
5. Notes on alterations and additions: A second floor has been inserted in the central portion, supported on steel arches-- a 20th century addition. At an undetermined date part of the first floor, at the east side, has been partitioned off.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The building is named for Eliphalet Nott, president of Union College for 62 years. [ibid].

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Record of Union College.

D. Supplemental Material: The following are copies of documents in the Schaffer Library of Union College, Schenectady, New York (correspondence of the architect, E. T. Potter).

Florida Hotel,
St. Augustine, Florida
March 7th, 1875.

To Dr. Tayler Lewis

Dear Sir:

Thank you for your letter of the 22d of Feb.

containing the slip on which was written the Hebrew sentence reduced to eight words or so as to go in eight compartments - and also the Latin equivalent of it also reduced so as to go in eight corresponding compartments - the two making sixteen in all. It will be very useful to me. But I had the idea of using the Hebrew sentence twice; once on the interior of the building, near the eye, written in a circle or ring, with its Latin equivalent written inside the ring; and once, without the Latin, on the dome, just above the cornice of the drum of the dome, the sentence running around the dome and the letters formed in the slating by using different colored slate, one color for the letters and another color for the plain surface or ground color.

My object is to diversify the slating by something more interesting than a meaningless ornament. Something which can not be copied readily in other buildings. - The form of the Hebrew letters struck me as lending themselves to such a de---- (design?) as I want in that place. Not so the roman letters, as for a double reason I think them undesirable for that place.

I send enclosed some specimens of the Hebrew characters worked out as they would work out in the slate roof and such as I should make as a pattern for every word for the slater. If you will notice, that the way the slates must be laid, to keep out the water, is to have the middle of each slate overlap over the joint which comes between the two slates below it you will see why I have made the letters slant instead of perpendicular. I send the whole inscription in a long strip composed of pieces of paper each one of which bears one word - just as each side of the sixteen sides of the dome would show one word if there were sixteen. As I do not want the Latin in this place and could not well represent it in slate and think it would not look well there - I should have eight plain spaces-I could have these alternate with the spaces bearing each a Hebrew word. I notice you speak of the sentence having eleven words: this would do leaving five spaces blank together. The most troublesome word in no. 3 it is so long. I send on separate pieces of paper another style for the letters. Please let me know if you think the lettering of any or all the slips will do for the place I want it for, and if so which is best.

Very respectfully & truly yours,
E. P. POTTER

Please direct to me
56 Wall St., New York.

51 Wall St. New York
Aug. 18 1875

(Pencil notation) My dear Mr. Shirs (?)

Under date of Aug 18th the architect
writes as follows

Prof. Pearson

Dear Sir

In designing the dome of Alumni Hall I proposed dome piercings as decoration of interior which I made a pattern of (what Mr. Stiemers calls a perforated or illuminated cast iron slate about which you have some communication with him). My object has been all along to work within the limits of the original contract or if at all going outside of it to have the expense of such addition as small as would serve my purpose. Mr. Steimers said the cost would be trifling, but lately learning that each cast iron perforated slate was said to cost \$3.75 I proposed to make what would serve the same purpose of sheet zinc. I had a model made costing 25 cts. As there would be at least 480 perforated slates and over 600 would be preferable, the difference in expense to college is material. Mr. Steimer said Messrs Cornell the contractors could not use the sheet zinc as in a few years the weather would wear away the zinc. Is this so? I believe also Messrs. Cornell have written you proposing to substitute copper for lead or zinc for the flahsings & covering of upper or exposed parts of the iron ribs of dome. I have an idea that copper will crack in the cold weather & that the zinc and lead serve the purpose as well. It seems a pity to add to the costs of the job materially unless it is necessary.

Very truly yours

(signed) Edward T. Potter architect

Mr. Howard Potter has suggested that Mr. Cantine of Schenectady doing business in a small iron works there would be a good person to consult in such a case as to the relative cost of what Messrs. Cornell for instance contracted to furnish in the way of a lantern & that which I drew out for it in detail. Could you arrange with him to do that? Paying him for his time if necessary to do it thoroughly. If so what would it cost? I ask for this tho I suppose an expert could put one up on the matter in perhaps a few moments.

What would Mr. Cantine make the lantern for as drawn by me (say without the gilding & without the stairs or the wrought iron work above? I will send the drawings to your care for Mr. Cantine by today's mail.

Copy. -- The original sent to Rev. E. Nott Potter at Newport R.I.
Aug/19/75

Messrs. Cornells & Co.
Centre St. New York
Aug. 23 1875

To
Prof. Pearson

Dear Sir,

Messrs. Cornell have shown me the President's letter of the 21st inst. They can not put in the illuminators at 25 cts each as the cutting & fitting them in place & working up to them is the chief (sic) expense in them.

They will put them in of heavy zinc with slate under & make a satisfactory job at \$1.35 each. The exact number should be determined by the architect as the work goes on (about 650 of them in all I think at outside). I think the above offer of Messrs Cornell should be accepted & the work can go on with no further delay.

Very truly yours &c
(signed) Edward T Potter
architect

56 Wall St., New York
Sep 18th 1875

To Prof. Pearson

Dear Sir -- Please send me the distance between the inner flanges of the columns where the marble is to go in drum of dome.

(sketch)

& oblige

Yours respt & truly

(signed) Edw T Potter
archt

Did you get my letter of some days time asking as to dating matter?

Newport, Oct 18th 1875

Dear Sir -- I have written to Messrs Cornell to complete the closing in of the drum of the dome from the wind as soon as possible. I think unless the matter is under way or completed it would be well for you or the President to ask it --

You mentioned in your last that the land in front of the terrace had been mortgaged to pay for the dome. As it has been mentioned to me, I feel I ought to say that nothing that I could design, or one far more gifted, could be at all as valuable as that land to the college.

To
Prof. Pearson
U.C.

Very truly yrs.
(signed) Edw T Potter
archt

56 Wall St. New York
Oct 30th 1875

Prof Pearson

Dear Sir

Your favors of the 21st & 22^d-inst were duly recd. I will attend to the marble matter as requested. I will send the samples of the tints for finish of walls and ceiling inside with directions for application

Very truly yrs.
(signed) Edw T. Potter

I should like the doors of the building of oak flush faced like those of the 1st Ref. Dutch Church, Schenectady.
I do not wish any other wood work in the building.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: A building of imaginative design and ingenious construction, with an interior frame of cast and wrought iron.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: About 94' interior diameter. 16-sided polygonal building.

2. Foundations: Lower part of foundation walls is random ashlar; the upper part is of brick, 44" thick. Foundations of the outer walls are not continuous--they form piers at the angles, between which spring brick arches. Under each of the 16 interior columns is a brick pier 3'-0 1/2" square, resting on a stone footing 4'-0" square.

3. Wall construction: Cut stone of a slightly-warm color. Alternate courses and voussoirs are lighter and darker in value. (There is no visible indication whether back-up courses are of stone or brick). The lower half of the wall consists of 16 piers, at the angles, with windows and spandrels between.

4. Stoops: Stone steps and a small stoop give access to the main entrance, on the south side.

5. Openings:

a. Doors: The entrance occupies the lower part of one bay, being arched with a two-centered form; the upper part of the opening contains wooden tracery. Double doors are of oak, constructed of diagonal planks. There is a basement entrance on the east side.

b. Windows: Each first-story bay contains triple windows with granite colonnettes and tricuspded arches. Above each group of three windows, lighting the first gallery is a window slightly higher than a semicircle, which fills the upper part of the bay. At the upper part of the wall, lighting the second gallery, are three lancet windows; above them, forming a frieze, are five small trefoil windows. All of these elements comprise one typical side (of 16) of the outer wall.

6. Roof: Each section of the outer portion is covered with a shed roof. The central portion is covered with a 16-sided dome on a glazed drum, each side of the drum containing triple windows, with tracery. The drum, its cornice, and railing at the base are covered with copper. Each section of the lower roof, and the roof of the dome, is separated from the adjoining ones with a narrow copper rib. The roof covering is of slate, that of the dome being patterned in color.

7. Cornice: The outer wall has a stone cornice, with small bracket corbels.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: The center of the building is a 16-sided polygon, with an aisle extending around it. At present there is a first story, a second story similar to it, and an upper gallery around the upper central portion. There is a full basement.

2. First floor: The first floor is constructed with rolled wrought-iron sections, with a 5" flange, 3'-0" on centers, with segmental brick arched construction between them. It is supported on 16 brick piers, iron girders between them, and the outer walls. It is covered with patterned ceramic tile, with earth colors predominating--dull red, yellow and black. Separating the main tile areas are bands employing some blue, green and white. The patterns and bands appear to follow medieval European floor motifs--14th century French Gothic--of encaustic tile work.

3. Interior frame: Sixteen cast iron columns of complex section, spaced about 10' on centers, extend from the first floor to the dome. Each is in three superposed stages, with the base of the upper one bolted to the capital of the lower one. Trussed braces

extend from each column to the angle in the outer wall, at each stage, and simple braces extend laterally between columns.

4. Second floor: The original part, over the side aisle, has trussed iron joists carrying corrugated sheet iron, and, presumably, concrete. The central part of the floor is carried on steel arches, each made of two angle sections, riveted; it appears to be of 20th century origin. Floor covering is of a mastic composition. The floor of the upper gallery is similar to the original part of the second floor.

5. The ceiling of the outer aisle, above the upper gallery, is pitched to form the roof construction. It is constructed with trussed iron joists, with wood lath and plaster between them. The ceiling of the dome is framed with iron.

6. Stairways: A symmetrical iron stairway of two straight flights leads from the first floor to the second floor. It has cast iron newels, cast iron treads and risers, bolted together, and is self-supporting, with the aid of one Corinthianesque cast iron column under the center of each flight. This double stairway is located at the west side. A single stairway of similar design, at the west side, leads on to the upper gallery, and another of three flights leads to the base of the drum (and exterior balcony at that level). A small iron stairway just east of the entrance leads from the first floor to the basement.

There is a wrought iron railing along the stairs and around the upper gallery.

7. Wall finish: Between the first and second floors, the outer walls are faced with thin slabs of marble, which appear to be original. The upper walls are plastered and painted. The wooden partitions of the first floor, which are additions, are varnished.

8. Miscellaneous: Windows are filled with leaded glass, although there is little use of color. There are curved oak reading tables on the first story, paneled, with consoles at the ends; they appear old but are probably not contemporary with the construction of the building.

9. Heating and ventilating: The present heating equipment appears modern, with no clear indication of the original system. At each outer angle of the main walls is a stone projection above the roof; these may have been ventilating flues originally.

D. Site: The Union College campus is located just north of Union Street, with its main entrance from Union Street. The Nott Memorial Library is located to the north of this entrance gateway and on axis with it, in a dominant central position on the campus. Its site was intended by Ramee, in his original designs for the campus, to be occupied by a classical rotunda. The present building is threatened with major alterations to convert it into such a form, according to plans being seriously considered by the college.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
September 1962.