

International Exhibition of 1876,
St. George's House (British Building)
West side of State's Drive, approximately
.2 mile west of Belmont Avenue, Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1080

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-1080

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF 1876,
ST. GEORGE'S HOUSE (BRITISH BUILDING)HABS
PA
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Address: West side of State's Drive, approximately .2 mile west of Belmont Avenue, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania

Present Use: Demolished

Brief Statement of Significance: St. George's House, one of three structures erected at the foot of George's Hill by the British Government for the 1876 Centennial, was used as offices and as a residence by the English commissioner and delegates.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners:
 - a. British Government
 - b. Nov. 22, 1876 - given to City of Philadelphia
 - c. Demolished in summer of 1961.
2. Date of erection: 1875
3. Architect: Thomas Harris ("of London")
4. Builder, suppliers, etc.: "Builder, John Rice, under immediate supervision of J. H. Cundall, C. E., the engineer of the commission. The interior is furnished with appropriate old-fashioned English furniture, under the direction of Mr. Cooper, of London." Westcott, Thompson, Centennial Portfolio, p. 17.
5. Original plans, construction, etc.: Two sheets of the original architect's drawings, submitted by the British Government to the Centennial Director General for approval, are now in the possession of the Philadelphia Department of Records, Archives Division. These sheets, one for St. George's House (see HABS photocopy) and the other for the Staff's Quarters, are of brown tracing paper. Each contains one elevation and a ground floor plan; the drawings are in ink and colored wash. The Archives also has in its possession two sheets which indicate the proposed site of the British buildings at the foot of George's Hill, and a contemporary lithograph of the complex (see HABS photocopy).

6. Notes on alterations and additions: The Fairmount Park Commission has used St. George's House at times as a residence for Park employees and even to house lockers for those using the nearby tennis courts. These uses necessitated some interior alterations, for which the plans are unavailable. However, the building remained essentially the same until its demolition in the summer of 1961. The Fairmount Park Commission had the architectural firm of Hatfield, Martin, and White of Philadelphia make a study in the fall of 1960 to determine whether it would be feasible to adapt the building to some permanent use; e.g., Park offices or the headquarters for some charitable organization. However, the foundations, intended originally only for a temporary structure, were in poor condition, and it was decided that further alterations and use of the building were impossible.

7. Sources of information:

- a. Gardner, Dorsey (ed.). Grounds and Buildings of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1878.
- b. Magee's Centennial Guide of Philadelphia. Philadelphia: R. Magee and Son, 1876.
- c. McCabe, James D. The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition. Toronto: J. B. Magurn, 1876.
- d. Pennsylvania and the Centennial Exposition. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Board of Centennial Managers, 1878.
- e. Westcott, Thompson. Centennial Portfolio. Philadelphia: Thomas Hunter, 1876.

B. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Documentary records of the Centennial at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

St. George's House, the largest of the three British buildings at the Centennial, was obviously a conscious effort by the British Government to recreate the era in history that had seen the rise and dominance of English sea power and the first fruits of her rapidly expanding economy. Though the structure does not conform in a strict sense to the design of the Elizabethan and Jacobean manor houses, particularly in room arrangement, the general plan relates it to many of the great houses of that period in England, which were based on the "H" plan, such as Wimbledon House, Surrey (1588), which was the first of the large houses built on this plan that was so generally accepted and used for more than half a century; Conover House, Shropshire (1598); Charlton House, Wiltshire (1607); and Charlton House, Greenwich (1607). The general impression of St. George's House, however, is of a design that is more the product of romantic imagination than of archaeological and historical concern. It had, however, considerable architectural merit, and it was one of the few temporary Centennial buildings that was used - in situ - until the middle of the 20th century.

B. Description:

A number of contemporary guide books and ambitious brochures described this complex of British buildings. St. George's House itself was "two stories high, and . . . surmounted by a roof of red tiles and a multitude of tall chimneys. The building was erected under the superintendence of the English Commission, and the furniture, upholstery and fixtures are from leading houses in England. The building covers a space ninety [approximate dimension on N-S axis] by twenty-five feet [the building plan is irregular; evidently twenty-five feet refers to the smallest transverse dimension], with projections in front and a verandah and balcony in the rear. . . . The window panes are small; the rooms have fireplaces, high mantels and broad window seats. On the first floor a suite of three apartments finely finished in oak and opening into each other by sliding doors are the 'show rooms' of the house. They aggregate fifty-six feet in length by sixteen feet wide. There are about twenty apartments on the two stories, opening into passageways running lengthwise through the centre of the house. Apartments in this building are provided for the use of various British Colonial Commissioners, from the Dominion of Canada, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, Cape of Good Hope, Jamaica, Bermuda and the Bahamas. In the two adjoining houses there are accommodations for thirty-eight

persons who are attached to the Commission."¹

Another account enlarges on this description. "This group of buildings [the three British buildings] represents in a very picturesque manner the old half-timber houses of two centuries ago, many of which yet remain near Chester and in other parts of England. The main structure covers a space of 93 x 68 feet, with projections. The exterior is indescribable with any degree of minuteness. It is composed of gables, projecting, bay and oriel windows, verandas and balconies, and defies that sort of taste which sees beauty only in straight lines. There are projections and recesses, porches and other arrangements, all of which to the American eye appear inexpressibly odd. The chimneys are broad and massive; the roof covered with red earthenware tiles; the windows, which are numerous, are composed of very small panes of glass set in leaden sashes. Outside, the house appears to be all window and gable; inside, there are several rooms finely finished in carved oak, which open into one another, and which connect with the main hall, stairways and corridors. The high mantelpieces are of carved wood bordered with paint and enameled tiles. The hearths and the floors are tiled; and the interior is so unlike anything that we have in this country that inspection of it reveals an interesting curiosity. The staff building is 65 x 35."²

Another source states that "nearly every article entering into the construction of the buildings was manufactured in Great Britain. The rooms are furnished in paneled dados, the walls above, hung with English paper. . ."³

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February 1964

¹James D. McCabe, The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition (Toronto: J. B. Magurn, 1876), pp. 608-09.

²Thompson Westcott, Centennial Portfolio (Philadelphia: Thomas Hunter, 1876), p. 17.

³Magee's Centennial Guide of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: R. Magee and Son, 1876), p. 142.