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New Whatcom City Hall (Bellingham City Hall, Whatcom
Museum of History and Art)
121 Prospect Street
Bellingham
Whatcom County
Washington

HABS No. WA-22

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

Name: NEW WHATCOM CITY HALL (1892 - 1904)
 Bellingham City Hall (1904 - 1939)
 Bellingham Public Museum (1940 - 1962)
 Whatcom Museum of History and Art (1966 - Present)

Location: 121 Prospect Street
 Bellingham, Whatcom County
 Washington

Present Owner: City of Bellingham, Washington

Present Occupant: Whatcom Museum of History and Art

Present Use: Regional History and Art museum

Significance:

The New Whatcom City Hall building is historically significant as a symbol of its community's past and the ideas, actions and philosophies of its builders. It is architecturally significant as one of the few remaining examples of late victorian public buildings that have been left in relatively original condition in its area. For these reasons the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on April 8, 1970.

Built in 1892, during the last years of the victorian era the building was the center of the boom and bust times often common to newly settled areas of the American west. The first settlers reached Bellingham Bay in 1852, and others followed soon after them, but when the New Whatcom City Hall was built, the area around the bay was still a cluster of little towns, all seeking to outdo each other in growth and economic expansion. The western terminus of several intercontinental railroads had bypassed them. Coal, timber and fishing were the remaining large industries in the area, and with the labor force this attracted, New Whatcom was a raw town, experiencing waves of boom and bust with every rumor of new industrial interest. The construction of the city hall was a major achievement during the "civilizing" of the area, and was the building where important plans were made concerning the future of this "fourth corner" of the State of Washington.

The building was indeed more than an achievement, it was a symbol of the hoped for growth and prosperity of the town. New Whatcom's city council on January 15, 1892 stated of the location and building: "This is a beautiful central location, convenient and in full view of the entire city. This location with this building constructed thereon would be the first attraction of strangers coming into our harbor and a sure index to all newcomers, tourists and travellers of our taste, thrift, enterprise and intellegence." and that the building would be "eleborate, expensive and elegant in design". They further indicated that it "would be a great credit and ornament to the city". As such the building testifies to the expansion hopes of the young community. It was, and continues to be a manifestation of the ideas and ideals of western towns and their leaders during a period of competitive growth and developmen

As an architectural structure the building has retained or been restored near to its original 1892 external appearance. It continues active use as a well maintained, structurally sound building. Designed by a local, self-taught architect (as was typical of many smaller communities at the time) it reflects the eclectic victorian style prominent in the West in the 1890's. It is a unique, yet fine example of small city late-victorian public architecture and one of the few remaining examples in the area.

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection:

The New Whatcom City Hall building is commonly considered to have been erected in 1892, a date that appears prominently on the outside of the building. Plans for the structure were accepted by the City Council November 7, 1891¹, bids for construction were opened December 1 of that year and a contract was awarded to the low bidders on December 9². Construction was slowed somewhat by the City Council decision to change location of the building to its present site after a basement had already been dug at a different location³. Notwithstanding the date of 1892 placed on the building structure, the City Hall was not actually completed until May 6, 1893, with the first City Council meeting convening May 9th⁴.

It is interesting to note that there seems to have been no dedication or opening ceremony for the new building. This may have been a sign of the times. The building was begun in late 1891 when the local area was experiencing good times. It was completed in 1893 during a major national depression and the interior of the structure was left in a partially completed state. Perhaps the building opened at a time not conducive to city celebration.

¹Bellingham Bay Mail, November 7, 1891.

²Record of Proceedings of the City Council of New Whatcom, WA December 9, 1891, p. 272.

³Record of Proceedings of the City Council of New Whatcom, WA January 15, 1892, p. 336.

⁴Daily Reveille, May 6th and 9th, 1893.

2. Architect:

The architect for the New Whatcom City Hall building was Alfred Lee¹. Mr. Lee was born in 1843 and traveled to the Oregon country as a child. As a young man he apprenticed as a wagon maker and carried on that occupation until he moved to Bellingham Bay in 1890. While working as a wagon maker he enjoyed architecture as a self-taught hobby, we are not aware that he had any formal architectural training. On arrival to the Bellingham area he opened an architect's office and practiced successfully for many years. Besides the New Whatcom City Hall building, he was the designer (and often building superintendant) for two Bellingham Bay high schools, two grade schools, the major structure at Bellingham Normal School (now Western Washington University), a hospital, library, YMCA, churches and numerous private homes.² Four of Mr. Lee's buildings, including the New Whatcom City Hall, are now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Mr. Lee died in Bellingham in 1933.

¹ Alfred Lee's design of the building is acknowledged in proceedings of the New Whatcom City Council December 9, 1891, pp. 272; Bellingham Bay Mail, November 7, 1891; and in the corner stone of the building.

² List of A. Lee designed buildings developed and housed by the Whatcom Museum.

3. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

The builder and contractor for the building was Long and Merritt Construction Company¹.

Source of materials for the building is for the most part unknown. Exterior red brick was supplied by the Portland Pressed Brick Company², and sandstone used for the stone block foundation and trim was supplied by the Chuckanut Sandstone Quarry, Bellingham.

¹Record of Proceedings of the City Council of New Whatcom, Washington, December 9, 1891. pp. 272.

"Long and Merritt, builders" is insized into a sandstone trim block above the front entrance of the building.

²Daily Reveille, May 9, 1893.

No original plans, contracts or architectural drawings remain for the New Whatcom City Hall building. A number of exterior photographs and a few interior photographs provide information of original design where changes have been made. Added to this information are comments by individuals who have viewed the structure at different times in its history. Photographs mentioned above are in the collection of the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, now housed in the building.

The structure retains its original appearance except as indicated in section 5 below.

5. Alterations and additions:

The New Whatcom City Hall building went through a number of minor exterior and interior modifications during its tenure as a city hall from 1892 until 1939. Its 1939 appearance remained relatively unchanged during its operation as the Bellingham Public Museum from 1940 until 1962. A fire in 1962 destroyed much of the building's tower and roof and water from fire extinction caused much damage to upper interior floors. After this time exterior restoration and interior restoration and remodeling to provide spaces for modern museum galleries has taken place.

Change during the building's use as a city hall reflected changing attitudes in exterior decoration and changing needs in interior space. Cornice trim on the building's roof and tower in 1892 photographs¹ was painted gray to counterpoint the building's basic red. Later photographs¹ show the roof and tower totally red with no color difference in trim. On the interior, gas lights were replaced by electric fixtures as technology changed, minor changes in doorways and wooden partitions were changed to accommodate changing office needs (no alterations of retaining walls took place)¹ and a small office space on the first floor was reconstructed into additional fire safe space in the 1920's². Maple and oak paneling and stairway balustrade were heavily varnished, appearing shiny black, and office paneling was painted institutional green.³

A public museum took over the city hall building in 1940. Minimum funding prevented many changes. Glass cases were brought into the rooms, and outside windows were painted over to reduce outside light in some areas.¹

An electrical fire caused much damage in 1962. The building's main tower and one cupola burned and much of the roof was damaged. Plaster walls soaked up water used to put out the fire and wall and ceiling plaster fell from their lattice supports. The roof was replaced but the building was vacant for six years while money was raised for restoration and remodeling.

Restoration and remodeling took place in a number of stages from 1966 through 1974⁴. During this time new electric wiring and plumbing were installed, including smoke and fire sensors. Window spaces were filled in from the inside to make more wall space for galleries (on the outside black slatted shutters appear behind the window glass so that the building retains its original "windowed" look on the exterior). Walls were replastered and many walls were covered with burlap wall paper to make professional display walls, while in other cases; particularly the first floor hallway and stairway and the second floor council chambers; wooden wall paneling, balcony railing and stairway balustrades were stripped down to their natural wood surfaces. New paneled wooden fire doors were designed and installed to complement original woodwork and new lighting fixtures were added in a style similar to that which might have appeared in the original building. A contained emergency stairway was added to pass current fire codes and an elevator was added. Emergency stairway and elevator pass up and down through areas that had been inclosed small offices or fire safes and are not visible from other building spaces.

1As seen in vintage photographs in the Whatcom Museum archives collection.

21920's first floor remodeling plans are a part of the Whatcom Museum Collection.

3Green paint and paneling are still visible in certain behind-the-scenes areas of the Whatcom Museum building.

41966 and 1972 restoration architectural plans are available in the Whatcom Museum Collection.

No original retaining walls were removed and all original spaces developed by those retaining walls remain so that one is at all times aware of the original design and ambience of the building.

Outside the sheet metal covered tower and cupola were replaced. Design of the new tower and cupola was made as close to the originals as possible using vintage photographs as guides. Bricks were cleaned and repointed, trim was resurfaced and the tower, cupolas and roof repainted to its all red configuration.

B. Historical Context:

The New Whatcom City Hall was built in 1892 to house the government of the City of New Whatcom. New Whatcom was a new town on Bellingham Bay. The Bay had originally been settled as four separate communities. Its two northern towns, Whatcom and Sehome, had incorporated in early 1891 into a single town of New Whatcom and a new building to house its enlarged city government was deemed necessary. Optimistic about future growth, a city hall was built that was larger than necessary at the time. On completion only the first floor and basement of the three story building were used. The extra size of the city hall became necessary within only a few years. In 1903 New Whatcom and Fairhaven, itself an incorporation of Bellingham Bay's two southernmost towns, voted to become a single city on Bellingham Bay. They chose the name Bellingham for the expanded city. Since Fairhaven had no major city hall structure and New Whatcom's city hall could easily accommodate the bigger government after this second town merger, the New Whatcom City Hall became the location for the city government of Bellingham.

In 1939 Bellingham built a new city hall and the old "New Whatcom" city hall became vacant. As was popular at the time, the building was rented to a museum society and a small museum developed in 1940. This museum became a city museum in 1945, although run by a volunteer staff.

In 1962 a large fire made the building unusable. One floor and the basement were put back in use in 1968 and the upper floors were restored and remodeled in 1974. After the fire the museum's name was changed to the Whatcom Museum of History and Art and is now run as a regional cultural center by professional staff.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Description of Exterior:

The New Whatcom City Hall building is a brick and sandstone structure approximately 90 ft. across its front, 80 ft. deep and 120 ft. in height to the top of its main tower (plus a 12 foot tower top flag pole). The three story building is topped by a mansard roof, central tower and four smaller roof corner cupolas.

The structure is built on a cement and local sandstone block foundation with sandstone appearing on the exterior. The sandstone blocks reach approximately seven feet above the ground level and incorporate basement windows into their design. Basement windows have been replaced with black metal louvers that retain building design but provide security for the basement floor.

Above the sandstone block foundation the building rises vertically for three floors (approximately 46 feet) of red pressed brick walls reaching to molded sheet metal cornices above. Each floor is easily delineated by lines of wood framed windows set into the brickwork, eight to ten windows in a horizontal row for each floor on each side of the building. Raised vertical brick columns and horizontal raised brick and sandstone belt courses and window sashes add to the wall design.

The central section of the front and back elevations reach up from a brick vaulted cement stairway and entranceway to a pediment within the mansard roof above the third floor cornice. Cast iron columns appear on each side of the entranceway with columns of diminishing sizes directly above on the second and third floor facades. "City" and "Hall" are incised in sandstone blocks supported upon the first floor columns and 1892 appears in the tympanum of front and back pediments.

The front and back facades of the building are identical as are the two sides. Building sides lack entranceways and iron columns but reach to a central pediment above.

Above the upper wall cornices a red sheet metal mansard roof extends the building height approximately 18 feet. Each corner of the roof supports a 27 foot cupola with small windows and extending lightning rod. Cupolas are approximately ten feet square at the base. The flat central section of the roof supports the main tower, approximately 20 feet square and 55 feet high. Similar on all four sides, the tower presents molded sheet metal columns supporting a pediment with a spire rising above. Sets of windows are housed between the columns and below the pediment. Molded sheet metal shingles cover the tower spire and circular clock faces approximately five feet in diameter are visible on three of the spires four sides. The fourth side houses a circular window in place of a clock face.

B. Description of Interior:

The interior of the New Whatcom City Hall building includes a basement and four floors of interior space. Basement, first, second and fourth floors contain approximately 4500 square feet of floor space each with approximately 3000 square feet of space on the third floor balcony. Interior space is in some cases remodeled to better fit the needs of a modern museum but retains general spaces and in some cases much detail from the building's city hall days. All present day space was utilized at the time the building was a city hall with the exception of the fourth floor. This space was originally an unfinished attic within the building's mansard roof line and was not finished for any use until 1974 when it was developed as a museum storage, registration and cataloging area.

The building basement originally housed the city police department and city jail. It contains rooms with poured concrete floors and walls. The 4500 square feet of floor space is divided into 15 rooms that were once offices and jail cells. Most rooms are quite small and are today used for museum storage, photograph cataloging, darkrooms, workshops and the original central stairway. All jail bars and other jail paraphernalia was removed at an unknown time in the past. A pieced oak stairway with simple incised and jigsaw-cut out designs ascends to the first floor, opening out of the back of the first floor grand stairway.

The first floor houses five museum galleries and a small museum shop that were once city offices. Gallery walls are covered with painted burlap wall covering and the ceiling supports spot and flood light tracks to illuminate museum exhibits. Two of the galleries are equipped with built-in glass exhibit cases. Ceilings in most rooms are thirteen feet high. The first floor also contains the 60 feet long central hallway that transverses the building from front to back door and opens onto the grand stairway leading to the second floor. The hallway walls are paneled in maple from the floor to a height of six feet. Ten-foot high entranceways into galleries off the hallway are framed in maple and red cedar. The grand stairway is eight feet wide with thirteen steps to a central landing then thirteen more to the second floor. Balastrades are pieced turned oak with mahogany insets and carved mahogany flowers on newel posts and landing posts. The body of the stairway is paneled in maple. Woodwork is all part of the original building. Three brass chandeliers of 1890's vintage hang

from the hallway ceiling supporting six white glass globe lights on each chandelier.

The second floor contains the rotunda room, largest room in the building, plus smaller galleries, glassed cases and offices. Like the first floor, most walls are covered in beige burlap. The Rotunda Room is a "U" shaped area approximately 56 feet long and 38 feet wide at the "U" opening. Originally the City Council Chamber, the space rises two floors to the third floor ceiling above and is surrounded on three sides by a third floor balcony. Two cast iron pillars rise approximately twenty-five feet to the ceiling in the center of the room. A large chandelier suspended from the ceiling consists of a brass ring with eight white glass globes with a central brass star of four additional globes. Surrounding the Rotunda Room on three sides (underneath the balcony area) are three small glass fronted rooms for exhibit use to the north, a small cased area and members room lounge-gallery to the south and to the east the stair well and two offices as well as utility and restrooms.

The third floor balcony space is open with the exception of three small office areas. Large glass cases run the length of the north, south and east outside walls. The balcony's inside edge surrounds the "U" shaped Rotunda Room a floor below on three sides with a turned wood balcony railing running the full length of the "U". Chandeliers similar to those on the first floor but larger in size light the balcony as well as the larger chandelier hanging over the Rotunda Room center. Small white globular lights along the "U" shaped wall below the balcony railing add a theatrical atmosphere to the space. The third floor is reached through an enclosed stairway from the second floor (the grand stairway reaches only to the second floor) with large vertical windows opening the enclosed stairway to the outside. The stairs and hand rails of this 1974 addition to the building are oak.

The fourth floor as stated earlier is one large open storage area developed for museum use after 1974. Exposed heavy wooden beams rise through the center of the open space to support the four corners of the tower above as well as "A" frame beam supports. Work tables, storage racks and catalog files fill the space today. A metal spiral stairway near the center of the area reaches nearly twenty feet to the ceiling and on into the tower above. This stairway was added with the rebuilding of the tower in 1974.

C. Site

The New Whatcom City Hall building sits on a site approximately 140 feet wide along its street frontage and 160 feet deep. It is located on a steep bluff overlooking the original shoreline of Bellingham Bay. The building's front and back sides are identical facades, presenting a building "front" northward toward the building's Prospect Street frontage as well as southward toward its most forceful view as seen from Bellingham Bay below the bluff. Fill built up onto the shallow tidflats below the bluff provided the location for the site of the northern half of the town of New Whatcom which the building served, giving residents and businesses in that area a striking view of the city hall on the bluff above them. The city hall building still provides a commanding view from this area and is visible from all parts of Bellingham Bay beyond. All or parts of the building are visible to most of the northern part of today's downtown Bellingham as well.

The site today includes a landscaped fourteen car parking lot on the east side of the building and brick walkways on the northern street side and east parking lot side. A brick open courtyard reaches from the back of the building (bayside) to the bluff and ends with a large kinetic sculpture by internationally known artist George Rickey. Two cedar totem poles and a bronze bird sculpture in the center of a space developed by a wood textured concrete and brick wheel car ramp are also a part of the bluff-side outdoor environment. Small trees extending from iron gratings in the brick sidewalk line the Prospect Street building front.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

No original architectural plans or drawings exist for the building. Drawings for a small change on the building first floor in the 1920's and restoration and remodeling plans for work carried out after the fire in 1962 are available at the Whatcom Museum, present occupant of the building.

1920: Plans for remodeling office space into fire safe and for opening treasurers office to hallway.

1966: Plans for restoration and remodeling of building first floor and basement.

1972: Plans for restoration of building exterior and tower restoration.

Plans for restoration and remodeling of museum 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors.

B. Early views:

Photographs mentioned below are housed in the Whatcom Museum photograph archives.

Exterior views:

- 1) 1893: structure viewed from south showing bay-side front and east side (70-139)
- 2) 1893: structure viewed from north showing street front (VD 424f)
- 3) 1893-94: structure viewed from south showing bay-side front and east side
- 4) 1893-94: photo shows half of east side of building
- 5) late 1890's: photo shows most of east side of building
- 6) 1906: photo shows street side entrance and plank sidewalk
- 7) 1909: photo shows street side entrance
- 8) approx. 1915: structure viewed from south bay side
- 9) 1940's: four detail photographs showing structure deterioration
- 10) late 1940's: photo shows most of west side
- 11) approx. 1960: structure viewed from south street-side front

Interior views:

- 1) 1893: first floor council chamber (present museum gallery V) (7396)
- 2) 1908: Office interior second floor (7386)
- 3) approx. 1960: two photos showing main hallway first floor and Rotunda Room as pre-fire exhibit area, prior to post-fire restoration and remodeling

- 4) 1966: series of interior photos taken prior to restoration and remodeling
- 5) 1972: series of 2nd, 3rd and 4th floor interior photos taken prior to restoration and remodeling

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary sources:

____. Bellingham Bay Mail. 1891-1893.

____. Daily Reveille. 1891-1893.

____. "Recordings of Proceedings of the City Council of New Whatcom, Washington, 1891-1893.

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2. Secondary sources:

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