Orniments of Civic Aspiration:  
The Public Buildings of Williamsburg

by: Carl Lounsbury

Throughout the eighteenth century, the fortunes of a city were frequently measured by its public buildings. Indifferent or, even worse, non-existent churches, courthouses, and marketplaces spoke of a place of no consequence. William Byrd, a man who spent much time in Williamsburg, played no small part in shaping its public structures. He was quick to disparage Edenton, North Carolina, by noting that its courthouse had "much the Air of a Common Tobacco-House. I believe this is the only Metropolis in the Christian or Mahometan World, where there is neither Church, Chappel, Mosque, Synagogue, or any other Place of Publick Worship of any Sect or Religion whatsoever." Even if Byrd would not admit it, Virginia's government and the citizens of Williamsburg often struggled mightily to erect structures of
durable quality and lasting significance. It was not an easy task to undertake massive projects such as the College of William and Mary, the capitol, or the Governor’s Palace in a colony whose architectural achievements through most of the seventeenth century had been extremely meager. Those who envisioned lasting monuments in Williamsburg had only to look at the shabby failure of Jamestown to realize what obstacles they had to overcome.

In the absence of a convenient supply of stone, brick became the symbol of permanence in Williamsburg, and every public building of consequence was constructed of this material. Yet, it was no guarantor of permanence, as the repeated destruction of the city’s public buildings demonstrated. Sometimes the scale, form, and quality of the buildings matched the ambitions of men like Byrd, Francis Nicholson, and Alexander Spotswood. In other instances, bad workmanship and ill proportions earned them strong epithets. Thomas Jefferson, no friend of Williamsburg’s architecture, likened the college and public hospital to “rude, misshapen piles, which, but that they have roofs, would be taken for brick-kilns.” Given the small amounts of money often allotted to major undertakings and the difficulty of coordinating workmen and the supply of materials, it is something of a surprise to observe how much was accomplished in the century from the construction of the first Bruton Parish Church at Middle Plantation to the removal of the state government from Williamsburg in 1780.

By the 1670s, a few well-established parish vestries had initiated a program of transforming earlier impermanent wooden structures into the first brick churches in the colony. A couple of years later, the vestry of Bruton Parish asserted its building aspirations, and ordered that “a New Church should be built with brick, at Middle Plantation.” Once levies were raised and donations from wealthier parishioners were in hand, the vestry committed itself to a church equal in size and quality to those new ones in Jamestown and Isle of Wight County, and in 1681 turned to Francis Page to build it. Page was ideally suited to the undertaking since he had the financial wherewithal to carry the project through and had considerable experience in the construction of brick structures. His own cruciform brick house erected in 1662 stood a few hundred yards northeast of the proposed building site that he had donated to the parish in 1678; and Page’s brick- and tile-making kilns located near his house had supplied materials for buildings in Jamestown and on neighboring plantations. Within two years, Bruton Parish had its first substantial building.

Standing a few dozen yards northwest of the present church, it measured sixty-five by twenty-eight-and-a-half feet. Like all Episcopal churches, it was oriented toward the communion table at the east end. Above the principal entrance in the center of the west facade, two windows lighted a gallery. Benches and tall pews lined a central aisle, and at the east end a raised and railed area for the communion table was lit by a large window. Typical of other Virginia churches of the period, Bruton had a small chancel door, probably in the last bay of the south wall, for exiting the church after the Eucharist service.

The most striking features of Bruton Church were the curvilinear gables capping the west and east walls and the series of buttresses that accentuated the longer north and south walls. Michel’s crude, inaccurate sketch of the church in 1702 (see color plate 4) depicts three arched or compass-headed windows on the south wall and omits the buttresses, which are evident in the archaeological footprint. The shaped gables, molded bricks, decorative windows and doorways, and buttresses are indicative of brickwork that had begun to flourish in Virginia in the last half of the seventeenth century.
As the new capital grew, the church became too small. In 1711, Governor Alexander Spotswood provided a plan for a much larger structure, a cruciform church measuring seventy-five by twenty-eight feet, with two wings, each twenty-two feet wide by nineteen long. There was no liturgical significance to the cruciform plan: the wings simply provided more space for the new capital's population of artisans, merchants, and officials. Rather than creating a wider building of boxier proportions, the plan followed regional predilections for narrow roof spans, eschewing those of more than thirty-five feet.

Because members of the provincial government would be using the church, Spotswood agreed to provide public funds to construct the two wings, but Spotswood's plan was revised, the wings being trimmed from nineteen to fourteen-and-a-half feet long. Although the new structure probably had some type of decorative parapeted gables like the first church, the walls and apertures featured elements that were becoming the standard form of late colonial brickwork with glazed, Flemish-bond headers and rubbed arches. The new church opened for services in 1715.

Entrance was through three doorways: the principal western one and two subsidiary ones into the wings. Each doorway may have been reserved for particular groups of parishioners, as was customary in many communities, and would have been in keeping with the fact that architectural divisions inside the church reflected social distinctions. Whereas pews were set aside for the governor, councilmen, members of the General Assembly, and other important provincial officers, ordinary parishioners were seated according to their rank, sex, and age. In 1716, the vestry ordered the men of the parish to sit on the north side, the women on the south side—although the more influential families probably continued to sit together. From the beginning, students from the college were seated in the west gallery, eventually taking over the entire area for themselves. It seems unlikely that any special space was allotted to slaves, in part because of the ambivalence many slaveholders felt toward Christianizing them. The few who did attend church must have been relegated to standing or sitting in the aisles or on a back bench. Although it has been asserted that an enclosed outside stairway that once ascended along the north wall of the church may have provided an entrance for slaves to a gallery in the north wing, this seems unlikely since the north gallery was erected as a private pew in the early 1760s.

The church continued to be enlarged, reworked, and rearranged. Among the more important changes, in the 1750s the churchyard wall was constructed and the church was lengthened twenty-two feet eastward. The last major addition was made in 1769, when Benjamin Powell erected a brick tower and wooden steeple at the west end of the church. Throughout the century its cruciform design was copied throughout the region.

Middle Plantation's centrality to the growing population of Virginia's tobacco planters in the early 1690s became evident when the House of Burgesses debated the location of the
new College of William and Mary; and among the benefits of siting the college here was the presence of a substantial brick church that would serve the spiritual needs of the new institution. The statute passed by the burgesses stipulated that the college was to be “built as neare the church now standing in Middle Plantation old fields as convenience will permit.”

Setting a precedent that would haunt almost every major public building project in the later colonial period, construction was plagued by a host of problems. First was the enormity of the undertaking. Following the example of English colleges at Cambridge and Oxford, the men who designed the plan of the college envisioned an enclosed, three-story brick quadrangle containing rooms and apartments for the students and professors as well as a communal hall and chapel. A front block facing east and measuring one hundred and thirty-eight by forty-six feet was to be connected to smaller blocks sixty-four feet long and thirty-two wide on the north and south sides, the north containing the hall and the south, the chapel. At the west end would be another range similar in size to the front. Although Virginians had undertaken a few large brick structures earlier, nothing close to this size had been contemplated, and members of the building committee were wary of straining the public purse.

Nonetheless, begun in August 1695, enough of the college was finished by 1699 for it to be put to use. A massive brick building extended thirteen bays, a smaller wing containing the hall being attached at right angles on the north end. The importance of the hall to the communal life of the college was emphasized by the set of five large compass-headed windows lighting the north and south walls of the wing. Two balconies projected from the center bay, one at the second story, the other at the dormer level, and the building was capped by a two-story cupola. The windows contained sliding sashes rather than pivoting casements, heralding the use of these new forms in the colony. Perhaps the most novel element in the entire design was a covered arcade or “piazza” extending across the rear of the main block as the principal connector between key parts of the building. The arcade had been an integral part of English public-building design for more than a century. Perhaps most pertinent were the several
colonnaded arcades built by Cambridge and Oxford colleges during the seventeenth century. Within a decade, the college arcade had been copied at the new capitol at the east end of the new Duke of Gloucester Street; and, from these two examples, the arcade passed into the building vocabulary in several Virginia county courthouses.

The responsibility for the design of the college building has been a matter of contentious speculation since the structure was restored in the late 1920s by the firm of Perry, Shaw & Hepburn (see p. 181). At this time, it was given the name “Wren Building” in honor of the English architect Sir Christopher Wren who was thought to have been its original designer. The attribution dates back to 1724, when Hugh Jones, a resident of Williamsburg, observed that the building was “first modelled by Christopher Wren, adapted to the Nature of the Country by the Gentlemen there... and is not altogether unlike Chelsea Hospital.” Despite the clarity of Jones’ statement, the meaning is fraught with ambiguities. Did Wren or someone in his Office of the King’s Works supply the actual design drawings; or were his public buildings, such as Chelsea Hospital, models altered to fit the needs of a fledgling institution and the abilities of the local building trades?

The college scarcely had time to adjust to the growing presence of the town before a fire in October 1705 left only a burned-out shell. This was the first of a number of fires that would ultimately destroy most of the major public buildings of Williamsburg. The response of college officials to this disaster was like that of later public officials: they debated whether a new building should be erected or the ruined walls salvaged. Finally, in 1709, officials decided to build on the footprint of the old building, incorporating as much of the earlier walls as were structurally sound. The principal change was the reduction of the main east facade, the third story being incorporated into a garret lit by a series of dormer windows.

Given the slowness of rebuilding, the spurt of sustained building activity during the next decade is remarkable. Starting around 1723 and drawing to a conclusion in the mid-1730s, three new
The Brafferton (left), College, and President’s House 1732 (right), from the Bodleian copper plate, ca. 1733–1740.

Courtesy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

projects were successfully projected and completed. First, in 1723, the college constructed a substantial brick school for Indians a few dozen yards southeast of the main building and on an axis, not with it, but with Duke of Gloucester Street. The two-storied Brafferton measured fifty-two by thirty-four feet, and was crowned by a tall, hipped roof (see color plate 6). At a time when most government officials, artisans, and freeholders in town and the surrounding countryside resided in much smaller, one-story, wooden dwellings, this brick pile was another remarkable achievement, far surpassing in detail and planning the accommodations of most citizens. Rather novel, and seen in only a few recently built houses, such as the Brush and Levingston houses on the east side of Palace Street, the Brafferton had a central passage running through the house, separating the schoolroom on the west from what was probably the two-room apartment of the Indian master on the east. Above stairs were a library and rooms for the students.

Second, at the end of the decade the college moved a step closer to completing its original design. To house the chapel, in 1729 Henry Cary, Jr., began constructing a two-story wing located at right angles to the west end of the main block and mirroring in outward form the hall to the north.

Third, a little over a month after the chapel was opened for service, on 31 July 1732, the college laid the foundations for the residence of its president. Cary built a two-story brick dwelling whose foundations were laid at right angles to the main building and nearly opposite the Brafferton. The dwelling was nearly a copy of the Indian school though slightly larger. Like the Brafferton and most houses of any pretension, the dwelling had a broad center stair passage. The principal ground-floor rooms, two on either side of the passage, probably contained a dining room and a parlor in the front and two smaller private rooms at the rear—possibly a chamber and a study. This arrangement would have been in keeping with the plans of many of the fashionable new gentry houses of Tidewater Virginia. Despite a fire in 1781 that forced extensive rebuilding, the President’s House still serves its original purpose.

The completion of the Brafferton and the President’s House completely reoriented the campus of the College of William and Mary eastward toward the new capital. Instead of closing in around itself in the original quadrangular plan, the open-ended campus became an integral part of the grand baroque plan of the city, anchoring one of the major vistas at the end of Duke of Gloucester Street and reflecting the desire of the college to be a part of the community and to partake in its social and cultural activities. The layout of the main building, with its two detached flanking buildings, replicated the form of the governor’s house and its
two primary outbuildings at the end of Palace Street and might be reckoned to follow the
pattern of plantation architecture where the principal subsidiary structures were sited sym-
metrically within an open courtyard. It heralded a break from English collegiate forms and
signaled the willingness of Virginians to adapt their European inheritance to the needs and
preferences of a maturing colonial society.

The destruction of the statehouse by fire at Jamestown in 1698 provided the opportu-
nity for Governor Francis Nicholson to remove the capital from Jamestown to a new and
healthier location. Throughout his tenure in Maryland, Virginia, and later South Carolina,
Nicholson did everything he could to promote tighter bonds between the colonies and En-
gland by strengthening the authority and trappings of imperial governance and the Church of
England. On his return to Virginia from Maryland in 1698, he soon had a chance to refine his
ideas about the symbolic importance of church and state in English America; but he had to
take into account the location of established institutions such as the college and the church.
Had there been no Bruton Parish Church, it seems quite likely that the state church would have
anchored one of the important terminal points of his new city plan.

Nicholson and the provincial government proceeded to plan and construct the most
important public building in the city—the capitol—at the east end of Duke of Gloucester
Street. The name “capitol” must have been a deliberate attempt on the part of Nicholson, the
probable designer, and his councilmen to attach prestige to the structure. After all, the old
statehouse in Jamestown, which had burned and been patched a number of times, probably
had few architectural attributes to distinguish it from the collection of neighboring taverns,
storehouses, and dwellings. Placing the capitol at a prominent location and giving it a name with
classical allusions pro-
vided the appropriate setting and aura for the architectural compos-
ition.

The design inte-
gerated novel ideas with
traditional forms. For the
first time in more than a
quarter of a century, all of the most important provincial bodies were to be housed within the
same building. In Jamestown, the Governor’s Council had abandoned the statehouse for
private dwellings and taverns and returned only to hold general court. The lower house of the
assembly met upstairs in a small chamber while provincial secretaries and archives were wedged
into any available spaces. The capitol was to contain two, two-story buildings connected by an
open arcade and provided a neat and equitable division of space for its various functions. The
west building, facing onto Duke of Gloucester Street, housed the general court and the

Reconstructed plan of
the first capitol,
drawing by author.

Courtesy, Colonial
Williamsburg
Foundation
secretary of the colony’s office on the first floor, while above was the chamber for the governor and council. The east building contained the House of Burgesses, offices for its clerk, and other apartments for provincial officials. The long room above the arcade served as a committee room and provided enclosed circulation between the two parts of the capitol. An important adjunct of the capitol, the public gaol, used to hold prisoners awaiting trial before the general court, was built a few dozen yards to the north. Constructed by Henry Cary, Sr., in 1703–1704, the brick structure measured thirty by twenty feet with communal rooms for the incarcerated. Already slightly larger than most county prisons, it was enlarged in 1711 as an addition was made for the reception of debtors.

Part of the design of the capitol derived from a familiar form—the rectangular county courthouse with an entrance on each long side and jury rooms both at one end of the courtroom or above stairs. However, other elements of the design varied significantly from this prototype. Foremost was the curvilinear apse at the south end of each wing. The form expressed the physical arrangement of the curved magistrates’ bench in the general courtroom and was replicated in the House of Burgesses, where it provided the backdrop for the Speaker’s Chair. Such curved benches had become fashionable in English courtrooms in the late seventeenth century. The compass-headed windows on the ground floor, the cupola sitting atop the connecting gallery, the semicircular porch that opened off the courtroom entrance onto Duke of Gloucester Street, and the coped brick wall that encompassed the grounds set the building apart from familiar forms. (Unfortunately, the design for the reconstructed capitol by the firm of Perry, Shaw & Hepburn in the early 1930s seriously misjudged the original configuration of the building. By ignoring archaeological and documentary evidence in favor of a more harmonious design, the architects mislocated the main doorways, failed to build the semicircular porch on the west façade, added an interior set of arcade arches, and created a far more elaborate decorative scheme of paneling in the courtroom and council chamber than was warranted.) Imitation marbling in the courtroom and councilroom, paintings of the monarchs, and a representation of the royal coat of arms enhanced the symbolic aspect of the capitol as the locus of imperial authority and seat of government of a prominent colony. After some modification of the 1699 plan, the capitol was completed in 1705; and the elements that made it such a novelty gradually began to be imitated in a number of county courthouses.

Destroyed by fire in 1747, the capitol was reconstructed in 1751-1753 by James Shelton (see color plate 7). The walls of the old building were razed to the ground and a new structure erected upon the foundations, including a two-story pedimented portico facing Duke of Gloucester Street. In the tympanum of the pediment hung the carved and gilt royal arms of George II. This second building, which witnessed the dramatic events associated with the Revolution, like its predecessor, came to a fiery end. It burned to the ground in 1832.

The threat of the destruction of records and other important public items in the first capitol fire led to the construction of a fireproof building for the storage of provincial documents in 1748 on a lot just to the northwest of the capitol. The Secretary’s Office, as it became known, had a large central room heated at both ends by fireplaces. On either side of this room, were two rooms where the colony’s papers were stored. Here young men learned their clerical craft under the secretary before they were assigned clerkships in the various county courts. To ensure the safety and preservation of the records, the floors were
paved with stones; and fires in the hearths vitiated the effects of Virginia's notorious humidity during summer months.

The immediacy felt in 1699 about designing a structure to house the government was not shared when discussing how to house the governor. Although urged by English officials to plan a residence, Governor Nicholson and members of the assembly felt that such an undertaking could not be sustained given the enormous cost of the capitol. Not until Governor Edward Nott succeeded Nicholson in 1706 were the first steps taken: the assembly set aside three thousand pounds for a two-story brick structure at the north end of the cross-axial street that became known as Palace Street. Specifications called for a fifty-four- by forty-eight-foot house with sash windows, a vaulted space and other rooms in the cellar, slate roof, and detached kitchen and stable. Henry Cary, Sr., who had just completed the capitol and gaol (see p. 181), was once again the overseer. Scarcely had work begun when Nott died suddenly, and his successor was taken prisoner on the high seas by the French. With no resident governor in Williamsburg to press the work, Cary labored less diligently and, by 1709, had spent all the money allotted to him without finishing the house. The walls were up, the roof covered, and a kitchen, flanking the front of the building, had been erected; but it was left to Alexander Spotswood, who assumed office the following year, to see the building to completion after making a number of alterations to the plan of the house and accompanying gardens.

When finished, the house had five bays across the front with an iron balcony over the front doorway, and a
steep hipped roof punctuated by dormers and capped by a balustrade enclosing a two-story cupola. In a manner reminiscent of small English country houses of the period, the “Governor's House,” as it was first known, contained a formal entrance forecourt, separated from the street by a tall brick wall with a ceremonial gate crowned with decorative sculpture atop the piers. On either side, one-story brick service buildings sat at right angles to the house. A wall running parallel to the front wall of the mansion enclosed this ceremonial yet functional forecourt. At the back of the house, formal parterres were laid out and other service buildings constructed.

The house was both a home and a public building where domestic and official business were intertwined in the layout of the house and grounds. The front door opened into a large reception hall where visitors of various ranks and purposes were welcomed and examined. In this room, a large symbolic display of weaponry reminded visitors of the governor’s military preeminence as leader of His Majesty’s forces in Virginia. Those of sufficient rank and status were led through the hall, up the grand staircase at the back of the house, and through a center passage on the second floor to the “great Room in the second Story.” This was the most elaborately furnished room of the house and “its position in the center of the front of the house on the superior level and at the terminus of a parade of rooms that began with the otherwise major space of the hall signaled its appointment as a room of state reception.” Besides these official rooms, there were semi-official state rooms, which were used for public and private purposes. On the ground floor were a parlor and dining room; above stairs, the governor and his family had their private bedchambers and study. The garret rooms served as additional bedchambers for the extended family of children, relatives, and servants. A growing fashion for large public entertaining spaces led to the construction of a large one-story addition to the back of the house in the early 1750s. This wing contained a larger ballroom and smaller supper room where governors could entertain in a manner characteristic of the spaces provided in assembly rooms in English public buildings and taverns. It was in these rooms that honored guests toasted the health of the king on his birthday or celebrated British victories over the French.

This was not the first large residence in the colonies. Seventeenth-century houses, such as Arlington on the Eastern Shore and Green Spring near Jamestown, were impressive. Yet, the Governor’s House set the architectural precedent for Virginians who wanted to take their places in society. Before now, few of the wealthy lived in dwellings distinguished by size or refinement; but no aspiring planter after the 1720s could ignore the cultural significance of a well-appointed brick house replete with formal entertaining spaces and pleasure gardens (see color plate 8). Thomas Jefferson, the last resident of the house, observed that it was “not spacious without; but it is spacious and commodious within, is prettily situated, and, with the grounds annexed to it, is capable of being made an elegant seat.” Rather than a promising future, however, the palace suffered a quick demise: the movement of the government to Richmond in 1780 made it redundant; and in the fall of 1781, French and American troops occupied it following the battle of Yorktown. At the end of that year, it burned to the ground.

Governor Spotswood took an active part in transforming Francis Nicholson’s twodimensional plan for the capital into a physical reality. In the midst of his architectural interests in Bruton Parish Church and the Governor’s House, Spotswood directed the design and
construction of a brick magazine on the market square. In 1714 a shipment of arms and ammunition received from England required secure storage. There had been a magazine in Middle Plantation; however, it must have been in bad condition by the time of the English gift, and Spotswood took the lead in raising the money and consulting in the design and construction of a new one. John Tyler, the builder of the north and south wings of Bruton Parish Church, oversaw the construction of a two-story, octagonal brick building more than thirty feet across. In the mid-1750s, a brick wall was erected around the building to further secure its contents.

The wooden floors, glazed windows, framed roof, and an armorer’s workshop violated all bomb- and fire-proofing measures found in similar structures. Despite this, the building managed to survive the catastrophes that beset other public buildings. By the late eighteenth century, however, it had been transformed into a markethouse; and during the nineteenth century it served as a Baptist meetinghouse and later, a dance hall.

Prior to the construction of a public institution dedicated to their care and treatment, those deemed insane were either confined at home, locked in county prisons, or, by the 1760s, sent to Philadelphia to receive care at the Pennsylvania Hospital. It was to Philadelphia, the
leading city in the study of medicine in North America, that Virginia’s officials turned when seeking a more suitable way of housing the mentally ill. In April 1770, Robert Smith, Philadelphia’s leading architect, produced drawings and specifications for a two-story brick, pedimented, three-bay center section. The rectangular box with projecting center bays had become a common plan for public buildings in the colonies; but Smith did cap his rather prosaic design with a one-story cupola over the shallow hipped roof. In June, an act authorized the construction of a hospital for the “Support of Ideots, Lunatics, and other Persons of unsound Minds.”

If not distinctive on the exterior, the interior was somewhat unusual for a hospital. Flanking an articulated public space in the three central bays were lateral passages lined on either side with individual cells for patients, rather than the usual open wards. This plan was adopted possibly to control the movements, behavior, and interactions of patients undergoing rehabilitation. Although it has been argued that “security, rather than medical treatment, played the greatest role in affecting the purpose, function, and details of specialized accommodations for the insane,” rather than allow the hospital to become a place to incarcerate the incurable, the directors established a policy of taking only those patients whom they thought could be cured.

Whatever the underlying assumptions of its architect and directors, the hospital continued to serve the colony and state well into the next century. By the time the original building burned in 1885, another story had been added along with flanking wings. It had become the centerpiece of Eastern State Hospital’s large campus, which rivaled in sheer physical presence its northern neighbor, the College of William and Mary.

The capitol, Governor’s Palace, and other major provincial structures may have dominated the colonial capital, but a handful of other public buildings also took their place in the city, including a courthouse and market hall. In 1715, the county voted to abandon its old courthouse at Jamestown and to erect a new one at the southwest corner of England and Francis Streets. Little is known about the form of this building because all of the county record books, which may have contained specifications for its construction and orders for its repair, were destroyed in a fire in Richmond in April 1865. No doubt the building was similar to other courthouses of the period, which were modest, one-story structures with an unheated courtroom and a pair of small jury rooms. Each month for a day or two, a handful of magistrates, composed of the most prominent planters and
merchants of the county, gathered in the courtroom to preside over the administrative and judicial affairs of the county.

In 1723 Williamsburg was incorporated as a city, which gave it powers similar to those granted to the county courts. It is unclear where the city council met or where the mayor and aldermen convened the hustings court during the first twenty years of the city’s existence. More than likely, they either held their sessions in a room at one of the many taverns, as was the custom in a number of English towns, or shared the county courthouse. In 1745 the city government found a permanent home in William Levingston’s old theatre on the palace green. Within this two-story frame structure, the mayor and aldermen presided over the affairs of the city for twenty-five years.

Finally, in 1770, the city and county governments joined together to build a new courthouse on the market square. The designer and undertaker of the courthouse are unknown, but whoever it was showed great skill in handling the proportions of the plan and its constituent elements. Though it appears as a one-story structure, the walls are nearly twenty feet high, and the apertures are enlarged proportionally to accommodate the increased scale. The form derived from two sources. In plan, the T-shaped building contained a central courtroom flanked by a pair of jury and storage rooms. Except for the addition of smaller unheated storage spaces, the T-configuration had been standard for Virginia courthouses since the 1730s; and although the compass-headed windows were unusual, they were not unknown in courthouse architecture. What set this building apart from others of its type was the Ionic pediment across the front. Whereas earlier courthouses used the arcade to distinguish their civic function, the new courthouse was inspired by the second capitol’s two-story portico. Unfortunately, the columns that were to go with the pedimented portico were either soon destroyed or were never in place: in 1796 architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe observed their absence. Although the building burned in 1911, preservation-minded citizens fought a movement to tear down the ruins and build a larger building. The courthouse was repaired and functioned until 1932, when a new structure was erected on the site of the 1715 courthouse.

Until the 1750s, the weekly market on the south side of the market square probably consisted of several temporary stalls and stands set up by hucksters, merchants, and “country people”—that is, farmers selling produce, firewood, and small items of manufacture. In 1757 the city authorized the construction of a market hall. The absence of city records and inconclusive archaeological evidence make the precise size and location of this structure uncertain; however, it is clear from other sources that it stood on the south side of Duke of Gloucester Street, east of the magazine.

The market does not appear to have flourished as well as those in larger cities because of ready access to foodstuffs and other provisions from neighboring farms. Despite its vulnerability, the market continued to function through the Revolution. When the market hall disappeared is uncertain; but by the end of the century, the magazine was used for market functions, and in the 1830s a new market house, perhaps bordering on the southeast side of the square, was erected to served a community bereft of its exalted status as capital of the commonwealth.
Selected Sources & Suggested Readings


