



Pilgrim Hall Museum: an honorable past, a glorious future!

By Peggy M. Baker, Director Emerita
Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum

The English writer and lecturer J.S. Buckingham toured America during the 1830s. A remarkable account of his Forefathers Day visit to Plymouth in 1838 was published in his book, *America: Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*:

The anniversary of the Landing of the Pilgrims falling this year on a Saturday, and Saturday evening being revered in many parts of New England as the commencement of the Sabbath, it was thought proper that the public ball, which usually closes the proceedings of the anniversary day, should on this occasion be given on the night preceding. The ball was to be given in the building called "Pilgrim Hall;" the tickets of admission were three dollars each, including refreshments; and the hours of dancing were limited from seven in the evening till three in the morning...

The dances, which were all previously fixed on, and announced in a printed code of regulations for the evening, distributed with every ticket, consisted of country-dances, called here, more accurately than with us in England, "contra-dances," cotillions, Spanish dances and quadrilles.... [as] this is almost the only public entertainment in Plymouth throughout the year, every person that can save up the requisite sum of three dollars, and who feel no scruples of a religious nature as to joining in such entertainments, make a point of attending the annual ball. There was a great mixture, therefore, of classes, and consequently a great variety of tastes in dress, and of general carriage and manners.

Many of the gentlemen danced in frock-coats; some had drab, and others black and white plaid trousers, such as were fashionable for morning wear in England a few years ago. One gentleman danced in yellow morocco slippers, and scarcely a dozen were in what would be considered a proper ball-dress at home. The ladies, however, exhibited no such marks of carelessness or neglect in their costume, but ran generally into the opposite extreme [with the] most fanciful mixture of colours [and] great profusion of ribbons... throughout the whole of the long evening, I do not remember to have seen a single countenance which did not express satisfaction, cheerfulness, and good nature. Some of the younger ladies were among the most beautiful that we had yet seen in America; three or four were exquisitely lovely, and, as specimens of feminine beauty, hardly to be surpassed, I think, in any country in the globe...

Apart from the beauty of the ladies, Buckingham was most impressed by a heroic-sized history painting:

The great attraction of Pilgrim Hall is the noble picture presented to it by the artist, Colonel Sargent, of Boston, who studied under Benjamin West, at the Royal Academy, in London, and whose genius and talent are admirably displayed in this magnificent production of his pencil. It was at first painted as an historical picture, for sale, and the price of it was fixed at 3,000

dollars, or 600 l. sterling; but no one being ready to purchase it at that sum, the artist very liberally presented it to the Pilgrim society, for the adornment of their Hall; and never was private munificence more appropriately bestowed.

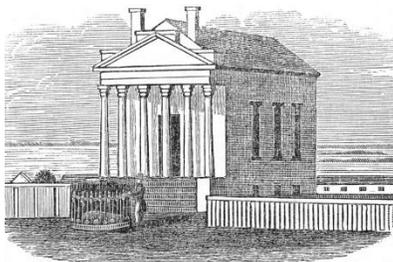


"The Landing of the Pilgrims" by Henry Sargent, viewed with admiration by Mr. Buckingham in 1838, still hangs in the Main Hall of Pilgrim Hall Museum today.

Although the Sargent painting captured Buckingham's imagination, he did acknowledge that Pilgrim Hall housed an "interesting museum of Pilgrim relics."

Buckingham also tells how Pilgrim Hall came to be built:

In 1820, the second Centennial Celebration of the Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers, took place at Plymouth; and on this occasion was founded The Pilgrim's Society. This was incorporated by the Legislature of the State, and resolutions were passed to build a Pilgrim Hall, to be devoted to the annual festivities accompanying the celebration. In 1824 this edifice was erected... The Pilgrim Hall is a Doric building, with a portico of four pillars, the edifice being 70 feet in length by 40 feet in breadth, and 33 feet high. It consists of an area story, in which is a large school-room for girls, and several requisite offices. The main story is devoted to the Hall, which is lofty and well proportioned, lighted on both sides. At its entrance are two ante-rooms, used for the Library and Museum; and above these two are two drawing rooms, communicating with the orchestra or gallery, which are used for refreshments. It was erected in the year 1824, at the expense to the Pilgrim Society, and cost about 10,000 dollars.



The earliest depiction of Pilgrim Hall Museum, from John Warner Barber's *Historical Collections...relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts*, published in 1839, 5 years after the front of Pilgrim Hall Museum was completed and 1 year after Buckingham attended a dance held at the Hall. Although Buckingham described a portico with 4 pillars, the Hall actually had 6.

Buckingham's account leaves out many tantalizing details of a rather lengthy and convoluted process.

As with all well-managed capital projects, the Trustees first came to agreement on the functions that the new building should fulfill. The Trustees minutes of 1822 articulated that the future Pilgrim Hall should be able to accommodate Forefathers Day celebrations on its lower floor, with an assembly room for gatherings on the main floor with ceilings and wall space sufficient to accommodate Sargent's painting "The Landing of the Pilgrims," and "suitable room for antiquities which may be collected by the society and for a Library." (A committee was then established to accumulate books and antiquities for the new museum.) The Trustees envisioned a building 72 feet long and 32 feet wide, made of brick with a slate roof, and hoped that this could be accomplished for \$3500 to \$4000.

Whether the Society's officers were inspired by their newly acquired antiquities or whether a larger and grander vision arose from discussions with the chosen architect, Alexander Parris (who attained great prominence in 1820 when he designed St. Paul's Episcopal Church opposite Boston Common but is today better known as the architect of Boston's Quincy Market), we shall probably never know. No further details are recorded of the discussions of the Trustees. By the meeting of May 31, 1824, however, the proposed Pilgrim Hall was being described not simply as a handsome meeting place but as a "monumental building."

This resulting building was to be made not of the expected brick, but of granite, in the bold new "Greek Revival" architectural style. Visitors would enter through a classical portico with 4 Doric columns. Not only were the architectural plans bold – so was the financing! Although a strongly conservative organization, the Society accepted a design costing \$10,000 - so expensive that the building had to be done in two phases.

Job and Abner Taylor of Plymouth were selected as builders and, on September 1, 1824, the cornerstone was laid. Paid for by private subscription and with considerable financing, Pilgrim Hall's first phase was a simple box (no columns yet!), measuring seventy by forty feet with a peaked roof, with 10-foot ceilings on the lower floor and 23-foot ceilings on the main floor.

Enough of the building was finished by the end of 1824 that the Hall could be declared publicly "open." On December 17, 1824, "a very large number of the Members of the Society & others met for the first time in Pilgrim Hall."

By the 1830s when implementation of the second phase of Pilgrim Hall Museum, the front portico with columns, was under consideration, the cost of building in granite had become prohibitive. Instead, architect Russell Warren of Providence was commissioned to design a wooden Doric portico with 6 twenty-four-foot high fluted wooden columns and, in 1834, the "public face" of Pilgrim Hall was finally complete.

Pilgrim Hall Museum, c1860. This photo was taken before the improvements made in the 1880s. Note the fluted wooden Doric columns. The portico has a pediment that is lower than the pitch of the roof behind it. The roads are unpaved and the ocean is visible at the far right. On the left, in front of Pilgrim Hall Museum, is a round cast iron fence. This surrounded the top part of Plymouth Rock, which sat, between the 1830s and 1880s, in front of Pilgrim Hall Museum before being reunited with the bottom half, which had remained on Plymouth's waterfront.



The generosity of Joseph Henry Stickney of Baltimore strengthened and modernized the fabric of the Hall in the 1880s. Fireproofing measures were introduced and the internal configuration of the Hall was changed by closing off the drawing rooms and orchestra gallery described by Buckingham and walling in the side windows to allow for the display of two more heroic-sized paintings, the copy by Edgar Parker of

Weir's "Embarkation of the Pilgrims" (the original graces the Capital Building in Washington D.C.) and Charles Lucy's "The Embarkation of the Pilgrims from Delftshaven." The roofline was altered and a skylight and ventilator added; at about this time, a wooden sculpture showing Squanto greeting the Pilgrims was added to the pediment over the front portico.



Pilgrim Hall Museum, c1890. Mr. Stickney's improvements have been made! The roofline and portico now "agree," and the wooden sculpture has been added to the pediment. The "ventilator" can be seen at the back on top of the roof.

The interior of Pilgrim Hall Museum, c1890. Although the windows are still visible on the exterior, they have been blocked off on the interior to present an unbroken expanse of wall for the display of Charles Lucy's painting, "The Departure of the Pilgrims from Delftshaven." The dark color of the walls and the detailing make it clear what a grand Victorian space greeted the visitors



In 1904, a Library wing was added to Pilgrim Hall Museum to house the Museum's collections of books and manuscripts. Although complementary to the main Pilgrim Hall in the granite material used, the wing is a distinctly different style with a flat roof and large windows at the front and back. The upper roofline of the Library wing reaches only to the eave line of Alexander Parris' Doric temple and the wing is set far back from the front colonnade. The front façade of the Library wing received a magnificent gift from the Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America at the time of the Tercentenary Celebration of 1920 - three stained glass windows in rich reds and blues and greens. Designed by the Boston firm of Goodhue & Company, the panels depict a natural and wooded shoreline, a family landing from the *Mayflower*, and the Pilgrim Fathers bringing law and religion to New England.



The magnificent stained glass windows presented to the Library in 1920.

And it was in 1920 that Pilgrim Hall Museum finally achieved the granite portico that the founders and architect had envisioned in 1824! Designed by the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White, the new portico was the generous gift of the New England Society in the City of New York.



Pilgrim Hall Museum, 1920, during the construction of the new granite portico – Open as Usual!

The Hall has hosted varied functions over its many years. As one of Plymouth's largest and most distinguished buildings, public entertainments and fancy-dress balls were held here. Artist Cephas Thompson set up his easel in the Main Hall and painted elegant commissioned portraits under the gaze of interested visitors. "Quaking Shaker fire dancing" was done at the Hall – or at least contemplated! – as we know from the disapproving comments of Librarian & Cabinet Keeper James Thacher, who feared for the safety and well-being of the Hall's antiquities. One happy couple, Richard L. Swift of Falmouth and Miss Caroline R. Gibbs of Sandwich, were even married at the Hall in 1848! Educational activities were held at Pilgrim Hall as well. Ralph Waldo Emerson lectured here, Plymouth's first high school classes for girls were held in its basement, and the Public Library used the Hall as a reading room in the 1860s and '70s.



Pilgrim Hall Museum 1922

Whatever its secondary uses, the Hall has always been a museum, open to the public, dedicated to telling the Pilgrim story. One of the earliest artifacts donated to Pilgrim Hall was the “Carver chair.” American-made (and not owned by Governor John Carver), it is one of the earliest examples of colonial furniture. The Society has continued to collect and today Pilgrim Hall exhibits a unique collection of authentic 17th century objects, books and manuscripts of overwhelming historic value, including:

Bible of William Bradford

Cradle in which Susanna White rocked her son Peregrine

Great chair of William Brewster

Only portrait of a Pilgrim - Edward Winslow - actually painted from life

Loara Standish sampler, the earliest made in America

The collection also includes artifacts that illuminate the lives of the Wampanoag who inhabited this area before the arrival of the Pilgrims and a significant collection of history paintings by world-renowned artists depicting the Pilgrims as seen and valued through different eras of American history.

Pilgrim Hall Museum is the oldest museum in continuous operation in the United States. More than 20,000 guests visit Pilgrim Hall annually, most in family groups, to view its exhibitions and participate in a variety of educational programs. The Hall continues to host lectures and small concerts; the Annual Meeting of the Pilgrim Society is still held on Forefathers Day in the Main Hall.

Pilgrim Hall Museum has also been granted accreditation by the American Association of Museums, a status held by less than 800 of America’s estimated 8,000 museums. One of the highest honors a museum can receive, accreditation certifies that a museum operates according to professional standards, manages both its collections and finances responsibly, and provides a quality educational experience for the visitor.

Pilgrim Hall has celebrated many birthdays and has a remarkable record of success and longevity. The Hall has been educating, preserving and celebrating the Pilgrim story since 1824. This success didn’t just happen.

The founders of the Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum took a big risk in 1824! Their granite temple was a radical architectural idea for sleepy (and thrifty) little Plymouth. It was also radical financially: it took the Trustees years to pay off the debt. But they took the risk because they knew they were building for the future. Subsequent generations have continued to expand and improve the Hall, fireproofing the building in the 19th century and adding the Library wing in the 20th.

We recently reached another turning point. The Trustees of the Pilgrim Society engaged in several years of discussion about the Pilgrim Hall Museum of the 21st century. They decided that, just as those earlier Trustees had stretched their imaginations and their finances when they built the extraordinary little Greek temple that is Pilgrim Hall Museum, it was now this generation’s time to step up and face the responsibility of caring for the collections and telling the story to the best of our ability.

After long deliberations, the Trustees identified four priorities:

Access. Universal access into the building and then between the two floors is not only a legal imperative but a moral one as well.

Climate. Pilgrim Hall Museum has no air-conditioning; the heat and humidity and lack of ventilation make the summer months almost unbearable in the Hall. It is destroying the artifacts and ruining the visitors’ experience as well.

Exhibitions. Our story is significant and compelling. Our exhibitions need to convey that drama to our visitors to keep the story alive for new generations of Americans.

Space. We need space for changing exhibitions that keep us fresh and sharp. We need space for storing our most vulnerable artifacts.

The Trustees of the Pilgrim Society, working with an architect and an exhibit-design firm, came up with plans that reflected these four priorities while still retaining the integrity of our 1824 Greek temple facade. The renovated and expanded Pilgrim Hall now allows us to preserve the artifacts and tell the story to generations yet to come, keeping the Pilgrim story and Pilgrim Hall Museum alive for another 180 years.



Pilgrim Hall Museum 2010