SMITHSONIAN
PRESERVATION
QUARTERLY

THE OFFICE OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY & HISTORIC PRESERVATION

FALL *1992*

DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

IN THE BEGINNING

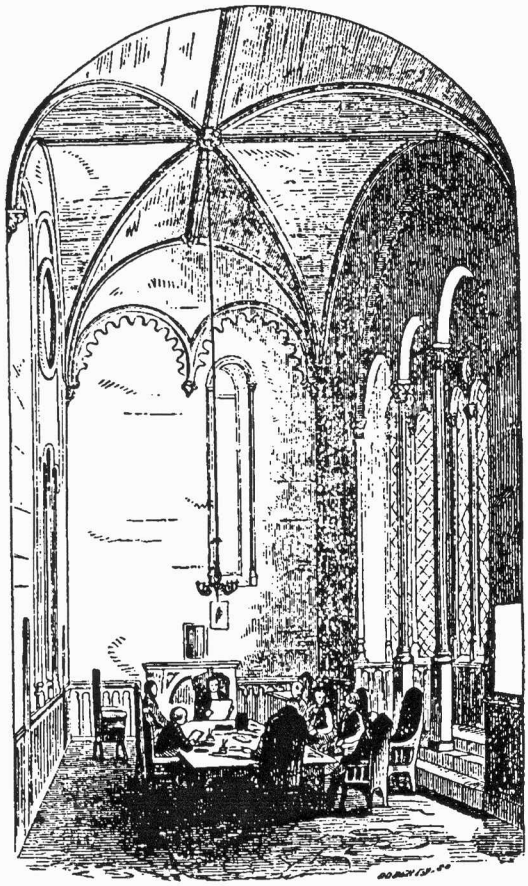
Many of the items in this issue reflect the extensive research which OAHP has done on the Smithsonian Building. One aspect some of our readers may not know is that, before James Renwick won the commission for the Smithsonian Building, there was a complex design development which involved Robert Dale Owen, David Dale Owen and Robert Mills.

As early as 1841, Robert Mills submitted a plan for a building to house either a National Institute or a Smithsonian Institution. Mills designed a crenelated structure, strikingly different in its medieval style from other public buildings in Washington. By placing all stairs within the numerous towers, Mills kept large areas of the building open for public use, most especially the large uninterrupted museum space on the top floor.

In August, 1845, Congressman Robert Dale Owen of Indiana, who was to introduce a bill for the establishment of the Institution at the beginning of the next session of Congress, wrote to his brother, geologist David Dale Owen, asking for a building plan. To begin the design process, Robert Dale Owen sent a sketch plan of Robert Mills' design of 1841. Owen proposed to adopt from Mills' plan the uninterrupted museum room, the tower staircases and the medieval revival style. Owen's intention for the Institution was that it would have a broadly educational function. To serve as a teaching facility he wanted a building with four or five lecture rooms, one for chemistry with a student laboratory and another for geology with provision for using large scale visual aids, and a meeting room for the governing board. He envisioned also sizable spaces for a museum and a library. His evocative language conjured up a medieval college filled with students, saying that *a piazza, or cloister, for the use of students in wet weather, might be introduced, in keeping with the style of architecture suggested.*

After David Dale Owen produced the desired plan and drawings, Robert Mills was asked to review them. David Dale Owen's plans and drawings (since lost) and Mills' second design were used by the Building Committee in choosing an architect. This preliminary work on the plan and architectural expression of the Institution was indispensable to James Renwick in creating his own refined interpretation.

INSIDE:



The Regents' Room, from the 1859 Guidebook

THE REGENTS' ROOM

Recent research conducted by the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation has shed light on the image of the original Regents' Room printed by William Jones Rhees in his 1859 Guidebook. An integral part of the building plan articulated by Congressman Robert Dale Owen, this room was to provide a meeting place for the governing body of the Institution.

The room, as designed by James Renwick, Jr., was finished in December of 1852, several years before the entire building was completed. It was remarkably different in proportion and atmosphere from the room as we know it today. Originally, the room was approximately 14 feet deep, roughly half the depth of today's Regents' Room. In contrast to the shallow dimensions of the floor area, the twenty foot high ceiling would have created an extremely striking effect. The ceiling was finished in a gothic groined vault such as can be seen in the Commons today. It would have been a lofty and dramatic meeting space, with a backdrop of the oriel window alcove set off by steps and slender colonnettes.

The fire of 1865 severely damaged the South Tower and its contents. Adolf Cluss, the architect chosen for the reconstruction of the building (and who later designed the Arts and Industries Building), entirely reconfigured the Regents' Room. The space was changed from a shallow, narrow room with a high gothic vault to a roughly square room with a flat ceiling. The room was reduced in height to about 13.5 feet, providing more office space in the South Tower by the insertion of additional floors. Secretary Joseph Henry and the architect decided to demolish the original north wall of the room, fearing that it had suffered too much damage in the fire. Thus the room was expanded to its present dimensions and an ornate cornice with foliated scrolls in high relief constructed along the perimeter.

In about 1901 the Regents ceased to use the Regents' Room as their meeting place, congregating instead in what is known today

it even contained the remains of Smithson himself

as the Secretary's Meeting Room, in the East Wing. The original Regents' Room housed the personal effects of James Smithson until 1912; it even contained the remains of Smithson himself for a year, after their arrival from a Genoa cemetery in 1904 and before Smithson's Crypt was established at the north entrance.

For much of the 20th century the *old Regents' Room*, as it was known, served as the library for the Department of Botany. It was not returned to its use as the meeting room for the Regents until 1970. The room has been restored over the past twenty years to reflect a Victorian setting; it is furnished with items illustrating the history of the Institution and with the massive Gothic chairs designed by the architect for the original room. HE

HERE COMES OM 852

GUIDELINES FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation was formed in the summer of 1986 under SI Announcement 86-38. Although the announcement stated that the office was established to

oversee the Institution's obligations for the policy and practice of historic preservation, OAHP staff realized that the announcement did not state exactly how this was to be accomplished. OAHP staff determined that its customers needed a formal document which explained the procedures the Institution must follow for historic preservation and the role OAHP plays.

In August 1991 the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation formed a team to devise a policy for historic preservation compliance at the Smithsonian. The team consisted of staff from the Facilities Services Group-- Design and Construction, Environmental Management and Safety, Plant Services, and Protection Services-- as well as the Exhibits Office of Natural History and the Assistant Secretary of Museums' Accessibility Coordinator. The team was led by the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation.

Ideas from the team were incorporated into the first draft of the policy, which was finished in the spring of 1992. The draft listed the regulations the Institution must follow, the buildings covered by them, and the historic preservation review procedure at the Institution. After the draft was reviewed by the Director of OAHP and the Director of Facilities Services, it was decided to include only the regulations the Institution must follow in the policy and to state the Institution's commitment to historic preservation. In August, this version of the team's first draft was sent to the Office of Financial and Management Analysis for the coordination of the final review process with upper management. In a few weeks, all bureau and office heads will receive a copy of the policy, which will be issued as OM 852.

Each recipient of OM 852 will also receive an eight-page illustrated brochure, *A Guide to Historic Preservation at the Smithsonian.* The brochure, written by OAHP, anticipates questions Smithsonian staff may have on the Institution's historic preservation review process and its coordination by OAHP.

When you read OM 852 and *A Guide to Historic Preservation at the Smithsonian*, you will see the efforts of a much larger team at work. We are grateful to the many people who contributed to the policy and the brochure to make them quality products for you, our customer. AB

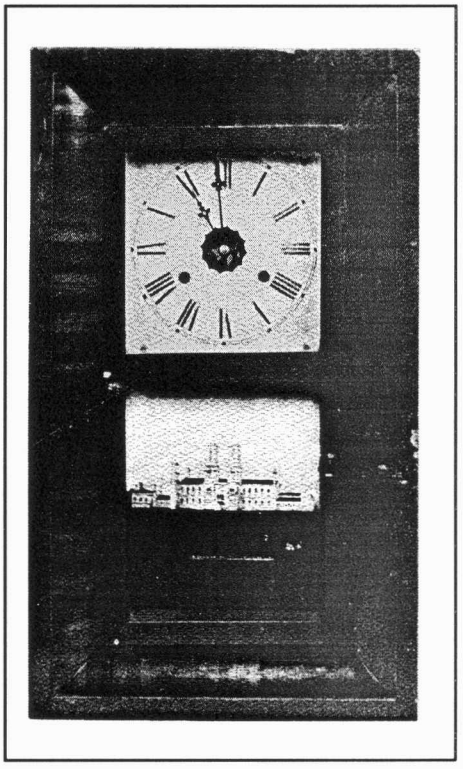
THE CASTLE COLLECTION

COMMEMORATIVE CLOCKS

The regulation of time is inextricably woven into the fabric of modern life. The OAHP *Castle* Collection, housed in the Smithsonian Building, contains over twenty mechanical clocks from the nineteenth century, when clocks became common household furnishings. These historical objects reveal the designs and technologies of previous times, and preserving them presents an opportunity to view the physical evidence of artistic and technological developments through history.

Around the year 1840, Connecticut clock makers invented a greatly simplified 30-hour clock that could be mass produced and cheaply sold. The new clock had simple, weight driven, brass movements which were not only easier to manufacture, but less temperamental than standard wooden movements. The 30-hour, brass movement often housed in a simple rectangular wooden case, with "S" shaped moldings was referred to as an *ogee* clock. These inexpensive clocks remained popular and were very common during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, corresponding with the establishment of the Smithsonian and erection of the Smithsonian Building.

The Smithsonian Institution was commemorated during its inception with a number of manufac-



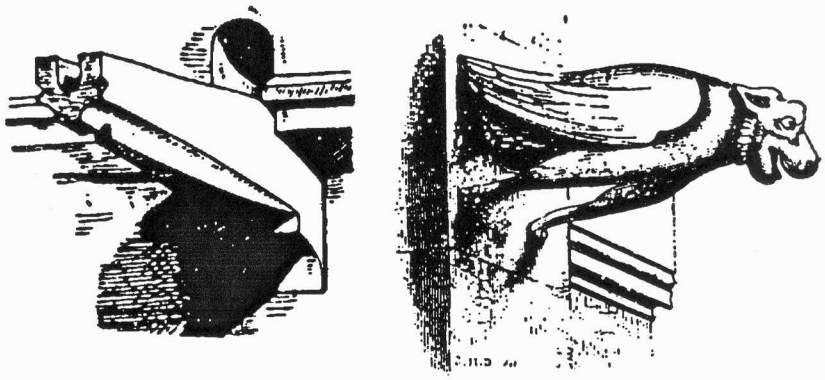
Commemorative clock, ca 1850, SI.79.40

tured souvenir clocks, which incorporate an architectural rendering of the Smithsonian Building into their design. The *Castle* Collection includes two commemorative Smithsonian clocks with identical renderings of the building and grounds. The *ogee* clock has a decorative glass plate in a hinged front panel, providing the typical form for commemorative clocks.

The glass panels of these clocks are often misleadingly referred to as reverse glass paintings; however, physical and documentary evidence allows for a more complete and accurate understanding of this nineteenth century art. An interesting paragraph from the *Report of the U.S. National Museum, 1943*, in the report of the Department of Engineering and Industries explains the method by which the glass panels of commemorative clocks were decorated. The report stated:

One of the most deceptive of art objects is the transfer print, which to the untutored eye, appears to be a miniature painting on glass... In this process, popular about 125 years ago, a small engraving or etching was securely attached with a varnish face downward to a piece of glass. When the varnish was thoroughly dry, the paper was rubbed away from the back of the print, leaving the lines of the engraving on the glass. The next step was to apply oil colors over the engraved lines. The final result is viewed from the unpainted side of the glass.

Although the mechanical clock has lost much of its place as a modern instrument, the clocks of the nineteenth century continue to engender fascination. The *Castle* Collection's commemorative clocks are not only living documents of a previous art and technology, but products of an age of invention and celebration. PLM



ETYMOLOGICAL MORSEL

A gargoyle is a projecting spout used in Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages to throw rain water from the roof gutter of a building away from the wall. Today, the term is synonymous with the grotesquely carved beasts or human forms found on many of the great Gothic Cathedrals of Europe. The drain spout is often concealed in their mouths but may also be directly above or below the stone figure. The term *gargoyle* is derived from the old French *Gargoille* meaning *the throat* and can, according to *A Concise Glossary of Architectural Terms* by J.H. Parker, apply to perfectly plain projecting drain-spouts as well.

Aficionados of architecture may wonder why there are no gargoyles on the Smithsonian Institution Building, built in 1847-55 in a Medieval Revival Style. The answer can be found in *Hints on Public Architecture,* written in 1849 by Robert Dale Owen, an influential member of the Building Committee. In reference to the style chosen for the building he stated:

There are certain peculiarities which the rude spirit of the age engrafted on this Architecture, and which good sense will at once reject. Among these may be reckoned... those hideous gurgoyles [sic], which obtrude their disgusting presence, even in some of the finest specimens of Middle-age Architecture....

It was Owen's opinion that everything grotesque had been eliminated from the architectural details of the Smithsonian's building and that the capitals, bosses and corbel-courses were gracefully designed using varieties of foliage as their model. RS

Drawing by F.B. Meek inscribed "All the family I have"

ALL THE FAMILY I HAVE

Joseph Henry and his family, who resided on the second floor of the east wing during the first decades of the Smithsonian's history, were not the only residents of the sandstone *Castle*. The building provided lodging for many of the Institution's scientists, curators and labor force, as well as offering guest rooms for visiting scientists. One of the residents best known today to Smithsonian staff was Fielding B. Meek, who lived in the building for almost as long as Joseph Henry did.

Meek, who first came to the Smithsonian in 1858, was a paleontologist. Receiving no salary from the Smithsonian, he was compensated instead with the use of a workroom and a bedroom. His small sleeping room was located in a corner of the lecture hall under the stairs leading to the balcony (the lecture hall was located in what today would correspond to the Woodrow Wilson Center Reception Area). This room was destroyed in the fire of 1865, which consumed the entire second floor of the main building. From 1865 until his death at age 59 in 1876, Meek probably occupied a room in one of the north towers.

During the last years of his life, because of his frail health, he spent the winters in Florida, where he continued his studies. He had no family, as evidenced by the finely-drawn picture of his cat (inscribed: *This is all the family I have*), and few friends. Henry wrote in the *Annual Report of 1877* that in his last years Meek *gradually lost his hearing, and could only be communicated with by means of writing. He gradually withdrew from social intercourse, and devoted his life exclusively to the prosecution of science. He was in correspondence with the principal investigators of the world in the line of paleontology, and although scarcely known in this city his name was familiar to the cultivators of geology everywhere.* As no relative came to claim his property, Joseph Henry took responsibility for administering his estate. Meek was perhaps the only person to have his funeral held in the Smithsonian Building, which could be the reason he is sometimes recalled as one of the ghosts of the Institution. HE

POLKAS, ANYONE?

In 1855, a pair of polkas may have been played and danced in the new Smithsonian building, since they were composed in celebration of the building's opening. The polka was a very popular dance at the time, having originated as a Bohemian folk dance around 1830. It is performed like a quick waltz with a jump, in 2/4 time. Our two polkas were scored for solo piano, with rhythmic, undulating bass lines accompanying light melodies in the treble.

One, actually titled the *Smithsonian Polka,* was composed by W. Bergmann, who dedicated the music *to the Officers & Members of the Smithsonian Institute.* This, like the other piece, was published within the District by the Hilbus & Hitz firm. A lithograph of the north facade of the *Castle,* engraved by A. Hoen & Co. of Baltimore from a drawing by Sindall, decorated the cover of both pieces of music.

The second piece is the *Institute Polka & Schottisch,* written by Frederic Kley, a local composer who dedicated it *to the Officers & Members of the Metropolitan Mechanics Institute of Washington*

City D.C. Devoted to the promotion of the mechanical and useful arts, the Mechanics' Institute held meetings in the Smithsonian's Apparatus Room, and opened its second exhibition in the Great Hall in February 1855. This was the first major use of that space, and Secretary Henry, who was also president of the Mechanics' Institute, considered the exhibit a method of *favorably exhibiting the Smithsonian building to the public.* Kley's Polka & Schottisch form one piece of music, the latter part being a slightly slower and more formal type of polka. The schottisch had been introduced in England in 1848, and therefore would have been as new and current in 1855 Washington as the Smithsonian building itself.

A copy of the Smithsonian Polka score has been in OAHP's files for some time, and Michael Hendron and Heather Ewing recently located the Institute Polka at the Library of Congress. In an effort to restore these pieces to their dedicatory setting, arrangements are being made for performance on period instruments in the *1876* exhibit before museum hours. Interested parties may contact Michael or Heather of OAHP for details of their upcoming polka-duet recital. MCH

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