

THE OFFICE OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY & HISTORIC PRESERVATION

WINTER

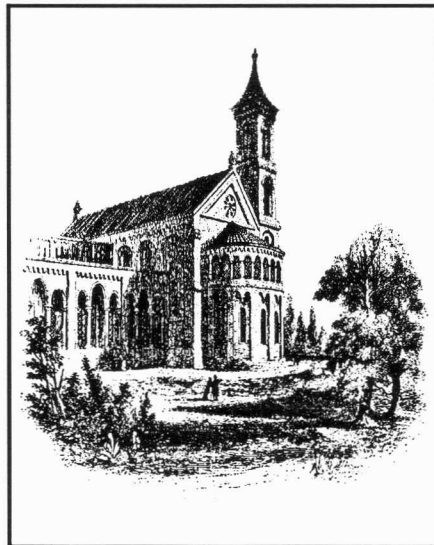
1994

DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

The distinctive West Wing of the Castle is so rich visually and historically that we have devoted this entire issue to the area known today as The Commons. This large, well-lit hall has served many functions over the Smithsonian's history as the chronology published in this issue demonstrates.

Even before the beginning of this recorded history, the room had a telling role in the identity of the new institution. In the earliest concept of a Smithsonian Building housing collegiate functions, the westernmost wing was designated as a lecture hall for the study of natural history, with its rounded apse providing an admirable lecturer's podium. With the evolution of the research and museum aspects of the Smithsonian, many of these lecture spaces and student/teacher spaces were altered.

The presence of a chapel with its rounded apse suggested the identity of the building as a college or university because the building type was established by European



universities which started as outgrowths of religious institutions. Although the West Wing derived its form from ecclesiastical models, it was never intended to function as a chapel; rather the apsidal form was intended to create a visual contrast with the blocky East Wing.

Despite the changes, the delicate beauty of this space has retained its integrity. On the interior, the apse is distinguished by delicate colonnettes united at the cornice level by an ornamental band with naturalistic scroll work and with numerous lancet windows giving it a lightly decorative

air. In the Gothic manner, the walls rise to a vaulted ceiling above pointed arches; the ribs intersect at round sculptural ornaments known as bosses. In the beginning, the effect of Gothic splendor was heightened by the variegated reddish tints applied over a rough texture plaster scored to resemble building stones. So precious was the ribbed vaulted ceiling with its Gothic ornament that every aspect was copied in exacting detail when the old ceiling and roof were replaced with fireproof versions in the late nineteenth century. Especially striking was the abundant light which poured in from large arched windows on the west and south walls and from the skylights in the ceiling.

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CHRONOLOGY OF THE WEST WING

1848

Construction begun on the West Wing, intended for use as Gallery of Art.

1850

West Wing completed and occupied by the Library.

1857

Library rearranged to include a gallery level encircling the room on three sides.

1866

Library removed from the West Wing and transferred to the Library of Congress. West Wing was then closed to the public and used for storage of natural history specimens.

1871

Wooden floor of the West Wing replaced with brick arches resting on iron beams to make it fire-proof. Level of the floor raised eighteen inches to provide additional space below for the Laboratory of Natural History.

Meeting of the National Academy of Sciences held in the West Wing on April 18, 1871.

West Wing re-opened to the public as Mineralogical Hall.

1877

Large ceramic objects exhibited at the Centennial Expositi-

tion in 1876 joined the Mineralogical specimens on exhibit in the West Wing.

1883

Minerals and pottery of the West Wing moved to the new National Museum Building (A&I); West Wing then used as a workroom and storage room for marine invertebrate collections.

1886

West Wing opened to the public with an exhibition of Marine Invertebrates.

1891

Fire-proofing of the roof of the West Wing begun.

1893

Marine invertebrate exhibition in the West Wing re-opened to the public.

1908

Monumental neoclassical statue of George Washington, executed by Horatio Greenough in 1841, placed in the apse of the West Wing.

1912

Marine invertebrates moved to the new National Museum Building (NHB). Installation of graphic arts exhibits begun but halted for over three years due to extensive renovation in the Great Hall of the Smithsonian Building.

1914

West Wing used as a workroom for the restoration of the

"Star Spangled Banner," the garrison flag which flew over Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland, during the War of 1812.

1916

West Wing re-opened to the public with exhibition of graphic arts.

1956

Modernization of the exhibits of Graphic Arts completed. Electric lights installed in the West Wing for the first time, walls, ceiling and cases painted light gray.

1962

Statue of George Washington moved to the Museum of History & Technology (NMAH), then still under construction.

1963

Graphic arts exhibit transferred to the newly completed Museum of History and Technology, now NMAH.

1971

West Wing opened as a dining hall, re-named "Commons." Ceiling painted dark blue and decorated with gold stars patterned after the Gothic chapel Sainte-Chappelle in Paris.

1992

Slate roof replaced with new slate due to extensive leakage.

1994

Commons closed for repair to water-damaged paint and plaster.

RS

IF WALLS HAVE EARS, THEN DOORS SPEAK

The Castle Collection staff is studying and restoring a door taken from the West Tower exit of the Commons. This round-top door is two-and-a-half feet wide, seven-and-a-half feet tall, very heavy and quite dirty, but it is almost certainly the only original door extant in the building.

In 1847, James Renwick Jr. specified that all doors to be built for the Smithsonian Building would have semi-circular heads, in the Norman style. The smaller doors were to be made of three thicknesses of pine boards of a certain width, the outer layers set diagonally. The boards were to be planed, tongued and grooved, given a beaded edge, and "be strongly screwed or rivetted together with white lead in the joints and painted on all sides." Renwick also directed that all the doors of the building would be grained in imitation of white oak and varnished four coats. The outside of the Common's door was faux-finished in this way. The inside of the door is much darker, and may have been stained to match the black walnut furniture which Renwick specified for the Library. The Commons door meets all of Renwick's guidelines, except for a slight discrepancy in the width of the diagonal boards. In construction and hardware, it matches one of the building's original

doors partially visible in the photograph below. This evidence places the Commons door in the West Tower doorway when the Library was completed in 1850.

Further support for this conclusion resulted from close examination of the door itself. Horizontal cuts in the planking and the enclosing casing revealed that the door was reduced in height sometime in the past. All evidence indicated that this was done so that the door would fit the reduced opening cre-

ated when the floor of the West Wing was raised in 1871.

Castle Collection staff will remove a modern dead-bolt lock from the door, and install a bronze doorknob as Renwick specified. The original escutcheon (keyhole) cover and the oak graining will be restored. This rare survivor of the Building's earliest days will then be catalogued as part of the OAHF Castle Collection and reinstalled.

MCH



The Cloister of the West Range, ca 1873.

THE LABORATORY OF NATURAL HISTORY

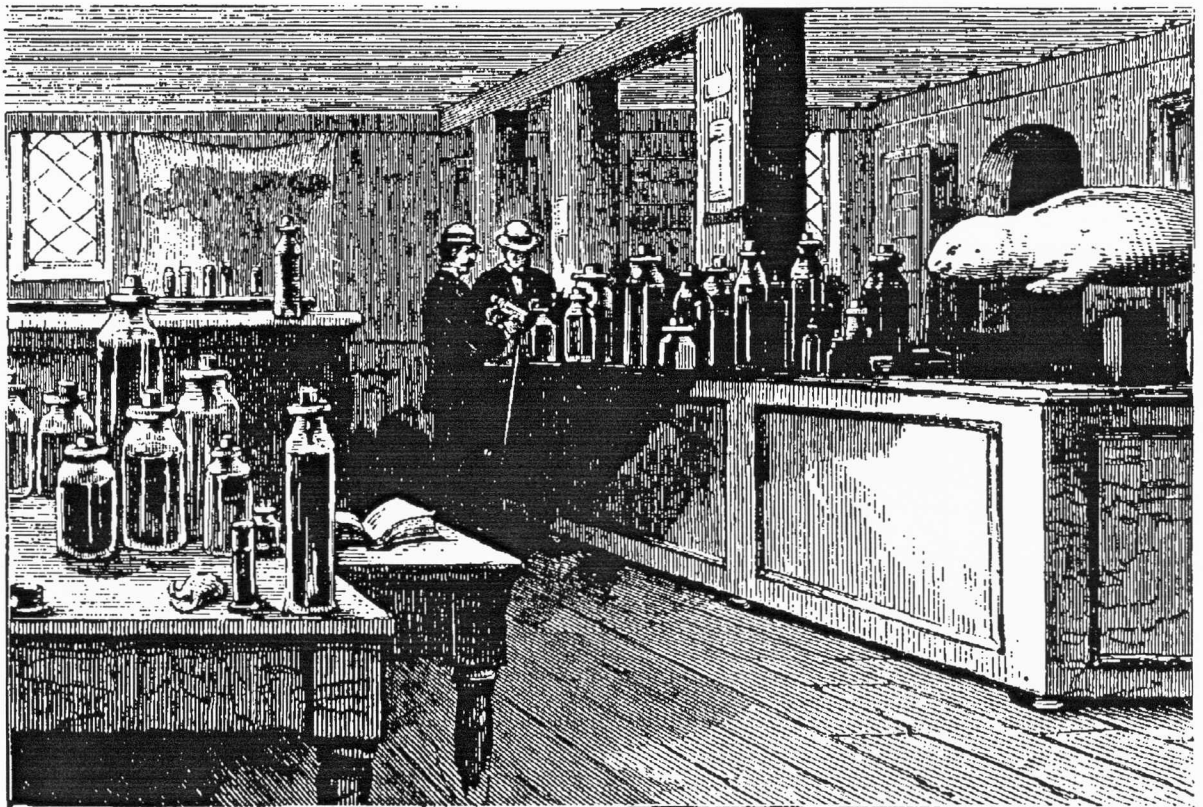
Joseph Henry, first Smithsonian Secretary, long held that the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum should be two separate and distinct entities. Part of his plan to accomplish this goal included the relocation of the Natural History Laboratory in 1871 to the basement of the West Wing, which, prior to that time, had been located on the first floor of the East Range, near Henry's residence on the second floor of the East Wing. As early as 1868, Henry had proposed privately to have the Smithsonian Building and the National Museum collections transferred to the federal government. Realizing, however, that severing the museum from the institution "would injure the cause of natural history," Henry opted for a less drastic measure and merely separated the two operations within the building. To this end he gave over virtually the entire building to the museum, appropriating only the East Wing and East Range to the business of

the institution. The rest of the building, including the rooms in the towers, was devoted to the National Museum. Thus, he hoped both to "show how small a space is sufficient to carry on the legitimate operations of the establishment," and to remove the source of bad odors - emanating from the laboratories - which permeated his living quarters.

The Natural History Laboratory in the West Wing was used by scholars studying the fishes, reptiles, and invertebrates preserved in alcohol that comprised the National Museum's natural history collections. These specimens were considered highly flammable, therefore, the entire wing was made fireproof in 1871 prior to their installation. The wooden flooring

and support beams were replaced with shallow brick vaulting sprung between iron beams, a technique used throughout the building. The wing was then considered fireproof even though a wooden floor covered the brick-arch system. During the fire-proofing of the West Wing, the floor was raised to create enough space in the basement for the Laboratory of Natural History, which remained in use there until 1911, when the natural history specimens were moved to the newly completed National Museum Building (NHB). The wood-block illustration below, from *Harper's Weekly*, shows the laboratory in 1878. It was based on sketches and photographs by Henry W. Elliot, a naturalist, artist, and employee of the Smithsonian.

RS



GENERAL LABORATORY OF NATURAL HISTORY.

Illustration from *Harper's Weekly*, June 1, 1878.

THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL MUSEUM

The changing uses of the West Wing are reflected in the cabinets furnishing its walls. The architect, James Renwick Jr., specified in 1847 that the perimeter of the West Wing be lined with tall, glazed wooden bookcases "of the best clear thoroughly seasoned white pine painted three coats with the best oil paint, grained if so directed to resemble oak, and varnished four coats." After the disastrous fire of 1865, the stacks of the Smithsonian Library were trans-

ferred to the Library of Congress and the entire West Range was adapted as a museum exhibition space

The cabinets we see today were replacements of Renwick's work, installed in 1871 not as bookcases, but as museum exhibition. The new cases were fashioned from American walnut in a simplified aesthetic reform style that was to become associated in name with the theories of English architect, Charles Locke Eastlake. The flattened and reductive ornamentation of this style is evident in the incised carving and simple wood moldings of the cases.

The West Wing exhibition hall opened in 1871 and the cases were first used to display mineralogical specimens. The donation of objects from the Centennial Exposition of 1876 expanded the scope of exhibition to include both minerals and ceramics. In 1886 these objects were removed for an exhibition of marine invertebrates, displayed in jars of alcohol. After 1912, the exhibition cases were used to display graphic arts.

The West Wing was modified in 1956 to conform with a plainer aesthetic, when each case had its pair of doors replaced by a wider single door and the cabinets, ceiling, walls, and woodwork were

uniformly painted a light gray. For the opening of the "Commons" in 1971 the cases were stripped of paint and then varnished. Although many of the glazed doors of the cases were lined with fabric to soften the appearance of the new dining room, some glazing was retained to exhibit mineralogical specimens, as had been done a hundred years earlier. While the purpose of this space has changed over the past 150 years, the West Wing, furnished with Eastlake style cases, continues to serve as a museum-quality exhibit of both architectural constancy and change.

PLM



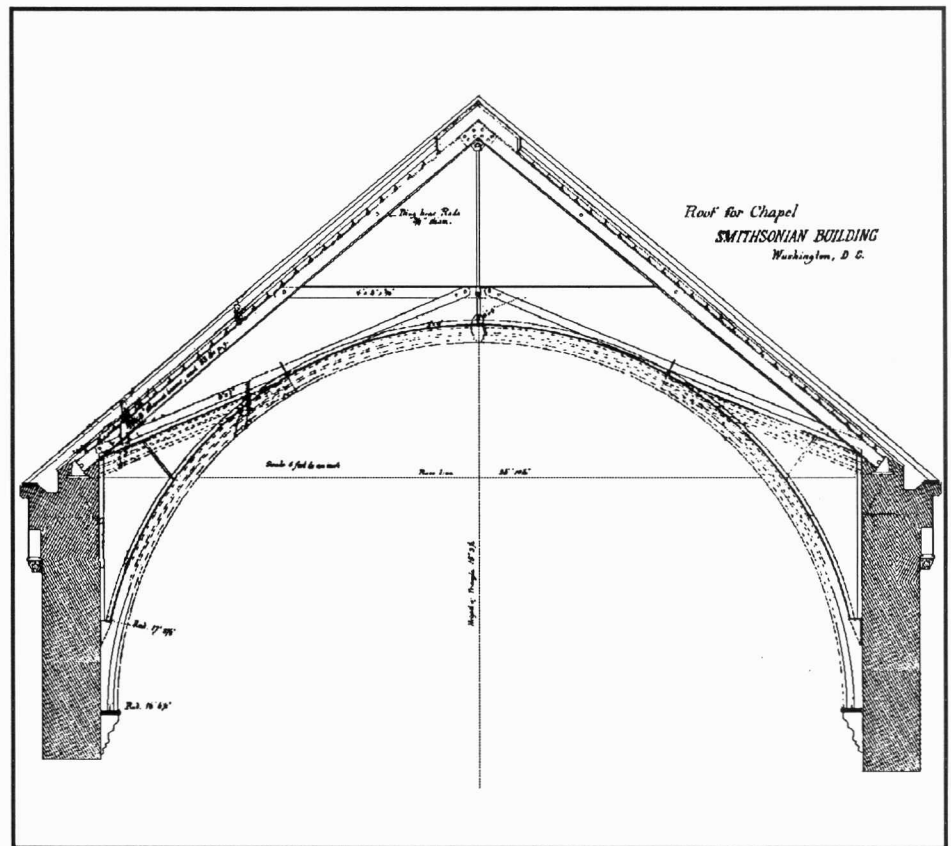
Stereoview of meteorites in the West Wing, ca. 1871.

UNCOMMON CHANGES

Since New Year's Day, the Commons Dining Room in the Smithsonian Building has been closed for renovations. On 1 May, the plastic will be lifted from its walls, doors will be unlocked, and Smithsonian staff and guests will view the changes for the first time. The architectural elements of one of Washington's great spaces will be restored to their nineteenth-century appearance under the guidance of the Office of Design and Construction's Robin Vasa. The work itself will be executed by the Institution's team of talented craftsmen from Office of Plant Services (OPLANTS). Working together, Ms. Vasa and her OPLANTS colleagues will ensure that the Commons will continue to give pleasure - and meals - to all who enter its doors.

The idea to restore the Commons stemmed from the recent plaster repair of the Secretary's Meeting Room, located on the second floor in the East Wing of the Castle. "All the work in this room was done by OPLANTS," says Ms. Vasa. "In the Meeting Room, we took the plaster all the way down to the brick in order to get a good base so that the new plaster could be put in the same configuration as the old plaster. Not all of the old plaster was removed, but a good portion was, because it was not adhering to the surface. Our goal was to do a plaster repair job that was going to last."

OPLANTS identified other areas in the building that showed signs of plaster deterioration.



Drawing of new roof and ceiling for West Wing, 1891.

These included the second floor hall, east wing, and the Commons. "When I was working on the Meeting Room, I received a call from OPLANTS saying a piece of plaster had fallen from the ceiling of the Commons and landed on someone's plate during lunch. I never got a clear story on whose plate it was," says Ms. Vasa. OPLANTS told Ms. Vasa that they would also like to repair the plaster in the Commons. After discussions with the Business Management Office, it was decided to close the room for four months to conduct the proper restoration.

OPLANTS and Ms. Vasa conducted a visual inspection of the Commons using a scaffold. "We discovered that although the plaster seemed in solid shape, the paint was peeling. Considering that the Commons is almost 150 years old and paint has been put on

the surface for almost that long, the paint is pretty thick," says Ms. Vasa. "We found that it wasn't a plaster problem, but a paint problem. The paints just don't adhere to the wall. The newer paints are pulling the old paints away from the wall."

Research was conducted on various paint removers to find one that could remove the numerous paint layers in an efficient manner. Ms. Vasa explained, "We're using a product called 'Back to Nature.' It's designed with a system for lead-paint abatement and doesn't produce poor air quality. You spray it on, leave it to dissolve so it consolidates all the paint. A vacuum process is used to suck the paint off without damaging the wall. A light water mist is applied to rinse and neutralize the materials," says Ms. Vasa.

After the paint is removed, OPLANTS will prepare the walls for their new look. The walls will be returned to their original appearance using a faux finish slightly lighter in color than the exterior stone walls. "We also plan to restore the skylights as well."

The new look of the Commons will be unveiled on 1 May. It is a model restoration project because it returns the room to its original appearance and is done as a team effort, using the highly skilled OPLANTS and ODC staff. OAHF looks forward to congratulating our colleagues on what surely will be a job well done.

AB

ETYMOLOGICAL FEAST

WHAT IS A "COMMONS?"

com•mons n pl. 1. a large dining hall in an institution.
2. food provided at a common table, as in colleges, where many people eat at the same table or in the same hall.

Did you ever wonder where the term "commons" comes from? What it means? Since this Smithsonian dining facility came into existence in 1971, few have thought to question the derivation of its name. Prior to its opening,

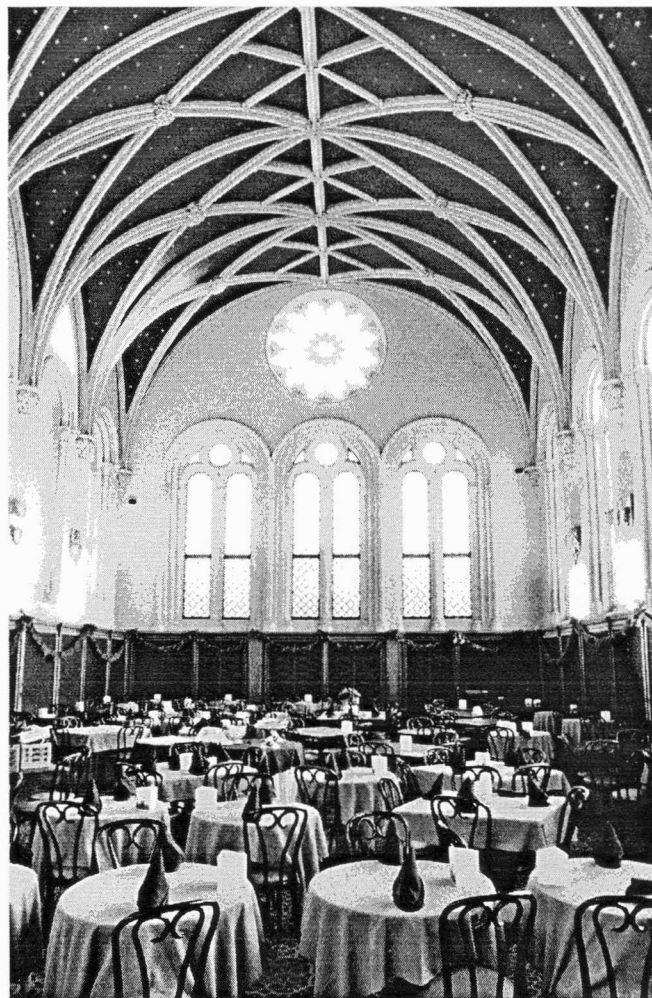
documents refer to the facility as a "dining hall" in some places, as a "refectory" in others. One source, a *Prospectus for the Smithsonian Faculty Dining Commons*, seems to provide the transition between the generic label, "dining hall," and its new designation, "The Commons," used in all official correspondence since the renovation. With the new name, this space acquired a different set of historical associations befitting its new use.

In medieval Britain, "commons" was used interchangeably with, but less frequently than, "common room" to denote a central, heated communal gathering room. This common room, however, was separate from the eating facility, referred to simply as the dining hall or refectory.

As early as the 17th century, the term "commons" was associated with dining customs in the colonial colleges of North America. At Harvard University, the first American college, the word "commons" was used frequently for the fare provided to students by the school, served at common tables. The word evolved into the name for the room, usually a large hall, where this food was consumed.

Many references are made to these large communal spaces in the early college records. In one notorious incident, the first recorded student rebellion at Harvard occurred in the spring of 1766, when students protested over the "bad butter at commons."

By the 19th century the idea of a "commons" took on the added connotation, in the university setting, of an inexpensive alternative for students to the private dining rooms at boarding homes, eating clubs, and restaurants. These vast dining halls became the main eating facilities for diverse campus communities, symbolic as well as functional central spaces uniting expanding university populations.



The Commons in the West Wing, 1986.

Given this ancestry, the name "commons" brings an array of new meanings to the old "chapel," a space with a rich heritage of its own. The historic roots of the term "commons" make this title seem particularly appropriate for the institution-wide dining facility. Renovated in conjunction with the scholarly center which became the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies in the Up-

per Main Hall, this room was to serve as a central gathering place for scholars, staff, and other friends of the Smithsonian, where they could interact socially and be provided with good food in a congenial atmosphere at reasonable prices. When "The Commons" re-opens, consider the complex history of this place as you linger over lunch. Hopefully this knowledge will help to enhance your dining experience.

RJO

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Notice

Movement or breakage of any "Castle" collection objects should be reported at the earliest convenience to the OAHF Preservation Studio. E-Mail may be addressed to AHHPM01, or phone messages may be left at 357-1409.

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