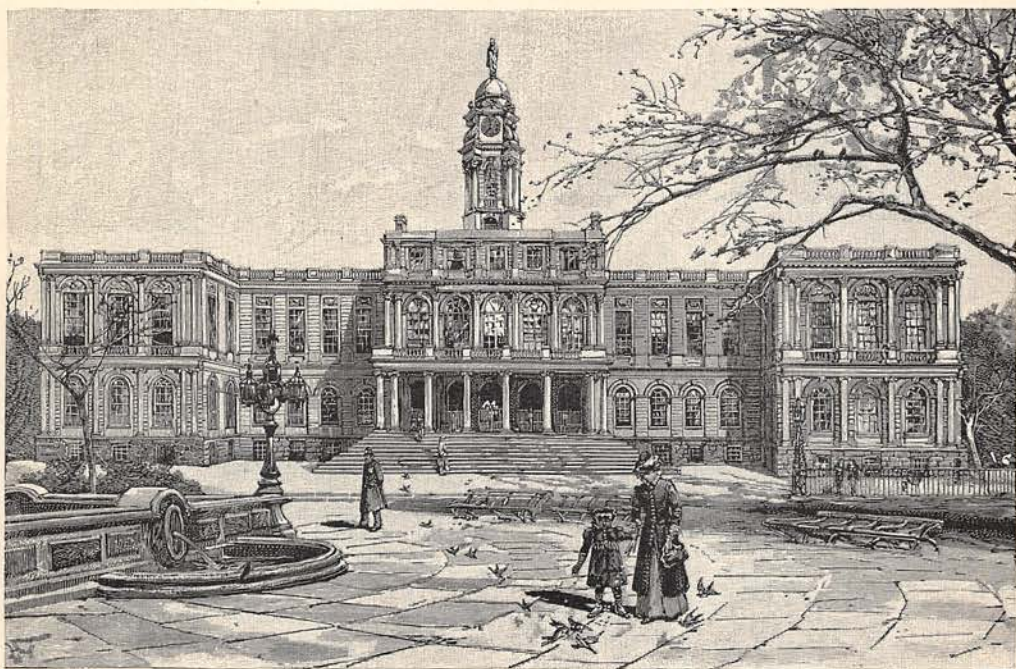


THE NEW YORK CITY HALL.



GENERAL VIEW OF THE NEW YORK CITY HALL.

AT this time, when architecture is being revived in America as an art, rather than practiced as a trade, attention is being drawn to the excellence of some of our public buildings erected in the last century or about the beginning of this,—when, fortunately, the purity of style in architecture maintained in England, especially by Sir William Chambers and certain of his pupils, and others, was gaining a footing in this country, and was taking shape in the New York City Hall and some other buildings of the time. If what is said here helps to fix attention upon these old buildings, and to stimulate efforts for their preservation, the object of the writer will have been attained.

When the City Hall was first occupied, in 1811, it had for its nearest neighbors the bridewell close by on the west, the almshouse behind it, and the jail, which was made over into the present Hall of Records. From the portico of the City Hall there was an unbroken view down Broadway, including St. Paul's, the odd little shops that occupied the site of the "Herald" building, the wooden spire of Trinity, and the cupola of Grace Church. Now the post-office shows its ugly back to its classic neighbor, and, on the

northern side, the new court house has been built on the site of the almshouse.

To tell the story of the building of the City Hall in all its details would be impossible here. From corner-stone to parapet it was more than ten years under way. Many a modern settlement has grown to cityhood in less time. The labors and dangers, constructive and financial, connected with it, rivaled those of carrying the gods to Latium. May 26, 1803, the corner-stone was laid in the southeast corner by Edward Livingston, then Mayor of the city.

The preceding three years had been spent by the corporation in the endeavor to settle upon a plan that would be acceptable to all. On March 24, 1800, they had appointed a committee to consider the expediency of erecting a new Hall, and to report their opinion as to the proper place, with a plan of the building, an estimate of the expense, and suggestions for the disposal of the old City Hall. In accordance with this resolution, the committee offered a premium of three hundred and fifty dollars for a plan and elevations of the four facades. From among the plans so obtained one was selected and adopted by the Aldermen, October 4, 1802. On the 11th

of the same month the Common Council appropriated twenty-five thousand dollars toward carrying it out, and appointed a building committee. Opposition to the undertaking now developed itself through a

by the late committee were discharged, and the moneys remaining in their hands were paid over to the city treasurer. The new committee immediately reappointed Mr. McComb architect, and fixed his pay at six dollars a



THE NEW YORK CITY HALL, FROM DRAWING BY W. G. WALL, PUBLISHED DECEMBER 20, 1826.

dilatory resolution offered in the Common Council, December 27. It was ingenuously worded and called for much detailed information. The hope of its promoter was to create dissatisfaction with the adopted plan as being too ornate, too expensive, and larger than the city required. Under the pressure thus brought to bear, the committee, although fully intent upon the use of marble, on February 21, 1803, reported estimates of the cost of using marble and of using stone for the front of the building.

They advised the Common Council that the plan might be somewhat curtailed, especially in the projecting wings, but were unanimously of the opinion that it was advisable that the Hall should be built in accordance with the adopted plans, with the exception mentioned; that the front should be of Stockbridge marble, the sides of Morrisania or Verplanck marble, and the rear of brown stone.

This report was rejected, and at the meeting of the Common Council a week later it was ordered that the committee should be discharged and a new one named, to consist of a member from each ward of the city. Aldermen Oothout, Van Zandt, Brasher, Barker, Minthorne, Le Roy, and Bogardus were accordingly appointed. All persons employed

day for each and every day he should be engaged upon the building.

I have had access to Mr. McComb's papers, which still remain in his family, and which include the original designs, a great part of the working drawings, the diary that he kept pertaining to the building, his accounts of marble, correspondence, etc. Many of the books of his library also remain, and through them one may trace the sources from which he had collected much of the information that enabled him to execute a work which, so long as it stands, will continue to be admired for the purity of the design and the elegance of its execution. It was probably in anticipation of the change which was to take place in the committee that the architect had been instructed on March 10 to make out a plan on a reduced scale, by taking away three windows from the extreme depth of the building, two of them to come away from the depth of the end projections of the main front; and by shortening the length of the building by taking out two windows, and to make estimates accordingly. The reduced plan and estimates were at once furnished, with the information that, should brown stone be used, the cost, exclusive of statuary and bas-relief, would not exceed \$200,000. On the 18th of the same month the new Building Committee

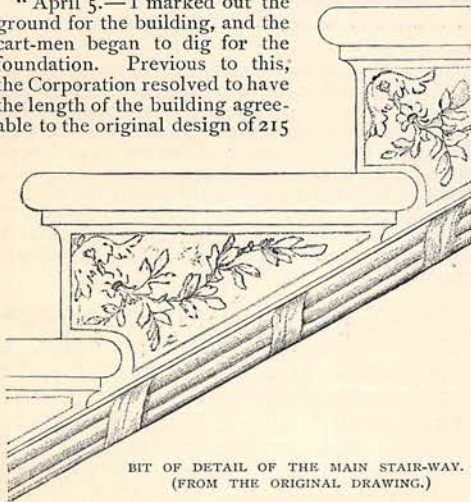
met at the almshouse, and determined "that the reduced plan for building the new City Hall presented by Mr. John McComb should be adopted; that the front, rear, and ends be built of brown freestone; that the said building be erected on the vacant ground between the jail and bridewell; that the wings, in front, range with Murray street, on a parallel line with the fence in front of the almshouse."

On the 21st the committee reported their action to the Common Council, and the plan and estimates above referred to, with the assurance that they had "endeavored to combine durability, convenience, and elegance with as much economy as the importance of the object will possibly admit of." This report was at once confirmed, and \$25,000 placed at the disposal of the committee, with instructions to proceed with the construction of the Hall with all expedition. During this time Mr. McComb had been indefatigable in his efforts to induce the committee to return to the original plan with the use of marble as the building material; and on April 4 they so far relented as to express to the Common Council their doubts as to the propriety of diminishing the length by leaving out two windows of the front. Fortunately, the Common Council seems to have been similarly impressed, and ordered the original dimensions of the front to be restored. Discussion as to the dimensions of the plan then ceased, for under date of the following day Mr. McComb's diary contains this entry:



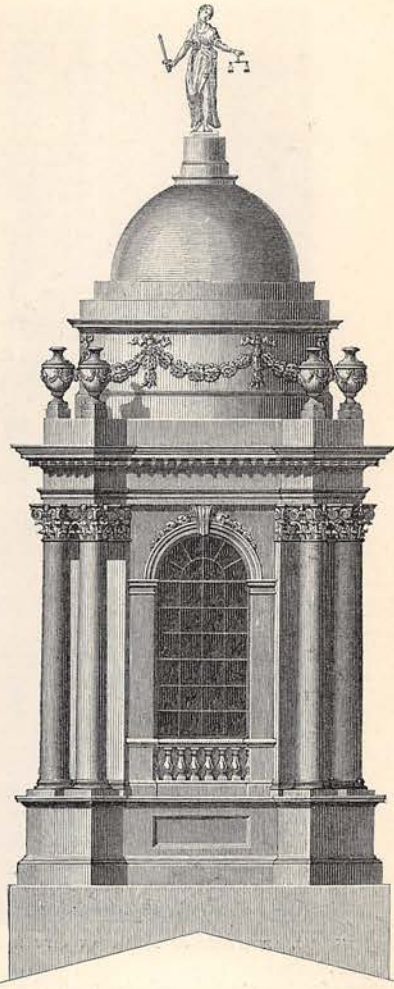
STATUE FROM THE ARCHITECT'S ORIGINAL DESIGN.

"April 5.—I marked out the ground for the building, and the cart-men began to dig for the foundation. Previous to this, the Corporation resolved to have the length of the building agreeable to the original design of 215



BIT OF DETAIL OF THE MAIN STAIR-WAY. (FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAWING.)

feet and 9 inches, but insisted on its being reduced in depth as they had directed in March. Reducing the projections in front, I readily agreed to; but cutting off the depth of the building, I contended, was a very bad plan, as it spoils the proportion of the large court-rooms and cramps the whole of the work,—but no



THE CUPOLA, PRIOR TO 1830. (FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAWING.)

arguments could prevail. Several wished to cut off the projection in the rear, and two of the committee insisted, that the north front had better be built of blue stone."

Steps were taken to procure the brown stone determined on as the material to be used from New Jersey. A quarry at Newark was leased, and arrangements were made to procure more from Second River. Notwithstanding the unhealthfulness of the city, the construction does not seem to have been retarded, for in the fall of the same year the foundation had been carried to the top of the basement window arches, at a cost of some \$46,000. Meanwhile the views of the committee seem to have been again enlarged, for on September 3 Mr. McComb records that he found some of the members of the Common Council in favor of white stone for the principal fronts, and that he was then requested



JOHN MCCOMB, ARCHITECT OF NEW YORK CITY HALL. (FROM A PAINTING BY WALDO, IN POSSESSION OF THE FAMILY.)

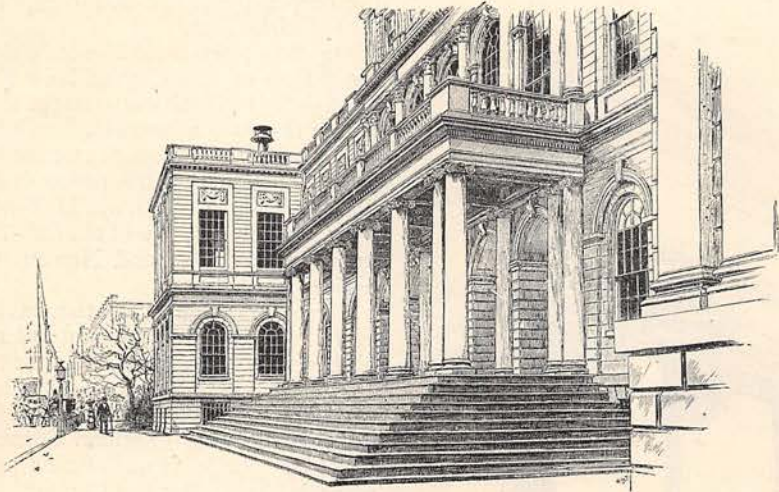
to estimate the additional cost of the use of marble for the three fronts. The estimate was furnished and reported to the Common Council. The report was made in October, and included the following argument in favor of a more liberal expenditure :

“ It appears from this [the architect’s] estimate, that the difference of expense between marble and brown stone will not exceed the sum of forty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars, including every contingent charge. When it is considered that the city of New York, from its inviting situation and increasing opulence, stands unrivaled; when we reflect that as a commercial city we claim a superior standing, our imports and exports exceeding any other in the United States, we certainly ought, in this pleasing state of things, to possess at least one public edifice which shall vie with the many now erected in Philadelphia and elsewhere. It should be remembered that this building is intended to endure for ages; that it is to be narrowly inspected, not only by the scrutinizing eyes of our own citizens, but of every scientific stranger, and in an architectural point of view it, in fact, is to give a character to our city. The additional expense of marble will be fully counterbalanced when we recollect that, from the elegance and situation of this

building, the public property on the Broadway and Collect will much increase in value, and that the same influence will be extended to property far beyond these limits, and that in the course of a very few years it is destined to be in the center of the wealth and population of this city. A building so constructed will do honor to its founders, and be commensurate with our flourishing situation. Under these impressions, the Building Committee strongly recommend that the front and two end views of the new Hall be built with marble.”

The report is in Mr. McComb’s handwriting, but is signed by Wynant Van Zandt, Jr.

In accordance with this report, the Corporation authorized the use of marble in the “three fronts,” and on November 14 concluded a contract for marble from West Stockbridge, Mass.; the price was \$1.06 per cubic foot, delivered in New York. Under this contract 33,274 feet and 10 inches of marble were delivered. In 1808 the same contractors furnished 2000 feet more, at \$3 a foot. The aggregate of these two bills gives us the amount used in the edifice.



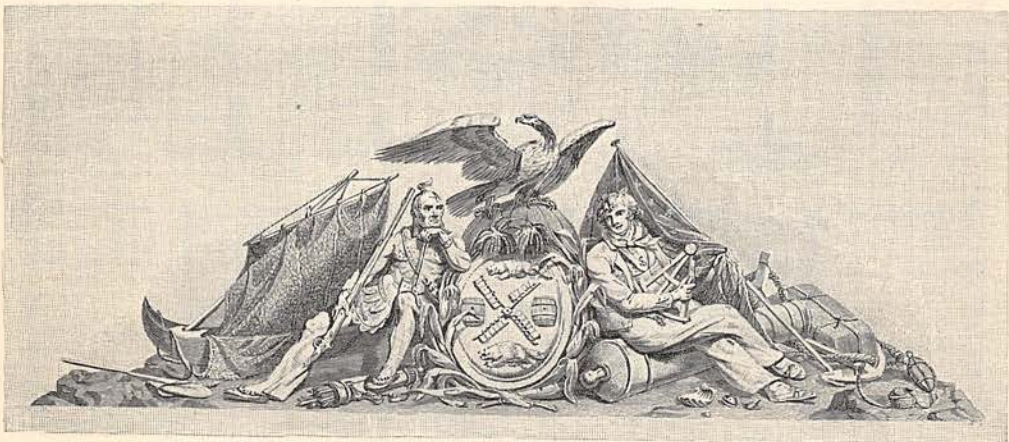
VIEW OF PORTICO.

Nearly all the building material was furnished by contract. The labor was by day's work. By December 1, 1807, the amount expended had reached \$207,000, and the walls were built up to the under side of the second story window-sills. The expenditures were always in excess of the appropriations, and the slowness with which the work was carried on is attributable probably to the reluctance of the Corporation to increase the burdens of taxation. The stirring political contests of the day induced both parties to act with great caution. At the same time, apart from the question of expediency, the ability of the city to raise money for extraordinary purposes was circumscribed.

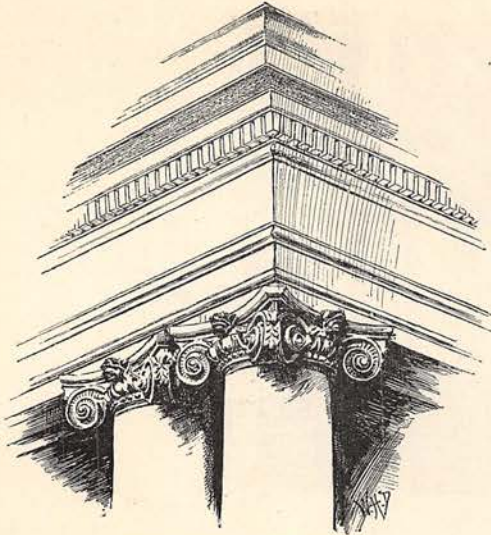
In 1808 the wages of the stone-cutters was reduced from \$1.25 to \$1 a day, and many were given employment who would otherwise have become a charge upon the city. The building was then retarded on account of

hard times, for the appropriation was small. In the spring of 1810 it was impossible to obtain workmen enough, and delay was caused by the return of prosperity. In the fall of this year, however, the interior walls had been carried up to their full height, and the interior roof of the wings in part slated. The copper for the upper roof, which was imported at a cost of £2425 13s. 9d. sterling, was daily expected. It did not arrive, however, in time to be used before the following spring. Considerable progress had been made toward finishing rooms for the accommodation of the Common Council, Mayor, Clerk, and Comptroller; and in 1811 the city fathers celebrated the Fourth of July in the new Hall.

On the second Monday in August the Aldermen bade adieu to their old quarters, and met for the first time in the room intended for the Mayor. The Comptroller and Street



PROPOSED FOIL TO THE BASE OF THE CUPOLA. (FROM ORIGINAL DRAWING.)



IONIC ORDER—FIRST STORY.

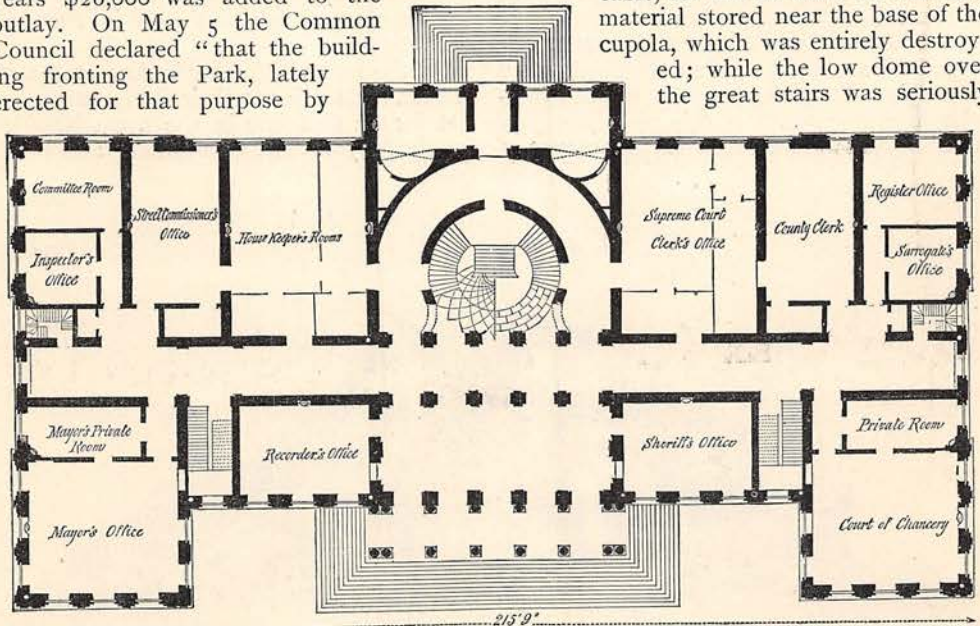
Commissioner moved in at the same time. In October the roof was complete, the window-sashes were about to be put in, and they were waiting for the capitals and statue to complete the cupola. The interior of the west wing, with the housekeeper's apartments, were finished that fall, and the east wing put under scratch-coat. The largest annual outlay was made in 1812, running well up to \$100,000, expended mostly upon the inside finish and embellishment. The center columns over the main stairs were put up, and the front steps were cut and set. During the next two years \$26,000 was added to the outlay. On May 5 the Common Council declared "that the building fronting the Park, lately erected for that purpose by

the corporation, shall be the *City Hall of the City of New York.*"

On the corner-stone the building is called the "Hall of the City of New York"; but in 1831 by legislative enactment the designation of 1812 was adhered to. Early in May the old City Hall and grounds were ordered to be sold at auction, and the proceeds devoted to the new building. The old Hall stood nearly upon the present site of the Sub-Treasury at the corner of Wall and Nassau streets, opposite Broad street.

The only notable change that has been made in the exterior of the building was not accomplished without opposition. In the original design, a clock was to have been placed in the middle window of the attic-story front; and when in 1828 the Common Council ordered one to be made, it was at first proposed to place it there. But the Committees on Repairs and Arts and Sciences, to whom the matter had been referred, recommended "that it is altogether practicable to alter the present cupola, by cutting it off near the bottom of the round part and raising it up to receive an octagonal section to show four dials. The proposed alterations, in the opinion of your committee, will not cost more than five or six hundred dollars, and will add materially to the usefulness and beauty of the building."

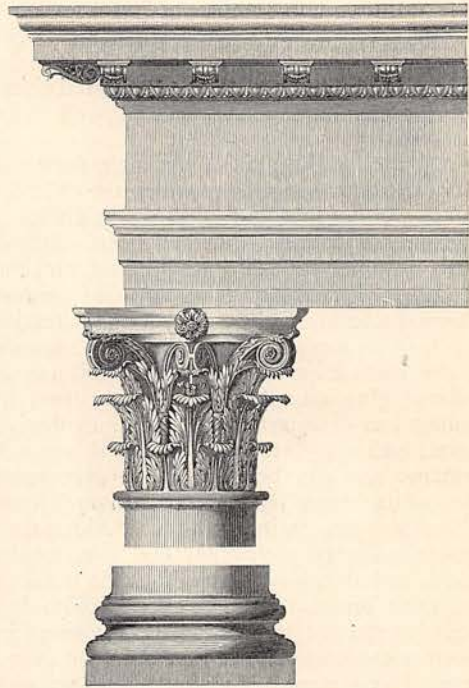
In the spring of 1830 this change was made, and a clock was placed in the cupola. In August, 1858, a spark from the fireworks displayed from the roof, at the celebration of the successful laying of the first Atlantic telegraph cable, set fire to some inflammable material stored near the base of the cupola, which was entirely destroyed; while the low dome over the great stairs was seriously



PLAN OF PRINCIPAL FLOOR AS FINALLY ADOPTED, APRIL 4, 1803. (FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAWING.)

damaged. Wall's drawing exhibits the cupola as it stood prior to the insertion of the clock, and the cut showing it detached is from the architect's original design. It appears that some slight changes were made during construction. In rebuilding the cupola and the dome over the stairs, but little effort was made to restore more than the general appearance of the originals, which accounts for the present deformity of both.

Notwithstanding this change, and the damage done less by time than by stupidity, the Hall stands to-day unsurpassed by any structure of the kind in the country. The design is pure. No pains or research was spared. The capitals of the first and second orders are marvels of execution. When some fault seems to have been found during the progress of the work by a competitor of the sculptor, in a communication upon that subject to the Building Committee Mr. McComb remarked: "I have visited the carvers' shop almost daily, and have been always pleased with Mr. Lemair's attention, mode of working, and finishing the capitals,—work which is not surpassed by any in the United States, and but seldom seen better executed in Europe, and which for proportion and neatness of workmanship will serve as models for carvers in future." The name of Mr. John Lemair, to whom this compliment was so deservedly paid, will be found cut in the top of the blocking course over the front attic story, together with the names of the Building Committee, architect, and master mechanics. The Ionic columns and pilasters, with their capitals, are remarkably like those in the portico of St. Paul's Church, New York. The latter, however, are fluted and cabled, and in turn resemble those by Ripley in the Admiralty Office, London. The second order is designed after Sir William Chambers, whose work on civil architecture had made its appearance a few years prior to the beginning of the century. The entablature of this order, however, after the Greek, is composed without the dentil, which gives prominence to the modillion and lightens up the cornice, the dentil being introduced in the Ionic order of the first story, where the soffit of the corona is worked into a plain drip with strong effect. The classic detail throughout is admirably wrought. There is a touch of the Adam Brothers in the leaves of the capitals to the pilasters of the attic-story front that is not displeasing. This part of the building has, in fact, never been finished. The undefined want was supplied in the design by a pedimental foil to the base of the cupola, composed of statuary representing the city arms as shown in the illustration, which was



CORINTHIAN ORDER—SECOND STORY. (FROM ORIGINAL DRAWING.)

simply intended to convey the architect's idea. This was to have covered the middle block, while the blocks at either end were to have held respectively the arms of the United States and those of the State of New York. In 1817 Mr. McComb, then Street Commissioner, endeavored to have this carried out, and stated, in a communication to the Common Council, that it had not been done before for the want of a sufficiently skilled resident artist; that a highly recommended sculptor having recently settled here, the difficulty no longer existed. He therefore recommended the subject to the consideration of the Board. The Committee on Arts reported adversely, the estimated cost being \$8,556. The outlay was considered too great. It was the same committee that in 1830 expended about \$6,500 in providing a bell and placing a clock in the cupola. The clock was destroyed in the fire of 1858, and the bell has been removed. In removing the bell, the cornice of the rear was damaged, and the decorative parts that were set aside have never been replaced, but still lie upon the roof. The scales have fallen from the hand of the statue of Justice, and the birds have built a nest in a break in her side. Heaven benignly wards the lightning from the broken rod on the cupola, but seems powerless to prevent the heavy telegraph cables from tugging at the chimneys. One of these wires stretches, other-

wise unsupported, to the roof of the Tract House. Holes for rain-water leaders have been hacked through the cornice, and on the west side the iron rust from a neglected chimney-top has discolored the marble, well down the building.

A glance at the plan of the main floor will serve to show the uses to which the different rooms were at first put. The Mayor's office is the only apartment that has been continuously occupied for the same purpose, and the room over it, which was the original Common Council Chamber, is the only one that retains much of its former appearance. The mantels of this room have been torn out, and the magnificent glass chandelier that hung from its ceiling has disappeared. But despite foreign paint, and dirty and dingy as it is, enough remains and can be retained to give some idea of its former beauty. The original Ionic pillars also remain in the present Aldermen's room, bedizened with color and gilt, but the doors and doorways throughout the building are fairly intact. The Governor's room has been lengthened by including the rooms formerly occupied by the Comptroller and grand jury. The portrait of Lafayette, together with some others, remain in this room, but several good portraits have been removed to glorify other walls. Of the present City Library, located in the south-east wing on the main floor, it were charity to say nothing. A comparison of the Hall of to-day with the Hall of 1814 is unsatisfactory. Yet it would not be difficult to restore much of the original appearance, and the building is as solid as ever.

Of the original plan, as reference has been made to the existing evidences of its origin, a word should be said. Cross-sectioned north and south, it bears a strong resemblance to the Register Office erected, in 1774, in Edinburgh by the Adam Brothers; the main stair-way is very like that in the new Assembly Rooms at Glasgow, built about that time by the same architects, but is superior in grace and proportion. Much of the interior detail shows a careful study of these architects; but the

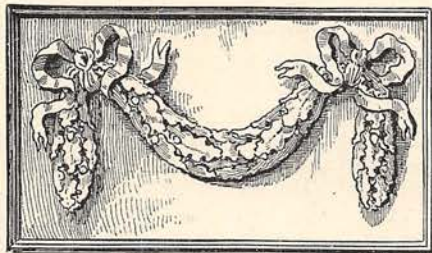
whole was most influenced by the genius of Sir William Chambers, whose works and productions Mr. McComb admired and followed above all others.

The principal elevations were undoubtedly suggested by Inigo Jones's design for the Palace at Whitehall, of which only the Banqueting House was built.

In fact, it may be said that, in the detail of the exterior and of the marble of the inside, Sir William Chambers was closely imitated; while in the plan and wood-work the Adams, Richardson, and Soane, and the examples in the "Vitruvius Britannicus" of both Campbell and Richardson, were followed to a certain degree. The execution of the wood-carving is inferior to the work done by Mr. Lemair, for great difficulty was experienced in obtaining competent workmen in this department. The aggregate cost of the building, exclusive of furniture, did not exceed half a million of dollars, a generous sum for those days, while some twelve millions are said to have been expended upon the New Courthouse.

John McComb, the architect of the City Hall, was born in this city October 17, 1763. His grandfather was a Malcolm of Scotland, and first settled in Maryland. At the beginning of the Revolutionary war the family removed to Princeton, but at its close returned to New York, where he pursued his studies, and was very successful in his profession. He furnished the designs for the front of the Government House in New York, which was executed in 1790, and for St. John's Church, the Murray and Bleecker Street churches, Washington Hall, and many other public and private buildings in New York, Philadelphia, and throughout the Eastern States. He was a governor of the hospital, "a strong supporter of Fulton, and shared with Clinton the obloquy of the day for his determined advocacy of the Erie Canal." He filled many positions of honor and trust, and died in New York May 25th, 1853.

Edward S. Wilde.



WINDOW HEAD — MAIN FRONT.