



Built to Last

No. 3

Pennsylvania Railroad Company District Office Building 200 East Baltimore Street, Baltimore (1905, Parker & Thomas, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

Built to house the Baltimore branch offices of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company following the Great Fire of 1904, this structure was an early commission of the architectural firm of Parker & Thomas (later Parker, Thomas & Rice), the pre-eminent architects of Baltimore's Beaux-arts commercial & financial structures of the first quarter of the 20th century.

Throughout the 19th century, the Pennsylvania Railroad vied with the locally owned Baltimore & Ohio Railroad for control of rights-of-way and development rights for lines in and out of the city. While the B&O was the older of the two competing railroads (founded in 1830), the Pennsylvania Railroad had surpassed the B&O in size, scope, and profitability by the 1870s. Such was the nature of railroad competition in Baltimore that the two lines even maintained separate passenger terminals, with Mount Royal Station serving the B&O (and its dominance of lines running south) and the Pennsylvania maintaining a site between Charles and St. Paul Streets.

In 1900, under the leadership of Alexander Cassatt, brother of expatriate Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, the Pennsylvania Railroad merged with the B&O, and the two companies shared a Board of Trustees. Partly in response to efforts in Washington to enact legis-



Pennsylvania Railroad Company District Office from southwest. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

lation prohibiting railroad monopolies, the Pennsylvania and B&O maintained separate corporate identities during this period, although the “union” of the two companies was celebrated by Cassatt’s pet project, Washington, DC’s monumental Beaux-arts style Union Station (1902).

When the 1904 Fire destroyed the Second-Empire style B&O headquarters on the northwest corner of Baltimore and Calvert Streets, the corporate officers elected to rebuild a grand, 13-story Beaux-arts tower on a new site, two blocks to the west. The Pennsylvania, by contrast,

retained its site and elected the relatively small, restrained building seen today. The inter-relationship of the two companies and the coordination of their post-Fire building schemes is attested to by the fact that both the Pennsylvania Railroad building and the B&O tower on Charles Street were designed by the same architectural firm, Parker & Thomas. The modesty of the Pennsylvania’s building (in spite of the company’s essential domination of the B&O) is part and parcel of the effort to maintain distinct identities for the two merged companies.

By 1906—the time of the Baltimore

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post-Fire rebuilding of both the Pennsylvania and B&O buildings—Cassatt was dead, the Republicans had passed antitrust legislation and the two companies administratively pried themselves apart once again. Thus, what may have begun in 1905 as a somewhat disingenuous attempt to maintain the united railroad companies' discrete corporate identities through the erection of two separate and stylistically and hierarchically distinct structures, became an accurate representation of corporate separation by the time the buildings were complete in 1906.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Building reflects stylistic and material trends in Baltimore's commercial and financial center following the Great Fire of February 7-8, 1904. Although the Great Fire played the leading role in eradicating the predominantly Victorian architectural character of the larger financial and commercial institutions located in the area, this transformation was partly due to a general shift in architectural fashion during the same period away from the formally complex, visually multivalent and picturesque modes such as Queen Anne and Second Empire and towards the more restrained Renaissance-based classicism of the watershed White City at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

The Second Empire style, in particular, had fallen most precipitously from favor on an international level by the turn of the century. Parker & Thomas's own design of the nearby Alex Brown & Sons Company Building (1901) shows that, even before the Great Fire, the firm was working very much within current international standards of taste. In Baltimore, this stylistic shift away from the Second Empire would have received the support of the city's business and architectural lead-

ers, who, like their fellow citizens, believed that the air pockets beneath the Second Empire style's hallmark mansard roofs might have contributed to the invisible, unchecked spread of the fire from one building to another in the commercial district. The building's completion by July 1905 indicates the rapidity with which the Pennsylvania Railroad and the city's other business institutions rebuilt in the area, thus maintaining their association with the part of the city that had functioned as its financial and commercial heart since the eighteenth century.

The Beaux-arts matrix of Parker & Thomas's design is evident in the use of a classical vocabulary applied to a non-specific but clearly historical form, adapted to contemporary function. The Pennsylvania Railroad building refers to the Florentine Renaissance palazzo historical model with its block-like form resting on a rusticated street-level base and rising through two levels to a heavy cornice. As the palazzo form was widely adapted between the Renaissance and 1905, the Pennsylvania Railroad building may owe its primary associative identity to Georgian adaptations. The arrangement of commercial offices over an open, loggia-like ground story recalls—perhaps deliberately—the colonial market house form, a form exemplified by Peter Harrison's 1726 Brick Market in Newport, RI, or Baltimore's own original frame courthouse of 1729. This application of a historical type to a suitable contemporary function is not only typical of Beaux-arts design, but indicates an element of Colonial Revivalism in the work as well. As Baltimore has very few surviving pre-1776 buildings, drawing on a vanished typological model (such as the courthouse) and “upgrading” it to brick with classical ornament effectively romanticizes

Baltimore's urban past and suggests a tradition of refinement that suited both the patron and passersby of 1905.

The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:

www.cr.nps.gov/habsbaer/habs/

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore's Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore's Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district's Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore's rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul's Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district's growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore's Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore's tremendously rich architectural heritage.