



Built to Last

No. 9

B & O Railroad Company Headquarters Building 2 North Charles Street, Baltimore (1904-6, Parker & Thomas, architects)

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

The B & O was not only significant as America's first railroad (founded 1827) but also as the pre-eminent driving force behind Baltimore's importance as a commercial center in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Architecturally, the 1905-6 building's 13-story height was a local novelty and its well-publicized "fireproof" construction was clearly a material reaction to the 1904 Great Fire that destroyed the company's previous headquarters building. The design by Parker & Thomas, architects, of Boston and Baltimore, exemplifies the style which defined the city's rebuilt commercial center, and the building is also the only known Baltimore work of associated architect James Gamble Rogers, who later established a reputation as a premier "image maker" architect for America's corporate elite and for Yale University.

The first spike of the B & O was struck on July 4, 1827, but the company did not officially begin operations until 1830, when it had built a whopping 13 miles of line (out the 23 miles in the entire United States at the time). It was, by all accounts, the first planned general-purpose, long distance railroad in the world, intended from the start to span the 300-miles from West Pratt Street in Baltimore to the banks of the Ohio River. By 1905, when the present building was commissioned, the pioneer railroad had reached 13 states, running as far west as St. Louis and Chicago.

The B & O's greatest rival was certainly the Philadelphia-based Pennsylvania Railroad. The two companies battled endlessly over rights-of-way and control of small lines linking Baltimore to the rest of the country. While the B & O was older, by the 1870s, the Pennsylvania Railroad was second only to Vanderbilt's New York Central in



B & O Railroad Building, sculptural detail of Charles Street entrance. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

size, scope and profitability. Such was the 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) while the Pennsylvania maintained a site between Charles and St. Paul Streets, well to the north of the city's center. Eventually (and logically), the two companies settled on the Pennsylvania dominating the northeast connections, while the B & O retained its (and the city of Baltimore's) claim to being "the gateway to the South."

In 1900, under the leadership of Alexander Cassatt (brother of expatriate Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt), the Pennsylvania Railroad Corporation effectively merged with the B & O and for several years the two companies

shared a Board of Trustees. At about the same time, the Republican Party, led by Theodore Roosevelt (elected President 1901) began to move toward legislation prohibiting such railroad monopolies. As a result, the Pennsylvania and B&O maintained separate corporate identities during this period, although the "union" of the two companies was also celebrated by Cassatt's pet project, Washington, DC's monumental Union Station (1902).

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

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B & O Railroad Company Headquarters Building (continued)

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 13-story B & O tower on Charles Street were designed by the same architectural firm, Parker & Thomas. The clear assertion of dominance by the B & O in its hometown may have been somewhat disingenuous at the time of the commission but, by the building's completion in 1906, the B & O had regained stock majority over the Pennsylvania and was effectively "independent" again. Thus, while the building represented the pre-eminent local company's triumphant rebuilding "bigger and better" after the 1904 Fire, it also represented the reassertion of "local ownership" after the six years of domination by the Pennsylvania Railroad and its trustees.

The importance of the B & O Railroad to all aspects of the development of Baltimore can scarcely be overstated. Throughout the nineteenth century, industry grew in the city, as raw materials were easily transported by ship or by train from distant suppliers. Finance houses were founded to support the trade ventures and the development of a manufacturing sector that sprang up once the railroad created a viable infrastructure for distribution of goods produced. Manufactured goods were distributed from Baltimore to the south and the west on routes the B & O had built to open new or previously inaccessible markets. Manufacture of iron, steel and materials used by the railroad for its own infrastructure and durable goods also grew in the Baltimore region to support the B & O. As these materials found uses in other industries, such as construction, the market for these goods grew beyond supplying the railroad, but Baltimore industry still relied on the B & O to transport materials to consumers.

Until World War II, the B & O was the city's single largest employer, meaning that the company—through its employees and their families—indirectly supported myriad other local industries and services, such as housing, production of domestic consumable goods such as food and clothing and even schools

(through both demand via population growth and a stable tax base from which to pay for construction and salaries). Local philanthropists such as George Peabody and Johns Hopkins owed large parts of their wealth to the railroad, and through their charitable activities and cultural initiatives the B & O's good fortune was transformed into the city's most treasured institutions. Hopkins literally funded and endowed the university, hospital and medical schools that bear his name with B & O Railroad stock.

The florid newspaper coverage of the grand opening of the 1906 B & O Building gives some sense of how the company was perceived as part-and-parcel of Baltimore's civic identity in the early 20th century. It is surely not coincidental that the building's grand opening was timed with the 1906 "Baltimore Jubilee"—a week-long festival of parades, expositions and entertainments intended to publicize the city's rebirth after the Fire but, especially, to emphasize the city's "progressive spirit."

The building was not only a corporate emblem depicting the company's profitability and stability to rival railroad companies (of which, by 1905, there were many), but it was also a civic monument of progress. One aspect of the building that particularly awed its contemporaries was its lavish use of electric light. The building was described in exhaustive detail by the *Baltimore Sun* under subheadings that suggest the values that appealed to the public at the time: monumentality and scale; materials, both lavish and novel (reinforced concrete and marble are accorded equal consideration) and, particularly, modern conveniences such as "pneumatic tube service"; "filtered water supply"; "steam vacuum heating"; "air filtered and washed"; "novel electric appliances" (with a lengthy quantification of the number of switches and feet of wiring). The public was invited to tour the building as part of the Jubilee calendar of events to marvel at both its technological marvels and its "dignified, impressive and monumental," design, which was billed as an "adornment to the city."

Of the four major trunk railroad lines

in 1900, the heyday of American rail, only the B & O's headquarters from this period remains.

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/habs/haer/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.