

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic      Nott Memorial Hall

and/or common

**2. Location**

street & number      Union College      \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town      Schenectady      \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of

state      New York      code      36      county      Schenectady      code      93

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
district	public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	agriculture
X building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	museum
structure	both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	commercial
site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
object	in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	entertainment
	being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	government
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	industrial
			military
			other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name      Trustees of Union College

street & number      Union College

city, town      Schenectady      \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of      state      New York

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc.      Schenectady County Courthouse

street & number

city, town      Schenectady      state      New York

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title      Historic American Building Survey      has this property been determined eligible?      yes      no

date      1962       federal      state      county      local

depository for survey records      Library of Congress

city, town      Washington      state      DC

## **7. Description**

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved      date
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### **Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

Founded in 1795, Union College is among the oldest "planned" schools in the Nation. Its physical plan was laid out by the French architect, Joseph Jacques Ramee in 1813 but was never fully realized. The focal point of the planned symmetrical buildings arranged in an open space is the central rotunda - the Nott Memorial.

In the 1850's, the President of Union College for 62 years Eliphalet Nott began construction of a Ramee-style, sixteen-sided rotunda. The building was halted, due to financial problems with only the foundation in place, in 1858. In 1872, Edward Tuckermen Potter (1831-1904) was engaged to complete the construction. Sixteen-sided and domed, the memorial is not in the Classic tradition but is an imaginative statement in the Italian-Gothic style, a Ruskinian-Gothic tour-de-force.

Essentially the building is a stone cylinder supporting a cast-iron drum and dome between 94 and 100 feet in diameter. The lower part of the foundation walls is random ashlar; the upper part is of brick 44 feet thick. The walls are a warm-colored cut stone with alternating courses of varied color stone in the arches. The lower half of the wall consists of 16 piers, at the angles, with windows between. The windows vary in size on three levels, lighting the interior space.

The main entrance on the south side has stone steps with a small stoop. Each element of piers, windows, and sculpture is repeated sixteen times--a segmented shed roof is crowned by a glassed copper drum and each face of the dome has triple stained glass windows with tracery. Each section of the lower roof and the roof of the dome is separated by a narrow copper rib. The roof is covered with slate and the dome has patterned colored slate tiles, with an inscription from the Talmud, "The work is great, the day is short, the master presses the workman."

The interior of the building is open and is a 16-sided polygon, with an aisle extending around it. There is a full basement, a first and second story with exceptionally handsome cast-iron balconies and an upper gallery around the topmost central portion. The main floor is paved in handsome encaustic tile in the style of Minton, but these were made by Craven Dunhill and Co., Jackfield Works, near Ironbridge, Salop.

Sixteen cast-iron columns, placed about 10 feet on centers, extend from the first floor to the dome. Each column is in three superimposed stages, with the base of the upper one bolted to the capital of the lower one. Trussed braces extend from each of the columns to the angle in the outer wall, at each stage, and single braces extend laterally between columns. There are two particularly handsome cast-iron stairways from the first to the second floor. Each has cast-iron newels, cast-iron treads and risers, bolted together, and is self-supporting with one cast-iron Corinthian column support.

## **8. Significance**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Areas of Significance—Check and justify below</b>				
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion	
1400–1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science	
1500–1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture	
X 1600–1699	architecture	X education	military	social	
1700–1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian	
X 1800–1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater	
1900–	communications	industry	politics government	transportation	
		invention		other (specify)	

**Specific dates** 1858, 1876, 1902      **Builder Architect** Edward Tuckerman Potter

William Appleton Potter

### **Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Nott Memorial is "one of the most colorful and elegantly decorative High Victorian Gothic buildings ever built in the United States."<sup>1</sup> The vogue for buildings produced between the years of Richard Upjohn's archeologically correct Gothic and the mature H. H. Richardson's Romanesque style were largely shaped not by any architect but by the writing of English critic John Ruskin (1819–1900).

The two most important American practitioners of Ruskin's High Victorian Gothic were the architects of the Nott Memorial, Edward Tuckerman Potter and William Appleton Potter. The Potter brothers designs were "high style" and date from the early years of the Civil War through the 1870s. These buildings were looked upon as anomalous until the 1960s when Henry-Russell Hitchcock in his article, "Ruskin and American Architecture, or Regeneration Long Delayed" (1968) stimulated a number of scholarly studies on High Victorian Gothic architecture and its creators. The Potters were well known important professionals from a family of college presidents, bishops, bankers, and politicians and enjoyed commissions as diverse as Brown Brothers & Company Banking House, Packer Hall at Lehigh University, the Mark Twain House, a number of churches, and the Nott Memorial.

The Potter family was closely associated with Union College. Edward T. Potter, the Nott Memorial architect, was a grandson of Eliphalet Nott, who was president for over 60 years. Edward (1831–1904) graduated from Union in 1853, and his younger stepbrother, William Appleton Potter (1842–1909), also an architect, graduated in 1864. Another brother, Eliphalet Nott Potter, became President of Union College in 1873 and remained so until 1884. So close was the Potter family to the college that some \$35,000 towards the cost of the Nott Memorial was given by the two architect-brothers, Edward and William.

The older brother, Edward Tuckerman Potter also completed commissions for a number of churches: St. John, East Hartford, St. Paul, Staten Island, Harvard Church, Brookline and his masterpiece, the Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut. Toward the end of his career (which was a short one) he turned to and was influenced by the work of H. H. Richardson, the architect who would dominate the 1870's and 1880's. William Appleton Potter, his more prolific younger brother, also a graduate of Union College, was responsible for several Princeton University buildings. He was for a time the Supervising Architect to the Treasury Department and was known for his high Victorian-Gothic style until he turned to the "Shingle Style" seen in those great houses in the Richardson manner of the 1880's. Finally he turned to the more historically correct Gothic at the end of the 19th century. A few examples were Washburn Hall, Union College, Christ Church, Poughkeepsie, St. Margaret's, Washington, D.C. and competition designs for the cathedral of St. John

## **9. Major Bibliographical References**

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

## **10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of nominated property Less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Schenectady

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

**UTM References**

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**Verbal boundary description and justification**

Beginning at a point on the north side, the boundary should be a complete circle 150 feet in circumference with its center at the center of the building.

**List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries**

state \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_

state \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ code \_\_\_\_\_

## **11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Carolyn Pitts

organization History Division date July 1985

street & number 1100 "L" Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8172

city or town Washington state DC zip 20013-7127

## **12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification**

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national     state     local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature \_\_\_\_\_

title \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date \_\_\_\_\_

Keeper of the National Register

date \_\_\_\_\_

Attest:

date \_\_\_\_\_

Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
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For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

7

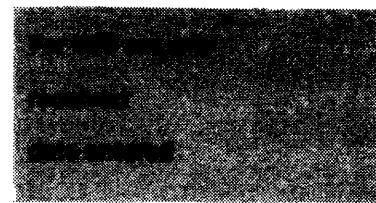
Page 2

On the third floor in the fabric of the dome, can be seen the translucent glass bullseyes arranged in different bands of colors, representing various constellations of stars.

The Nott Memorial was completed in 1876 and served as a museum until the first decade of the 20th century when it became a library (1902). In 1961, it was converted into a bookstore and theatre-in-the-round.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 2

the Divine, New York. His last works were New York Teachers Training College at Columbia University and Pyne Library at Princeton University, before he left America and retired in Rome. He died there in 1909. The Nott Memorial credited to both Potters was dedicated to open in 1879 with the college art collection in the lower gallery, the library in the top domed room and the main floor with its magnificent encaustic tile floor was used as a multiple purpose meeting room.

When another brother, Eliphalet Nott Potter, was elected president of Union College in 1871, sufficient funds were then collected to resume work on the rotunda. At this time the sixteen-sided Tempietto of 1850 became a High Victorian baptistery.

The rotunda was almost completed in a burst of activity in the 1870's, the building at first was to be called Memorial Hall, and after more gifts and funds, the Nott-Potter Memorial, as it was named, opened in November 1878. Due to continuing money problems, the work was never completely finished with all of the Gothic detail cut and polished.

In contrast to the rich exterior walls, the interior framework of cast iron is a masterpiece of engineering. The bolts joining the beams were left unconcealed and appear to be stock catalog items. The incredibly light iron skeleton was somewhat like medieval Gothic construction even to the filling in of the open walls with large stained glass windows.

Cast iron was thought to be fire proof but unfortunately is not immune to fire.

The iron skeleton at Union was to have been the frame of a building eventually intended as a library for the school. The iron components were manufactured by the well known J. B. and J. M. Cornell Iron Works in New York City who were then reaching prominence making cast iron store fronts that could be ordered by catalogue and easily bolted together. The SoHo District in New York has a great collection of them. Cornell was also responsible for the turret for Ericson's Monitor which was constructed in their shop. They also sid the elevated railways in New York, the framework for the Statue of Liberty and th Flat Iron Building. The Nott Memorial is an outstanding example of this new technology, prefabricated cast-iron architectural elements.

"Two generations removed from its conception and twenty years after the laying of its first stone, Eliphalet Nott's dream of a central rotunda had been realized. No doubt it fell short of Edward Tuckerman Potter's vision, but the hall with its delicate skeleton of iron bones forming tiers of galleries rising from dazzling pavements to a starry vault one hundred feet above in a single sweep of open luminous space--could not have failed to overwhelm the beholder."<sup>2</sup>

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only  
received  
date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 3

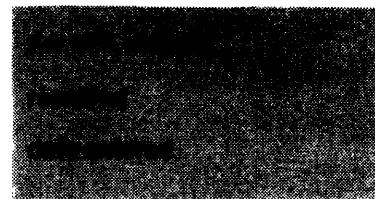
Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Landau, Sara. Edward T. and William A. Potter, American Victorian Architects.  
New York: Garland Publishing Inc. 1978, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Mendel, Mesick, Cohen, Architects. The Nott Memorial: A Historic Structure Report. Albany, 1973. p. 46.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet	Item number	Page
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