

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

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

1. Name

historic Boston Public Library

and/or common

2. Location

street & number Copley Square not for publication

city, town Boston vicinity of

state Massachusetts code 025 county Suffolk code 025

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name City of Boston

street & number city Hall

city, town Boston vicinity of state Massachusetts

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Suffolk Registry of Deeds

street & number Pemberton Square

city, town Boston state Massachusetts

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1972/1973 federal state county local

depository for survey records National Register

city, town Washington state DC

7. Description

Condition

excellent
 good
 fair

deteriorated
 ruins
 unexposed

Check one

unaltered
 altered

Check one

original site
 moved date 1888-1895

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Copley Square is one of Boston's major public spaces. Surrounding this square are several major architectural achievements such as Trinity Church, New Old South Church, and the Copley Plaza Hotel and, on the southwest side, the Boston Public Library.

The Library is fully documented in a number of publications and an architectural description follows. Mention should be made, however, of one of the unique features--the court at the center of the building. This open well was intended for light and ventilation around stacks, which were not provided in the dungeon-like book storage due to fire laws. The open space with its patches of green grass is, however, one of the delights of Boston. It was not informal enough, however, to accommodate a sculpture of a Dancing Bacchante by Frederick MacMonnies which the architect, Charles F. McKim, gave in memory of his wife. (The statue was sent to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) These grand spaces--the court, the grand stair hall, and the great reading room, running the full length of the second floor, made life difficult for the efficient librarian--a situation corrected by Philip Johnson's departmentalized annex, constructed in 1969.

Walter Muir Whitehead and William Jordy have devoted many pages to describing the building in detail. An excellent condensation was written by Andrea Calfee of the Massachusetts Historical Commission in the National Register of Historic Places inventory-nomination form:

McKim's design for the Boston Public Library consists of a monumental free-standing block in the style of an Italian Renaissance palace. Nearly square in plan (225 feet in length across the front, 227 feet in width), the building surrounds an open courtyard and contains three stories. The Library measures 70 feet high at its cornice. It is set up and back from the surrounding streets on a granite platform of broad, easy steps. The exterior walls of the building are entirely Milford granite. A wide band of rustication at the first story level is separated from the smoothly finished wall of the second story by a series of courses. Decorative details have also been carved of granite, most notably the 33 medallions in the spandrels of the second floor window arches. These were executed by sculptor Domingo Mora and represent the colophons, or trade devices, of the early printer and booksellers. On three sides friezes identifying the Library, its purposes and dates, lie just below a richly detailed cornice which projects outward from the sweep of flat wall. Elaborate copper cresting completes the cornice silhouette. Similar cresting once adorned the roof ridge but suffered damage and was removed. The low hipped roof is covered with reddish brown Spanish tiles. At each corner of the ridge stands an ornamental copper rod.

The Library structure surrounds an open courtyard, measuring 100 by 135 feet. The wall of the main staircase projects well into the court and an arcaded loggia runs along the other three walls. Landscaping and a rectangular pool complete this setting.

Much as a Renaissance artist might have done, McKim and his partners also sought out the contributions of their contemporary artists for the visual enrichment of the building's interior spaces and surfaces. The French muralist Puvis de Chavannes' major composition is the fresco found in the second floor corridor and entire upper portion of the main stair hall. This classical allegory is entitled "The Muses of Inspiration Hail the Spirit, the Harbinger of Light." To the right of the Chavannes Gallery is the Abbey Room dominated by a series of richly-colored mural paintings depicting the "Quest of the Holy Grail," by the American artist Edwin Austin Abbey.

8. Significance

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

Specific dates 1888 **Builder/Architect** McKim, Mead and White

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Boston Public Library set the precedent for grand-scale urban libraries in the United States. In addition, its site in Copley Square, opposite Holy Trinity Church presents a historic confrontation of two structures that set the trend for the decades that followed. Charles Follen McKim's Library (1888–95) faces Henry Hobson Richardson's Trinity Church (1873–77). Trinity began the style called "Richardsonian Romanesque" which dominated the 1880's, while McKim's Boston Public Library is the first outstanding example of Renaissance Beaux-Arts academicism in America. Professor William Jordy writes:

The Romanesque-inspired pile faces the Renaissance-inspired front; brown opposite gray; rough opposite smooth. The irregular mass of Trinity modeling the hierarchy of spaces within opposes the abstract rectangular container of the Library, which is largely (if not completely) justified by its own elegance rather than by its disclosure of interior arrangements. Writing of his student days in Cambridge in My Life in Architecture at a time when regard for Richardson's work had temporarily waned because of its part in the then unfashionable Victorian past, Ralph Adams Cram maintained that,

No greater contrast could be imagined than that between Trinity Church and the new Library across the way. On the one hand, an almost brutal, certainly primitive, boldness, arrogance, power; on the other, a serene Classicism, reserved, scholarly, delicately conceived in all its parts, beautiful in that sense in which things have always been beautiful in periods of high human culture. ¹

At the same time, McKim was influenced by Richardson's Marshall Field Wholesale Store (1885) in Chicago, much admired by critics of modern architecture. The heavy repetitive arches and the rectilinear "Palazzo" style are echoes of styles of the past. McKim used Roman and Renaissance precedents for early twentieth-century academicism. The exterior also bore references to Leon Battista Alberti's San Francesco in Rimini, but more closely the Library's principal facade resembles Henri Labrouste's Bibliotheque Sainte-Genevieve in Paris. This new building, in a new style, was attacked, as has so often happened in the past; it was criticized for its out-of-town architectural firm, for its cost, for its functional inadequacies, and for its formality. The cost was high -- over two-and-one-half million dollars. It was what Oliver Wendell Holmes called a "People's Palace." The building was discussed all the while it was going up. Its "classicism" was criticized before its apotheosis in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 under the leadership of Daniel Burnham. Thus this Renaissance-Revival style became enormously popular across America.

Joseph Wells, a young designer in McKim's office, is credited with the beautiful clarity and precision of Italian Renaissance details, whereas the balance and calm of the elevation of the Library are McKim's. In addition to this historicism there was a genuine movement toward order in American architecture from about 1885 on and the Boston Public Library was the prototype for the classic city-palace.

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET ITEM 8 PAGE 2.

10. Geographical Data

Acres of nominated property less than 1 acre
Quadrangle name Boston South

7½ minute series
Quadrangle scale 1:25,000

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

Bounded on three sides by Boylston, Dartmouth, and Blagden Streets; on the fourth side by Exeter Street. The boundary encompasses only the McKim, Mead, and White-designed library.

* See disclaimers in file

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, Historian
National Park Service

organization History Division

date June 1985

street & number 1100 "L" Street NW

telephone (202) 343-8172

city or town Washington

state DC

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

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Bates Hall, the Library's massive main reading room, with its 50 foot high barrellvauled ceiling, occupies the whole front of the building on the second floor. The necessity of providing this room with sufficient light led McKim to devise the solution of the second story window arcade.

Sargent Gallery, on the third floor, takes its name from the American artist John Singer Sargent, who, beginning in 1890, spent years decorating its wall with his most ambitious and original mural sequence, "Judaism and Christianity." Sargent's incomplete masterpiece gives the Gallery a dramatic environment of dark, rich tones, heavily accented in gold.

Among important works of sculpture within the building are the bronze statue of Sir Henry Vane, a Cavalier and youthful Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636-1637, by Frederick MacMonnies, and the great twin marble lions, couchant, on pedestals at the turn of the main staircase, which were carved by Louis Saint-Gaudens, brother of Augustus. The three pairs of bronze doors leading to the main entrance hall contain allegorical figures sculpted in low relief representing Music and Poetry, Knowledge and Wisdom, and Truth and Romance. These doors were executed by Daniel Chester French in 1894 at a cost of \$25,000.¹

The new wing, designed by Philip Johnson in 1969, is not included in the Landmark. * Although it is connected to the building on the northeast side, it does not imitate McKim's stucture. Massive in scale and monumental in concept, there is little or no ornament on the exterior which is faced with the same Milford granite as the original library.

* See disclaimes in file

¹ Calfee, Andrea. "National Register of Historic Places, Inventory Nomination Form," February 21, 1973. Files of the National Register Branch of Registration, National Park Service, Washington Office.

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Page

2

The Library was also intended to be an expression of the City Beautiful movement -- an example of civic grandeur and high-mindedness. Financed with public funds but supported by the cultural and economic elite of Boston, this building was intended to be a great monument. The program for exterior embellishment was also directed by McKim. Daniel Chester French did the bronze doors; Augustus Saint-Gaudens the reliefs above the main entrance. The interior spaces were also embellished by some of the best known artists of the day -- murals were painted by Edwin Austin Abbey, Puvis de Chavannes, and John Singer Sargent. McKim, Mead, and White constructed 1/4 scale wooden models of interior spaces to help the muralists. The Library was regarded as much more than merely a book repository but rather as a sanctuary, a "veritable Assisi of American Art." ²

Such grand spaces often plague the employees charged with the library's work. The Boston library was no exception. Leaving the original design intact, it became necessary to provide more space. In 1968 Philip Johnson was commissioned to design the addition which provides needed utilities appropriate to a contemporary public institution.

- ¹ Jordy, William H. American Buildings and their Architects. Anchor Books. 1976, p. 316.
- ² Fenollosa, Ernest. Mural Painting in the Boston Public Library. Boston 1896, p. 25.

9. Major Bibliographical References

- Bacon, Edwin, ed. and Richard Herndon. Boston of To-day: A Glance at Its History and Characteristics. Boston, Post Publishing Co., 1892.
- Fenollosa, Ernest. Mural Painting in the Boston Public Library. Boston. 1896.
- Jordy, William H. American Buildings and their Architects. Anchor Books. 1976.
- Moore, Charles. The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim. Boston. Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1929, pp. 62-94.
- Wadlin, Horace G. The Public Library of the City of Boston: A History. Boston. 1911.
- Whitehill, Walter Muir. Boston Public Library, A Centennial History. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1956.
- _____. "Making of an Architectural Masterpiece--The Boston Public Library," in American Art Journal. Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 13-35.

AMERICAN BUILDINGS AND THEIR ARCHITECTS

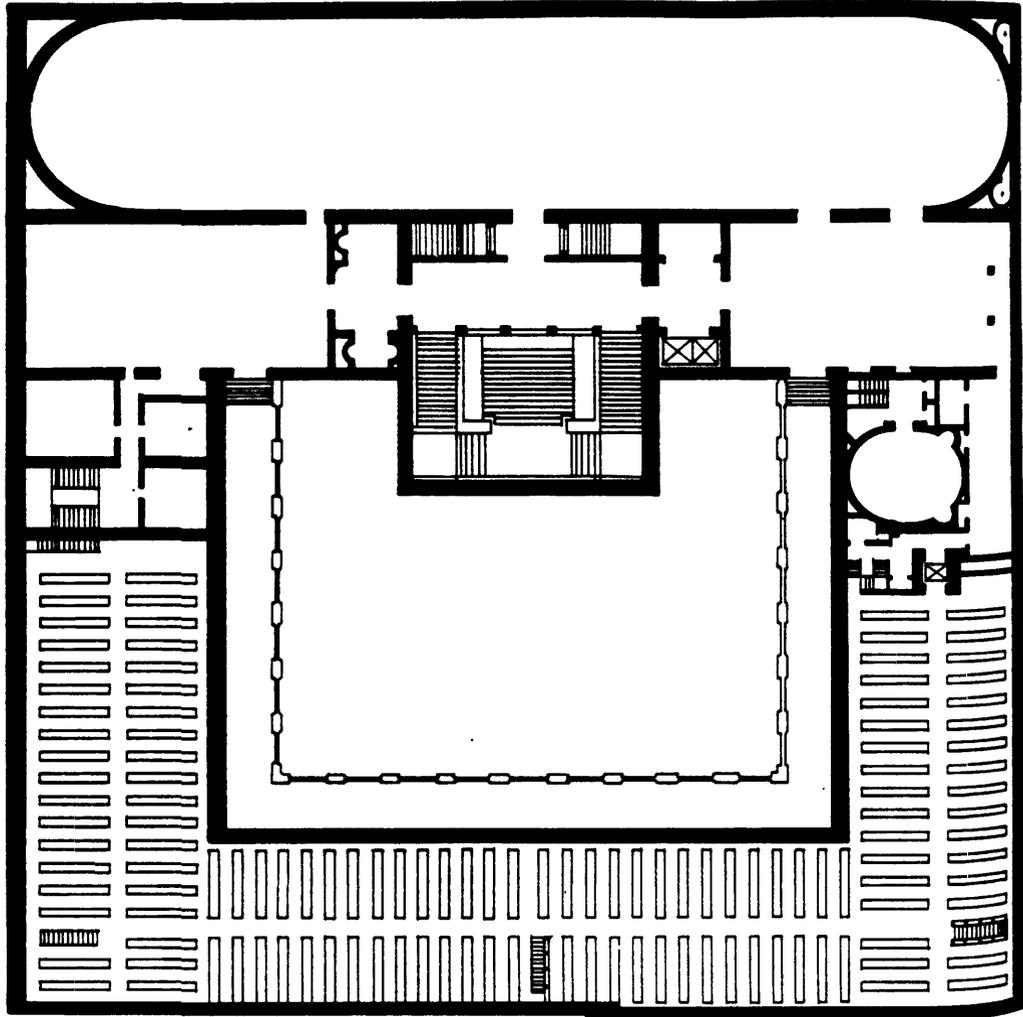


FIGURE 165. *Boston Public Library. McKim's original plan (simplified) for the floor containing Bates Hall.*

From:
William H. Jordy. American
Buildings and Their Architects.
(Anchor Books, 1976). P. 368