

CHESTER TIMES – June 25, 1919 – FACTS ABOUT OLD COURT HOUSE – Interesting Data
Concerning Oldest Building of Its Kind in the United States on Market Street, This City

Historical facts of considerable interest are being unearthed by Architect Clarence Wilson Brazer, who is restoring the old Court House, the oldest in the United States to its original condition, for Governor William C. Sproul, who is paying for the work. A complete research is being made and every effort is being exerted to place the old building in its original state.

It has been found that Governor Sproul's fifth great-grandfather, Nathaniel Newlin, was a member of the provincial assembly for Chester County that appropriated the money for building the old Court House. The Governor made an interior inspection of the building a day or two ago and enjoyed it.

Newlin was also a member of the Chester County Commissioners and had charge of the erection of the original building. Other members of the board were Robert Pyle and Samuel Hollingsworth. The clerk of the court was Richard Marsden, who was succeeded in 1723 by Joseph Parker.

For a long time no evidences were visible of the staircase within the building to the second story, despite the care taken by the contractor rearranging the old building, but marks were apparent of a staircase having at one time been upon the exterior rear corner.

However, upon removing a portion of the floor, the framing of the old timber, which probably was sawed at Richard Townsend's Chester Mills, it was clearly indicated from a hole in the floor of sufficient size for a staircase and upon removing the wallpaper modern plaster was discovered.

This was carefully pulled off and an old coat of white sand plaster revealed. Having been broken in several places, this revealed the original yellow clay and shell lime plaster applied directly on the interior of the stone walls without furry or airspace.

The two more recent coats of plaster were then stripped off and distinct marks of the original staircase "horses" were plainly revealed and from which it will be easy to restore the original staircase with landing in the southeast corner of the building.

A REAL ANTIQUE – This old record gives sufficient information, when compared with structural marks in the old building, to restore completely the rooms, not only in the second story, but furniture as well. The oval table mentioned is so unique that it is sincerely hoped someone will write the Chester Times what they know about it as there is probably no other old colonial table in Pennsylvania of this size and shape. It just fitted the room "above the stairs," which was not quite wide enough for an eight-foot round table.

By a minute entered in the Comrs Booke, bearing date ye second day of October, Anno Dom., 1725, it appears that then Comrs agreed with John Owen to make a "large oval table in the Court House room above the stairs of the dimensions of 7 by 8 feet and another table in the Grand Jury room of the dimensions of 6 by 5 feet and the dimensions length of 6 feet and one bench of 4 feet long in the same room, and necessary conveniences in the office for laying and keeping the records in, and Thomas Griffing is ordered to make two pr. of tongs and fire shovels for the two rooms with irons to lean them against, as also dogs and finders for the said rooms, and Samuel Hollingsworth procure four dozen of chairs, four of which to be arm chairs."

In the files of 1723 in the Court House at West Chester are to be found two Grand Jury presentments for the new Court House, one of which, dated May 29, 1723, is signed "Joh Beazer, foreman," as illustrated on page 8 of Wilmer W. MacElree's "Side Lights in the Bench and Bar of Delaware County." "ailing to find any bills of records of erection of the original building at West Chester, it was found upon research that "an act for the emitting and making current 30e,000 pounds in bills of credit," chapter CCLXII, votes of the Assembly 1723-4, the trustees, Samuel Carpenter, Jeremiah Langhorne, William Fishbourn and Nathaniel Newlin, were instructed that 400 pounds be put into the hands of the treasurer of the county of Chester and 300 pounds be applied towards building the Court House at Chester and the other 100 pounds to be spent upon bridges upon the King's Highway from Philadelphia.

By vote of the Assembly, 11 month, fourth day, 1723-4. "Lieu or Dog dollars weighing 16 pwt. shall pass for 5 shilling." This would apparently place the original cost of the court house at \$1200, "Lion or Dog dollars."

The act of the provincial assembly for the second month, 22, 1717, requiring Chester county, Bucks County and Philadelphia County (the only counties in Pennsylvania at this time) to erect goals (jails) and work houses for the confinement of prisoners evidently stirred up the question of the new court houses, as complaints against the then old court house in Chester being a menace of fire, etc., have been discovered.

NEW JAIL BUILDINGS – The new jail buildings were probably erected of masonry materials by the province and that in this city seems to have been completed about the same time as the new court house for which the province passed the funds in 1723-4. About the same time, there was considerable discussion in Bucks County about the location of the new court house and jail petitions being presented to the assembly for erection in Bristol and for removal to Newtown. An act was eventually passed appropriating 300 pounds for the Bucks county Court House in the latter part of 1724. This is the same amount appropriated by Chester County in 1723.

The accounts of the provincial treasurer, Samuel Preston, and of the collector or secretary, "Owen Roberts and Charles Read, were required to be submitted to a committee, given power to send for papers of the county treasurer. The committee was composed of Benjamin Vining, Anthony Morris, William Biles and William Webb. This probably accounts for the fact that it has been impossible to discover papers in regard to the original court house in the files at West Chester and therefore it is the object of Mr. Brazer to follow them in the provincial archives. So far he has been unable to discover any original contract orders or bills for the erection of the original building or for the bay window addition.

Upon consulting the minutes of Pennsylvania Assembly, the inhabitants of Bucks County petitioned the assembly for permission to erect a jail and court house in Bristol in 1722. It has also been discovered that the Assembly passed the bill permitting the sale of the old Chester court house in 1724.

From time to time other facts regarding the historic court house will be published.