

The Bulfinch Drawings in the American Antiquarian Society

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THE SIX Bulfinch drawings in the Society's graphic arts collection which illustrate this article relate to alterations the architect suggested or made for enlarging the First Parish meetinghouse in Charlestown, Massachusetts, in the period 1803-04. The drawings represent two distinct design concepts: plates 1 and 6 delineate Charles Bulfinch's highly ambitious scheme to recast the late colonial church in the form of an elliptical polygon; plates 2-5 represent, so far as can be determined, the actual remodeling of the building. The drawings have not hitherto been reproduced, although two of them (plates 1 and 3) were redrawn by a hand other than the architect's and published by James F. Hunnewell in 1888.¹ The provenance of the Bulfinch drawings is conjectural; along with other papers, they were saved from destruction in the late nineteenth century and represent 'the only early parish relics of the sort extant.'² Subsequently, and through channels as yet unknown, the drawings found their way into the Society's collections.

Bulfinch's preliminary design for remodeling Charlestown's fourth meetinghouse, apparently rendered early in 1803, was certainly revolutionary for him—assuming the concept originated with the architect. The Reverend William Budington, who succeeded to the First Parish pulpit in 1840,

¹James F. Hunnewell, *A Century of Town Life: A History of Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1757-1887* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1888), facing p. 52.

²*Ibid.*, p. 52.

writes: '*They* at first determined to make a circular alteration' (italics added).³ However, if this novel idea originated with the building committee rather than the architect, it is difficult to account for that body's ultimate choice of the commonplace solution embodied in plates 2-5. The more logical assumption is that the adopted plan represented the kind of compromise characteristic of so much of Bulfinch's work. At any rate, the initial remodeling scheme (plates 1 and 6) is the single known example in which Bulfinch designed a building in elliptical form. Ten years earlier, in the mansion built in Somerville for the Boston merchant Joseph Barrell, he introduced such neo-classical refinements as the oval into New England planning, and, in work contemporaneous with the Charlestown project, he repeated the form in country houses designed for his friends and relatives. The scheme represented in plates 1 and 6 was presented to the building committee on June 8, 1803. According to Budington, the design was 'relinquished' and a second one, presumably that delineated in plates 2-5, was accepted.

Hunnewell's published plans for pew allocations in 1804 show the First Parish meetinghouse in unaltered form, so it is assumed that Bulfinch's alternate scheme was rendered, or at least acted upon, only in that year. As plate 4 suggests, remodeling was minimal: the building width was extended fifteen feet on either side to approximate a square; the number of pews was increased from 99 to 162, and their focus changed from the south side to the eastern or vestry end. Although the pulpit is not shown in this plate, it clearly must have stood in front of the vestry wall, and it is assumed that Bulfinch gave some kind of architectural importance to that location. The exterior treatment of the vestry (plate 2) represents the only spatial addition to the church other than the overall extension of the width by some thirty feet. Stylistically the vestry repre-

³William I. Budington, *The History of the First Church, Charlestown* (Boston: Charles Tappan, 1845), p. 235.

sents the simplest design conception, being merely a porch with a double entry and a single round-headed window. Indeed, the only external 'architectural' element permitted the architect was the neoclassical balustrade, also delineated in plate 2. According to Hunnewell, the interior finish was somewhat modified, but as the section (plate 3) suggests, this too was of the simplest nature.

All of the sources tell us that Bulfinch continued the round-headed window treatment of the original 1783 structure. A comparison between plate 1 and the E. W. Bouvé lithograph, prepared in 1799 and published in Richard Frothingham, Jr., *History of Charlestown*,⁴ shows that the architect did not alter the existing tower and steeple. Nonetheless, writers from Frothingham on have insisted that Bulfinch actually 'designed' the fourth church's splendid Wren-like steeple. The truth of the matter is given in Budington, who states that at the time of remodeling 'the tower and steeple were . . . repaired and painted.'⁵ As in all of his important alterations of historic buildings, such as Faneuil Hall in Boston and the Capitol in Washington, Bulfinch meticulously preserved the original lines so far as was consistent with changed requirements. Given his modest and generous nature, the architect could not have done otherwise. The remodeled meetinghouse was demolished in 1833 to make way for a 'modern' church in the Greek style.

It is interesting to note that at about the same time Bulfinch was working on the remodeling of the Charlestown meetinghouse, he also furnished the design for two Worcester buildings: the third County Court House (1801) and the Worcester Bank (1804).⁶ Both structures have long vanished, and although each was an ambitious provincial example

⁴(Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), facing p. 161.

⁵Budington, First Church, p. 235.

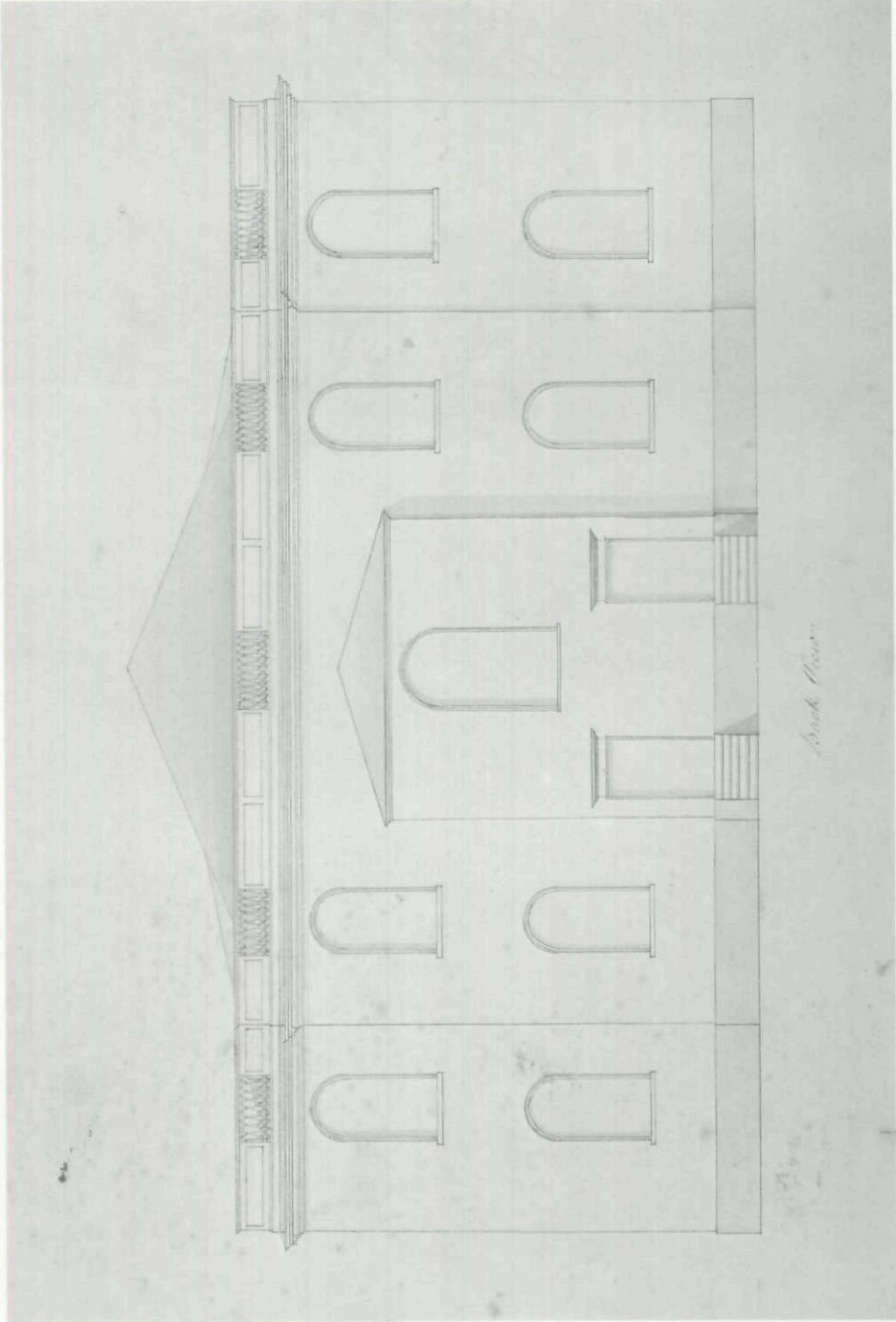
⁶Described in *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, 9 (1909):6, 46.

of late Federal design, neither was a particularly important piece of architecture. Still, Worcesterites of the day described their courthouse as 'a magnificent building' and the bank of Daniel Waldo as 'that Superb Brick Edifice.'⁷ The courthouse was not only the better of the two buildings but is historically interesting because of its over-scaled cupola, which furnished Bulfinch with the model he later incorporated in his projected study for University Hall at Harvard and, still later, brought to great refinement in the surviving Lancaster church. Bulfinch's elevation of the Worcester courthouse hangs in the office of the county commissioners; his drawings relating to the bank have not been discovered, although an interesting view of the bank in ink and wash by Samuel E. Brown is in the Worcester Art Museum.

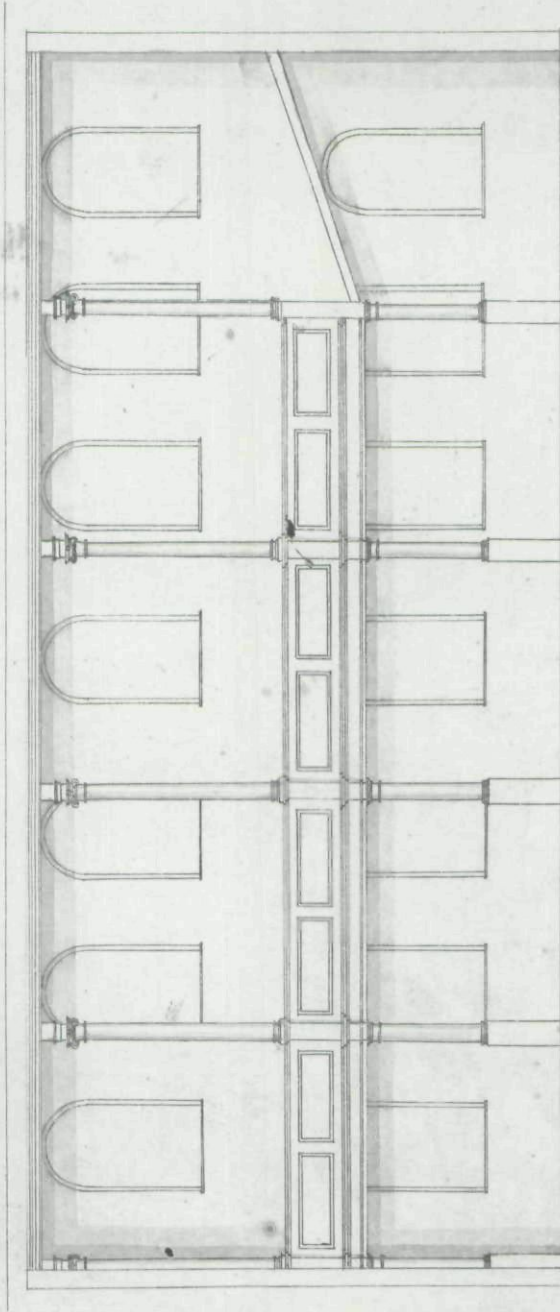
⁷William Lincoln, *History of Worcester* (Worcester: Moses D. Phillips, 1837), p. 343; *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester), February 12, 1806.



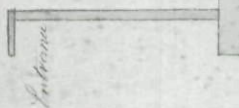
A plan of the alterations of the Meeting house in the First parish in the Town of Charleston, reported and presented, by the Committee to the Parish at their meeting June 8, 1803.



Back View



Section of the side



70	71	75	79	Poor
76	77	78	83	8 Newell
80	81	82	89	Poor

83	84	85	86	Poor
87	88	89	90	91
92	93	94	95	96
97	98	99	100	101

102	103	104	105	106
107	108	109	110	111

78	79	80	81	82
83	84	85	86	87
88	89	90	91	92
93	94	95	96	97
98	99	100	101	102

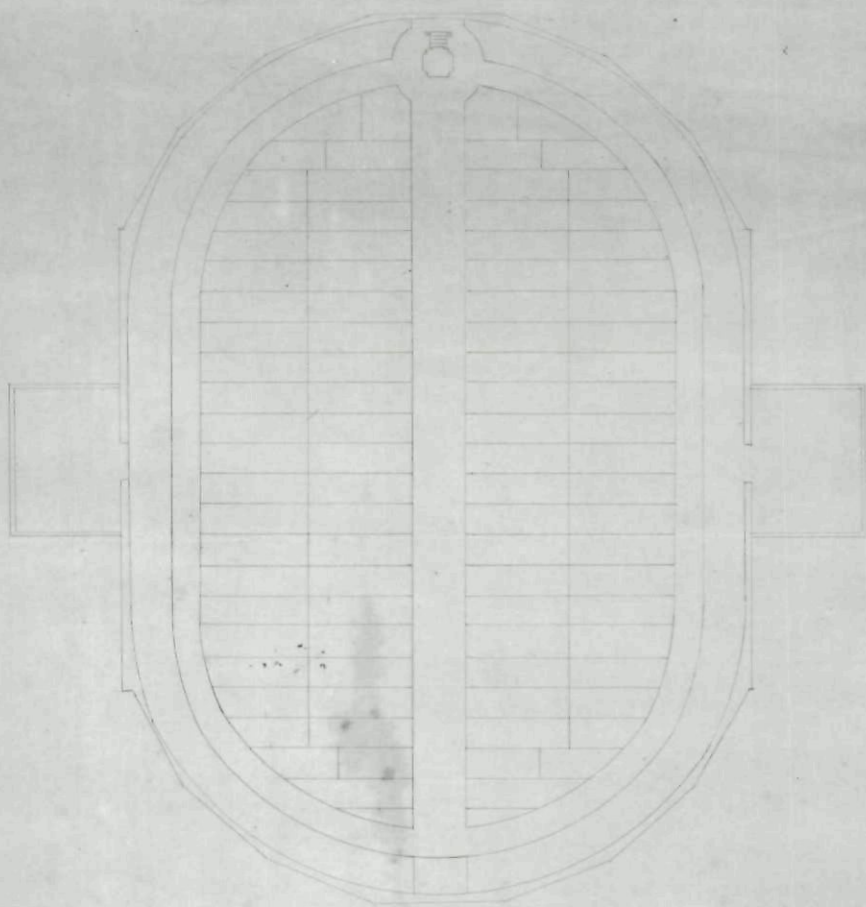
103	104	105	106	107
108	109	110	111	112
113	114	115	116	117
118	119	120	121	122
123	124	125	126	127

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143	144	145	146	147
148	149	150	151	152

153	154	155	156	157
158	159	160	161	162
163	164	165	166	167
168	169	170	171	172
173	174	175	176	177

103	104	105	106	107
108	109	110	111	112
113	114	115	116	117
118	119	120	121	122
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158	159	160	161	162
163	164	165	166	167
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178	179	180	181	182
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188	189	190	191	192
193	194	195	196	197
198	199	200	201	202

103	104	105	106	107
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128	129	130	131	132
133	134	135	136	137
138	139	140	141	142
143	144	145	146	147
148	149	150	151	152
153	154	155	156	157
158	159	160	161	162
163	164	165	166	167
168	169	170	171	172
173	174	175	176	177
178	179	180	181	182
183	184	185	186	187
188	189	190	191	192
193	194	195	196	197
198	199	200	201	202



*A plan of the alterations of the Meeting house in the First parish in the Town of Charleston
as reported and presented, by the Committee, to the Parish at their meeting June 8th 1803.*

Plate 6

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