

Old State House (Boston)

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The **Old State House** is a historic building in Boston, Massachusetts, at the intersection of Washington and State Streets. Built in 1713, it was the seat of the Massachusetts General Court until 1798, and is one of the oldest public buildings in the United States.^[3] One of the landmarks on Boston's Freedom Trail, it is the oldest surviving public building in Boston, and now serves as a history museum operated by the Bostonian Society. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1960.

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Old State House

U.S. National Register of Historic Places

U.S. National Historic Landmark



East view of the Old State House, circa July 2003.

Location	Boston, MA
Coordinates	42°21′31.57″N 71°3′28.1″W﻿ / ﻿42.3586139°N 71.0575278°W﻿ / 42.3586139; -71.0575278
Built	1713
Architect	Original Architect unknown – rebuilt 1748; Alterations: Isaiah Rogers; 1830: Restoration: George Albert Clough, 1881–1882; Renovation: Goody, Clancy and Associates, 1991. ^[2]
Architectural style	Georgian
NRHP Reference #	66000779
	(http://focus.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/66000779) ^[1]
	Significant dates
Added to NRHP	October 15, 1966
Designated NHL	October 9, 1960

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History

The Massachusetts Town House: seat of colony government 1713–1776

Today's brick Old State House was built in 1712–13, possibly designed by Robert Twelves; the previous building, the wooden Town House of 1657, had burned in the fire of 1711.^[4] A notable feature was the pair of seven-foot tall wooden figures depicting a lion and unicorn, symbols of the British monarchy.

The building housed a Merchant's Exchange on the first floor and warehouses in the basement. On the second floor, the east side contained the Council Chamber of the Royal Governor while the west end of the second floor contained chambers for the Courts of Suffolk County and the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. The central portion contained the chambers for the elected Massachusetts Assembly. This chamber is notable for including public galleries, the first known example of such a feature being included in a chamber for elected officials in the English-speaking world.^[5]

The interior was rebuilt in 1748, after a fire in 1747 (the brick walls of the 1712–13 building survived the fire).^[6]

In 1761, James Otis argued against the Writs of Assistance in the Royal Council Chamber. Though he lost the case, Otis influenced public opinion in a way that contributed to the American Revolution; John Adams later wrote of that speech, "Then and there... the child independence was born."^[7]

On March 5, 1770, The Boston Massacre occurred in front of the building on Devonshire Street. Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson stood on the building's balcony to speak to the people, ordering the crowd to return to their homes.^[8]

The Massachusetts State House: seat of state government 1776–1798

On July 18, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed from the east side balcony to jubilant crowds by Col. Thomas Crafts (one of the Sons of Liberty). At one o'clock Col. Crafts rose in the Council Chamber and read it to the members.^[9] Then, fellow patriot Sheriff William Greenleaf attempted to read it from the balcony, but he could only muster a whisper. Col. Crafts then stood next to the sheriff and read it



This engraving by Paul Revere, portraying the Boston Massacre with a patriot's bias, shows the Old State House sitting prominently behind the action.

from the balcony in a stentorian tone. For most people, it was a festive occasion, as about two-thirds of Boston residents supported the revolution. The lion and the unicorn on top of the building were removed and burned in a bonfire in King street.^[10]

After the American Revolution, the building served as the seat of the Massachusetts state government before its move to the present Massachusetts State House in 1798.

Boston's City Hall 1830–1841

From 1830 to 1841, the building was Boston's city hall. Previously, the city's offices had been in the County Court House. In 1830, Isaiah Rogers altered the building's interior in a Greek Revival style, most

notably adding the spiral staircase that remains today. The building was damaged by fire in 1832.^[4]

During this period of time, City Hall shared the building with the Boston Post Office and several private businesses. On October 21, 1835, Mayor Theodore Lyman, Jr. gave temporary refuge to William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the abolitionist paper *The Liberator*, who was being chased by a violent mob. Garrison was kept safe in the Old State House until being driven to the Leverett Street Jail, where he was protected overnight but charged with inciting a riot.^[9] In 1841, City Hall moved to the former Suffolk County Courthouse, on School Street.^[11]

Period of commercial use 1841–1881

After Boston's city hall left, the whole building was rented out for commercial use. This had been the case once before, in the interim between the State House period and the City Hall period. Occupants included tailors, clothing merchants, insurance agents, railroad line offices, and more. As many as fifty businesses used the building at once.^[12]

The Bostonian Society and the museum 1881–present

In 1881, in response to plans for the possible demolition of the building due to real estate potential, The Bostonian Society was formed to preserve and steward the Old State House. In 1881–1882, restorations were conducted by George A. Clough.^[13] In 1882, replicas of the lion and unicorn statues were placed atop the East side of the building, after the originals that had been burned in 1776.^[14] On the West side, the building sports a statue of an eagle, in recognition of the Old State House's connection to American history.



The Old State House



The Old State House

Since 1904, the State Street MBTA station has occupied part of the building's basement. The East Boston Tunnel, which is now the Blue Line, opened in 1904, and the Washington Street Tunnel, a part of the Orange Line, opened in 1908.^[15] The Boston Marine Museum occupied rooms borrowed from the Bostonian Society, 1909–1947.^[16]



Old State House

On July 11, 1976, as part of her Boston visit to celebrate the bicentenary of the United States of America, Queen Elizabeth II toured the Old State House with her husband. She appeared on the historic balcony and delivered an address to a large audience. The Queen said, in part,^[17]

If Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, and other patriots could have known that one day a British monarch would stand on the balcony of the Old State House, from which the Declaration of Independence was first read to the people of Boston, and be greeted in such kind and generous words well, I think they would have been extremely surprised! But perhaps they would also have been pleased to know that eventually we came together again as free peoples and friends to defend together the very ideals for which the American Revolution was fought.

The museum today

Today, tall buildings of Boston's financial district surround the Old State House. However, they do not entirely block the view of the building, and it can be seen clearly from a good distance away on the harborfront. The Old State House sits atop the State Street station on the MBTA's Blue and Orange subway lines, and the station can be entered from the basement. The building is available to be rented for evening events. However, its main function is as a museum, which is open year round, seven days a week except for some holidays.

The next stop on Freedom Trail is the site of the Boston Massacre, which is marked by a cobblestone ring on the newly rebuilt plaza in front of the Old State House. The museum offers a multimedia presentation on the massacre and a guided tour that describes the massacre in its historical context.

Recent preservation and restoration and future plans

The Old State House frequently has preservation and restoration projects as a part of the ongoing effort to keep the building in good condition.

In 2006, the museum underwent a restoration to repair water-damaged masonry. The damage had long been a problem, but was aggravated in fall 2005 by Hurricane Wilma. The project was the subject of an episode of The History Channel's Save Our History.^[18]

In 2008, the museum's tower was given a major restoration. During the project, the building's 1713 weathervane, which may have been made by Shem Drowne, was re-gilded. The windows were repaired and resealed, the balustrades were repaired, and the copper roofing and rotten wood siding was replaced. This was done to prevent structural damage and to protect the museum's collections and the 1831 clock by Simon Willard below.^[19]

According to their website, the Bostonian Society is in the planning stages of several changes to increase accessibility to the museum. Historical buildings pose many challenges to accessibility for visitors who cannot use stairs, but the museum plans to use new technologies to solve this problem and add a ramp and wheelchair lift.^[18]

Images



The "Court House" in 1751



Engraving by Samuel Hill, published in the Massachusetts Magazine, 1793



State Street, 1801, by J. Marston



Advertisement for Clothing Warehouse in the Old State House, 1849



State Street, 1851



Old State House, c. 1898 photo.



Old State House, 19th century



Old State House, 19th century



State Street, 1904



The tower a year prior to restoration, c. 2007



The Old State House's spiral staircase



East Front showing the balcony from which the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence in Boston took place. Note the lion and unicorn on the roof of the building, the same used in the Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom, a reminder of the building's past



Devonshire Street entrance to State subway station



Old State House in January 2011



Old State House in August, 2011

See also

- List of National Historic Landmarks in Boston

- National Register of Historic Places listings in northern Boston, Massachusetts

References

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11. Old City Hall, Boston, Massachusetts. <http://www.oldcityhall.com/history.html>
12. Hillary Hopkins. *Boston's Historic Places — So What? An interactive guide for the thoughtful walker*.
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14. Official National Park Handbook 146. *Boston and the American Revolution*.
15. Celebrate Boston website. <http://www.celebrateboston.com/mbta/orange-line/elevated-division.htm>
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17. Associated Press (12 July 1976). "Queen Elizabeth Ends U.S. Visit". *The Times Recorder*. Retrieved 24 July 2012.
18. The Bostonian Society: Preservation projects (<http://www.bostonhistory.org/?s=os&p=preservation&sub=priorities>) Retrieved 7 September 2013
19. Old State House Tower Restoration Project <http://oldstatehousetower.blogspot.com/>

External links

- Boston Historical Society - Old State House (<http://bostonhistory.org/>)
- Boston National Historical Park Official Website (<http://www.nps.gov/bost/>)
- Freedom Trail Foundation (<http://www.thefreedomtrail.org>) (Official website of the Freedom Trail)



Wikimedia Commons has media related to ***Old State House***.

Preceded by Old South Meeting House	Locations along Boston's Freedom Trail Old State House	Succeeded by Site of the Boston Massacre
Preceded by unknown	Tallest Building in Boston 1713–1745 105 feet (32 m)	Succeeded by Old North Church

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