

FROM SKETCH TO SKYLINE

BY GEOFFREY BIRD
CITY ENGINEER
1950 - 1963



CITY HALL

HAMILTON

BERMUDA

ONIONS & BOUCHARD
BAYFIELD CLARK
WM. HARRINGTON
HAMILTON

ARCHITECT
LANDSCAPE ARCHT.
DESIGN CONSULTANT
BERMUDA

Scale
 $\frac{1}{8}'' = 1'-0''$

Date
OCT 26/57

SOUTH ELEVATION

Sheet

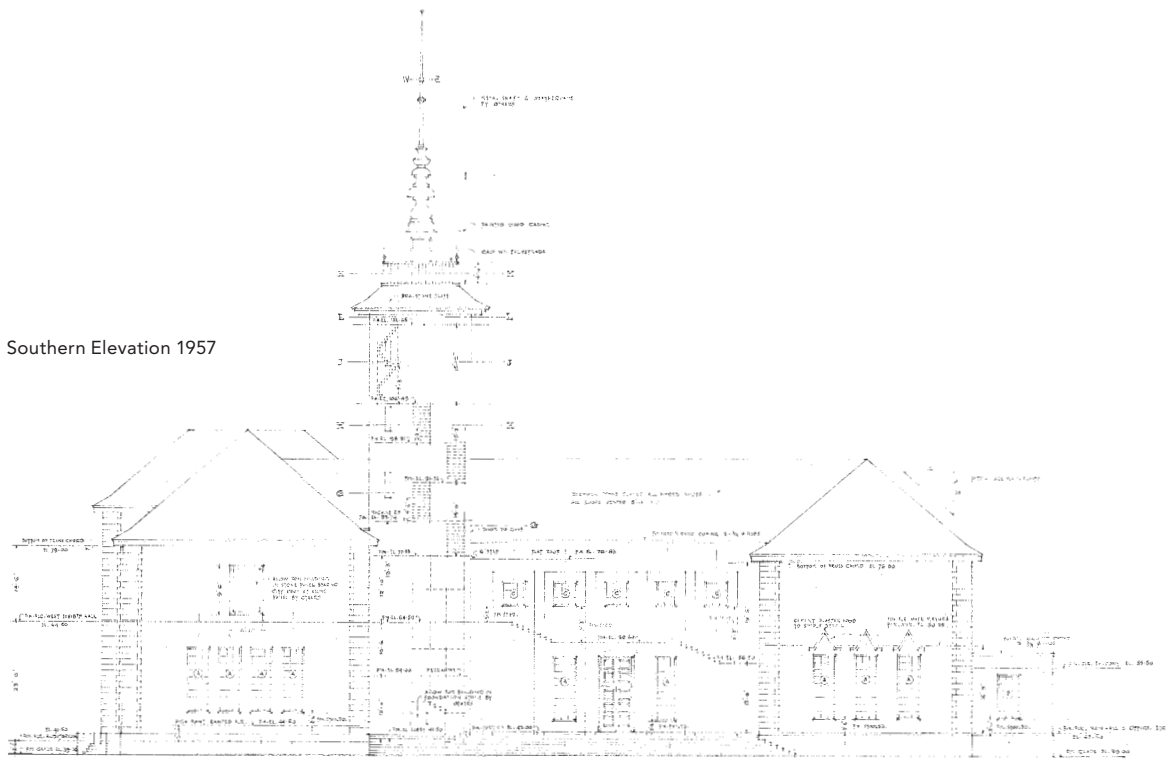


CONTRACTOR TO CHECK ALL DIMENSIONS ON JOB






Southern Elevation 1957



Since 1960 our beloved City Hall has been a major landmark in the City of Hamilton, housing the Corporation's accounting and executive offices, two art galleries and a theatre. 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the official opening of City Hall and I hope residents and visitors alike will participate in the celebrations and visit the various exhibitions that will be on display throughout the year in the City Hall foyer.

Thanks to everyone who has worked on this year long event in particular to my predecessor, Mayor Sutherland Madeiros, for taking the initiative to begin this project, to ensure the history of the construction of City Hall was documented for future generations. I extend my thanks also to Mr. Geoffrey Bird for taking the time to thoroughly research the construction and share his memories of his time as City Engineer to the Corporation of Hamilton.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles R. Gosling". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first letter "C" being particularly large and prominent.

Charles R. Gosling
Mayor

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF CITY HALL





PREFACE

Late October 1958

At the end of the 18th Century, with the capital still in St. George's, it was realized that a change would have to be made by moving the capital to a more central position in Bermuda. This would facilitate Government, commerce and administration to be equidistant from the far ends of the island.

Various sites were considered for this purpose, including Ely's Harbour, Port Royal, Salt Kettle and Tucker's Town, but the one which carried most favour was the north side of Crow Lane Harbour in Pembroke Parish which finally won out and is the location that you see today.

The township elected a Mayor and Corporation who for years met in the upper floor of the building at the corner of Court and Front Streets and in other suitable locations.

Immediately prior to the construction of the new City Hall, the City fathers and its administration met in what is now the Bermuda Chamber of Commerce adjacent to the Bank of Bermuda and the ferry terminal.



Mayor Roddie Williams with City Hall Model



June 25th 1958

THE BUILDING OF CITY HALL



November 13th 1958



April 10th 1959

In 1933, upon her death, Catherine Browne Tucker left the sum of £43,000 (\$120,400) in memory of her father, Mr. George Somers Tucker, to be used towards the construction of a new City Hall in Hamilton, Bermuda.

This money sat in the bank for many years, at interest, as the Tucker Trust Fund. At the time of the bequest the Corporation did not feel inclined to construct a sufficient building for the City's purposes. These monies were eventually liquidated in 1956 in the amount of £56,600 (\$158,480) and placed into the

New City Hall Fund. Further monies were added to the New City Hall Fund in 1958, totaling £100,000.

During the term of Mr. E.R. Williams as Mayor, the Hamilton Hotel caught fire and burned to the ground on 23rd December 1955. This fire gave the spark to the Corporation to consider constructing a new City Hall as the site was now devoid of all buildings. Many other sites around the City had been previously suggested as possible homes for the new City Hall such as the dock area by No. 7 Car Park and Par-la-Ville Park.

As a preliminary, the Corporation decided to excavate the site down to the level of Church Street along the frontage as Nellie's Walk was some 20 feet higher than the Church Street level. Nellie's Walk was named for Ms. Helen Rees. She was a long-time City resident whose family owned the property where Gibbons Co. now stands. When the women property owners finally gained the right to vote, Miss Rees actually ran for the office of Common Councillor in 1945 but received the least amount of votes being 31, 7 of which were cast by the 7 eligible women on the register. "Nellie" was also seen

about town doing her tree-planting in a trap pulled by her pony "Merrylegs". She is recognized for her great deal of unpublicized work around the streets of Hamilton.

The Salisbury Construction Company was awarded the contract for the leveling of the site, which included moving some 30,000 cubic yards of sand and rock in the area bounded by Church Street, Washington Street and Victoria Street.

The western end of the lot belonged to the Government and contained the Police Barracks and Dog Kennels in a building on the corner of Victoria and Wesley Streets. The Corporation endeavoured to negotiate with the Government to acquire or use this land but was not successful and so the new City Hall had to be built on the balance of the land to the east of the Government owned section which is now a car park.

On August 14th, 1957, the Corporation, having made a decision to start the ball rolling, appointed Onions & Bouchard, in particular, Wil Onions, a McGill University graduate, to prepare sketch plans for the New City Hall. Mr. Onions was an accomplished architect who had been



Wil Onions

practicing in Bermuda for many years but mostly on residential projects and his experience of large buildings was limited. The Corporation, therefore, asked Mr. William Harrington to be appointed as interior decorator and design consultant to work with Mr. Onions. Mr. Harrington was originally brought to Bermuda to provide design and interior decoration for the restoration and rehabilitation of the Hamilton Princess Hotel in 1948. I was in charge of the project and soon became aware of his design ability and extraordinary speed as a draftsman. He remained in Bermuda for many years as the chief designer for the Elbow Beach group and other entities. His and Wil's pairing on the New City Hall was a very happy and beneficial association.

The theatre section was widely discussed at Corporation meetings, the strong protagonist being Gilbert Cooper who was very interested in theatricals and considered the lack of even a small up-to-date theatre in Bermuda to be an artistic vacuum. The architects were therefore constrained to only use the major eastern section of the site as they would have preferred the tower be centred on Queen Street so that it could be seen all the way from Front Street looking up the Queen Street hill.



August 12th 1959

The first sketch plans showed a slender tower which, when it came to Mr. Harrington making the model, looked – in Mr. Onions words – like a chimney stack. Mr. Harrington, therefore while modeling, increased the size of the tower to twenty feet which was a better proportion than the earlier scheme.

I was the City Engineer at the time and sat in on all meetings in which the details of the buildings and the design were examined and resolved. Later, I was in charge of the supervision of the construction in conjunction with the architects. With the construction of the model and finalization of the sketch drawings, estimates were produced which showed that the cost of the new City Hall would probably be in the region of £200,000 (\$560,000). The building was to contain a large entrance hall, the municipal offices, two art galleries, a theatre as well as ancillary areas. The Corporation deliberated at length before instructing the architects to proceed with the final plans and working drawings and to place the works out to tender. This was done in a letter signed by the Right Worshipful Roddie Williams, the Mayor of Hamilton.

The working drawings were mostly prepared by Mr. Sam Hardy who was a senior employee of Onions & Bouchard. Mr. Harrington and Mr. Onions decided on what the tower should showcase. It was felt that there were clocks on both the Telephone Company and the Sessions House; something different was called for of a Bermudian nature. Inasmuch as early Bermuda's lifeblood was due to the use of sailing vessels, it was thought that a wind clock on the tower face, operated by a model ship at a higher level, would be a very fitting addition to the external appearance of the building. Armed with large sketch drawings prepared by Bill Harrington, I therefore, whilst in London, found a firm of architectural metal workers, Messrs Starkie Gardner, who were ready and willing to make the necessary equipment at a cost of £7,830 (\$21,924). A bronze shaft went from the top of the cupola down into the next floor level and as the ship, a replica of the Sea Venture, rotated with the wind an electrical unit repeated its direction on the coloured tiled vertical face of the compass rose on the south side of the tower. The cupola was constructed in wood and covered in copper sheeting by a technical instructor from the Bermuda Technical College.

The Corporation finally approved all the drawings and instructed the architects to place the works out to tender to the following firms: - G.H. Burland & Co., Post Andrews Ltd., Salisbury Construction Company Ltd. and W.J. Richold & Son. The tenders were opened and the lowest bid, in the sum of £180,000 (\$504,000) was received from Post Andrews Ltd. They were awarded the contract which was to start in February 1958 and be completed in 21 months.

The construction of the building was fairly conservative – Bermuda stone from the quarries of Joel Benevides being used. The roof was made of pitch pine trusses and was a traditional Bermuda stone roof.

All the steps and paving to the main hall were of reconstituted York stone imported from England. The City Fathers were extremely supportive towards the project. They had held meetings in the upper level of the Visitor Service Bureau, where the Municipal offices were also situated, and whilst that building was very pleasant to work from, it did not really have any degree of municipal appearance.

The contract got underway and shortly thereafter Post Andrews amalgamated with the British firm of Kirk & Kirk who were very experienced in all aspects of building construction. They sent Mr. Leslie Barrett to be the Superintendent on their behalf for the duration of the contract and his able and professional assistance undoubtedly contributed in no small way to the satisfactory completion of the building contract. Kirk & Kirk imported to Bermuda the very first tower crane which was erected in the North central well of the City Hall wings and which considerably accelerated the speed with which the building materials could be delivered to a high level.

Difficulties were experienced in the delivery of sufficient Bermuda stone for the walling and later on, sufficient Bermuda slate for the roofing. Although exhausting the local supply of these two items, the construction proceeded and was well underway by the middle of 1958. Another problem at this time was that the contractors working on the U.S. military bases were paying higher wage rates than the local contractors and this problem was dealt with at the Government level so that local building contracts were not hurt by the lack of sufficient labour. It is interesting to note that at the time wage rates in the construction industry varied from 9/6d (\$1.33)



per hour for supervisory staff down to 6/6d (\$0.91) per hour for building labourers.

In the 1950's the Corporation applied to the college of Arms for a Grant of Arms for the City of Hamilton. Prior to that the Corporation had a seal and a Latin motto - "Sparsa Collegit". The motto has been variously translated but my own opinion is that "It gathers the scattered" is the best version; the formation of the City centralizing the persons and businesses of the then Colonial settlers. A suggested coat of arms was sent to the Corporation by the College but as it portrayed a plantation feeling, which was never part of the Bermuda culture, the Corporation asked Mr. Harrington to prepare a more suitable design and armed with his sketch, I personally visited the College of Arms in London. The final design was agreed to and consists of: the shield, being the Sea Venture surrounded by three Cinquefoils; the crest which depicts a sea horse holding a sprig of Bermudiana; and the supporters being a buxom blonde mermaid holding a mirror on one side and another sea horse on the other. During the construction of City Hall, a British firm made a casting of the Coat of Arms, as seen today on the South-facing exterior wall.



April 18th 1958

A short time after the construction commenced and when it was evident as to how the building would fill the site, Mayor Williams met with me at the theatre and introduced me to Sir Malcolm Sargeant who was the conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Sir Malcolm was pleased to see that a theatre was being built in Bermuda particularly as much attention had been given to the acoustics but he expressed his distress that no orchestra pit had been included in the design. Although performers could use the stage for orchestral or dramatic work, the layout, as planned, precluded the production of musical shows when the orchestra was not on stage. It was therefore decided to redesign the area and include an orchestra pit, which is quite usual in many theatres, and it would be located directly in front and below the level of the stage. At a later date the proscenium arch was widened to allow more performers to use the stage as was required in Gilbert & Sullivan pantomimes and other musical performances.

Most of the landscaping design work was put into the hands of Mr. Bayfield Clark. It was originally proposed that the pool in front of City Hall should be a reflecting pool. This

was later changed as it was felt that unless the water was completely still, the reflection could not be obtained with the average winds in Bermuda being high enough to cause wave action and ripple the surface of the water. The design was therefore changed into a series of fountains surrounded by a lily pool. Mr and Mrs. Edmund Gibbons and family donated the cost of the fountains and accessories for the lily pool. There being no source of water lilies in Bermuda, they were all imported from the United States and propagated and cultivated by Mr. Roy Thomas and later by Mr. George Ogden,



April 29th 1959

The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh paid a visit to Bermuda in April 1959. At that time the new City Hall was half completed. The Duke's tour of the City included a visit to City Hall to view the model of the new building.

left to right:

Geoffrey Bird, Duke of Edinburgh,
Mayor Roy Selley, Corporation Secretary
Herman Leseur and Governor Sir John Woodall.



the City horticulturists at the time. Every year when the fountains and pool were cleaned many children happily came with their jam jars to collect some of the goldfish that bred profusely in the pool waters. It was decided in the 1990's to eliminate the water lilies and goldfish as a build-up of algae affected the functioning of the fountains and the prohibitive costs of keeping the waters clean for the fish were proving to be very expensive. Today the pond is full of chlorinated water to keep it crystal clear and free of algae.

Construction continued into 1959 which proved to be a tragic year for many of those involved in the City Hall construction. On April 2, whilst sailing his beloved yacht, "Undine", in Hamilton Harbour, Mayor Roddie Williams suffered a heart attack. At only sixty years old, his passing was a great shock not only to his family but to all those who had worked with him for many years at the Corporation of Hamilton. His energy and foresight contributed in no small degree to the City Hall project. Further tragedy ensued on July 2nd, 1959, when, at the age of only fifty, chief architect Wil Onions died. He would never see his finished vision; that of City Hall. Upon the death of Mayor Williams, Chesley White assumed the post but, he,



too, would die that same year of pneumonia on October 21st at the age of seventy-one. He had been an Alderman for many years and donated the scallop-shell clock that still adorns the City Hall foyer.

With the passing of Mr. White, the next senior Alderman, Mr. Roy Selley became Mayor and held the position for four years. I well recall his great interest in the parks and street planting of the City. He had great knowledge of horticulture and many of the magnificent trees that we see in Hamilton today are attributed to his term in office – a legacy indeed.

Mention must be made, when considering the new City Hall, of the stalwart work and support received from Mr. Herman Leseur, the able Secretary of the Corporation of Hamilton. Throughout the project he gave immeasurable help and advice with regard to many problems and his effectual involvement undoubtedly made the process of the City Hall construction much easier for those involved.

Work on the building proceeded fairly well and in the middle of 1959, the time came for Mr. Bill Harrington to carry out the



Mayor's Parlour, circa 1960

designs for his interiors. Cedar balustrades were designed for the main staircase and the main foyer was lit by two impressive chandeliers, designed by Mr. Harrington and crafted out of Canadian pine by local carpenter, Mr. George Trott of the North Shore Village Craft Shop. The chandeliers weigh almost half a ton in total and are operated on a pulley system. Mr. Harrington produced detailed sketches of his vision for the Mayor's Parlour, complete with furniture. This municipal room is little changed over the last fifty years with some of the original gifts still in place.

By the end of 1959, the new City Hall was virtually complete at a total cost only slightly above the original estimate of £250,000. The opening ceremony of the new City Hall took place on February 11th, 1960 with all City taxpayers being invited to a reception. Governor Major General Sir Julian Gascoigne was on hand to officially open the building. A minor incident involving a child slipping through the cedar balustrades of the upper walkway, fortunately with no injury, was the only event to mar the day. It was not long thereafter that bronze rods were installed between each balustrade to prevent any such injury occurring in the future.

The completion of City Hall did not end the problems that were initially encountered in the building. The structure is the largest one in Bermuda to have been built with a Bermuda slate roof which in itself is very heavy. Sometime after the opening, cracks were noticed in parts of the roof and water came through into the main hall. A thorough examination of the roof structure and assessment by the engineers showed that some of the fastenings between wooden members in the roof were insufficient and that the main trusses needed bracing to prevent a spread over the wall plate. This repair work was carried out by the contractor who, on leaving the Colony, handed over the making good of any defects in the building to Messrs. Burland Conyers & Marirea. The insufficiencies were only finalized in February 1962; some two years after the opening of the building and Messrs. Post Andrews (Kirk & Kirk) were paid off by a final certificate.

In retrospect, the contract presented great difficulties because of the arrangement between the British and local contractors. The contract was originally bid by Messrs. Post Andrews and undoubtedly was not very accurate. I recall



Official Opening
Governor Sir Julian Gascoigne
February 11th 1960

seeing the original estimate prepared on five foolscap sheets of paper – this for a very complex building which would have given costing problems to any estimators. Messrs. Kirk & Kirk bought a controlling interest in Post Andrews very shortly after the start of the contract and then themselves became liable for the building's completion. Needless to say, the cost of the building contract ran far in excess of the agreed sum which led to a difficult relationship between the architects and the Corporation of Hamilton on the one hand and the contractors on the other.

In spite of the remonstrance of Messrs. Kirk & Kirk and their use of various methods – not always ethical – to obtain additional payment, the Corporation stood fast to the contract and its provisions so that in the end the contractors lost an estimated £50,000, almost 25% of the value of the contract. Fortunately, they were a substantial British company and much of this was undoubtedly recovered as tax deductible in the U.K.

The City Hall that locals and tourists know today is much unchanged from the one unveiled in 1960. In 1991 an elevator



was installed in the northeast corner of the foyer with access to the Bermuda National Gallery. A second elevator to the Bermuda Society of Arts was installed in 2000.

In 2002 a portico addition was built on the western façade of the building to allow easy exit for patrons of the theatre. Various changes have been made to both art galleries to allow for additional show space. Both galleries are thriving organizations and have been a tremendous asset to the cultural ambience of the City Hall, allowing it to become the enabling factor for the successful centralization of the cultural and artistic activities of Bermuda.

This story cannot be concluded without a tribute to the work carried out by members of the Bermuda Musical and Dramatic Society in connection with the mounting of productions and the complete revamping of the theatre lighting system. In particular, Bruce Hallett, Philip McIntosh and the late Alan Bainbridge all carried out the installation in their spare time along with their many helpers. The whole of the lighting



controls were removed from the flanking walls of the stage to the new control room that currently sits below the ceiling at the south end of the theatre. The grand piano used for many performances is also a provision of the Society.

I feel privileged to have been a part of the building of the new City Hall. From sketch to skyline, she was a building before her time in Bermuda, especially in 1960. I would like to dedicate this memory to all those laborers, engineers, designers, architects, contractors and Members of the Corporation who, together, put 17 Church Street on the map.

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF CITY HALL



January 1958

BIOGRAPHY

Geoffrey Bird came to Bermuda from England in 1948 to assist with the restoration and refurbishment of the Hamilton Princess Hotel. He became the Corporation of Hamilton's first City Engineer in 1950 until his retirement in 1963 when he went into private practice as one of the founding partners of Woodbourne Associates. He served in the Royal Navy as a pilot from 1940-1946. He built Bermuda's first Condominium complex at Roxdene on Pitt's Bay Road and went on to build Manor House, Mizzentop, Mount Wyndham and many others. He is co-founder of the Marion to-Bermuda Race, a Trustee of the Bermuda Maritime Museum and was the Chairman of the Bermuda National Trust Property Committee for five years. The Birdcage on Front Street was designed by and named for him.



SOURCES

‘Biography of a Colonial Town, Hamilton, Bermuda: 1790-1897’

By Sister Jean de Chantal Kennedy

“Hamilton, Bermuda, City and Capital, 1897-1997”

By Colin H. Benbow and Marian S. Robb

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