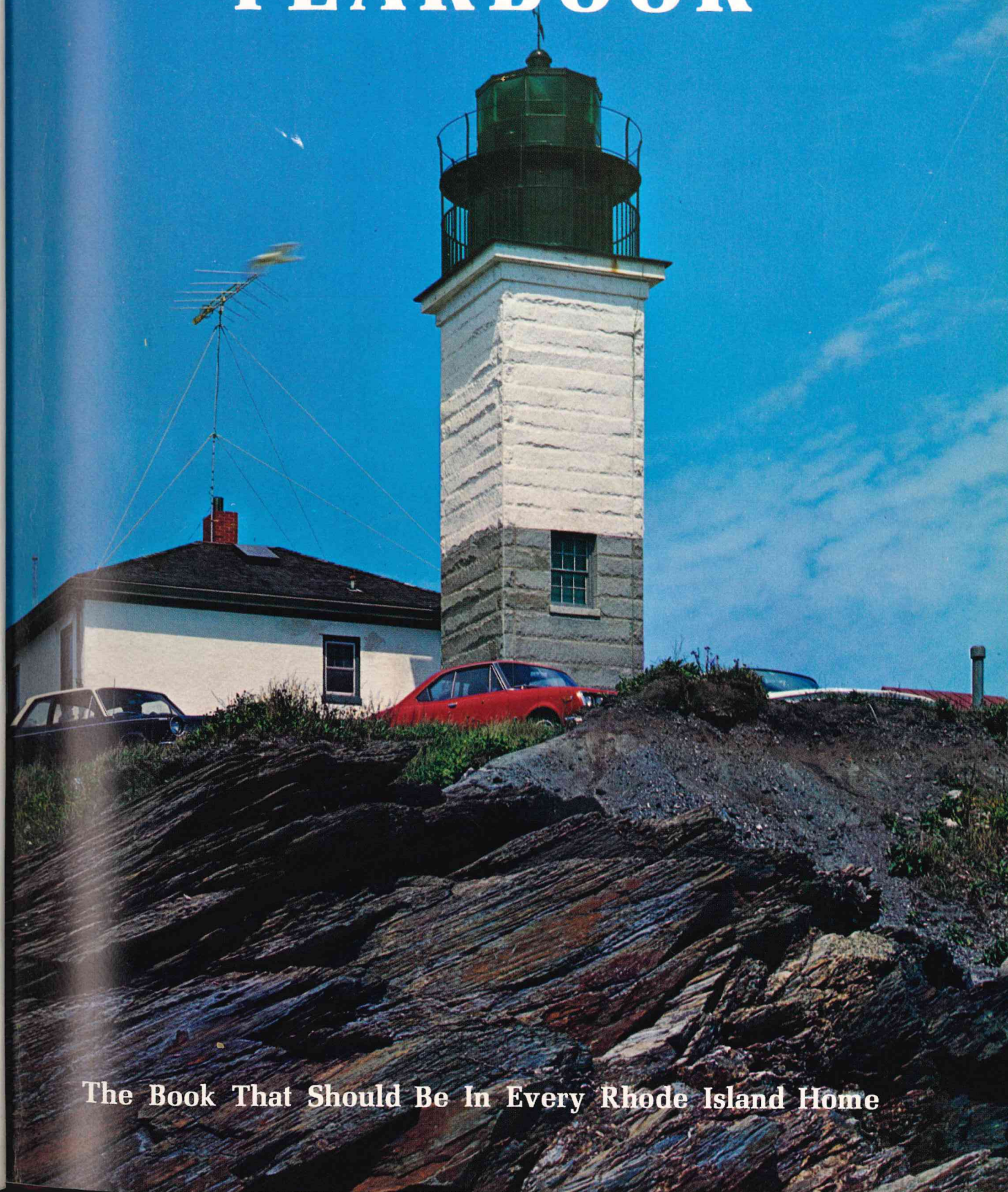


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# The United States Customs House, Providence

BY HELEN FARRELL ALLEN

THE U.S. and Treasury flags enliven the street scene at 24 Weybosset, flying from the mast of the Customs House for the Port of Providence. This distinguished building is diagonally across from our famous Arcade Building. Fortunately, architecture buffs are welcomed by the Collector, Alfred C. Dumouchel, and his staff. In May, 1970, a special tour was arranged for Historical American Buildings Survey officials, with an exhibit of Customs artifacts and the architect's drawings, owned by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Ammi Burnham Young, supervising architect for the U.S. Treasury Department (1852-1862), designed this Italian Renaissance style building. Talbot Hamlin, the outstanding historian of 19th century American architecture, calls Young "one of the many brilliant architects whose careers cry out for more careful research."\* I am indebted to two enthusiastic Young admirers in the Library of Congress and the General Service Administration for this article.

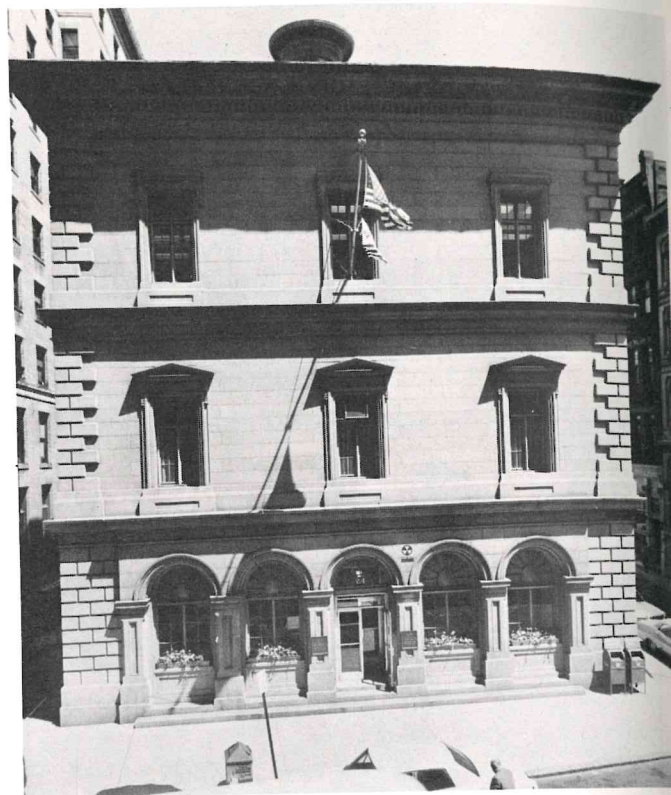
An arcade of five arches graces the street floor of the three-story building. Three deeply-set pedimented windows, offset by supporting leaf sculpture are above and, completing the Italian villa facade, three more simply framed windows pierce the third-story area. Handsome cornices articulate each floor, and the bold roof cornice casts a deep shadow on the facade, reminiscent of Florentine street rhythms. Bold rustication sets off the corners. Hamlin typified Young's buildings by their "simple and powerful composition . . . set off by restrained and carefully studied detail."

In 1856 the Customs House stood on Long Wharf, and its dome (visible today only from the "water" side) was a lookout. Some experts question its origin, attributing it to Thomas Tefft, the famous Providence architect of Union Station and the Bradley Mansion at Providence College, who died abroad in 1859.

Upon opening, Young's building housed the Post Office and Federal District Court as well as Customs. The street level Post Office has been completely broken up for offices. The second floor, originally Customs, fell to the same fate.

On the third floor, the scale and grace of Young's design is less impaired. Here is the U.S. Court Room, its apse dominated by a looming golden eagle, 48 inches

\**Greek Revival Architecture in America*, Peter Smith Publishing Co., 1944. Despite its 1944 date, this is still the most respected study of this type of architecture. It has gone into numerous printings, including paperback.



from head to tail. It was carved in 1842, and, as late as 1911, specifications called for twenty-three carat gold leaf gilding. The eagle's perch is a white scroll — the Constitution.

Below the eagle sat the judge. Although painted over, the wall paneling and two corner niches remain. But the ceiling, drastically lowered during renovation directed from Washington, not only increases the room temperature, but also destroys its scale. One would wish for less standardization in General Services Administration building programs.

Access to the dome that originally illuminated the Court Room is limited. Sixteen cast iron Doric columns (mates to columns in the basement of the Providence Athenaeum) support it. The lantern is gained by climbing a long, exposed, and rudimentary wooden ladder. On the platform, one is rewarded with frosted glass, another innovation of the G.S.A. specifications.

Cast iron columns and wrought iron beams were the great new fireproof construction units of the 1850s. Young's use of these, and of decorative metal detail, "with great imagination, delicacy, and a true sense of the material" (Hamlin) is evident in the broad and elabo-





*Golden Eagle in U.S. Courtroom*

rate staircase of our Customs House, its iron shutters on the third floor, and occasional iron doors. Like the beautiful plaster cornices, cast iron Corinthian column capitals are obscured by the remodeling of 1966.

Boston's Customs House of 1850, a Greek Revival building whose dome was replaced by the present central tower, was Young's major work. Three Dartmouth College buildings and Vermont's capitol preceded it. The nationwide fame of the Boston building led to his Washington appointment. Five portfolio-size bound volumes in the Library of Congress contain his published designs, widely circulated by the government as examples to the American architectural profession. Young saw seventy of his Federal designs built, one of them the Customs House in Bristol, now owned by the Y.M.C.A. Despite geographic and functional disparity, Young's buildings all combine excellent construction with graceful eclecticism. Hamlin, again, credits him with contributing a "solid basis of classic tradition to Federal building."

Young's Federal Building was abandoned in 1908; it was proposed for auction in 1912, but in 1921 it was returned to Customs authority. What good fortune for Providence that this building with its "proud, stocky little tower," as it was dubbed in a Chamber of Commerce magazine of 1934, still stands on Weybosset Street, a beautiful, and a working building.

*Dome and "Watch Tower" on roof of Customs House*

