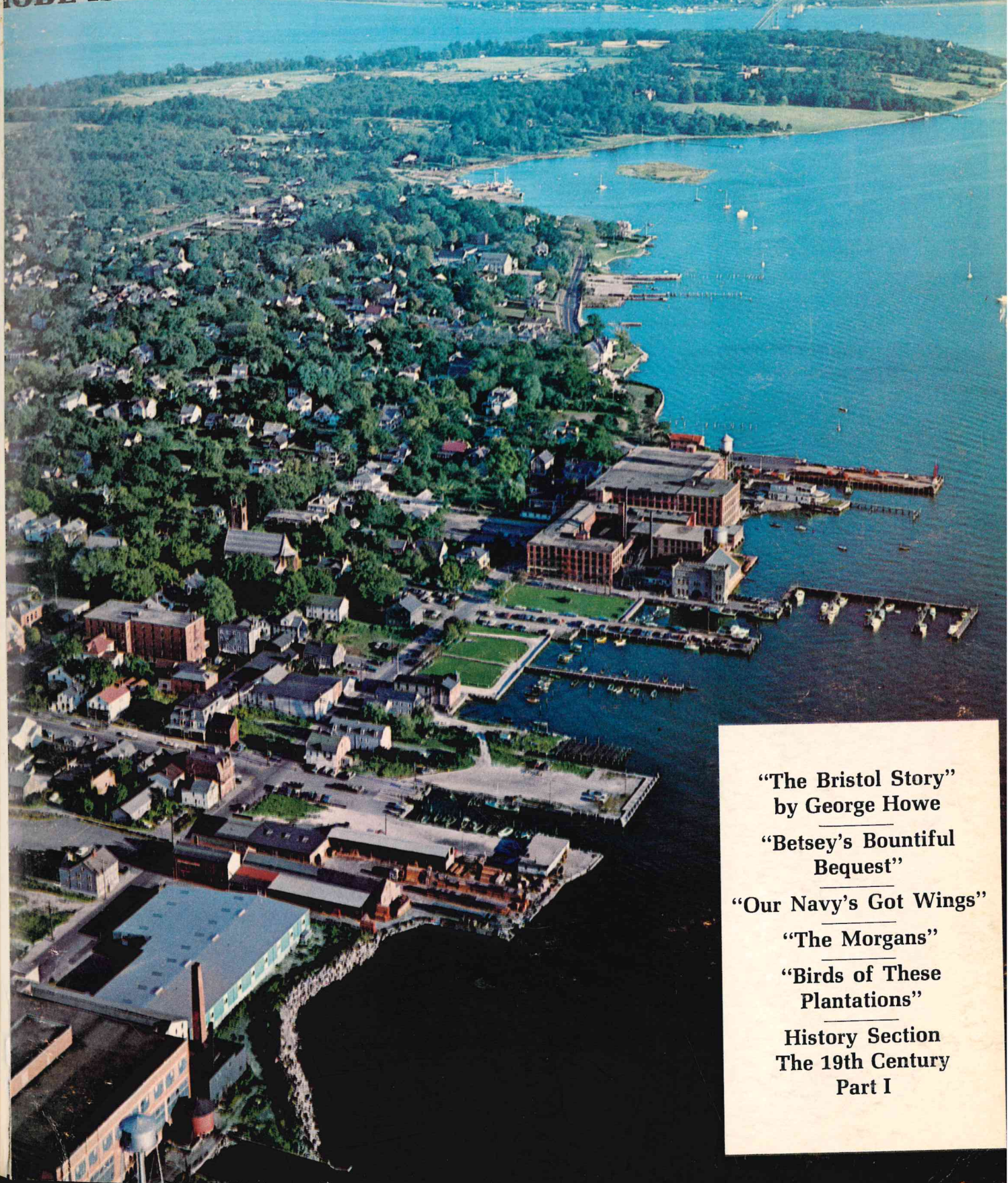


YEARBOOK

RODE ISLAND, BIRTHPLACE OF TEXTILES AND HAVEN OF HOPE



"The Bristol Story"
by George Howe

**"Betsey's Bountiful
Bequest"**

"Our Navy's Got Wings"

"The Morgans"

**"Birds of These
Plantations"**

**History Section
The 19th Century
Part I**



Illustration by Garvin Morris

THE MARBLE PALACE

THE STORY OF THE RHODE ISLAND STATE HOUSE
BY DAVID A. DUFFY

OF things historic, probably nothing is taken so much for granted by Rhode Islanders as their own State House.

True, most of us can vaguely remember that there is something unusual about its dome. Some quick and easy research of our schoolday memory will tell us that it was the first marble dome in the United States and is one of but four in the entire world, the others being the Taj Mahal at Agra, India, St. Peter's in Rome and the Minnesota capitol at St. Paul.

But there is more to Rhode Island's capitol than its dome. In fact, the State House has been called and is one of the world's great buildings.

Standing atop "Smith's Hill," its 327,000 cubic feet of white Georgia marble proved to be an awesome sight that could be seen for many miles causing Rhode Islanders at the turn of the century to refer to it as "The Marble Palace." Greatly impressed with the structure, G. H. Edgell, former dean of the faculty of architecture at Harvard University, has commented: "For a civic building, America demands not only power but restraint. The Rhode Island State House embodies both."

Rhode Islanders had a good excuse to be exuberant about their State House when the General Assembly first convened there on January 1, 1901 for it was long and sometimes confusing in coming.

As a matter of fact, Rhode Islanders at one time had to put up with five capitals at once: Providence, Newport, Bristol, East Greenwich and Kingston. However, in 1884, the General Assembly stopped traveling to the

people and the number was dropped to two, Providence and Newport. This all ended on November 6, 1900 when a Constitutional Amendment was passed making Providence the official capital, at last reflecting the shift to political power, economic strength and population to the northern areas of the state.

The first State House in Rhode Island—then, of course, known as a "Colony House"—was constructed on what is now the northerly end of Washington Square, Newport. This building, thought to be the second oldest capitol building in the United States, is now acclaimed as a National Landmark and an outstanding example of Colonial architecture.

The first such building in Providence was called "County House" and served as a meeting hall for the town as well as for the Colony. Originally on the present site of the Providence Preservation Society on Meeting Street, the structure measured but 40 × 30 feet. It was built in 1731 and served government purposes for 27 years, being leveled by fire in 1758.

A new building was completed at a cost of about \$8,750 in 1762 on Benefit Street and this, now the home of Sixth District Court, was utilized as the State House until the General Assembly moved up to Smith's Hill, formerly known as Jefferson Plains.

Sorely needed for many years, it took Rhode Islanders quite awhile to get around to building a realistic State House. It is not clear when the first move was made although in 1850 a commission considered a new capitol but nothing came of it. Republican Governor Seth Pad-

dleford seems to have planted the seed for the project during his Inaugural Address in 1870 when he called the attention of the General Assembly to the "want of proper accommodations" in the State House on Benefit Street.

"The present State House," Governor Paddleford told the Assembly, "was erected more than 100 years ago when Rhode Island was one of the smallest, and I may add, least populated of any of the then British Colonies on the American Continent. With its greatly extended interests, its industry, its wealth, and its increasing populations, the present building is quite inadequate to its wants. When it was erected, Providence was but a village with a population of 3,200 and the entire colony with but 40,000.

"The village has increased twenty-fold and become the second city in New England; while the State has multiplied its population nearly five times. The lot on which this building stands, with the adjacent grounds, cost \$1,000. It does not seem extravagant, therefore, with so small an outlay for a lot and building of moderate cost which has answered for the General Assembly, for the courts, and for the clerk's office for 110 years, in asserting that it is time for a more capacious edifice, and one, too, that shall have accommodations for all the State officers."

Nothing was accomplished concerning this project during Governor Paddleford's term in office but his plea was echoed almost annually thereafter by the state's governors in their messages to the General Assemblymen.

Civic groups also took up the hue and cry for a new capitol. Referring to the Benefit Street structure, the Public Park Association of Providence noted that "the state has stultified itself too long by occupying the present ancient, inadequate, inconvenient and insecure legislative building . . . with less architectural pretensions than a county court house."

Finally in May, 1891, a resolution was adopted by the General Assembly naming a commission to "obtain plans and receive proposals for sites" for a new capitol.

A Board of State House Commissioners was formed headed by Governor Herbert W. Ladd and E. K. Glezen, secretary. Original commissioners were General William Ames of Providence, Olney Arnold of Pawtucket, Albert L. Sayles of Burrillville, George P. Wetmore of Newport, Joshua Wilbur of Bristol, Enos Lapham of Warwick and Rowland Hazard of South Kingstown.

In 1893, five additional men were named commissioners. They were Francis L. O'Reilly of Woonsocket, John W. Davis of Pawtucket, Nathaniel B. Church of Tiverton, Russell Brown of Providence, and Ellery H. Wilson of East Providence. Webster Knight of Warwick

was named to the Commission on October 3, 1900 to succeed Olney Arnold who died.

The original commission reported back to the January, 1892, session on its work noting that it was aware of the importance of its task and that it had planned for a building that would be "plain and practical . . . solid, substantial, fireproof and worthy of the dignity of the State."

The commission had previously called for architects' drawings starting with a contest for Rhode Island architects. The local ideas were considered, the best three chosen and then these were permitted to enter into a contest that was open to all architects in the country. The competition closed January 14, 1892 and a board of consulting architects was called in to aid in the final decision.

The board was impressed. Noting that "the exceptional quality of the designs submitted excited the greatest admiration in the architectural world," the commission finally decided that the best plan had come from McKim, Mead & White of New York.

The commission's report was accepted by the General Assembly and in November, 1892, the ballot at the general election carried the referendum: "Shall the General Assembly be authorized and directed to provide for the issue of such an amount of State bonds as may be necessary for the purchasing of a site for, and the erection and completion of a new State House? Provided, however, that the whole amount of such bonds so issued shall not exceed the sum of \$1,500,000?"

20,977 Rhode Islanders voted in favor of the proposal and 12,205 against. Bonds were quickly issued.

In all there were four issues. One issue of \$300,000 was due January 1, 1904. An issue of \$400,000 had a due date of January 1, 1914. Another \$400,000 had \$5,000 due on January 1, 1915 and \$395,000 due on January 1, 1934.

The voters later approved another referendum which called for an issue of \$800,000 on July 15, 1898 with a due date of July 15, 1938. Then in 1901, a third loan amounting to \$700,000 was issued with the due date May 1, 1941.

The City of Providence donated 454,838 square feet of land next to a tract that the State had bought and ground was broken on September 16, 1895.

Contrary to popular belief, the State House was not the brainchild of world famous architect Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White. Rather it was his associate, Charles McKim who conceived the plans. Gustave E. Wolters was brought from New York City to supervise the construction and the general contractors were Norcross Brothers of Worcester, who also built



Color photos by Tilley

Boston's South Station.

Proponents for the new State House had much to cheer about on October 16, 1896 when Worshipful William H. Crawley, Grand Master of the Masons in Rhode Island, laid the cornerstone of the "Marble Palace."

The Board of State House Commissioners invited more than 3,000 persons for the ceremonies and more than that turned out despite bad weather. Commenting on this, the *Providence Journal* of the day noted that "evidently the drizzling rain—cold and penetrating—did not dampen the spirits of the sightseers" and "the grandstand population looked like a regiment of umbrellas."

The impressive ceremonies, which began at 11:45 a.m. with the invoking of the Divine Blessing by Rt. Rev. Thomas M. Clark, D.D., Bishop of Rhode Island, were preceded by a parade from the city of the First Light Infantry, numerous Masonic groups and many carriages containing state, city and town officials.

The speeches, highlighted by the "eloquent account" of Rowland Hazard, were "attentively listened to" for two hours. "Those who had guest tickets admitting them to the sanctum of the occasion were fortunate. They could see and hear everything that was going on, and were not obliged to crane their necks. The non-holders of guest tickets were not so fortunate. Owing to the location of the State House, perched as it is upon the summit of the hill, the crowds of sightseers could see but little of the ceremony and could hear even less."

Hazard told the gathering that we have met to lay

the cornerstone of the most costly and the most important public building ever planned to be erected in this state.

"The people of the state have ordered this building," he said. "The architects have given it shape and form. Between the people and the architects stands the commission; the mouthpiece of the people. While we greatly admire the generosity of the people and the genius of the architects, let us not fail to recognize the important work which this commission has performed. Five years have been consumed in acquiring the site, in studying plans, arranging details of use and occupancy, selecting materials and awarding contracts. The labor has been immense and without remuneration. The State House Commission well deserves the thanks of the people for the patience, perseverance and ability with which this labor has been performed."

In the box of the cornerstone was the record that Grover Cleveland was president, Charles Warren Lippitt was governor and Edwin D. McGuinness was Mayor of Providence. These were recorded on a large silver plate along with the names of Bishop Clark and Rev. Edward C. Moore, D.D., chaplains, and Rowland Hazard.

Also included were copies of the addresses of the day, a copy of the general laws of the state, copies of the *Providence Journal*, *Providence Telegram* and *Providence News*, a roster of the First Light Infantry, a Providence telephone directory, a list of Providence fire alarm boxes, photographs of the Governor and of the

Board of State House Commissioners, and a varied assortment of Masonic documents.

Following the ceremonies described by newspaper accounts as "a most successful observance of a significant event," most of the Masonic groups went to the Music Hall for dinner. There, Caterer Victor Gelb offered a menu including "small Blue Points on half shell, Consommé Semoule, Boiled Salmon, Sauce Colbert, Saratoga Chips, Fillet of Beef, larded, with mushrooms, and Coomesquis of Capon" among many other delicacies.

It was reported that "nearly two hours were spent around the banqueting boards, the various courses of tempting viands being interspersed with story telling, jokes, mirth and jollity."

Total building cost to the people of Rhode Island for the State House was \$3,018,416.33. This included the State House itself with power house and tunnel, \$2,402,809.32; furnishings and decorations, \$215,000; and grounds, \$400,607.01.

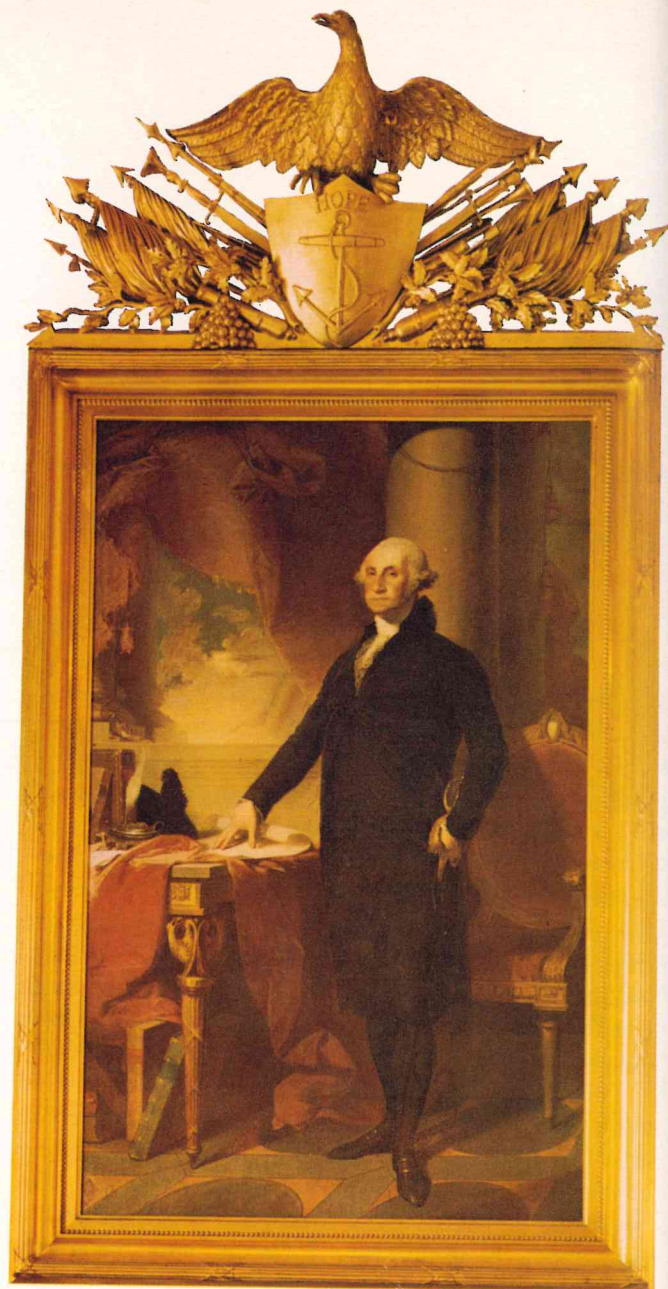
Typical of the fine furnishings in the new building were the tapestries adorning the walls of the House of Representatives. Described at the time as "the finest examples of modern tapestry," they were purchased for \$6,340 from Baumgartner & Co. of New York, importing French weavers.

Apparently the State had some money in 1929 so the General Assembly decided to reduce some of the State House debt and authorized two payments of \$100,000 each of January 1, 1930 and January 1, 1931 lowering the final bond payment scheduled for May 1, 1941 from \$700,000 to \$500,000.

As might be imagined, May 1, 1941, was another big day in the history of the State House as Governor J. Howard McGrath burned the \$500,000 worth of cancelled bonds in an urn, the last official reminder that Rhode Island once owed a debt of three million dollars for its Capitol. In colorful ceremonies, five young women, each representing a county of the state, passed a bundle of bonds to Governor McGrath who placed them in the urn. Providence firemen had started the blaze and the National Anthem was sung as the bonds disappeared in smoke.

The Secretary of State and his staff moved into the new building in December, 1900 to be the first occupants with the other State officers and the General Assembly moving in on January 1, 1901. The complete establishment—building, terrace, approaches and grounds—was turned over to the State by the architects and builders on June 11, 1904.

Opening day for the General Assembly proved to be another exciting event on Smith Hill. Newspaper accounts report that the House Chamber, for example,



The Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington one of Rhode Island's most precious possessions.

was "entirely devoid of a semblance of floral display, it having been rightly decided that the sumptuous nature of the fittings of the chamber was in itself sufficient without adding anything to the general effect of the color scheme, which has been so carefully followed in all the decorations throughout the building."

Col. Arthur V. Warfield, chief doorkeeper, had his hands full trying to control the large "opening day" crowd who visited the legislative chambers. There were even pointed injunctions at the State House entrances directing all to be sure to wipe their feet.

But, the *Providence Journal* reported, an hour after the legislative sessions had begun "the novel of the surroundings began to wear off. Cigar ashes fell on the red and green carpets in the beautiful retiring rooms and a

feeling that after all the whole thing was merely what should have been provided long ago succeeded the first somewhat terrifying impressions."

Over the years, the State has made several improvements to the building to further enhance its beauty. On the evening of November 11, 1931, Governor Norman S. Case threw a switch lighting 109 floodlights which illuminated the magnificent dome topped by its famous Independent Man, the 12-foot, spear-carrying symbol of the State's freedom and liberty.

The proper lighting of the dome posed a technical problem for it had to be so designed as to eliminate all shadows. Frederick A. Young was the electrical engineer who created such a design and who later, sometime in the '30s, became Public Utilities Commissioner of Rhode Island.

In April of 1955, Governor Dennis J. Roberts signed a bill appropriating \$100,000 to redecorate the chambers and lounges of the Senate and House, the first time since the State House opened its doors that the interior was refurbished. Late in 1965, \$247,722 was allocated to return the grey exterior of the structure back to its original white.

In addition to being the site of thousands of heated political battles, the State House has had several problems of its own. Muggy air coupled with what some observers called "muggy debate" forced the clearing of the House on May 9, 1939 and the Assembly quickly appropriated monies to investigate the building's ventilation system. Pigeons in the great dome posed problems in 1947 as the intruders flew about apparently taking serious note of the inscription on its interior: "Rara temporum felicitas ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet"—Teaitus: "Rare felicity of the time when it is permitted to think as you like and say what you think."

Even the sturdy Independent Man has had his problems. Since the State House exterior has been cleaned, its dome has taken on a definite tinge of green which has been traced to the aging of the bronze statue. Howard P. Brelsford, Chief of the State Division of Public buildings, has said that the stain is permanent and results from the elements washing down over the Independent Man which is undergoing a process called "patina" which involves oxidation of the bronze.

But these problems and others that might come along will never affect the overall beauty or meaning of the Rhode Island State House.

Much has been said and much will be said about this famous structure and its beginnings but probably no one will say it better than an unidentified newsman in 1912 who commented in the language of the day that: "So free from all suspicion of dishonesty was the con-

struction of Rhode Island's most magnificent building that throughout the United States, the work was commented upon and, at divers times since, has been pointed out as being worthy of the emulation of public servants in other states. The great structure, in itself a work of surpassing architectural beauty, brought forth unstinted praise as a model for the uses for which it has been designed, but even this universal admiration of its aesthetic and utilitarian features was no greater than the expressions of commendation of the work of the Commission in erecting a building that really became a monument to the honesty, trustworthiness and patriotic zeal of those who built it."

For state House statistics see Page 65.

The Governor's reception room

