

PUBLIC BUILDINGS—PART TWO  
RECORDING THE ARCHITECTURE OF  
LATE COLONIAL TIMES IN  
SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS  
BY M. S. FRANKLIN

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CUSTOM HOUSE—1819—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS  
*Measured drawings of porch, doorway, and Palladian window on pages 202-203.*

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## PUBLIC BUILDINGS OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

SALEM, the shire town of Essex County, Massachusetts, was first settled by a group under Roger Conant, who came on to Naumkeag (Salem) after a brief attempt to colonize upon the rocky shores of Cape Ann, under authority of the "Sheffield Patent" for settling the north shore of Massachusetts Bay. In September, 1628, another group of colonists, under Captain John Endecott, arrived bearing a new charter granted to the "Dorchester Company." And finally, Winthrop and his following, including Simon Bradstreet, arrived in June of 1630.

The first occupants of Salem became fishermen, while at Salem Village (now Danvers, the location of the "witchcraft delusion" of 1692) farming was also carried on. The outbreak of the Revolutionary war caused Salem, in 1776 a town of 5,337 inhabitants, to turn to privateering; and during the war the small community sent out a total of 158 vessels, manned by over 2000 men who brought back 445 prizes, more than half of those captured during the entire war! Thus was her maritime supremacy established, and the shipping was turned to commercial ventures at the end of the war, extending American commerce to new places and far distant seas; and bringing to the Salem of 1800 a population of 9,457 and the wealthiest merchant class of the New England coastal towns. After the embargo was placed upon American ports in 1808, our foreign commerce fell away, but in 1820 Salem had a population of 12,731; and it is within these years that the examples of architecture here selected for portrayal were all designed.

Derby Street, running along the margin of the Harbor, was in olden times the very center of the teeming maritime life of the community. Upon the one side were the old wharves, lined with shipping, extending out into the water; upon the other the houses, warehouses, and shops of the ship-owners. Nearby were the homes of their ship-captains and crews. Many a corner and wharfhead, too, had its tavern serving the grog and rum for which Salem was then almost as famous as Medford was later to become.

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To get an idea of the wide variety of the cargoes brought from all over the world to the Salem of those days, one must now go to the crowded cases and walls of the Peabody Marine Museum on Essex Street, where many of these rare and colorful objects have been preserved along with models of the old ships, contemporary pictures of them and their exploits, and some of their old figureheads as well.

It is on Derby Street, opposite the head of Derby Wharf, that the Custom House, built in 1819, stands—though since 1913 the Port has no longer its own Collector. The building previously used for the purpose was burned in the great fire of October 6, 1774, along with many valuable records of the office. Joseph Hiller was the first Collector under the Constitution, 1789-1801. Gen. James Miller, "the hero of Lundy's Lane," was Collector from 1825 to 1849, and lived in the fine brick house adjoining at the left, built in 1811 by Benjamin Crowninshield, who was Secretary of the Navy under both Madison and Monroe. It was from 1846-49 that Hawthorne came from the "Old Manse" at Concord to serve as "Surveyor" at Salem. Another name, of interest this particular year, is William Fairfax, who came to Salem from Nassau as Royal Collector, but gave up the office to go to Virginia to act as manager of Lord Fairfax's vast estates, and live at "Belvoir" adjoining "Mount Vernon"; where his daughter married Lawrence Washington, and his son became the best friend of the young George Washington, accompanying him on his surveying expedition into the Ohio valley.

Although of too late a date to have been the work of Samuel McIntire, who died in 1811, the finely molded ornament, the spirited capitals of the porch columns, and especially the lifelike carving of the eagle adorning the roof balustrade of the Custom House show the influence of that master carver upon the school succeeding him in his home locality. Despite the late date, the richness of handling of the more architectural portions of the structure are still notable examples of the fine feeling for beauty and richness, combined with restraint and simplicity, that is illustrated by the best New England architecture of this

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period. Compare the essential simplicity of the interior treatment of the entrance doorway and its spacious side and fan lights, with the more florid detail of its exterior face, and one can realize the fine straight-thinking craftsmanship that combined so successfully the two designs. The bricks are a rather full height, laid in a narrow joint averaging an eighth inch in thickness, in Flemish bond; with refined wooden moldings, some of which show the flattened Greek tendency in their outline. The sidelights of both Palladian window and door originally had patterns marked in thin eight-inch wood strips between the heavier muntins.

Within the hallway, the simple staircase rises to second floor and roof cupola—where the outlook always kept watch over the harbor entrance—and a tall archway leads to the stores in the rear, while the five doorways on the main floor are handled with the simplest of characteristic finish and entablature. The naïve manner in which the doorhead under the curving stairway has been truncated so as not to interfere with the detail of the stair ends, while still conforming so far as may be with the neighboring doorhead, is also worthy of attention.

While many visit the Custom House because of the few years that it was housing the famous author, Hawthorne, yet it has probably but seldom received the attention today that its architectural features merit; even though its location is but a short half-mile from the center of the city.

Recalling the many controversies waged over the locations and sizes of early theatre buildings in the United States, it is odd that it is in Puritan New England that we find still extant an edifice of sixty by ninety feet, built in 1828 as Salem's first theatre—though it was in actual use for only four years. By that time the curse invoked by certain pious inhabitants who, according to tradition, knelt one night upon the piles of lumber and bricks going into the new structure to pray that God would soon bring to ruin this "diabolical venture," had its effect. Despite the acting of Junius Booth and Edwin Forrest, business did not prosper and the building became "dark." So, in 1832, when Rufus Choate and some others from the Howard Street, or Branch Church, wanted to set up a new Congregational Society, this building was secured, the stage torn out, a pulpit installed in its place, and it was dedicated on November 22, 1832 to its new uses. The hundredth anniversary is being celebrated this year.

With the exception of the upper portion of the gable, including the tablet bearing the later date, the façade seems to have been very little changed. Designed in two planes of brick surfaces, one set four inches back of the other, the building still remains a

direct and convincingly simple expression of the architectural methods of the time.

But the theatre was not the only indication of a certain carnal-mindedness upon the part of the old Salemites; for if architecture is a true expression of the life of a people, a study of the architectural remains still found in the town would seem to proclaim unusual fondness for another means of self expression usually supposed to have been frowned upon by the Puritan—dancing! And incidentally, it would also seem to have been rampant among the same group who were even then upholding, with others of aristocratic background, the tenets of Federalism.

How otherwise may one explain what is now called the "Assembly House," which was built in 1782 as a "Federalist Clubhouse," with a Hall used for concerts, balls, plays, dances, and oratorios from then until 1795. Lafayette was entertained here on October 29, 1784, and Washington October 29, 1789. Shortly after that date it was altered into a dwelling. The porch was added—the graceful vine scrolled along the architrave is among the many details attributed to Samuel McIntire (1757-1811)—and the interior so changed that it is difficult now to establish the original arrangement. The Federal Club building, with its grouped pilasters somewhat suggesting its more imposing public character, remains upon its exterior, at least, a pleasing example of early New England formal architecture.

Hamilton Hall was built in 1805 from plans by Samuel McIntire and presents its more imposing side elevation to Chestnut Street. The front, with a spreading pediment, is very severe, hardly suggesting its festal character; which is expressed, however, along the side, with its five groups of Palladian windows, and the panels above, with the characteristic eagle adorning the central location. Inside, the hall itself is upon the second floor, and is square in plan, with a curved or arched plaster ceiling. The detail is again very simply carried out; with pilasters, without entasis, upon the walls. The sparsely narrowed window groups, of refined yet restricted detail, are related to the wall seating in a most engaging yet architectural manner; and, finally, the overhanging music balcony, with its gracefully curved line, and simple balustrade, even omits the usual strengthening buttress at the external angles. The interior is so restrained, almost bare, that the old gilt mirrors and handsome chandelier and wall brackets appear quite florid by contrast. Again its naming after Alexander Hamilton, the leader of the Federalist party, which was so strong between 1793 and 1820, indicates the proclivities of the better Salem families of that time.

It remains to record a third "Hall," important in old Salem records. It was known as "Washington

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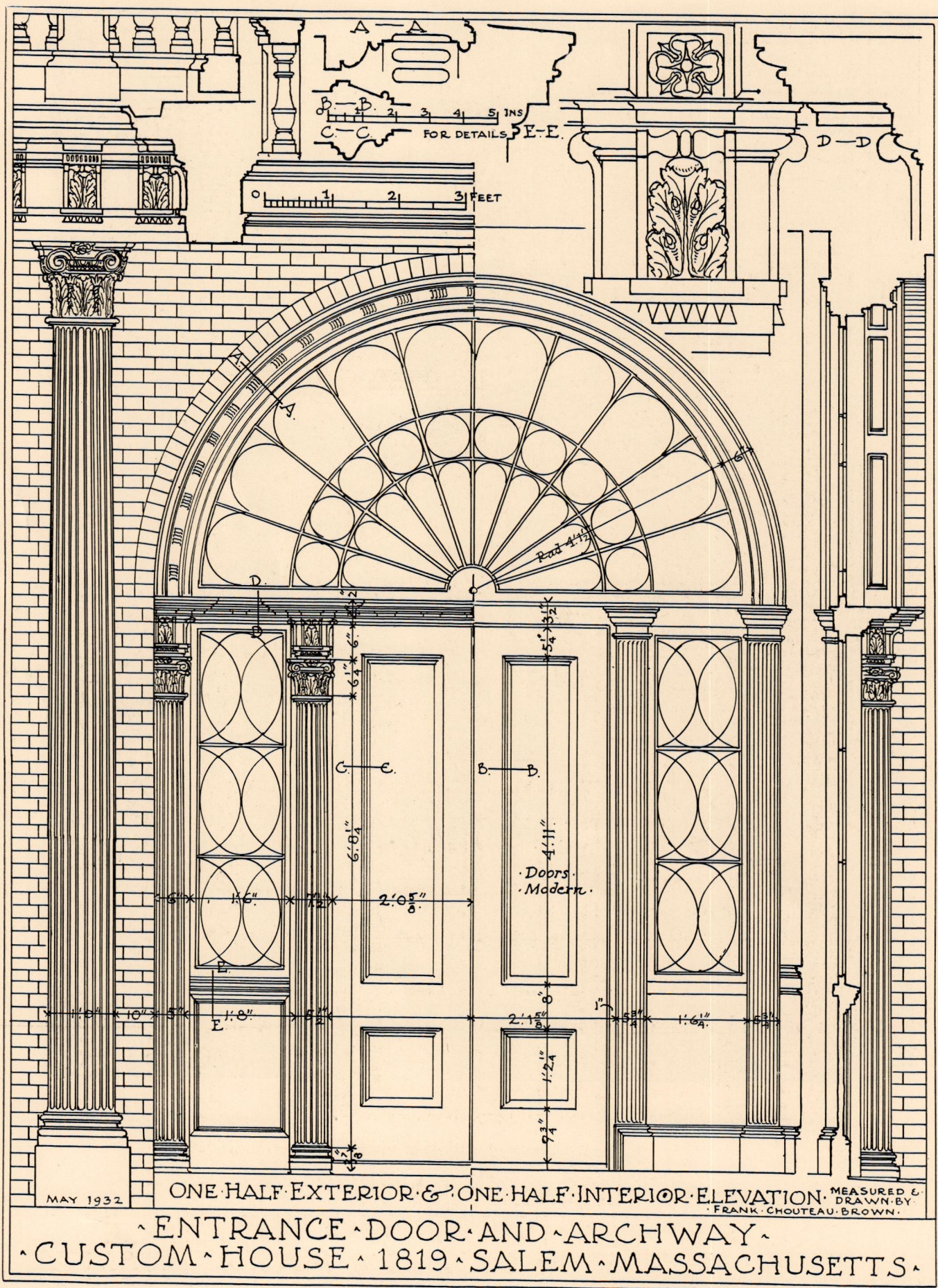




CUSTOM HOUSE—1819—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

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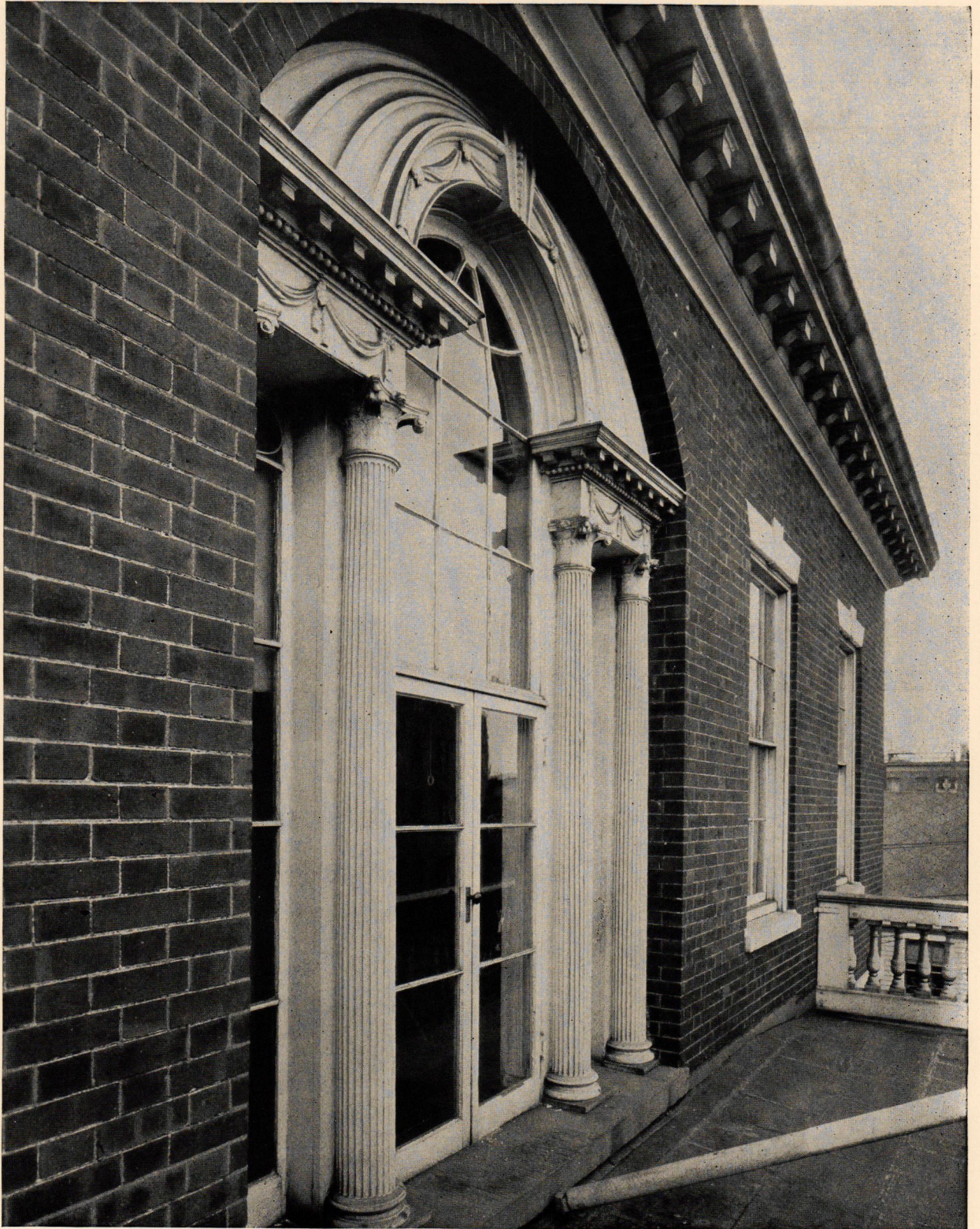








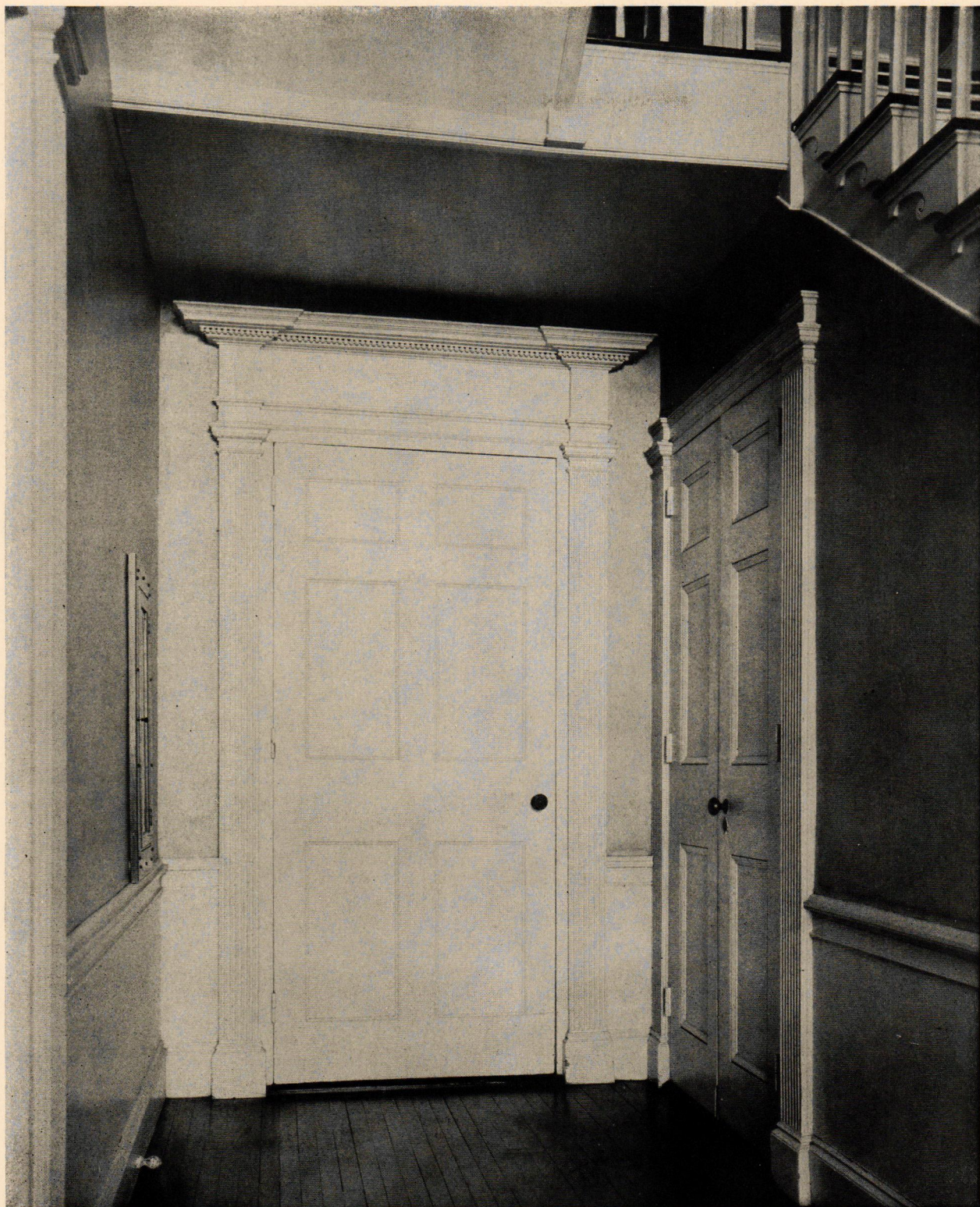




WINDOW DETAIL—CUSTOM HOUSE—1819—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

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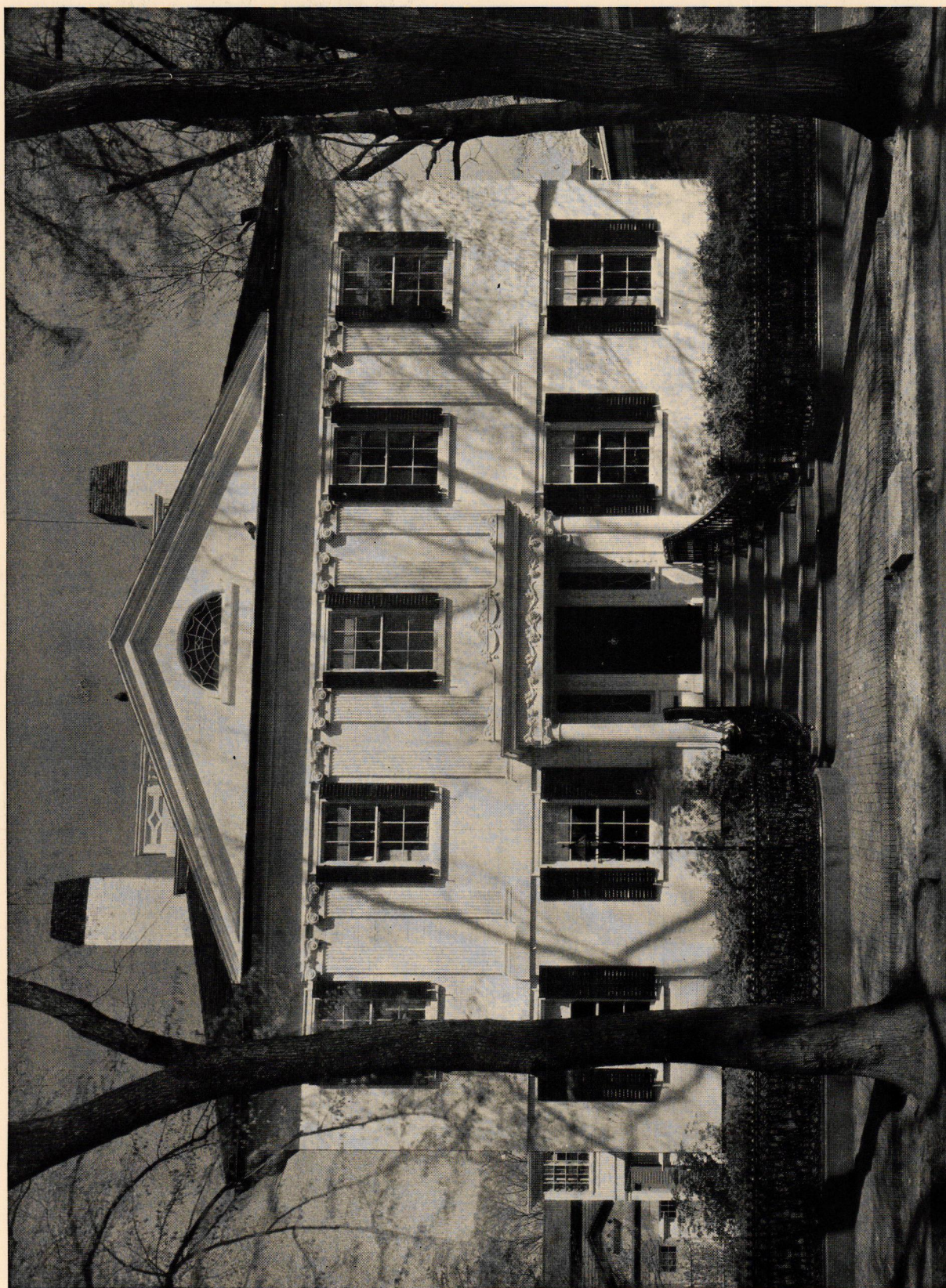


HALLWAY—CUSTOM HOUSE—1819—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

*The necessarily truncated doorhead conforms otherwise with its neighbor.*

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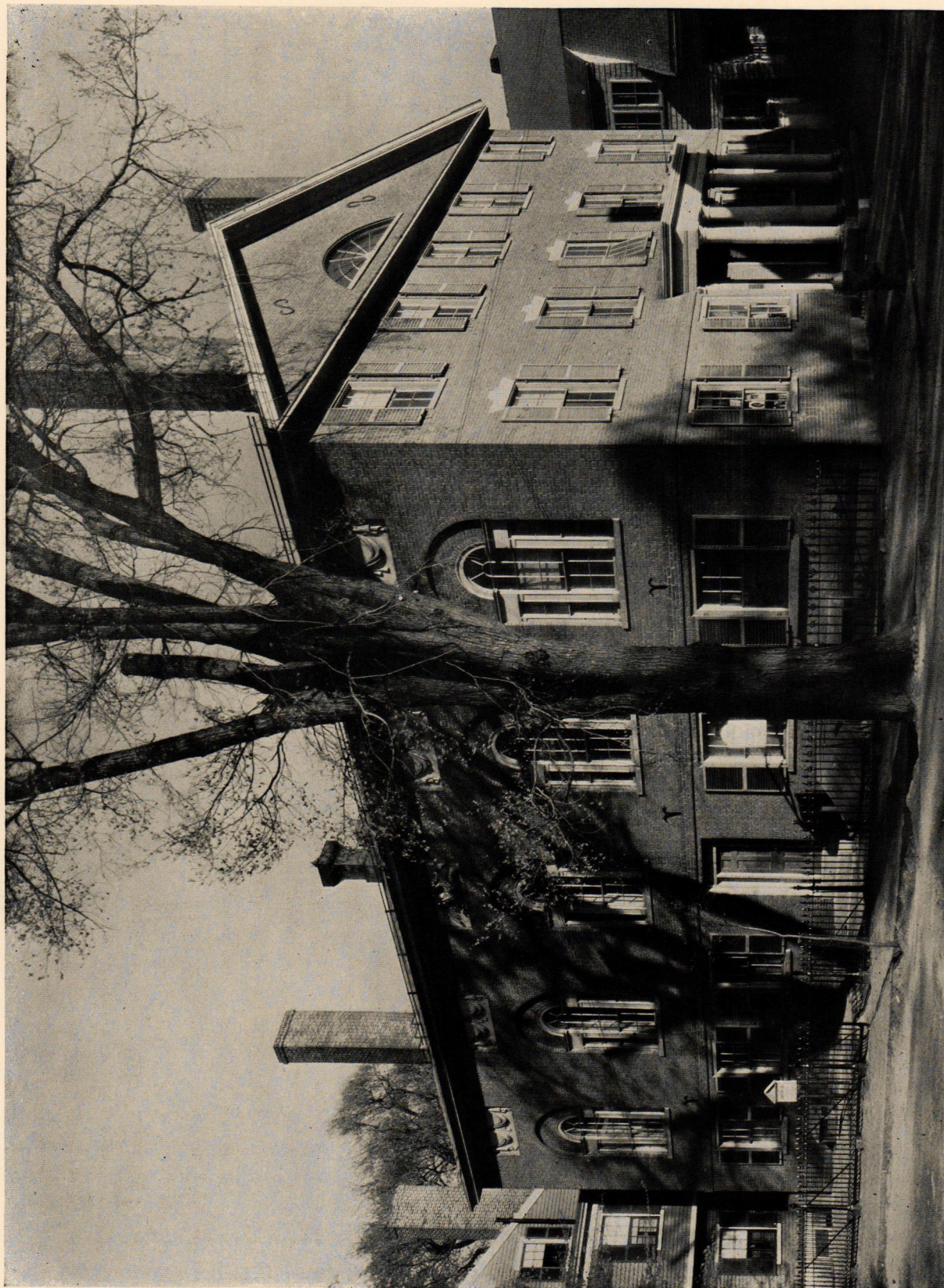




“ASSEMBLY HOUSE”—1782—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

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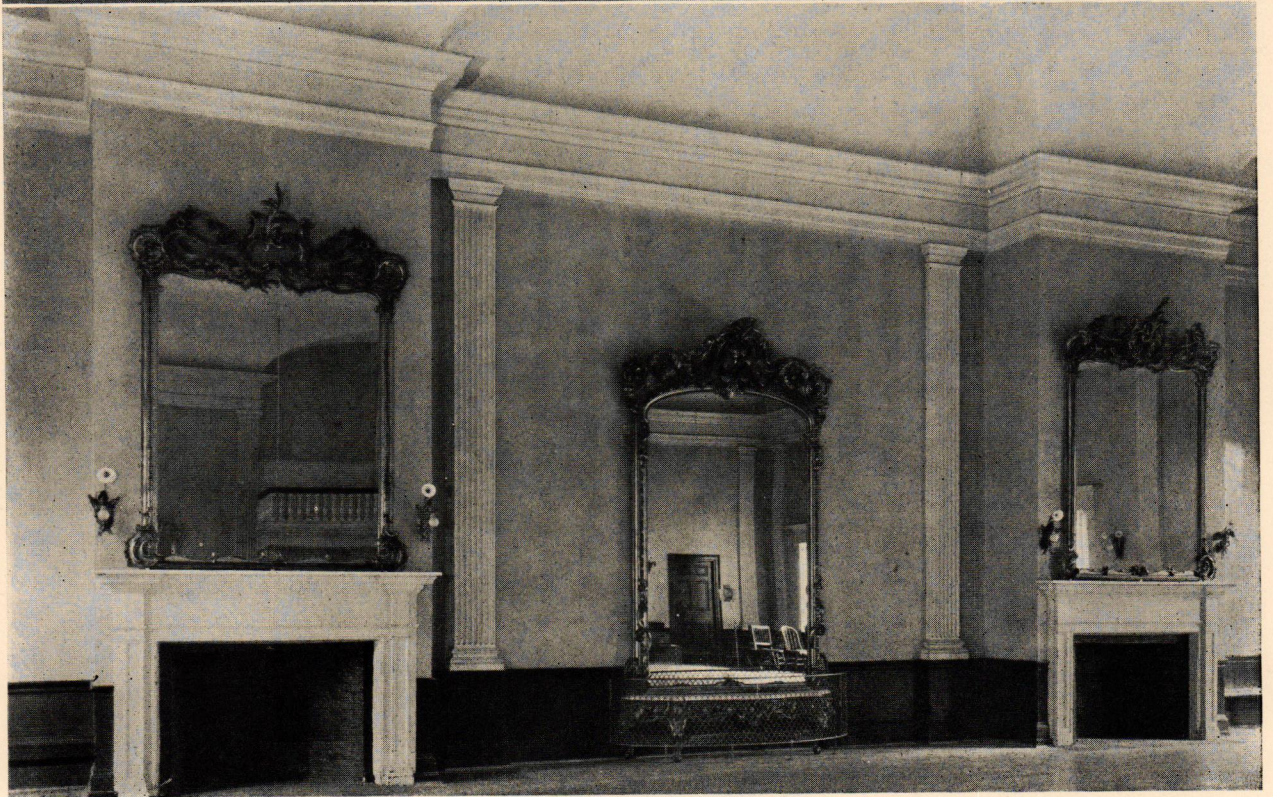
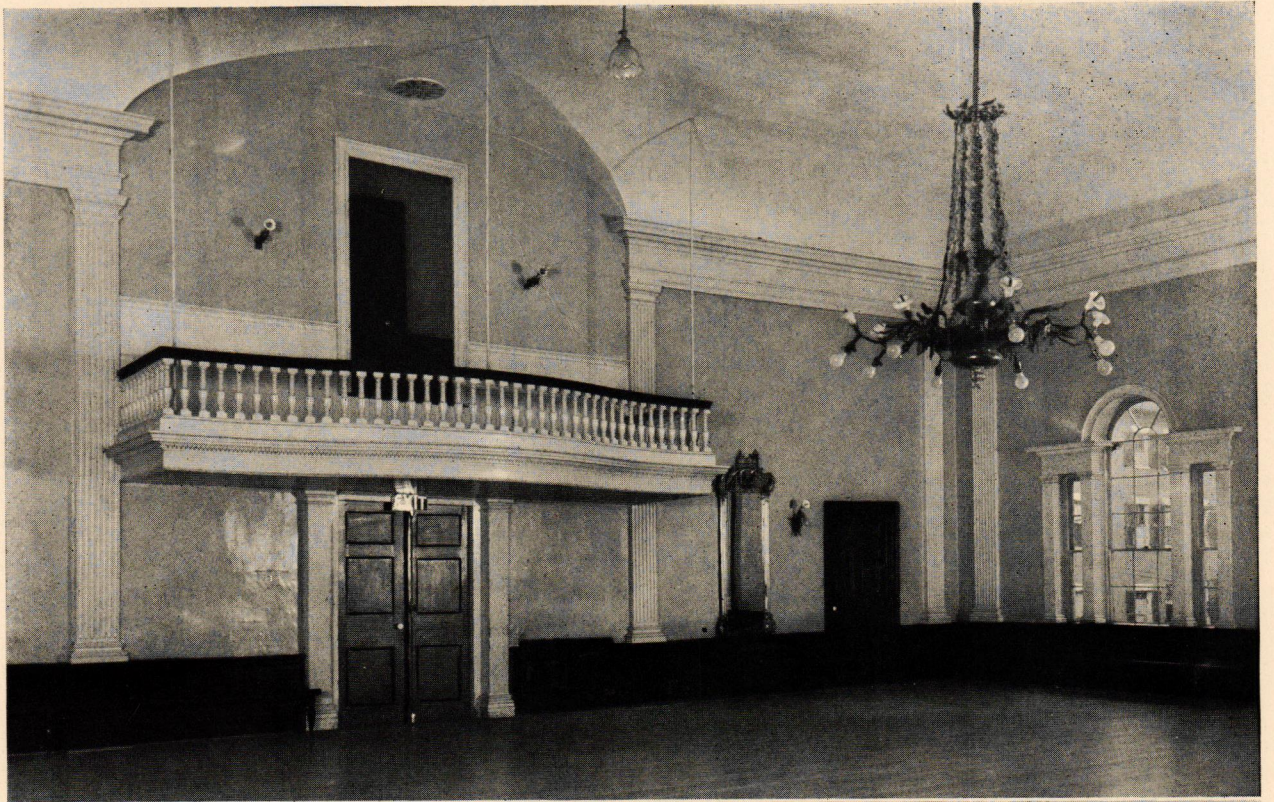




HAMILTON HALL—1805—CHESTNUT STREET, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

*Samuel McIntire, Architect*





THE HALL—HAMILTON HALL—1805—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

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SIDE ELEVATION—HAMILTON HALL—1805—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

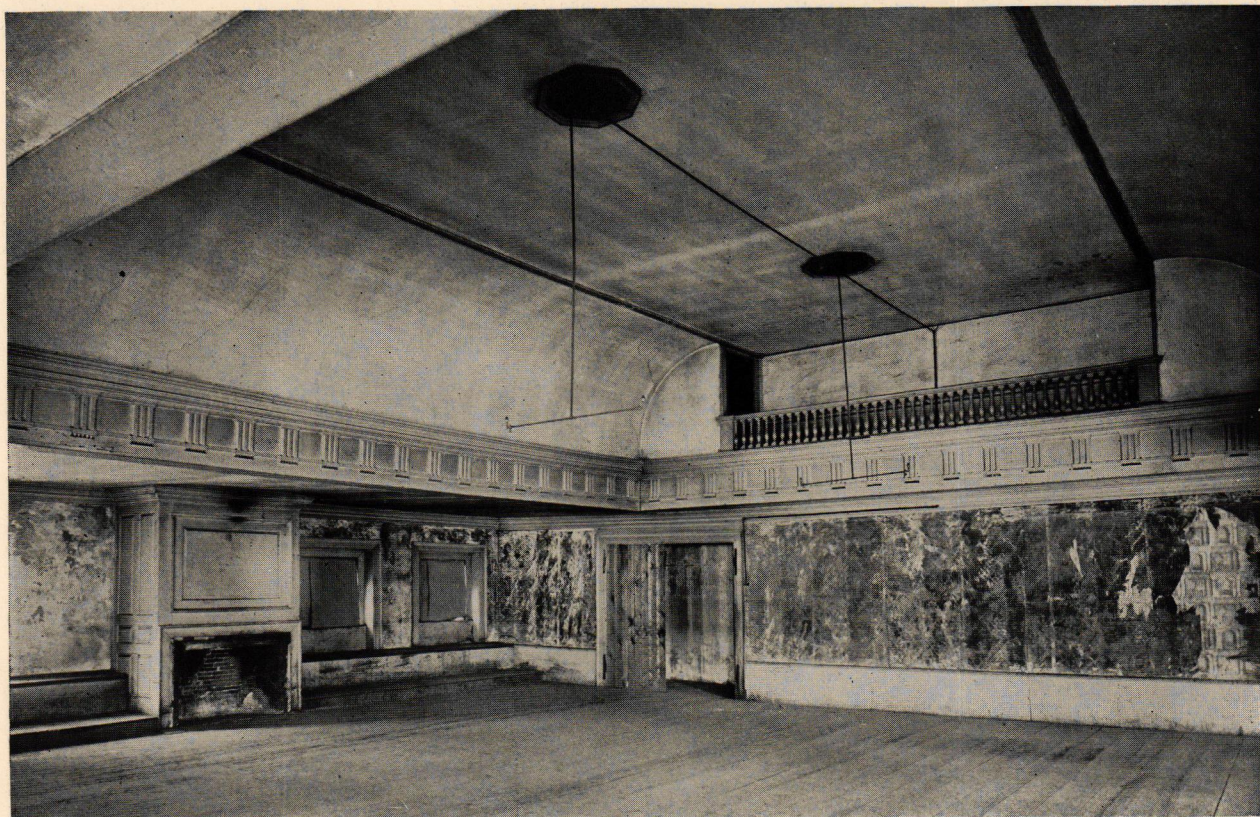
*Detail of Chestnut Street façade. The Hall on second floor expressed by groups of Palladian windows.*

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Hall," and was dedicated February 22, 1793—the birthday of Washington that marked his second assumption of the presidency—with a dinner and speeches including much gratification at the recently received news of the French Revolution. Its main characteristics are shown in the single old photograph reproduced from the records of the Essex Institute. The building itself has disappeared. It was used for all sorts of social gatherings, as were the other halls illustrated—and in later years came into use as a theatre as well.

All these later buildings express, with others of their time, an innate restraint, not almost to say meagreness and thinness of detail, accompanied by great delicacy of molding outline, and a tendency that may be noted in several of these examples to substitute reeding for fluting or paneling in the pilaster faces. The Almshouse was probably also a problem in economics; as the great number of shiftless seafaring men then making Salem their homeport, necessitated that a structure of considerable size be planned. This five-storied structure was the result, and it was con-



Photograph by Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

"WASHINGTON HALL"—1793—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

*Formerly located in the third story of building at 101 Washington Street.*

The name of Charles Bulfinch comes into the architectural records of Salem upon several occasions. He was among those who made sketches for the famous town house of Elias Hasket Derby, built upon the site of the present market hall, in 1799, by Samuel McIntire. In 1811, Bulfinch designed the building on Central Street for the Essex Bank, still standing, though in a much altered state. An idea of the original appearance of another example of Bulfinch's work may still be obtained from a visit to the city Almshouse, out upon the Neck, built in 1816.

sidered so successful that it was visited by President Monroe when he came to Salem in 1817. It lacks entirely any central feature, which the designer tried to supply by advancing the central part of the structure *en échelon*, with a doorway upon the main floor at each side. The result is an ingenious yet very simple design, but little known. It is finely situated, overlooking a stretch of open water fronting toward Beverly Harbor and the Northern Shore of Massachusetts Bay.

M. S. FRANKLIN.

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FIRST THEATRE—1828—SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

*Dedicated as a Church in 1832, since which the façade has been little changed.*

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THE ALMSHOUSE—1816—SALEM NECK, MASSACHUSETTS  
*Charles Bulfinch Architect*