



Aldrich Center

One Walnut Street, Boston, MA

Early History

The building at One Walnut Street is the product of Charles Bulfinch, a leading architect of his time. His achievements include the Massachusetts State House here on Beacon Hill and later the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. One of Mr. Bulfinch's most noted achievements is the design of many outstanding homes on Beacon Hill establishing a style of quaint elegance that persists today. One Walnut Street was built in 1804 at the corner of Beacon Street and what would later become Walnut Street with its original entrance and five window configuration facing Beacon Street. Initially, its address was number 38 Beacon Street. According to the original development plans, Walnut Street was laid out as a way in 1799 but did not become an accepted street until several years later. Built in the "square style" for which Bulfinch was noted, it was most probably the first brick house on Beacon Street.

The builder and first resident of the house, John Phillips (1770-1823), was one of Boston's most prominent citizens. From 1804 until his death, he was a member of the Massachusetts State Senate, serving as presiding officer for the last ten years. When Boston became a city, Phillips was elected the first mayor in 1822. He served for one year and declined re-election for reasons of health. Born in the house was his son Wendell Phillips, the famous orator for anti-slavery and other causes. Of particular interest, the land deed from the developer, Jonathan Mason, to John Phillips contains the restriction that no building in the development could be over three stories in height, exclusive of cellar and roof, for a period of thirty years. During the Phillips ownership of nineteen years, there is no record of significant changes having been made to the house.

Two years after John Phillips death in 1823, his heirs sold the house to Thomas Lindall Winthrop, who was another prominent Bostonian. He served in the State Senate and was Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts from 1826 to 1832. He was highly esteemed especially for his work on behalf of public schools. He served as president of both the Massachusetts Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society. To accommodate his large family, Winthrop moved the entrance to the Walnut Street side and altered the Beacon Street façade to the four window configuration seen today. It appears that he raised the upper story and made the third-story windows higher, thus enlarging the living space while remaining within the three-story restriction. The ells were added in Winthrop's time and changes were made to the staircase and the interior. Since Bulfinch was still living at this time, it is possible that he might have had a hand in the alterations. One Walnut Street is also known as the Phillips-Winthrop House in memory of its first two owners.

On Winthrop's death in 1841, the house was sold at public auction to Thomas Dixon. Thomas Dixon brought international fame with him. He was born in London but served the Dutch government as Consul General at Boston and abroad. He was made a Knight of the Netherlands for his services.

(During the time of Dixon's ownership, the Boston Society of Civil Engineers (BSCE) was founded at the United States Hotel in Boston on April 26, 1848. BSCE is now a part owner of the building.) Dixon's family owned the house until 1858 when they sold it to Nathan Matthews. Since Matthews also owned buildings at Nos. 3 and 5 Walnut Street, he made some changes to the house on the side that faced his other properties. Matthews was a self-made businessman who was noted for his philanthropies. He donated Matthews Hall and several scholarships to Harvard. Matthews lived in the house only two years and then sold it to John Chipman Gray who owned it for but one year. Gray was a prominent lawyer. He served as Judge Advocate and, for five years, was a lecturer at Harvard Law School.

Robert M. Mason purchased the house in 1861 but appears not to have taken up residence there until 1866. Mason was a successful Boston businessman whose principal philanthropic interest was the Massachusetts Soldiers Fund. Mason's daughters, Ida M. and Ellen F. Mason, inherited the house in 1879 and lived there together for about fifty years. The sisters were prominent socially in Boston and at summer events in Newport, Rhode Island and Dublin, New Hampshire. It was Mason who added the building's mansard roof, effectively making it a four-story building, the three-story limitation having long expired. Also added were some Italianate features that may have reflected the Mason family's residence abroad for some years.

Recent History

In 1931, Mrs. James J. Storrow purchased One Walnut Street from the Mason Estate and, in 1939, donated it to the Judge Baker Foundation as its headquarters. The work performed to transform the former private residence to accommodate institutional functions removed some of Bulfinch's and other later architectural features from the interior. Under this ownership a number of charitable and service organizations had activities in the building but, by far, the most important were the Judge Baker Guidance Center and the Boston Children's Services Association.

In 1976, the building was acquired by the Phillips-Winthrop House Trust to serve as the law offices of Mahoney, Hawkes & Goldings. Some interior changes were effected in order to suit its new, more modern function. In 1978, an exterior restoration was accomplished that removed many decorative features that had been added over the years. Most noticeable was the removal of its exterior gray paint in order to expose once more the old red brick. On June 7, 1990, the Phillips-Winthrop House Trust sold One Walnut Street to The Engineering Center Education Trust. Made up of three engineering and land surveying societies, the American Council of Engineering Companies – Massachusetts Section, the Boston Society of Civil Engineers, and the Massachusetts Society of Land Surveyors and Civil Engineers, TECET continues to own the building and operate the Aldrich Center on the first floor.

Heritage

The building at One Walnut Street that one views today is an historic building that contributes to historic Beacon Hill. The mansard roof is certainly not Bulfinch but, even with this later addition, the Bulfinch lines and features are still in evidence. The changed features that remain reflect the history of Beacon Hill and Boston over the two centuries since the house was built. The interior arrangement is much altered except in the staircase and fireplaces. The proportions of the rooms and much of the original woodwork have been retained, preserving an atmosphere of substance and elegance culled from the past. In this building, one can be reminded of the rich heritage of Boston and Beacon Hill.

One Walnut Street represents a proud past and the Aldrich Center embraces this rich history. Here, one can experience the past, enjoy the technology of the present, and plan for the future, in comfort.

H. HOBART HOLLY (d. 1996) (revised DWH-2013)

H. HOBART HOLLY was Chairman of the History and Heritage Committee of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section/ASCE.