

Scenes from the Past...



photo—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

shown in this photograph taken between 1862 and 1864 is the Central Signal Station that was erected on the building's roof.

At first glance, the five-story building on the northwest corner of 17th and F Streets, NW, across from the Old Executive Office Building, may appear to have been built in the last century as a Colonial Revival-styled office building. However, it was indeed constructed between 1848 and 1849, and was the largest such building in Washington at the time.

Known as the Winder Building, it was built by John Henry Winder (1800-1865), a Philadelphian and son of General William H. Winder (1775-1824), who had



The building was named after the builder's father, William H. Winder, shown here, the War of 1812 general who arrived late at the Battle of Bladensburg thus allowing British troops to invade Washington.
photo—courtesy, FamousAmericans.net.

been largely responsible for allowing the British to enter and burn Washington during the War of 1812; he arrived late at the Battle of Bladensburg, having incorrectly guessed that the British were heading to Baltimore or Richmond.

John Winder had been born in Maryland in 1800, and was a graduate of the US Military Academy in 1820; he prospered as a lawyer following his service in the Army. He began work on the building about 1848, with the intention of renting it to the federal government when it was completed, at an annual rate of \$175 per room, or \$21,875 per year. The rent included fire attendance and firewood. Robert Mills, the architect in charge of government buildings at the time, noted that it contained 130 "fireproof" rooms, and was solidly built.

Its exterior was originally composed of marble on the first floor, with stuccoed brick on upper levels. It featured a distinctive wrought-iron balcony that surrounded the building on the second floor, which was removed in 1922 and sold for scrap. Its configuration closely matches that of the Winder family houses in



photo—Jack Boucher, Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

It's rather obvious that William Winder built the Winder Building to reflect the characteristics of his own Philadelphia houses, built on Society Hill at 232-234 S. Third Street, between 1842 and 1843 at 232-234 South Third Street. Their distinctive iron balcony was recreated during a restoration in 1972, just before this photograph was taken.

Philadelphia, built about 10 years prior.

The building features 60,000 square feet on five floors, with 104 individual windows; those on the second floor were originally 12 feet high. They were reduced in size during a 1933 renovation. The Winder was the first building in Washington to feature a central heating system, although it ultimately was not successful. The government purchased the building in 1854 for an impressive \$200,000.

During the Civil War, offices of the War Department were located in the building, along with Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant as Chief of the Headquarters of the Army. General John A. Rawlings served as his Chief of Staff. Earlier occupants included the Quartermaster General and the Navy's Bureau of Ordinance and Hydrography and later, the headquarters for the Bureau of Military Justice under Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt.

In 1865, the Winder roof served as a signal station of the Washington detachment of the U.S. Signal Corps for communication via flag signals to military fortifications and camps around Washington.

In 1888, the building was transferred to the Department of Treasury, which later built a cafeteria restaurant for its employees in 1896. During World War I, the Army moved back into the building, and in 1949, the building became the property of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA).
During the 1970s, many White House offices were moved here



photo—courtesy Kelsey & Associates, Inc.

Shown here is a 1949 view of the Winder Building's 17th Street entrance, located across from the Old Executive Building.

during an Old Executive Office Building renovation. Since 1981, the building has housed the headquarters of the Office of the United States Trade Representative.

The Winder Building was declared a National Register Landmark in 1969, as "one of the few remaining pre-Civil War office buildings in Washington, probably the earliest and least altered one in existence."

Despite that historic designation, in 1974 the GSA announced plans to demolish the building to make way for a new office building. A citizen's group, Don't Tear it Down, Inc., formed to prevent the demolition old Post Office building on Pennsylvania Avenue, filed suit that year to prevent the razing of the Winder Building.

The group, later renamed DC Preservation League, eventually won, but before the case was decided, GSA had begun demolition of adjoining historic buildings. As mitigation for the partial demolition of the other buildings, GSA allotted money toward the renovation of the Winder. They were completed in time for the Bicentennial celebrations in 1976.

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The interior of the Winder Building features barrel vault brick arches forming the ceiling, as seen here on the first floor corridor in 1975.