

The Doorknob Collector



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THE HUDSON COUNTY COURTHOUSE, AND THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

BY ALLEN S. JOSLYN

Most doorknobers know the knob for the Hudson County Courthouse in Jersey City, N. J., with its distinctive “HCCH” design, but (I suspect) not so many have ever visited it or know what the Courthouse looks like. It is, however, considered one of the finest examples of the Beaux-Arts architecture in the county.

The Hudson County Courthouse really has to be seen to be appreciated, but has been described in the American Heritage magazine by David G. Lowe as follows:

“The courthouse interior is a rush of color – pearl grey and green-veined marbles, golden light fixtures, yellow, green and blue paint. Standing in the great central court, one looks up the three stories of the magnificent rotunda to a dome whose outer rim is painted with the signs of the zodiac and whose center is an eye of stained glass worthy of Tiffany. One feels – as one does in the rotunda of the heart of the Capitol in Washington – of the dignity of government and the permanence of law.”

The Courthouse was built between 1906 and 1910 at a cost some \$3,328,000, 300% over the estimate. The result was a public outcry and a judicial investigation of the County Board of Freeholders which had supervised the fiasco. An Investigating Committee was appointed and found that the Freeholders had approved contracts which lumped together the prices of unrelated items, such as the cost of spittoons and of murals by eminent artists. By this method, among others, the Committee found overcharges of \$332,521, with others being incurred later. It recommended criminal charges, but the subsequent history is murky. Obviously patronage and the goodies it took to run a political machine cost a lot of money and exquisite public works were a good way to divert it from the public fisc. There were hopes



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expressed, of course, that the disclosures of the inflated cost of the Courthouse would lead to a public outcry and the end of political bossism in Hudson County. Not to be. Frank Hague was on the rise and in the next decade emerged as the new and far more effective boss of Jersey City. While, in his day, he ran Jersey City as a dictator, there is a lively debate as to positive contributions of political machines in an era with no governmental “safety net”.

The Courthouse’s architect, Hugh Roberts, was directly appointed Francis Millet, a distinguished and well-connected artist who had been decorations director for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Millet employed the outstanding muralists of the period, who had just completed the Essex County

without a competition and delegated decoration of the building to well-connected artist who had been decorations director for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Millet employed the outstanding muralists of the period, who had just completed the Essex County Courthouse in Newark with him. The Freeholders wanted decorations consisting of “chiefly historical subjects” that would tell the story of America’s founding, especially in the colonial period. To this point, the murals by Howard Pyle, in the former Board of Freeholders room, now the most magnificent of the Courtrooms, show the lives of early Dutch and English settlers. One is of Hudson’s ship first encountering the Indians, another of life in early Dutch New York, and then of Peter Stuyvesant watching the arrival of the English ships which would turn New Amsterdam into New York. Other murals by Charles Yardley Turner show George Washington in Fort Lee observing the Assault on Fort Washington, November 16, 1776 (pictured below), and the first voyage of the steamship “Clermont” on the Hudson to Albany, August 17, 1807.

At the same time, other muralists painted classical themes, such as “Wisdom” and “Learning” with draped figures. Edwin Blashfield



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painted the dome and four supporting figures (one illustrated at right), in a classical style.

The public passion for magnificent public buildings was inspired by the Colombian Exposition of 1893 – the “White City” – where all of the buildings (save Louis Sullivan’s Transportation Building) were done in the Beaux-Arts style, which swept the country as part of the “American Renaissance” movement. The muralists of the Courthouse, who had received training in Europe in 1870-90,

“passionately believed that they could create a modern American Renaissance that would parallel the great art and splendid cities of Europe and perhaps even surpass the brilliance of fifteenth-century Italy. They certainly felt the influence – either direct or indirect – of the leading academy of the day, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where many American artists and most of the outstanding architects of the period studied. The school advanced the Renaissance concept of achieving unity through the cooperation of architect, painter and sculptor – with the architect in the lead.” (Cynthia Sanford, *Heroes in the Flight for Beauty*, p. 13).



But as Sanford points out, there was a certain dichotomy in the concept of “American Renaissance” – was it to represent and exalt American foundations (as in many of the murals of Courthouse), or follow classical Renaissance themes (as in others)?

This movement led to the erection of magnificent Courthouses, libraries, schools and other public buildings throughout the country – such as Luzerne County Courthouse in Pennsylvania and the Minnesota State Capital, as well as the United States Capital Library in Washington and the Brooklyn Museum. It also led to a lot of business for Yale & Towne, which made the original Hudson County doorknobs and plates.

But what was regarded as magnificent when built can become bothersome old hat in 60 years. And so it was with the Hudson County Courthouse. Jersey City grew, and the Kenny machine replaced the Hague machine. By 1966 a new addition to a new ad-

ministration building was ready to receive the crowded Hudson County Courthouse next door, leaving open what would happen to the old courthouse.

The usual voices for “progress” and “efficiency” – and “out with the old, in with the new” – were heard. Application was made by the county government for \$14 million in Federal funds to erect a jail/office building in place of the Courthouse. Local preservationists rallied, and influential architectural critics opposed the destruction, including Ada Louise Huxtable in a leading New York Times article, “Functionalism Triumphs: Solid Granite Courthouse Vanishing in Trend to Businesslike Buildings” (7/22/1966, p. 25). While the public wanted to preserve the Courthouse, the powers were not impressed; when preservationists planned to address a Freeholders’ meeting, they found all the seats occupied by County cleaning women. The enthusiasm of the powers to replace the old Courthouse with something new was undoubtedly supported by the custom of the Kenny machine, carried over from the Hague machine, to insist on a kickback of 10% of all public construction contracts.



So the Courthouse sat there, empty, and scavengers moved in. They stole metal decorations, including the brass doorknobs. (So is that how my knob escaped?). It was an unmitigated mess. But the Courthouse was saved when, in 1970, a prominent local preservationist nominated it for the National Register and a New Jersey Senator pushed the nomination through. Now the County could not get any Federal money to replace the Courthouse. So it eventually restored the building, with Federal funds, to its former glory. And as to the missing doorknobs? The Foreman for the restoration, Ernie Grabich,

“was searching for a way to recreate the brass doorknobs, doorplates, and third-floor railings that had been stolen by vandals. Having an outsider make them was too expensive. Instead Grabich located a brass foundry in Newark that was going out of business, and he hired one of its workers to set up a foundry on the courthouse basement. Luckily, some of the original brasswork was located so that the molds could be



made. Within months Grabich was churning out signature HCCH door-knobs, and he was reproducing Millet's playful mermaids where austere goddesses of the state seal should have been." (Begans, "A Neglected Beauty", p. 106)

The debate continued as to the proper use of the old Courthouse, but by 1986, twenty years after it had been abandoned, it was returned to use as a Courthouse. To me, this is how Courthouses should look – dignified, magnifi-

cent, and a place where lawyers and litigants turn square corners.

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- And very special thanks to Cynthia T. Harris of the Jersey City Public Library for her help.



Schofield Building Cleveland, Ohio

Levi Schofield was a son of a pioneer Cleveland family and a decorated officer during the Civil War as an engineer. After the war he served as a draftsman for several architects in New York, and then returned to his home town to practice architecture. He was the first member of the AIA from Cleveland, and served as a Vice President while Daniel Burnham was President.

While Schofield designed schools, clubs, and prisons, he is perhaps best known as the driving force behind the Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Cleveland's Public Square. He not only designed and sculpted the monument, but paid 1/3 of the cost when elected officials failed to fund the total cost.

In 1901 he designed and built the Schofield Building on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland. Unfortunately time was not good to this proud building, losing its corner tower and losing much of the original terra cotta elements when a mid-century metal façade was applied. Recently the building was restored as a boutique hotel, with much of the original decoration recreated. The S doorknob by Corbin was found not only on the doors of this building, but also on the doors at the Schofield family crypt at Lakeview Cemetery.



Sources:

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<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=1554136&page=16>

Cincinnati City Hall Cincinnati, Ohio

The city of Cincinnati was founded in 1788, the first new major inland city after the Revolutionary War. Named for the Society of Cincinnati, a group formed by many of our founding fathers after the war, George Washington serving as the first Society President for 16 years until his death.

Over the next century the city grew to a population of close to 300,000 residents, and the earlier 1852 city hall could no longer meet the needs to a growing, vibrant city. The city commissioned local architect Samuel Hannaford & Sons to design a Romanesque Revival building, which was completed in 1893.

The hardware includes the city seal, inscribed with the motto *Juncta Juvant*, which roughly translates from Latin as “Strength in Unity”. Both the City and City Hall remain strong after 125 years of service.

The hardware is by J. B. Schroder of Cincinnati, in bronze, with designs that blend with the carved stonework on the buildings exterior.

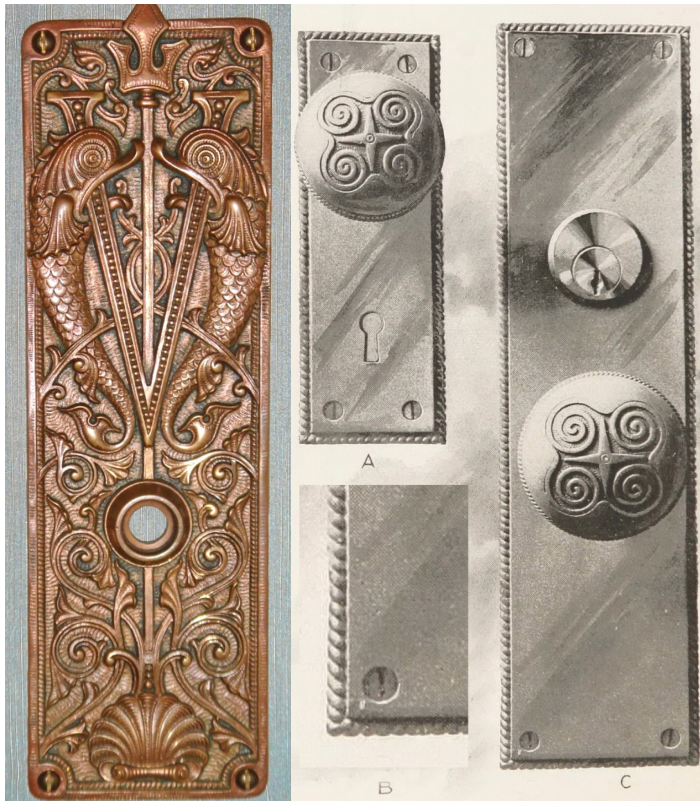


Sources: <https://www.loc.gov/item/oh0075/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cincinnati_City_Hall

The Doorknob Exchange

Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade, or wanted at no charge. ADCA is not responsible for any transaction or the condition of the items advertised.

Wanted:



Paul Woodfin (#829) is seeking the Yale & Towne plate shown at far left. Paul is also seeking either of the Niles/Chicago Hardware plates at left (edge detail is shown at bottom left). If you have either of these plates which you are willing to part with, or know where one could be acquired, please contact Paul at paul.woodfin@sbcglobal.net.

Robert McNutt is seeking the interior side of the cast iron plate (at right) from the Wainwright Building in St. Louis. Contact Robert at klutz68@gmail.com.



Steve Rowe (#287) is seeking the Norwalk H-23500 set at left. Contact Steve at 4narowe@sbcglobal.net.

Visit the ADCA on Facebook

Join in the discussion at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/412087788964066/>. Latest highlights include a discussion about Canadian hotel doorknobs started by Brian Woodward, plus VP Steve Rowe's photos of nature that resemble doorknobs.



Brian Woodward

October 25 at 12:33pm

With the exception of my very first doorknob, this would be my second most special knob in my collection. This doorknob came from the Chateau Laurier hotel in Ottawa Ontario Canada. There were 2 different types of knobs used in the hotel. The large CL monogram and small CL monogram. Mine being the large type makes mine from the original 1912 portion of the hotel. Unfortunately the escutcheon is not from the hotel, at least to my knowledge. I found the escutcheon and the mortise lock (not pictured) at a flea market some 20 miles away from the hotel. what really has had me scratching my head is all the original hardware i observed in the Chateau Laurier was made by yale while the escutcheon and mortise lock i found were made by corbin. Both appear to be identical.



Stephen Rowe

October 29 at 1:49pm

many designs were influenced by the beauty all around us!



this designer had to be a geologist



Antique Doorknob Collectors of America

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Co-editors: Allen Joslyn,

Phone (973) 783-9411

Email: ajoslyn@comcast.net

Paul Woodfin

Email: paul.woodfin@sbcglobal.net

ADCA Website: www.antiquedoorknobs.org

VDA Website: www.antiquedoorknobs.us

Officers

President: Allen Joslyn

Vice President: Steve Rowe

Secretary: Paul Woodfin

Treasurer: Allen Joslyn

Email Addresses:

ajoslyn@comcast.net

4narowe@sbcglobal.net

paul.woodfin@sbcglobal.net

ajoslyn@comcast.net

Membership Office: Faye Kennedy

ADCA

PO Box 803

Hackettstown, NJ 07840

Email: adcaoffice@aol.com

Phone: 908-684-5253

General Questions

ajoslyn@comcast.net

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Email: contact@americanantiquehardware.com



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Email: Shop@LAHardware.com



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Fax: (call first): 707-937-0078
Web Site: knobsession.com
Email: bysawyer@mcn.org



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Phone: 240-595-1115
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402 N. Main St. Bloomington, IL 61701
Phone: 309-827-5522 or 309.454.1713
Web Site: billskeyandlockshop.com
Email: locksmith@billskeyandlockshop.com



House of Antique Hardware

Owner: Roy Prange
3439 NE Sandy Blvd./PMB 106
Portland, OR 97214
Phone: 888-223-2545 Fax: 503-231-1312
Web Site: HouseofAntiqueHardware.com
Email: Sales@HouseofAntiqueHardware.com



The Brass Knob

Owners: Donetta George
2311 18th St. N.W. Washington, DC
Phone: 202-332-3370
Fax: 202-332-5594
Web Site: theBrassKnob.com
Email: BK@theBrassKnob.com



The Door Store

Owner: Sam Mirshak
1260 Castlefield Avenue
Toronto, ON, Canada M6B 1G3
Phone: 416-863-1590
Website: thedorystore.ca
Email: info@thedorystore.ca



Webwilson.com

Owner: H. Weber Wilson
PO Box 506
Portsmouth, RI 02871
Phone: 240-595-1115



Ohmega Salvage

Owner: Katherine Davis
2407 San Pablo Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94702
Phone: 510-204-0767
Website: ohmegasalvage.com
Email: info@ohmegasalvage.com



Houghton Street Foundry

Owner: Stephen Shellenberger
20 Houghton St.
Somerville, MA 02143
Phone: 617-970-0366
Website: houghtonstfoundry.com
Email: houghtonstfoundry@gmail.com



Discovery Architectural Salvage

Owner: Suzanne Kittel
409 Saint Francis St.
Gonzales, TX 78629
Phone: 830-672-2428
Website: discoverys.net
Email: swk@discoverys.net



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Owners: Tim Harmon and Julie Crow
Phone: 503-399-8009
Web Site: indysalvage.com
Email: timandjuliestore@gmail.com

