

The State House Story

On March 28, 1772, Governor Robert Eden laid the cornerstone for what would be the third State House built on State Circle in Annapolis. The first, built soon after the capital was moved from St. Mary's City to Annapolis in 1695, burned down in 1704. The second was completed by 1709 and, 60 years later, had become far too small for the growing business of government and was too delapidated to warrant enlarging it. The decision was made to raze it and Charles Wallace undertook the work when no one else submitted "plans and estimates" for the project.

With Mr. Wallace as the "undertaker" and Joseph Horatio Anderson as the architect, work was begun on the new State House in early 1772. While work progressed well for the first year and a half, at least one hurricane and the Revolutionary War intervened to cause enormous delays and difficulties. By the end of 1779, the building was still not completed, and Mr. Wallace's finances and patience with the project were exhausted.

When the Continental Congress came to Annapolis to meet in the Old Senate Chamber from November 1783 - August 1784, they found a State House which was still unfinished. Although the Old Senate Chamber was complete, the roof was not and it had leaked during the last few winters, damaging the upstairs rooms. The dome - or cupola - atop the State House was variously described as inadequate, unimpressive, and too small for the building and, it, too, leaked.

In 1784, the General Assembly asked the Intendant of the Revenue, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, to report to it on what needed to be done to complete the building. His conclusions were bleak. With reference to the roof, he said that it "had been constructed contrary to all the rules of architecture," and that it would be throwing money away to try to repair it. As for the modest dome, he thought that it might stand for another six or seven years without injuring the building.¹¹

In order to rectify the situation, Jenifer, in 1785, was authorized to contract with Joseph Clark, an Annapolis architect and builder, to repair the roof and the dome. Clark first raised the pitch of the roof to facilitate the runoff of water and covered it with wooden shingles. The crowning achievement of Clark's work on the State House was, of course, the extraordinary dome which he designed and built. It is not known where Clark's inspiration for the unusual design of the dome came from, but it is very similar to one in Karlsruhe, Germany called the *Schlossturm*. Clark's brother, Stephen, kept a book and print shop in Annapolis, and it is possible that Clark saw an image of the Karlsruhe dome there.

By the summer of 1788, the exterior of the new dome was complete. From a design and engineering point of view it is an outstanding achievement. It was constructed of cypress supplied by the Dashiell family of Somerset County, the same source used by George Washington when he built his octagonal barn at Mount Vernon in 1792-93. No metal nails were used in its construction and, to this day, it is held together by wooden pegs.

The lightning rod which tops the dome is a story in itself. It is a "Franklin" rod, constructed and grounded to Benjamin Franklin's specifications. In some respects, the use of this type of lightning rod was also a political statement, expressing support for Franklin's theories on protection of public buildings from lightning strikes and the rejection of the opposing theories supported by King George III. The pointed lightning rod atop such an important new public building was a powerful symbol of the independence and ingenuity of the young nation.

As an architect trained in London and with a brother who had a bookshop in Annapolis, Clark would