State House addition: stairway to nowhere

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State legislators returning to Annapolis for the opening tomorrow of the 1977 General Assembly session will find that the State House has been equipped in their absence with a stairway that leads to nowhere.

A sign at the bottom of the first floor staircase diplomatically advises that the stairway is "closed."

In fact, though, the stairway in the newly-restored anteroom to the old Senate chamber is as open as it can ever be—it ascends smack into an unyielding ceiling.

"That's the stairway to the dome," George R. Lewis, state secretary of general services, explained recently. "Obviously, we couldn't go further. I think that's the governor's secretary's office right above it. But I think you have to make some commitment to restoration."

The stairway was constructed during the legislative interim as part of a $50,000 Bicentennial restoration project aimed at returning the two rooms adjacent to the old Senate chamber to their Revolutionary War era appearance.

The chamber known for years as the "Flag Room," home of the state's collection of ancient battle flags, has been partitioned in half to re-create the committee room once situated off the left front of the Senate chamber and the anteroom with the stairway that leads futilely toward the State House dome.

The committee room was used during those early days not only by state Senators but also, according to state archivist Ed Papenfuse, by members of the Continental congress. The congress for sme time made the State House their national capitol. Sometime later the room served as the chamber for the old Chancery Court.

Papenfuse is expected to propose in a report to the State House trust this week that the committee room be furnished with Windsor chairs, a period table and secretary's desk, as he believes it was from about 1779 to 1800.

Actually, there are two newly-built stairways in the outer section of the old Flag Room, but the other staircase works. It leads to the balcony above the old Senate chamber.

If the top state officials who compose the State House trust approve Papenfuse's plan, that front room would become the home of exhibits explaining the state and federal history of the old legislative chambers.

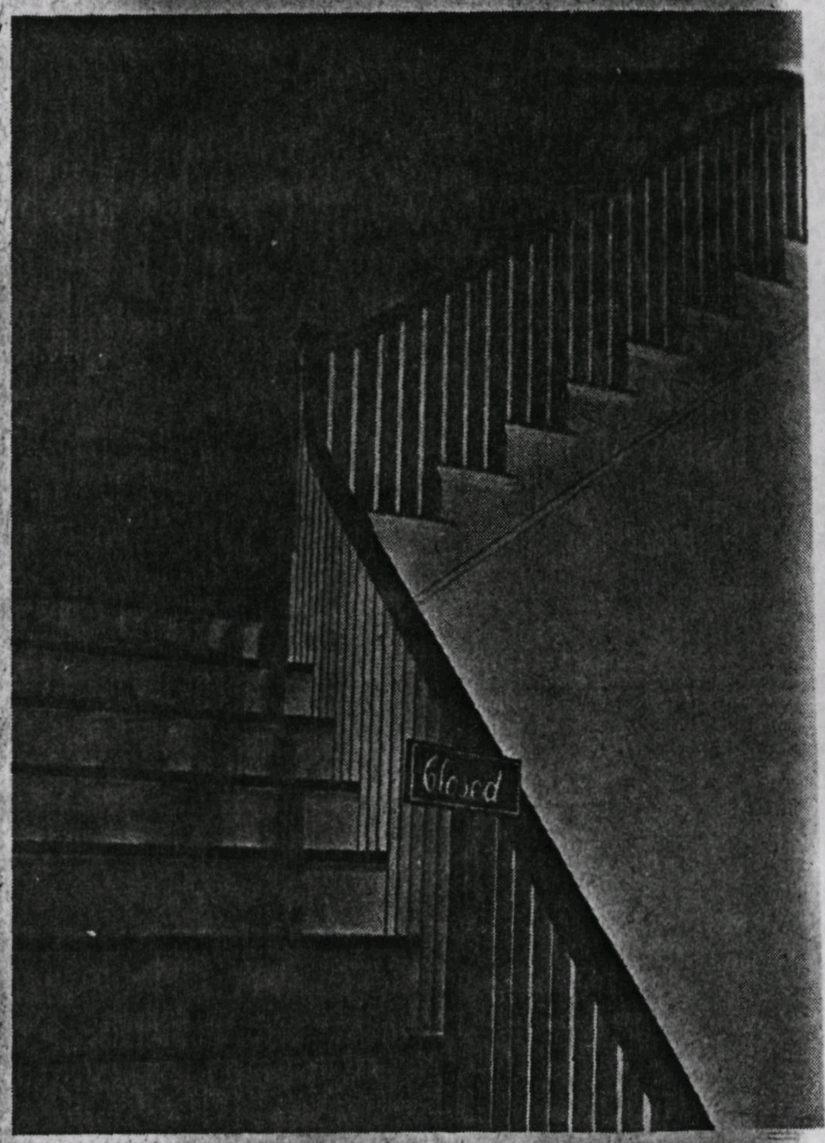
Also restored, partially at least, is the room on the opposite of the Flag Room from the old Senate chamber known as the old Archives Room, but which has served most recently as an Annapolis branch of the state attorney general's office.

Paneled along one wall with mirrors and tiled with red and black slate, the archives room is currently the repository of the huge glass cases containing the state's silver collection.

"That room was originally two smaller rooms, too," Papenfuse explained. "The back room was the original land office where citizens would come for a patent on a vacant tract of land. I'm recommending that we restore that office and turn the outer room into a museum that would explain the history of the whole building."

It all depends on how far the State House Trust is willing to go in the name of restoration.

So far, it seems fair to say, the ceiling's the limit.



THE DISCREET SIGN at the bottom of a new State House stairw understates the lack of destination.

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