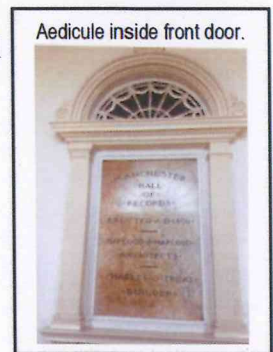


## Notes about the Probate Court building *by Susan Barlow, August 2015*

Today's Probate Court building at 66 Center Street, formerly the Hall of Records, Town Court, jail and police station, is described in the *Historic and Architectural Survey* as, "...a one-story three-bay yellow brick building with central pavilion, set on a high foundation of red sandstone rock-faced ashlar. A half-flight of red sandstone steps leads to the entry, which is recessed in a semi-circular blind arch. The doorway is comprised of paneled door embellished with bead-and-reel molding flanked by pilasters [pilaster: a shallow rectangular feature projecting from a wall, having a capital and base and usually imitating the form of a column] carrying the molded belt course (which circumscribes the building). To either side of the pilasters are half-sidelights with tracery in a diamond-in-a-circle motif. Above the door is a semi-circular fanlight with radiating muntins [muntins are the strips of wood or metal separating and holding panes of glass in a window], trimmed with egg-and-dart molding. To either side of the central pavilion, Palladian-motif windows are set in semi-circular blind arches. The original windows have been replaced and semi-circular portion infilled. The windows rest on heavy stone sills and have recessed panels below. A bead-molded belt course circumscribes this building and is carried across the windows and doorway. A modillion cornice [modillion: set of ornamental brackets under a cornice, especially as used in the Corinthian order] runs around the building and the pediment. Centered in the pediment is an elliptical window with radiating muntins and keystone motif.

The side façades have three bays. Palladian windows similar to those on the façade flank a 1/1 double-hung sash surrounded by half pilasters supporting a flat arch with keystone motif. The rear of the building has a one-story entry which has been infilled, and a new entry added on the right side.

Little of the original interior remains. It is notable for the aedicule [an architectural feature that looks like a little building or temple, consisting usually of two columns or pilasters supporting a pediment] bearing the building name, architect, builder and date built [Note – see photo of the aedicule at right, listing information including architect Hapgood & Hapgood, builder Charles O. Treat].



The Hall of Records is architecturally significant as an excellent example of the Colonial Revival applied to public buildings in Manchester. Its symmetrical façade, Palladian motifs, classical detailing are characteristic of the Colonial Revival Style and illustrate the return to classically-inspired architecture at the turn of the century. As constructed by noted architects Hapgood and Hapgood, the Hall of Records, though modest in scale for a public building, is sophisticated in its design.

The building is historically significant as the depository of Town records during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, increased concern was expressed over the safety of the Town's records. 'In 1894, the Town Meeting appointed a committee to prepare a recommendation for a new hall of records. In 1895 Frank Cheney offered the Town "on condition practically free of cost, the property of Center Street across from the Town Hall.'" At the town meeting in October, \$15,000 was allocated for the construction of the building. Completed in 1896, it was originally used to house the town records and as the Town Clerk's office. Occupying the basement was the Town Court and Probate Court, and jail cells." It served as the Police Department until 1953.

Bruce Anderson, former Manchester resident and amateur radio operator, call sign WIVOT, remembers that this building's basement served as a Civil Defense station. From 1939 to 1945, special FCC certificates were issued to licensed amateur radio operators to operate radios from this Civil Defense station and from firehouse posts throughout town. The group conducted drills, simulated emergency events, and air raid drills. In 1940, the Manchester Police Dept. acquired new radio equipment, and their old equipment was issued to this Civil Defense group – the equipment was modified to operate on the amateur radio frequency band for mobile communications. Thanks to Jim Todd, too, for information about the station and the radio operators.

---

Additional information about Town buildings that were surveyed are available on the Historical Society's web site [www.manchesterhistory.org](http://www.manchesterhistory.org) and look for "Historical & Architectural surveys" under the Special Features tab on the home page; or use the web site's "search" feature.

The following is a two-page flyer available at the Probate Court – articles from *The Hartford Courant*.

## HALL OF RECORDS MANCHESTER, CONNECTICUT

The following articles are from the Hartford Courant.

### March 26, 1896 Town Records Building

The town records building committee has organized by electing M.S. Chapman as chairman of the committee in place of K.D. Cheney, resigned. Mr. Hapgood, the architect of the building, was in town Monday and looked the ground over with the committee and it was decided to place the building on the lot west of Memorial Park. Work will begin as soon as the weather will permit and when completed the building will contain the town records and probate offices as well as the town court room.

### April 28, 1896 The Plans for the New Town Building

The contract for the new town record building has been awarded to Charles O. Treat of this place at \$12,455. The only other bid was by Barrett Brothers of Hartford at \$12,996. This is about \$2,500 inside of the amount which the town voted to expend. The building will be from plans of Hapgood & Hapgood of Hartford and will have on the main floor offices for the judge of probate and town clerk, with private rooms and vaults connected with each. In the basement will be a court room and lock-up, containing steel cages for the detention of prisoners. In the rear of the courtroom is to be a private room for the judge. Contractor Treat will begin work at once and the building will probably be ready for occupancy by the first of September.

### August 1, 1896 Town Building Corner Stone

The corner stone of the new town building was laid Wednesday though no ceremonies were observed. A copper box cemented in the stone contains latest copies of the "Herald", "News", and a "Courant" of the date of July 13, 1895, the latter containing an illustrated account of the silk industry of the town; names of the selectmen, building committee, architect and contractor are on one paper, and a copy of the vote of the town meeting authorizing the erection of the building. R.O. Cheney, one of the building committee, also placed a "solid money dollar" in the stone, a bright gold dollar.

### November 20, 1896 Frank Cheney's Gift to the Town

Frank Cheney has given to the town the plot of land included between Center, Laurel and Chestnut streets, lying west of Monument Park. This is the land on which the new town records building stands, and contains about two acres. The town teams are busily engaged grading the lot and laying out walks upon it. Trees and shrubbery will be planted and it will be used for park purposes. Later on when needed it will be used as the site for public buildings. Work on the records building is proceeding very slowly. The wood work on the interior is hardly begun and it will scarcely be finished by January 1.

### March 18, 1897 The New Town Records Building

The new town records building was inspected by the building committee and the architects Monday and was formally accepted. The probate office and the town clerk's office were at once occupied by Judge Wood and Town Clerk Daniel Wadsworth. The occupation of the new building marks a new era in the official life of the town. Heretofore the several offices changed location whenever a new official was elected. The town clerk's office has been in Mr. Wadsworth's house at Manchester Green for nearly forty-two years. When it was first located there it was in the business center of the town; but times have greatly changed the place and for many years it has been inconvenient to get to the town records. Judge Wood has removed his law office to the building. The town court has held its sessions in the new building for nearly a month. The probate offices occupy the west half of the building on the main floor and the town clerk's rooms have the corresponding east half. Below the probate rooms in the basement are the lockup and the furnace room and across the hallway is the court room. Spacious fire-proof vaults capable of accomodating the records for many years are provided for both the probate and the town records. The cells will be used exclusively for prisoners. The old lockup will be retained for lodging tramps. The land on which the building stands was given to the town by Frank Cheney and it has been graded and will be laid out into a park this spring. The building cost something less than \$15,000, the sum appropriated by the town. The building committee consisted of M.S. Chapman, chairman; K.D. Cheney, R.O. Cheney, A. Wells Case and C.W. Cowles.