

Maine Quarries, Granite Sloops, and Flagg's Naval Academy Vision

Robert Back's Painting of the chapel under construction

As an alumni, I have always admired the Naval Academy buildings and grounds. My interest in its granite architecture was rekindled by Robert Back's painting (above) of the chapel construction in 1905. I first became acquainted with this painting immediately upon entering the Alumni House in May of 2016. It hangs prominently behind the receptionist's desk. Furthermore, I thought I could recollect that my home state of Maine had shipped granite to Annapolis via stone schooners and sloops. The following month, a day trip to Stonington, Maine, confirmed my memory. Eventually my research at the Special Collection at Nimitz Library led to Maine's foundational contribution -- political suasion, if not blackmail.

In 1897 the Superintendent, Captain Philip A. Cooper, lobbied Senator Thomas Carter, a member of the Board of Visitors, in a "personal" letter regarding the deteriorating state of the Naval Academy facilities: "No corporation in the country would tolerate such a condition of affairs for an instant, and it seems strange that the Government of the United States will much longer neglect to properly provide for one of its two great schools, especially when it has been so generous towards West Point."ⁱ

Lest the invidious comparison to West Point be overlooked, Captain Cooper concluded his letter to the Senator: "All buildings here should certainly be made to endure as long [as] the Capitol at Washington."ⁱⁱ

Cooper's letter to Carter certainly was not the first attempt to emphasize the need for academy renovation. Earlier in 1895, the Naval Academy's Board of Visitors had called upon the Secretary of the Navy to form what became known as the Matthew Board to evaluate the school's ramshackle facilities. Following the 1896 Matthew report, which also embodied an architectural design for a proposed campus by Ernest Flagg of New York City, Captain Cooper conducted a detailed survey of each building. The unvarnished results were reported to the Secretary in 1897. Excerpts include:

"Since the report [the Matthew Board], the following important buildings have been surveyed as unsafe:

- **Armory:** "abandoned until supported by the erection of heavy timber props along the western wall."
- **Boat House:** "unsafe ...and unworthy of repair:"

- **Main Recitation Hall:** "...now being demolished as a menace to life:"
- **Pistol gallery:** "of no value other than to serve as a protection to the marksman from the weather and to the passer-by from being injured:" and
- **Cadets' Quarters:** "a disgrace to the nation and would not be tolerated in any self-respecting municipality- cheap, unsanitary, and in a state of decrepitude... a source of constant repair and anxiety."ⁱⁱⁱ

Ernest Flagg and Beaux-Arts Design

For the first three years, Flagg's design and services were "freely given without compensation," as noted by Cooper in a May 10th, 1898 letter to the Secretary.^{iv} This letter sought permission to finally enter into a contract for the first phase of construction based on Flagg's design. After decades of neglect, the Naval Academy campus seemed to stand on the brink of a renaissance.

Indirectly the 1893 Chicago World's Fair influenced the choice of des Beaux-Arts design selected by the Academy's lead architect, Ernest Flagg. The famous White City had showcased this Parisian style, which greatly influenced architectural preferences at the turn of the century. Flagg had recently graduated from Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The Naval Academy would become his architectural laboratory.

Tenants of the Beaux-Arts school apparent in Flagg's design included: themes from the antiquities (the carved decorations over the entrance to Bancroft Hall's rotunda); symmetry in building design and layout of the campus (Bancroft Hall facing the academic cluster of Mahan, Sampson, and Maury Halls); a flat roof (Mansard roof over Bancroft); and arched windows and doors (Dahlgren and Macdonough Halls).

Selecting a Campus-wide Building Material

Before the detailed blueprints could be completed and approved, the construction material had to be selected. The leading candidates were glazed pressed brick or granite. Aye, there was the rub.

Prior to instituting Flagg's design in 1899, the most recent construction (1893-98) in the Yard had been the red brick officer's quarters known officially as Upshur Row. Since these buildings would not be demolished by the new Academy plan and many of the most magnificent Annapolitan buildings, sidewalks, and streets were constructed of red brick, Flagg recommended that the new campus use pressed red brick with marble facings as the uniform building material.

Cooper and Flagg felt very strongly that the uniform appearance or "harmony" of the campus architecture was a priority. They fretted that the use of granite would be so expensive that a lesser material would eventually be substituted, thus sacrificing uniformity or, worse yet, reducing the number of future buildings to offset budget overruns.

On June 28, 1898, Captain Phillip Cooper wrote to Secretary of the Navy Long to nail down the selection between glazed brick and granite: “Outside the greater cost of granite it would appear that that material might be too somber in this climate and amid the regular surroundings.” The Superintendent added: “Pressed brick may be molded so readily...”

Four days after receiving Cooper’s letter, Secretary Long responded: “...careful consideration to your communication of the 28th instant ... the Department [of the Navy] prefers the use of granite.” Reasons given included:

- “... the liberal limitation put upon the cost of those buildings armory [Dahlgren Hall] and boat house [Macdonough Hall] by the naval appropriation act.”;
- “The Chairman of the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs has expressed a decided preference for this material [granite] and it is believed that his view is in accordance with the general sentiment of the committees on Naval Affairs of both the houses of Congress.”; and

What possible circumstance could have opposed the stated preference for glazed brick of both the architect and the Superintendent?

Granite, Sources and Shipping

At the time of the rehabilitation of the Naval Academy, which coincided with the peak of the Beaux-Arts movement, granite’s popularity peaked as well. Granite found roles in grand government structures, New England post offices, customs houses, bridges, and, breakwaters as well as the humble paving block and curb stone. The Maine coast of Casco Bay claimed 33 major quarries. A host of small granite production companies had entered and left the business, depending on the vicissitudes of the market. The state granite industry employed 10,000 to 15,000 quarrymen, cutters, and apprentices.

Photo of the Academy seal carved in granite at a Deer Isle, Maine, quarry (GR 1022)

Held by the Deer Isle/Stonington Historical Society

Coastal shipping was facilitated by the proximity of many Maine granite quarries to saltwater. The stone or granite sloops were custom built for moving the heavy, dense cargo. The typical sloop was 90 feet long and displaced 120 gross tons. It was broad beamed and sported a gaff-rigged mainsail of 1,000 square yards (largest sails fabricated in Maine). A crew of six could haul 200 tons of granite, which would be landed with a steam derrick at the base of the mast.

The loaded deck was so often awash that the sloops earned the nickname of “floating ledge.” Many coastal cargoes might permit jettisoning in desperate times; however, blocks of granite did not. Since the crews were often kin, the loss of a sloop could devastate an island not to mention a family.



Crotch Island quarry with Two Stone Schooners

The Construction Phase

Finally in early 1899, construction of the current Naval Academy campus was begun with the armory (Dahlgren Hall). The boat house (Macdonough Hall), also known as the new gymnasium, commenced construction soon thereafter. Both buildings were occupied on March 7, 1903. When finished, the granite armory was "...the only building completed in exact conformity with the original design."

The cadet quarters, soon to be named Bancroft Hall, was started in 1901. The dorm was completed in 1906. Later wings of Maine granite were added in 1919, 1938, and the 1960's.

In keeping with the Beaux-arts protocol for symmetry, the academic complex, Mahan, Maury, and, Sampson Halls, was positioned opposite Bancroft Hall. Growing costs resulted in the compromises foreseen by Flagg and Cooper. Designs with massive slabs of granite were quietly revised to include steel-reinforced concrete with a façade of glazed gray enamel brick, chosen to blend with the granite. The Chapel provides an excellent example of the blending of granite and glazed brick.

The reconstruction of the new Naval Academy extended over fourteen years, commencing on March 28, 1899, and lasting into 1913.

Robert Back's *The Naval Academy 1905*

This painting illustrates the canal running from Annapolis Harbor parallel to today's Porter Road. By 1903 Dahlgren and Macdonough had been completed and occupied. Bancroft Hall had

made two years of progress. The academic group had also started construction. One wonders how the midshipmen could have continued their education in such bedlam

Building materials are barged down the canal to a floating derrick and lifted onto narrow gauge flatbed cars as suggested in the painting.

Incidentally, the photograph below was used by Robert Back to ensure the historical accuracy of his painting. At the seaward end of the canal, the reader may view the masts of a schooner. The single bowsprit suggests that the vessel is a single, two-masted granite schooner with a visible derrick spar rising from the base of each mast.

Photo: View of Armory from Chapel- Naval Academy 5815jpg

Illuminating the Decision: Granite vs. Brick

The Nimitz Special Collection librarian, David D'Onofrio, suggested that the researcher peruse the Cooper family collection following a review of the official Superintendent correspondence. In one of those folders, a 1991 letter from Captain Cooper's grandson provided the answer:

“You will note in the last paragraph that he [Captain Cooper] recommended the academy buildings be built of red brick with white marble trimmings, this would match the early architecture of Maryland and Virginia, which seemed natural and desirable.

Then why the massive marble [sic] buildings in the new Naval Academy. Simple. Senator Eugene Hale of Maine was the Chairman of the powerful Senate Naval Affairs Committee. He told Mr. Flagg that Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire granite and/or marble had to be used in the new Academy or he would block any vote or appropriation for a new Academy. When Mr. Flagg told grandfather Senator Hale's terms, grandfather told Flagg to go ahead with the marble (sic) buildings. He said a new Academy was absolutely vital.”

Epilogue

During and immediately after World War I, The Navy returned to Maine, specifically Deer Isle and Stonington, for granite to be used to build what are today the fifth and sixth wings of Bancroft Hall. The original wings were the present-day third and fourth. Coincidentally, according several articles in the *Ellsworth American* (Me.), the Academy contracts with the quarries were concurrent with the purchase of Maine granite for the expansion of Sing Sing prison.

Endnotes (incomplete)

ⁱ Ltr dtd. June 12, 1897 from Captain Cooper, Superintendent USNA to Senator Thomas Carter

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ltr dtd December 16, 1897 from Captain Cooper, Superintendent USNA to Secretary of the Navy Long (?)

^{iv} Ltr. dtd, May 10, 1898 from Captain Cooper, Superintendent USNA to Secretary of the Navy Long
