

## Setting a Precedent

THE NANCY HANKS CENTER is the first federally owned and operated public building that is really public. This is made possible by the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, which allows commercial activities within a federal building.

This cooperative use gives the federal government an incentive to save and to rehabilitate historically and culturally important buildings not only to meet its own space needs, but also to enhance the commercial, cultural, and educational life of America's cities.

National Endowment for the Arts

National Endowment for the Humanities

President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

Institute of Museum Services  
(DARK INTERIOR)

National Park Service  
(CLOCK TOWER)

General Services Administration  
(EXTERIOR)

Pavilion at the Old Post Office Joint Venture  
(INNER COURT)

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## NANCY HANKS CENTER

# The Old Post Office



CHARLES A. BOSIO, COVER AND ABOVE

## Welcome to a New/Old Landmark

THE OLD POST OFFICE Building in Washington, D. C., ten floors of gray Maine granite topped by a 315-foot clock tower, seemed to have been built under an unlucky star.

In 1899, not long after the building was occupied, former Washington Postmaster James P. Willett plunged down an elevator shaft and departed this life. It became the "old" Post Office after just 15 years, replaced by a more efficient edifice. To citizens gazing up at its tower, the tallest structure

in the capital save for the Washington Monument, the building was called that "Old Tooth."

In the 1920s, a drive for more classic order and more federal office space, headed by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon, resulted in an enclave of new buildings—filling the Federal Triangle—between Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues and 15th Street. For the sake of classic conformity, the Old Tooth was to be extracted. Funds ran out before the government could complete this

ambitious project, and the Old Post Office was granted a reprieve.

Some forty years later, President John F. Kennedy rode down Pennsylvania Avenue seeing a street of urban blight just blocks from the White House. He appointed another commission to replan the avenue as a suitable "Main Street" of the nation. At first this commission (now the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation) thought only in terms of modern superblocks. Architecture was to be replaced with an updated version of

the Federal Triangle. Only the Old Post Office tower was to remain in naked solitude.

But Americans have been rediscovering their cities in recent years, and the Old Post Office has become a tower in the movement. Now reprieved and renovated, upgraded from grimy derelict to community asset, the pioneering project combines government offices with the shops and the restaurants of "The Pavilion," concerts and other public performances, and just plain fun.

FRIENDS OF THE NANCY HANKS CENTER, INC.  
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VOLKMAR WENTZEL

## Saving the "Old Tooth"

THE OLD POST OFFICE'S salvation was due to a mannerly public revolt, decisively abetted by the late Nancy Hanks, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts under Presidents Nixon and Ford (1969-1977), and to 30 million dollars in public funds.

Today the public enjoys the building's three-level cortile, or inner court, 99 feet wide and 184 feet long. The first level of this magnificent space, where mail was once sorted, is now crowded with festive restaurants, boutiques and shops and a performing arts stage. The seven upper levels with their arched galleries house renovated government offices.

That is not all. In the Old Post Office Tower, dramatically visible through the cortile's glass canopy, ten great bells peel from time to time, providing, their donors hope, that occasional "blinding flash of inspiration which helps drive civilisation on its way." The bells, which duplicate those of Westminster Abbey in London, are a gift to Congress from the Ditchley Foundation of Great Britain on the occasion of the bicentennial of the

Declaration of Independence. Like other Washington monuments, they are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, which provides guided tours to the public. The Old Post Office Tower provides one of the most impressive views of the nation's capital.

Like most federal buildings of its day, the Old Post Office was designed in the Treasury Department by the office of its supervising architect, Willoughby J. Edbrooke. Its neo-Romanesque design was inspired by the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh, one of the most renowned buildings by one of America's leading architects, Henry Hobson Richardson. The Old Post Office Building's rough stonework, massive arches and turrets contrasted sharply with the classical lines of the Federal Triangle. But, in time, people began to appreciate this grand granite pile, and it became a part of Washington's past.

In the early 1970s, when the Old Post Office's fate seemed sealed, a *Washington Post* column protested. The article pointed out that, if converted to a combination office building and festival market, the Old Post Office would draw tourists from the overcrowded Mall to the deserted downtown and thus promote the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue. While not



F. HARLAN HAMBRIGHT

long ago preserving old buildings seemed an obsolete idea, Americans were realizing that protecting the urban environment from misguided "progress" was as important to the country's true civilization as protecting the natural environment from destruction and pollution.

On April 19, 1971, two dozen protesters rallied in front of the doomed Old Tooth. Their slogan, "Don't Tear It Down," became the

name of their organization (now renamed D. C. Preservation League). The slogan echoed throughout the capital as the group attacked the Pennsylvania Avenue plan before zoning and planning agencies, the City Council and congressional committees.

The protesters' hope was not merely to salvage an old pile of granite but to adapt it to another use. They suggested the ground floor could be a festival market such



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as San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square. Later, Boston's Faneuil Hall Market Place and Baltimore's Harbor Place, among others, were also successful in contributing to the public's happiness and in attracting people downtown again.

The new mood began to catch on; officials who had espoused the radical rebuilding of Pennsylvania Avenue began to back away. Still the government's landlord, the General Services Administration

(GSA) clutched the death warrant. It hoped to replace the Old Tooth with a vast enlargement of the nearby Internal Revenue Service Building.

## "Old buildings are like old friends"

ENTER NANCY HANKS, a crafty politician and a girlishly unaffected, warm-hearted woman.

A graduate of Duke University, Miss Hanks began her exceptionally distinguished public service career in 1951 on the staff of the Office of Defense Mobilization. She served as a White House special projects assistant, and she worked for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund on various studies concerning foreign policy, defense, education, social and economic affairs, and the arts. Most of all, she learned, more intimately than most, how government works.

This put her in good stead when, in 1969, she was appointed chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Council on the Arts. These were young institutions at the time, looked upon with skepticism by many Americans. But under Miss Hanks' dedicated stewardship, the arts became as much the government's proper concern as they were in Thomas Jefferson's time.

In 1971, Bill N. Lacy, who was director of architecture and environmental arts at the National Endowment for the Arts, introduced Nancy Hanks to the Old Post Office as a possible location for her agency.

The place was a mess. The ground floor was carved up by partitions. Eighty years of grime had accumulated on the glass over the mail sorting room, and the skylight was covered with metal sheathing. All the same, Miss Hanks was enamored.

"She cared deeply—she cared about little things," said Lacy. "Nancy used all her charm, cunning and power of persuasion to save

the building." Miss Hanks arranged a breakfast meeting with the GSA administrator. She took him a single rose and ultimately got



successful negotiations going. She talked to congressmen and told them of her ambition to use this prominent avenue both for government offices and public enjoyment. But commercial activities were legally prohibited in federal buildings. Nancy Hanks' office drafted the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act, which passed Congress in 1976. (See last page.)

"Old buildings are like old friends," Miss Hanks told a Senate subcommittee. "They reassure people in times of rapid change. They encourage people to dream about their cities—to think before they build, to consider the alternatives before they tear down."

She made her point. In 1976, renovation began with GSA's plans of a joint venture of architects and engineers led by Arthur Cotton Moore, FAIA.

But Nancy Hanks never saw the completion of the building she so adamantly fought to save for the public's pleasure. She died on January 7, 1983. That February, Congress designated the Old Post Office Building and its surrounding public plazas as the "Nancy Hanks Center."