

# Old Post Office Tower

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
in cooperation with  
General Services Administration

## Nancy Hanks Center

Washington, D.C.

When completed in 1899 the Old Post Office building was criticized as looking "like a cross between a cathedral and a cotton mill," by *New York Times*. This criticism sparked off a seven-decade struggle to save the building. Rededicated in 1983, the Old Post Office is an example of the remarkable transformations that old buildings can undergo and the rich possibilities they can offer.

Tours of the Old Post Office Tower provide visitors with the history of the building, a breathtaking vista from the 315-foot clock tower and a view of the Congress Bells. Tours begin from the glass-enclosed elevator on the stage level.



Photo courtesy of Postal Service Library

### THE CONGRESS BELLS

In honor of our Nation's bicentennial in 1976, Congress was presented a set of English change ringing bells by the private Ditchley Foundation of Great Britain. In April 1983 the bells found a permanent home in the Old Post Office clock tower. They were dedicated as an everlasting symbol of friendship between the two nations.

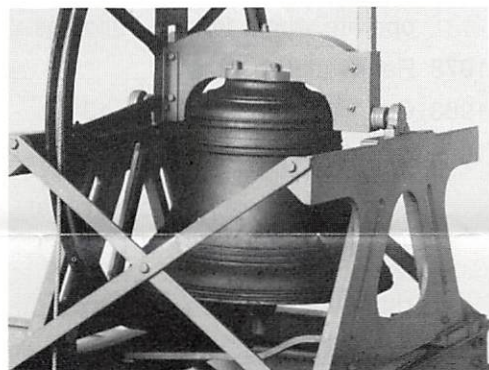
The 10 Congress Bells range in weight from 581 to 2953 pounds and are replicas of the bells at Westminster

Abbey in London. They were made at Whitechapel Foundry which cast the bells for the abbey four centuries ago. The bells are in the key of D major.

The practice of change ringing combines the disciplines of art and science to produce a unique form of music. Change ringing involves continuously changing the order in which the bells strike. The method of producing these "changes" is precise and requires extensive training,

practice and concentration.

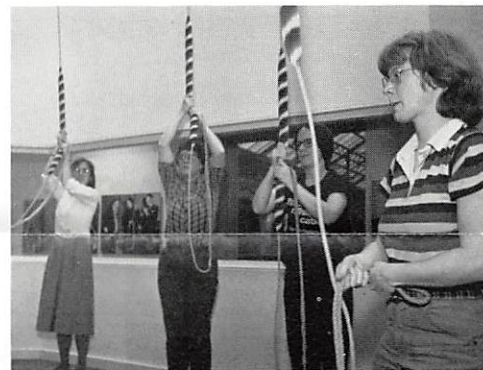
A full peal, which is a continuous performance that takes about 3½ hours to complete, is rung in honor of the opening and closing of Congress and on State occasions, including all national holidays. To achieve this feat, the tower is host to a weekly practice session by the bells' stewards, members of the Washington Ringing Society, of the North American Guild of Change Ringers.



Bell in "rest" position



Bell in "ready" position



Ringling the Congress Bells

### THE NANCY HANKS CENTER

As chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts (1969-77), the late Nancy Hanks led a diverse group of citizens, organizations, and government agencies in preserving the Old Post Office Building. "Old buildings are like old friends . . . they assure us in times of change," Miss Hanks told a Senate subcommittee while testifying in behalf of saving the

building. She saw in the Old Post Office an opportunity to promote the ideals of the National Endowment and "to encourage people to dream about their cities, to consider the alternatives before they tear them down."

Congress honored her by naming the Old Post Office and its adjacent plazas the "Nancy Hanks Center."



## STORY OF SURVIVAL

At its completion, the Old Post Office stood out as a symbol of prestige for the U.S. Postal Service which boasted of the buildings technological innovations. It was the largest government building in the District at the turn of the century and the first with a clock tower. It was the city's first steel frame building, and the steel was covered by a skin of granite to make it fireproof. The electric power plant, capable of driving 3900 lights, was the first to be installed in a building here.

The building is a fine example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture and the tower remains a prominent point above the District's uniform skyline. The interior courtyard has remained one of Washington's largest uninterrupted spaces at 99W x 184L x 160H feet.

Despite all these features, the word "old" was attached to the building only 15 years after it was completed and someone's description of the clock tower as an "old tooth" became the rally cry to tear it down. Critics mocked the massive arches and turrets. Controversy surrounded changing tastes for building styles, especially in the triangle formed by Pennsylvania Avenue, Constitution Avenue, and 15th Street where city planners wanted to incorporate a classical architectural style in an attempt to bring order and grandeur. This resulted in the construction of the Federal Triangle after World War I and made way for the extraction of the "old tooth" when the Postal Service moved out in 1934.

At first it was lack of money in the federal budget, due to the depression,

which saved the Old Post Office. The building was occupied for the next 44 years by several agencies, but time was taking its toll. Its deterioration was dramatized in 1956 when a 1,200 pound clock weight crashed through two floors. Luckily nobody was hurt.

When the building was slated for demolition, many concerned citizens asked why. Thanks to the diligence of the Washington preservationist group Don't Tear It Down and the National Endowment of the Arts headed by Nancy Hanks, the Old Post Office with its public use areas, federal office space, and National Park Service tour stands today as a fine example of adaptive use. The Old Post Office is a symbol on America's "main street" that the nation's older structures can be saved and given a new life.



*Pennsylvania Avenue, 1909*



*Decorated for Flag Day, circa 1910*



*Renovated interior courtyard, 1984*

## CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

- 1890 Congressional committee selects site and drafts bill for purchase in same day.
- 1891 Willoughby J. Edbrooke, Supervising Architect of the Treasury, appointed to design new post office building.
- 1892 Construction begins.
- 1899 Construction is completed. Building used as headquarters for U.S. Postal Service and District of Columbia mail depot.
- 1909 Postal Service employees begin tradition of Flag Day here on June 14.
- 1917 District post office moves from building to Union Station.
- 1934 Postmaster General moves to new headquarters and building is used for government overflow and storage.
- 1961 Report to President Kennedy describes Pennsylvania Avenue as "blighted area." Presidential advisory board formed to study the future of the "Avenue of Presidents."
- 1964 Advisory body recommends demolition of Old Post Office with the tower to remain.
- 1971 Permit for building demolition approved. Preservationists group, "Don't Tear It Down", plays a key role in stopping the wrecking.
- 1975 Nancy Hanks testifies on behalf of building's restoration.
- 1976 Congress passes the Cooperative Use Act, which enables private ventures to operate within federal buildings.
- 1978 Renovation begins.
- 1983 Congress Bells ring and 13¢ postcard is issued in honor of building dedication. Building opens as home for the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 1984 Public use area dedicated. The Pavilion and the Old Post Office Observation Tower opens to public.

## ADMINISTRATION

The Old Post Office Tower is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior in cooperation with General Services Administration. For more information contact the N.P.S. site manager at 900 Ohio Drive, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20242 or call (202) 523-5691.

