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Cullum Memorial Hall

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CULLUM MEMORIAL HALL

This structure, a memorial gift donated to the Military Academy by Major General George W. Cullum, is located on the eastern side of the Cadet Plain. The front of the building overlooks the cadet drill and athletic fields which make up the Plain, and the balcony of the rear side of the structure commands a beautiful view overlooking the Hudson River. General Cullum, an 1833 graduate of the Academy, a general during the Civil War, and the Superintendent of the Academy from 1864 until 1866, left a sum of \$250,000 to West Point for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a memorial hall to house trophies of war, paintings, and monuments of distinguished graduates. (Ref #1, page 7) In 1893 the Academy Board of Trustees selected the New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White to design the building. Construction actually began in 1896 and was essentially completed in 1898. (Ref #4)

The general architectural design of the building is of the Classic style, typifying the memorial temples used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to honor their heroes of war and battle. Considering the intended purpose of the building, this chosen style of design was most appropriate. The predominating architectural trend throughout the building is that of the Greek Ionic Order although a considerable portion

of the interior decor is based upon the very ornate Corinthian Order.

From the outside, the overall effect of the building is that of a large rectangular structure, somewhat severe in its simplicity, but quite in keeping with the general architectural tone of the Academy. The details of the exterior Ionic treatment are based upon those of the Erechtheion, one of the Greek temples of Athens built upon the Acropolis north of the Parthenon. (Ref#2, page 516) The material used throughout the exterior of Cullum Hall is Pink Milford Granite initially having the effect of white marble. (Ref #2, page 516) The weathering effects of the past sixty years have dulled the original finish of the stone slightly giving the structure an air of permanence and stability.

When viewed from the front, the building's symmetry is evident. The central portion is set off with a colonnade of four half engaged Ionic columns which support a Greek entablature bearing the inscription, "TO THE OFFICERS AND GRADUATES OF THE UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY." The features distinguishing the Ionic Order of the colonnade are the spacing of the vertical flutes or channels (24 for a full circumference), the spiral or volute design of the capitals, the triple fascia formation of the architrave (a construction in three planes like stepped continuous beams), and the surmounting inscribed frieze and cornice moulding. (Ref #5, page 168; Ref #3, page 105) The central wall section is slightly recessed to conform

with the half engaged columns and the resulting effect is a division of the building into three sections, two symmetrical wings about a central gallery. The unframed lower windows of the building are not accentuated and this feature is characteristic of many of the early Greek temples which had no windows at all. (Ref #3, page 80) The reason little emphasis was placed on embellishing the walls with openings can be attributed to the fact that the walls of Greek temples were frequently masked behind colonnades and that the sunlight of the Greek environment usually provided enough interior lighting by simply filtering through open doorways. (Ref #6, page 313) The wall space resulting from limited use of window openings is well suited to the hanging of pictures and mounting of commemorative plaques, tablets, and shields; a feature well in keeping with the intended purpose of the building. The upper windows of the building are clerestory in nature and indicate somewhat of a departure from the pure form of the Greek temple. This departure is understandable in that the main ballroom does not open to ground floor doorways and some means of bringing in light had to be achieved. Another slight departure from the Ionic Order of the exterior architecture is the positioning of large square stone plinths at the base of each outer column. (Ref #3, page 105)

The rear or east side of the building is somewhat similar to the front of the building except that the Ionic columns have been replaced

by six large pilasters with plain molded capitals. Between the pilasters, doorway openings connect the observation balcony with an interior loggia.

Another area of particular interest on the exterior of the building is the art work along the upper cornice. The small regularly-spaced decorative stones are known as antefixae and their original function, which is no longer necessary with modern construction methods, was to anchor the heavy roofing tile used in ancient times. (Ref #1, page 7) The large stones at each end of the row of antefixae are purely ornamental and are known as acroterion. The Greeks usually placed these at the extremities of the roofing pediment (along the ridges or eaves). (Ref #5, page 5) The rain spouts molded in the form of lion heads are typical of those used throughout the Classic and Hellenistic periods. (Ref #6, page 245)

Additional embellishment of interest on the exterior of the building is found in the placement of four massive bronze bombards at the four corners of the terrace balcony. These guns were captured during the Mexican War during the Vera Cruz campaign. Also impressive are the two large Spanish guns flanking the entrance doorway mounted upon two large granite plinths. (Ref #2, page 516)

Moving into the interior of the building, one passes through an

entrance doorway of heavy construction in sturdy bronze, mounted between two pilasters supporting a plain pediment. The downstairs consists of a loggia done with red tile flooring, vestibule and hallways done in Georgia White Marble, and reception, dressing, and service rooms. (Ref #7) At the south end of the building is a grand double stairway leading to the main ballroom above. The stairs are also of Georgia White Marble, and the bannisters are finished in oak. (Ref #7) Of interest are the partially engaged square pilasters bordering the landings and balconies of the double stairway. The capitals of these pilasters are of the Corinthian Order whereas the exterior column capitals are of the Ionic Order. This variation is typically Greek in nature in that it was their common practice to give their pilasters capitals different from those of the Order with which they were associated. The Romans were noted for maintaining Characteristics of the same architectural Order throughout. (Ref #5, page 284)

The main ballroom on the second floor is 107 feet long and 69 feet wide. The threefold paneled entrance joining the ballroom to the grand double stairway is formed by four caryatide columns supporting a richly decorated architrave. This entranceway is practically a replica of the Erechtheion's south portico. (Ref #2, page 517; Ref #4, page 104) The sculptured female figures received the name of Caryatides in that they traditionally have been taken to represent the women

of Caria, who sided with the Persians against the Greeks, and were made slaves. (Ref #3, page 967) An overlooking gallery is located above the Caryatide entrance at the southern end of the ballroom and a stage, bordered in decorative bronze, is located at the north end. The most distinguishing architectural feature of the ballroom is that it is surrounded by a colonnade of 20 half engaged smooth round columns with ornate capitals of Corinthian Order. These ornamental columns are the only examples of the ornate Corinthian Order of Classic architecture at the Academy. (Ref #1, page 8) The names of all the more important battles ^{in which the US participated during} of the 19th century ^{and thru WWI in the 20th.} are inscribed in the frieze above the Corinthian colonnade around the entire circumference of the room. The coffered ceiling is richly decorated and divided into 340 illuminated recessed caissons.

In summary, Cullum Memorial Hall represents the most comprehensive example of Classic architecture at West Point. The only other significant examples of this architectural style to be found at the Academy are the Old Cadet Chapel located in the cemetery, and Battle Monument located on Trophy Point.

CULLUM MEMORIAL HALL

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