

# The Engineering Center: One Walnut Street, Boston

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*The new home of the Engineering Center incorporates a rich history and culture to serve as a living monument embodying the best of the past, present and future.*

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H. HOBART HOLLY

**T**he engineering profession has a proud heritage that can serve as a guide and inspiration for the present and the future. It is therefore most appropriate that the Engineering Center should have as its home a building that is a monument to the past — a constant reminder of our engineering heritage and of our national heritage of which we both are a part.

The heritage that a building represents is the people associated with it, people that will now include the membership and staff of the three sponsoring engineering societies that constitute the Engineering Center: the Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section/ASCE, the Massachusetts Association of Land Surveyors and Civil Engineers, and the American Consulting Engineers Council of New England.

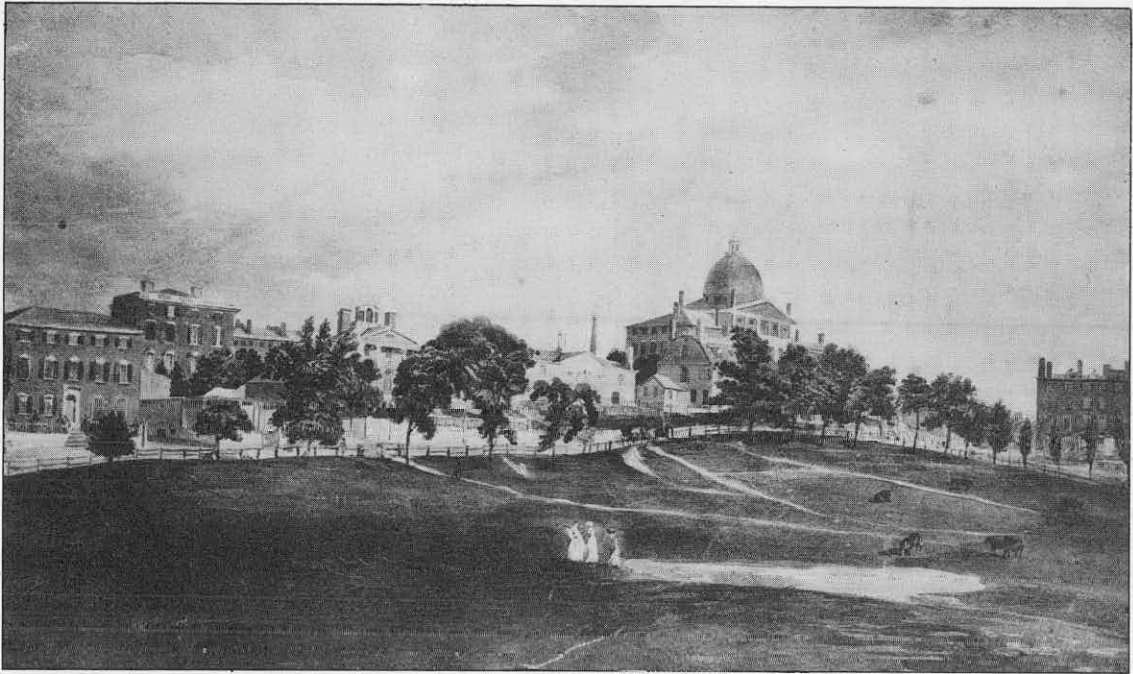
The building at One Walnut Street was the product of Charles Bulfinch, the leading architect of his time. While Bulfinch was engaged as the architect for this building as well as for the Massachusetts State House and many other historic buildings, Loammi Baldwin was serving as engineer for the historic Middlesex Canal, and Simeon Borden was establishing the Borden Base Line. Thus, One Walnut Street stands as a tribute to these pioneers in their respective related fields and to all of those who have made contributions to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the nation through the professions they represent.

It is also appropriate that the Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section/ASCE, as the oldest technical society in the United States (established in 1848), should have its headquarters in a building that reflects heritage and prestige.

Henceforth, a visit to the Engineering Center will provide an experience that links the endeavors of the present with a past in which the engineers of today can take pride and inspiration.

## Early History

One of Charles Bulfinch's most noted achievements was the design of many outstanding homes on Beacon Hill that established a style of elegance that has made the area on the hill



In the 1809 watercolor by J.R. Smith, the Phillips House is shown at the left with the entrance on Beacon Street. Courtesy of the Bostonian Society/Old State House.

famous. The new home of the Engineering Center was built on the corner of Beacon Street and what is now Walnut Street, with its original entrance on Beacon Street. According to the original development, Walnut Street was laid out as a way in 1799 and did not become an accepted street until some years later. Built in 1804 in the "square style" for which Bulfinch was noted, it was one of the earliest, and most probably the first, brick house on Beacon Street on which it was later numbered 38.

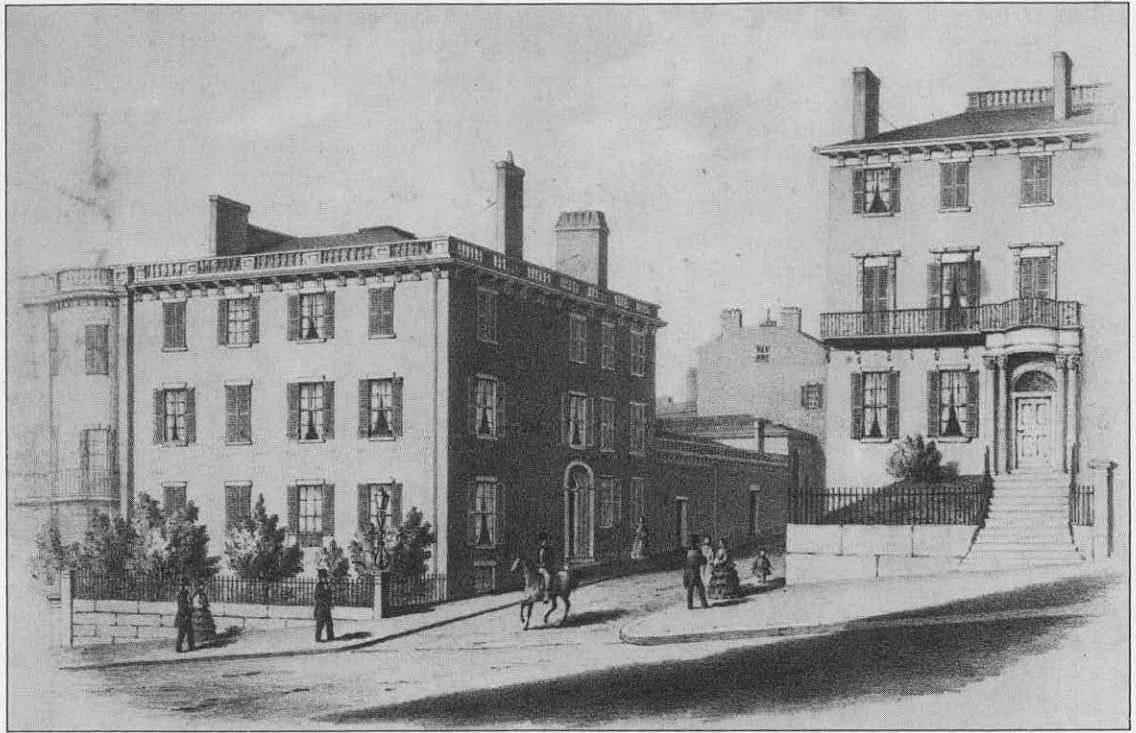
The builder and first resident of the house, John Phillips (1770-1823), was one of Boston's most prominent citizens. From 1804, the year the house was built, until his death he was a member of the Massachusetts State Senate, serving as presiding officer for the last ten years. When Boston became a city, Phillips was elected the first mayor in 1822. He served for one year and declined re-election for reasons of health. Born in the house was his son Wendell Phillips, the famous orator for anti-slavery and other causes.

Of particular interest, the land deed from the developer, Jonathan Mason, to John Phillips contains the restriction that no building in the

development shall be over three stories in height, exclusive of cellar and roof, for a period of thirty years. During the Phillips ownership of nineteen years, there is no record of significant changes having been made to the house.

Two years after John Phillips died in 1823, his heirs sold the house to Thomas Lindall Winthrop, who was also a very prominent Bostonian. He served in the State Senate and as Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts from 1826 to 1832 while he resided at the house. He was highly esteemed especially for his work on behalf of public schools. He served as president of both the Massachusetts Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society.

To accommodate his large family, Winthrop moved the entrance to the Walnut Street side and altered the Beacon Street facade. It appears that he raised the upper story and made the third-story windows higher, thus enlarging the living space while remaining within the three-story restriction. The ells were added in Winthrop's time and changes were made to the staircase and the interior. Since Bulfinch was still living at this time, it is possible that he



This 1843 view shows the Phillips-Winthrop House with the entrance on Walnut Street. Courtesy of the Bostonian Society/Old State House.

might have had a hand in the alterations.

On Winthrop's death in 1841, the house was sold at public auction to Thomas Dixon. Thomas Dixon brought international fame with him. He was born in London but served the Dutch government as Consul General at Boston and abroad. He was made a Knight of the Netherlands for his services.

During the time of Dixon's ownership, the Boston Society of Civil Engineers was founded not too far away at the United States Hotel in Boston on April 26, 1848. A few months later, on July 3rd, the first regular meeting of the society was held and a room for meetings was found in Joy's Building on Washington Street just a short walk away from the house.

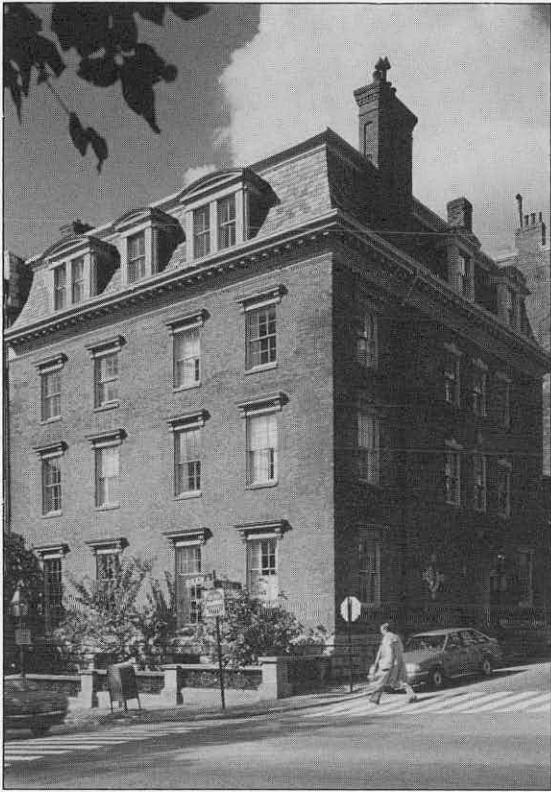
Dixon's family owned the house until 1858 when they sold it to Nathan Matthews. Since Matthews also owned buildings at Nos. 3 and 5 Walnut Street, he made some changes to the house on the side that faced his other properties. Matthews was a self-made businessman who was noted for his philanthropies. He donated Matthews Hall and several scholar-

ships to Harvard.

Matthews lived in the house only two years and then sold it to John Chipman Gray who owned it for but one year. Gray was a prominent lawyer. He served as Judge Advocate, and for five years was a lecturer at Harvard Law School.

Robert M. Mason purchased the house in 1861 but appears not to have taken up residence there until 1866. Mason was a successful Boston businessman whose principal philanthropic interest was the Massachusetts Soldiers Fund. Mason's daughters, Ida M. and Ellen F. Mason, inherited the house in 1879 and lived there together for about fifty years. The sisters were prominent socially in Boston and at summer places in Newport, Rhode Island, and Dublin, New Hampshire. It was Mason who added the building's mansard roof, effectively making it a four-story building, the three-story limitation having long expired. Also added were some Italianate features that may have reflected the Mason family's residence abroad for some years.





**The Engineering Center, One Walnut Street, at the present time.**

## Recent History

In 1931 Mrs. James J. Storrow purchased One Walnut Street from the Mason Estate, and in 1939 donated it to the Judge Baker Foundation as its headquarters. The work performed to transform the former private residence to accommodate institutional functions removed some of Bulfinch's and other later architectural features from the interior, but made it adaptable to the uses of the Engineering Center without requiring extensive alterations. Under this ownership a number of charitable and service organizations had activities in the building, but by far the most important were the Judge Baker Guidance Center and the Boston Children's Services Association.

In 1976 the building was acquired by the Phillips-Winthrop House Trust to serve as the

law offices of Mahoney, Hawkes & Goldings. Some interior changes were effected in order to suit its new, more modern function. In 1978 an exterior restoration was accomplished that removed many decorative features that had been added over the years. Most noticeable was the removal of its exterior gray paint in order to expose once more the old red brick. On June 7, 1990, the Phillips-Winthrop House Trust sold One Walnut Street to the Engineering Center Education Trust.

## Heritage

The building at One Walnut Street that one views today is an historic building that contributes to, and is part of, historic Beacon Hill. The mansard roof is certainly not Bulfinch, but even with this later addition the Bulfinch lines and features are still in evidence. The changed features that remain reflect the history of Beacon Hill and Boston over the nearly two centuries since the house was built. The interior arrangement is much altered except in the staircase and fireplaces. The proportions of the rooms and much of the original woodwork has been retained, preserving an atmosphere of substance and elegance culled from the past. In this building, engineers can be reminded of their rich heritage on which they base their present and future.

As the Engineering Center, history will be made at One Walnut Street by the engineers associated with it. As these engineers will now become part of the history of the house, their actions will merge into the lives and dreams of the past residents of the house who are the heritage that we inherit.

One Walnut Street represents a proud past. It will be a fitting reminder to those of the engineering societies that constitute the Engineering Center of the great heritage that they represent as they make history today and in the future.

*H. HOBART HOLLY is Chairman of the History and Heritage Committee of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section/ASCE.*