

CONSTRUCTION HISTORY – AN EXPLORATION

On December 2nd 2009 a symposium on this subject was convened at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC and delivered to a peak audience of 60. It was organized by CHSA in partnership with the Museum. Assistance was received from the Whiting Turner Contracting Company, who celebrated their centennial in 2009, and also from the Associated General Contractors of America.

The **objectives** of this event were:

1. To establish why the study and research of the history of all aspects of American design and construction is important,
2. To compare notes on our current activities and commitments of the representative entities in the field,
3. To explore opportunities for future collaboration on the subject,
4. To identify initiatives that can be taken to expand awareness of the value of construction history throughout the industry and with the public.

The format involved three distinct panels with a total of 21 speakers and moderators.

Full details of the program and speakers can be found at the CHSA website (Events page).

Introduction

In opening remarks titled “The Industry that Time Forgot”, Brian Bowen, Chair of CHSA, suggested that the key reason that so little attention was paid to the history of the American construction industry at large was its fragmentation into many parts with no single body to speak for it. Thus its comprehensive history was largely ignored by the media, academia and the industry itself. CHSA was formed to encourage a unified examination of construction history in the broadest sense.

Summary Panel 1: Federal Agencies (GSA, NPS, Corps of Engineers, Architect of the Capitol, Smithsonian)

All were impressed by the scope of the GSA (www.gsa.gov) and NPS (www.nps.gov) activities in the field of preservation and in particular the extensive documentation completed and underway, all of which is open to the public. In addition to technical records (drawings and specifications), NPS also archives other documentation, such as contracts. Of particular interest is a growing register of construction material and equipment suppliers.

The US Army Corps of Engineers traces its history back to 1794. Its Office of History is charged with recording and preserving this history and collecting artifacts and memorabilia. In addition to military history, the scope includes the extensive Corps activities in the civil works arena. Far more information is available at their website – www.usace.army.mil/history

The Architect of the Capitol (www.aoc.gov) is responsible for far more real estate than just the Capitol building itself and for far more than design and building. An operations and restoration work force totals more than 1,500. Extensive study and research materials on the Capitol area facilities are available for access.

The Smithsonian (www.si.edu) maintains excellent records of its own facilities and has various construction documents and artifacts in the collection of the Division of Work and Industry.

Summary Panel 2: Professional and Trade Associations (AIA, ASCE, ACEC, AGC, CMAA, University of Maryland)

The AIA’s Historic Resources Committee (www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc) was formed in 1890 and is the oldest standing committee; it has over 5,000 registered members. The focus understandably is on the identification, protection, preservation and reuse of the country’s architectural heritage. This is done through broad education initiatives, an awards program and conferences. The History and Heritage Committee of the ASCE (www.asce

org/history/index) was established in 1964, with the mission of conducting programs to increase understanding of the professions contribution to the development of society. It implements landmarks and awards programs and arranges symposia with one on the Hoover Dam planned for October 2010, the 75th anniversary. ACEC (www.acec.org) has no specific history mission, but incorporates lessons from history in such current activities as its proposals for a new definition of performance based design.

AGC of America (www.agc.org) will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2018 and this has awakened a new level of interest in the historic contributions made by its members.

CMAA (www.cmaanet.org) was formed in 1982 and has focused its history activities largely on examining and documenting the growth of construction management since the 1960's.

Finally, Grace Palladino, author of *Skilled Hands, Strong Spirits*, spoke of the little known and little appreciated history of the building trade unions and how this should be regarded as an essential part of Construction History.

Summary Panel 3: Design and Construction History Societies (SAH, CHSA, PWHS, NBM, APT/DC, SIA)

SAH (www.sah.org) was formed in 1940 and is primarily home to architectural historians, many of whom are academics. It is well supported and offers the full array services enjoyed by a well-established professional society with 3,500 members – conferences, peer-reviewed publications, etc. The Society has not shown a great deal of interest in expanding its horizons to include construction or engineering history and a collaboration with CHSA was suggested.

CHSA (www.constructionhistorysociety.org), only two years old, is growing and establishing itself as a home for those interested in both broad and narrow subjects of construction history. It has an affiliation agreement with the British-based CHS.

PWHS (www.apwa.net/about/sig/pwhs) established in 1975, is a branch of APWA, and is focused naturally on public works history. It produces books, essays and oral histories of luminaries in the field and has a joint annual conference with APWA.

The National Building Museum (www.nbm.org) was started in 1985 and, beyond being a custodian of the magnificent Pension Building, fields multiple programs dealing with innovation, sustainability, youth education and careers, plus mounting exhibitions relating to design and construction. Its archives are steadily growing in importance.

APT/DC (www.aptdc.org) is a branch of the main association. It concentrates on all aspects of preservation and conservation of the built environment. It numbers a diverse range of members from the public sector, practitioners and academics.

SIA (www.sia-web.org) was begun in 1971 and its interests focus on virtually any feature of our industrial, technological and engineering heritage, including of course the buildings and facilities. There is an annual conference, tours, visits and publications. The Society is nurtured by Michigan Technological University.

Afternoon Speakers

Professors Richard Burt and Linda Ruth of the School of Building Sciences, Auburn University (www.auburn.edu/bcsi) and members of CHSA, gave an invigorating presentation on Construction History in Academia, decrying the lack of attention to the subject in most curricula and making an excellent case as to why this omission should be corrected. To do so they drew on their own courses and research in the field at Auburn to illustrate the value CH can bring into the curriculum and the wide-open opportunities it presents for research. Linda's course led to the development of a potential CH text book using selected buildings from each key period of history to illustrate the evolution of design and of the construction process. Richard summarized his own research dealing with WW II 'conflict' sites in Normandy and London and emphasized the level of interest (and hence funding) that these have attracted.



Exterior of National Building Museum

Conclusions

- There was a great deal of information shared over a short period and some general conclusions can be drawn from the presentations and the discussion that followed.

- There is an amazing quantity and variety of activities being undertaken in the field on many different aspects of construction history, most of which tend to concentrate on ‘objects’ as distinct from ‘process’.
- The exchange of information and the identification of multiple sources of research materials were extremely valuable.
- There was general acceptance of CHSA and of construction history as a new discipline; calls were made for closer collaboration in the future between the societies and associations represented.
- The moves being made with ASC and ASCE to introduce construction history into construction and engineering curricula were noted and supported.
- Opportunities for research and scholarship clearly abound and would be improved with better access for publication.
- Some concerns were expressed that Construction History was not well understood. As a new field its definition will slowly emerge.
- Recommendations were made to encourage more research into and record-keeping of , the workers active in the industry, including a better understanding of the role of the unions, employer-worker relations, oral histories of key players, etc.



Interior of National Building Museum

Acronym Key:

ACEC	American Council of Engineering Companies
AGC	Associated General Contractors of America
AIA	American Institute of Architects
AOC	Architect of the Capitol
APT/DC	Association for Preservation Technology, D.C. Chapter
APWA	American Public Works Association
ASC	American Schools of Construction
ASCE	American Society of Civil Engineers
CHSA	Construction History Society of America
CMAA	Construction Management Association of America
GSA	General Services Administration
NBM	National Building Museum
NPS	National Park Service
PWHS	Public Works Historical Society
SAH	Society of Architectural Historians
SIA	Society for Industrial Archeology
USACE	United States Army Corps of Engineers