

Connecticut's Old State House and the Three Branches of State Government

The Old State House's construction and its role as state capitol

Many of Connecticut's most important debates took place at the Old State House. Constructed over a period of three years, the General Assembly (the legislative branch of Connecticut's state government) first met in the building in May of 1796.

Connecticut had two state capitals: Hartford and New Haven. Originally, the government met in Hartford during the spring and in New Haven during the fall. After 1818, the government alternated capitals on a yearly basis. In 1873, the General Assembly voted to make Hartford the sole capital. This act was later ratified by the people of Connecticut.

After the new State Capitol opened in 1878, this building became Hartford's City Hall. In 1915, a new (and larger) City Hall opened. Subsequently, civic groups used the Old State House for meetings. It also served as headquarters of the American Red Cross during World War II.

Twice during the 20th century, the Old State House faced an uncertain future and was almost torn down. However, citizens fought to save the building. In 1959, it became a museum, and a year later was designated as a National Historic Landmark. In 2008, Connecticut's General Assembly assumed management of this important and historic building.

Home to 3 Branches of State Government

Unlike today's State Capitol, the Old State House housed all three branches of government in a single building. The second floor has two large chambers. They were used for meetings of the legislature. At the time, the General Assembly consisted of the House of Representatives and the Governor's Council. In 1818, the Council became known as the State Senate.

The first floor consisted of a courtroom and offices. In fact, many 18th and early 19th century citizens referred to this building as "the courthouse." The Superior Court of Errors, then the highest court in the state, met in this building as did lower courts.

The treasurer and comptroller had first floor offices, while the secretary of state had an office on the second floor. The governor, however, did not have an onsite office until 1820. Connecticut governors possessed little real power during much of the 18th and early 19th century. In 1818, a new state constitution gave governors the power of veto. Governor Oliver Wolcott Jr. was the first governor to occupy this office.



Location of Connecticut's Old State House

Since Hartford's earliest days, this site has been important to the citizens of Connecticut. Today, we refer to this area and its nearby surroundings as State House Square.

Two buildings were located in this area prior to the construction of the Old State House. Shortly after Hartford's founding in 1635, settlers built a meeting house to be used for religious and civic meetings. In 1639, Reverend Thomas Hooker preached the Fundamental Orders (considered by some to be the earliest American Constitution) in this early meeting house.

As the colony's government grew, more space was needed. Citizens built a wooden state house on this site in 1720. It caught fire in 1783 during celebrations marking the end of the Revolutionary War. Although repaired and used for another decade, more space was needed by the 1790s.

The Old State House replaced the earlier building. Evidence indicates that Charles Bulfinch, a well known Boston architect, designed the building. To guard against fire, builders used brick and Connecticut brownstone.

Today's Old State House

Today, the Old State House remains a place to discuss and debate! We welcome visitors to engage in the present by touching the past. We hope you will come back often to participate!

