

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Alfred B. Mullett
1834-1890

Maine was an important factor in the government career of Alfred B. Mullett. The state was represented by such powerful political figures of the Gilded Age as James G. Blaine, Hannibal Hamlin, William Pitt Fessenden, and Lot M. Morrill. Their positions in the U.S. Congress influenced the course of the federal government's architecture program, with Mullett at its head from 1866 to 1874. Maine was also the location of granite and other building materials used in the construction of public buildings. It is no wonder, therefore, for a state with a small population, that it should possess so many federal buildings or that Mullett should have paid so much attention to the requests of its official representatives.

Mullett was born in 1834 in Taunton, Somerset County, England. The Mullett family was engaged in farming activities and in a small dry goods store in Taunton. Attracted by reports of new opportunities in the United States, the family emigrated in 1844, settling in Glendale, Ohio, an agricultural community on the outskirts of Cincinnati. At that time, Cincinnati was an expanding and prosperous urban center. Its growth in manufacturing and the arts provided an attractive setting for developing an

architectural interest and building professional and political alliances. Young Mullett helped his father with farming and attended Farmers College, a nearby school that emphasized technical education. He left school on his own accord in 1854.¹

In about 1856, Mullett entered the firm headed by well-known architect Isaiah Rogers. Rogers had moved from Boston to Cincinnati in 1848 to design the Burnet House hotel and subsequently established a flourishing practice in his new location. With Rogers' firm, Mullett rose from apprentice to partner by 1859 or 1860. Apparently, Mullett left the partnership abruptly in 1860 and established his own practice. By then, Mullett claimed leading Cincinnati merchants and political figures as clients.² In late 1860, Mullett crossed the Atlantic to visit family members in Taunton and to make a grand tour of Europe. He travelled through cities and towns in France, Germany, and Belgium, making note of the urban scene, cathedrals, and other architectural landmarks.³

The following year, when the Civil War broke out, Mullett was back in Cincinnati. He organized the Dennison, Ohio regiment to fight for the Union cause. Ohio's quota had been filled, however, and Mullett's regiment disbanded in Washington.⁴ In June of 1861, Mullett entered the Treasury Department as a clerk. Noting the departure of the head of the Bureau of Construction, Captain William B. Franklin, Mullett applied to Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, also of Ohio, to succeed him. Instead, Mullett's former employer, Rogers, received the position of Engineer in Charge of the Bureau of Construction in June of 1862. The duties of Supervising Architect Ammi B. Young were absorbed into those of the Engineer in Charge, and Young was dismissed shortly after Rogers' appointment. Rogers' title was changed to Supervising Architect in 1863. To placate Mullett and his supporters, Secretary Chase transferred him to the Supervising Architect's Office in 1863, where he served first as a clerk and later as Chief Clerk and Assistant Supervising Architect under Rogers.⁵

Outwardly, Mullett and Rogers had the makings of a protege-mentor relationship. However, at the



Figure 1. United States Custom House, Portland, c. 1866 rendering (National Archives).

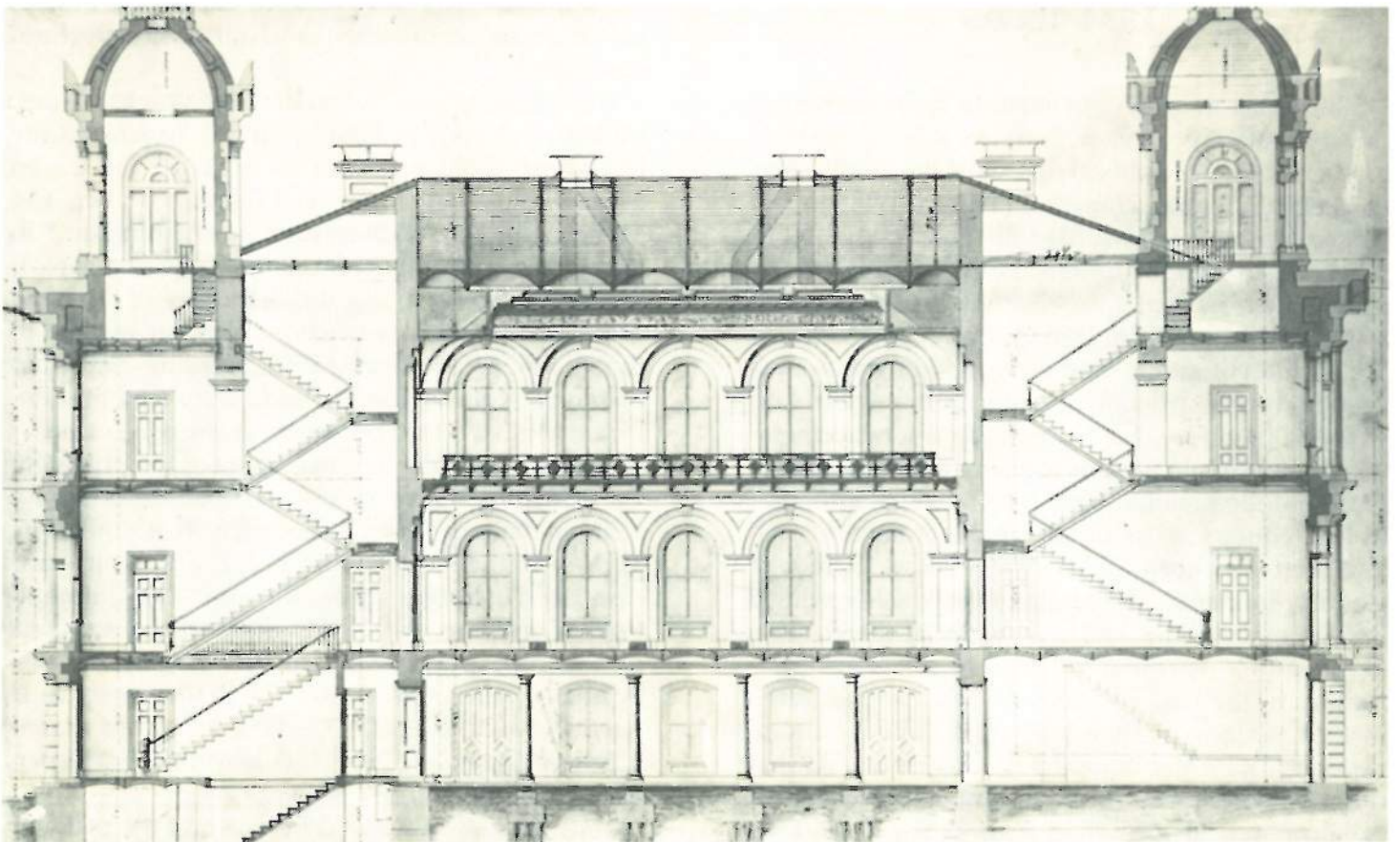


Figure 2. United States Custom House, Portland, c. 1866 longitudinal section (National Archives).

Treasury Department, they were at odds, a situation that likely stemmed from their experiences in Cincinnati. Mullett made numerous reports to Secretary Chase and his successors, William Pitt Fessenden and Hugh McCulloch, regarding what he viewed as mismanagement of the federal architecture program under Rogers. In 1864, Mullett announced his resignation, but then was talked out of it by a detail to San Francisco to inspect government buildings there and prepare plans for the San Francisco Mint. Upon his return, Mullett's relationship with Rogers had deteriorated to the point where it became apparent that one or the other would have to leave. Sensing Mullett's political support among Treasury Department Officials, Rogers left his position in September of 1865 to return to Cincinnati. Mullett served as Assistant Architect from the date of Rogers' departure to June of 1866 when he was appointed Supervising Architect.⁶

During his tenure as Supervising Architect, Mullett oversaw a program that grew rapidly. In the

lean years that immediately followed the Civil War, the federal architecture program consisted of little more than repairs and additions to existing custom houses, federal courthouses, post offices, and marine hospitals. In 1874, by contrast, Mullett presided over the design and construction of forty new buildings. This explosion in public building construction tested Mullett's administrative skills, a test which he passed with flying colors. His peers in the architectural profession praised his skill and conscientiousness in handling the workload, although they were reluctant to be as sanguine about the appearance of his buildings.⁷

The most important structures designed for the State of Maine during Mullett's period were the new custom house and the new federal courthouse in Portland. Mullett's Portland buildings, as well as those at other locations, reflect the range of his design capabilities — from classical to Second Empire and picturesque.

The custom house in Portland was one of the first

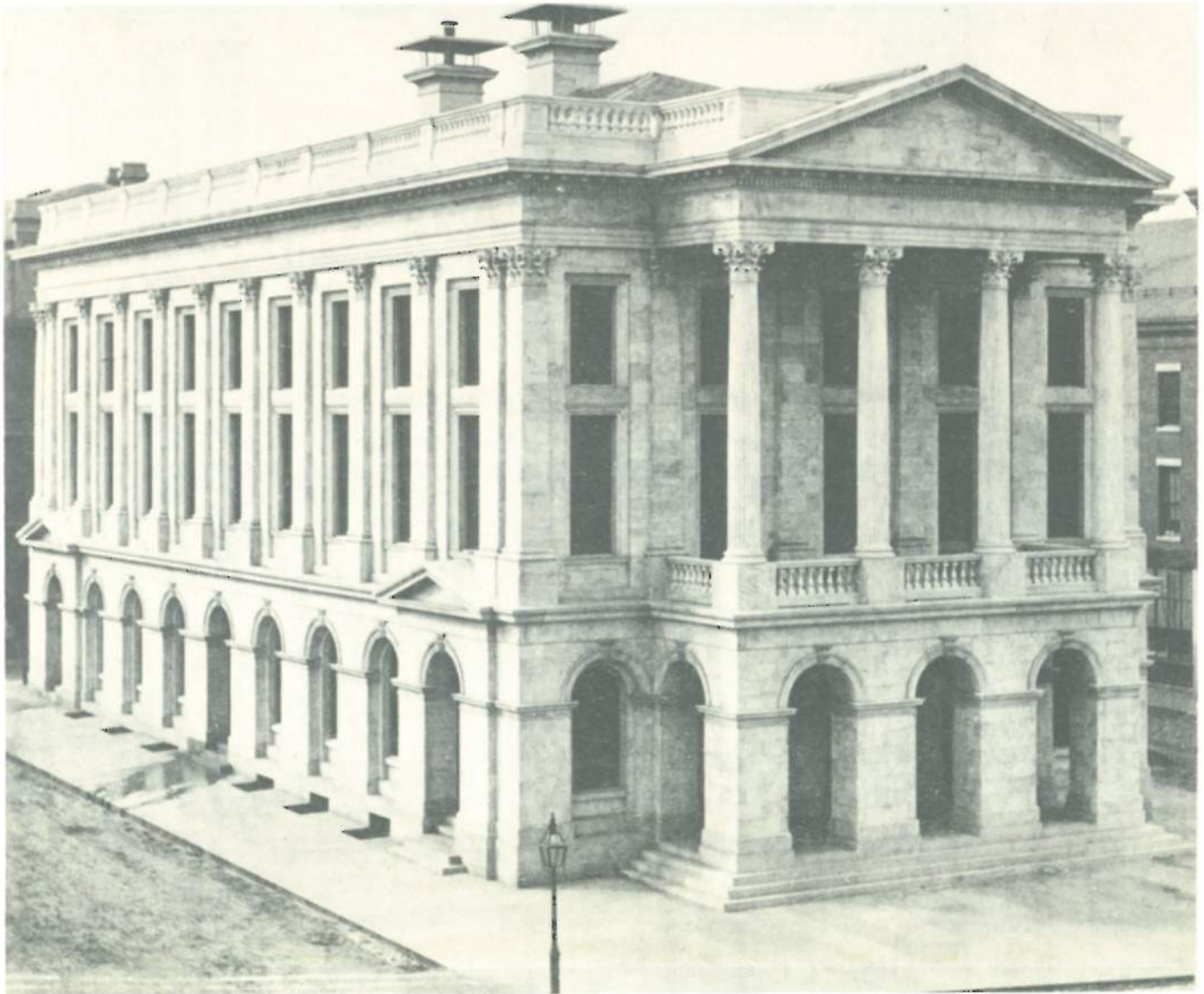


Figure 3. United States ~~Courthouse~~ House and Post Office, Portland, c. 1873 view (MHPC).
Court

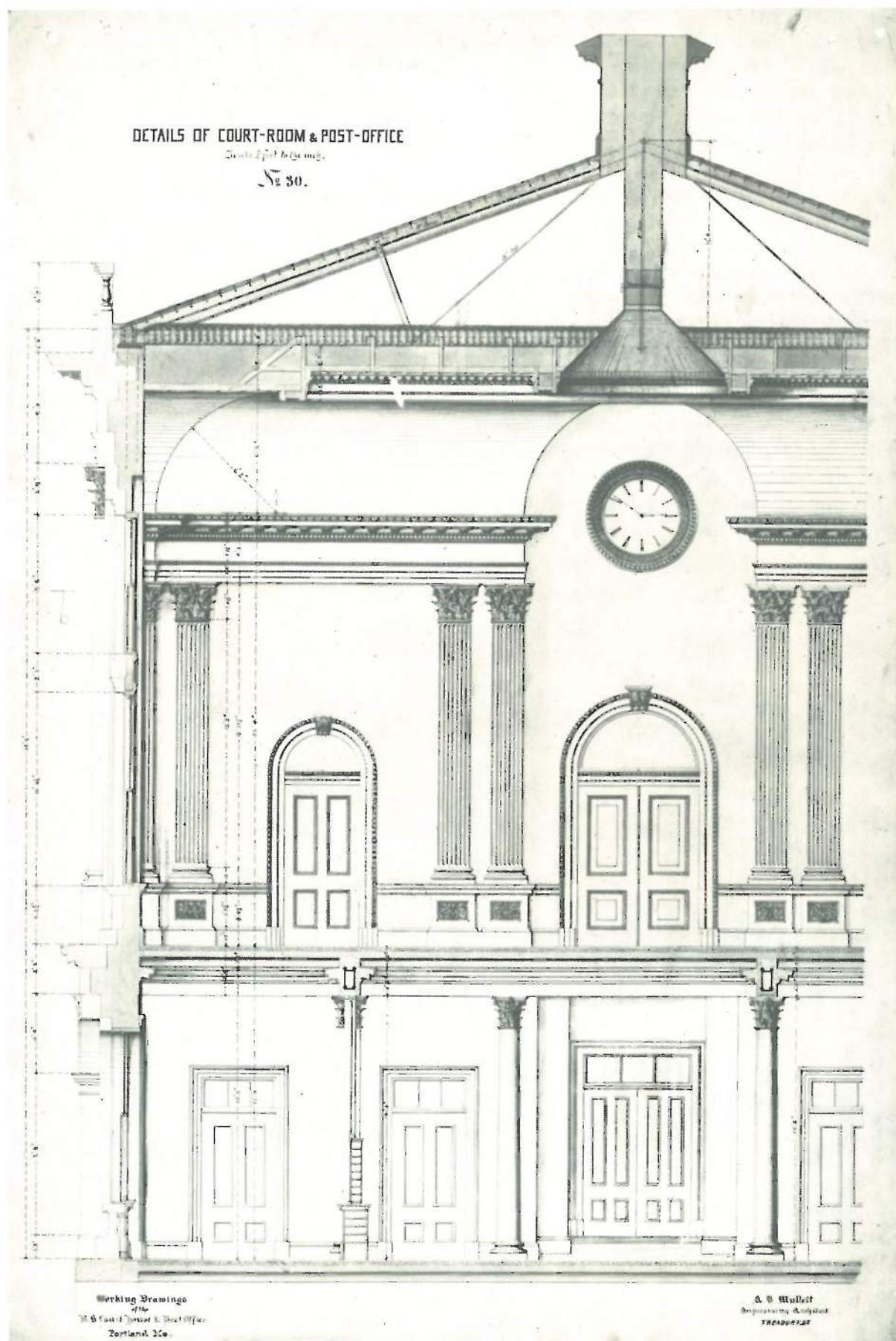


Figure 4. United States Courthouse and Post Office, Portland, c. 1866. Details of Court Room and Post Office (National Archives).

designed by Mullett in the Second Empire style (Figure 1). This structure was intended to replace the 1854 custom house that burned in 1866. Mullett completed plans for the new custom house in 1866, and two years later construction commenced. The building was completed in 1872 at a cost of approximately \$500,000. Constructed of granite from Concord, New Hampshire and Hallowell, Maine, the custom house received much attention from Mullett and his design staff. The front and rear facades were broken into a central section of one bay, flanked on either side by two-bay recessed sections. The massing of the side facades was similarly symmetrical. The building was topped by a balustrade and two towers that rose from the center of the front and rear facades (Figure 2). A small mansard roof capped each tower. The street level of the building was heavily rusticated. Surviving architectural drawings testify to the care lavished on the interior details. Upon its completion, Mullett stated that the workmanship on the building was of the "very best character."⁸

The federal courthouse and post office in Portland was also designed in 1866. However, the style

employed was more reminiscent of Mullett's San Francisco Mint, which is generally regarded as one of the last major buildings in the classical revival style (Figures 3, 4). The courthouse, constructed of Vermont marble, was commenced in 1869 and completed in 1873. (The post office section was occupied in 1871.) The building was devoted primarily to postal activities in 1908 when a new federal courthouse was constructed after the designs prepared under Supervising Architect James Knox Taylor. Mullett's building was demolished in 1965.

Mullett designed three other buildings in Maine: the custom house and post office in Wiscasset, the custom house and post office in Machias, and the custom house and post office in Rockland. The Wiscasset building, dating from 1868 to 1870, was a modest two-story facility constructed of "hard burned brick" with granite trim (Figure 5). The Machias building, erected between 1871 and 1872, was also constructed of brick with stone trim and was similar in style to the Wiscasset building (Figure 6). The Rockland building was designed in the gothic style. Constructed in 1873-74, it was built of undress-

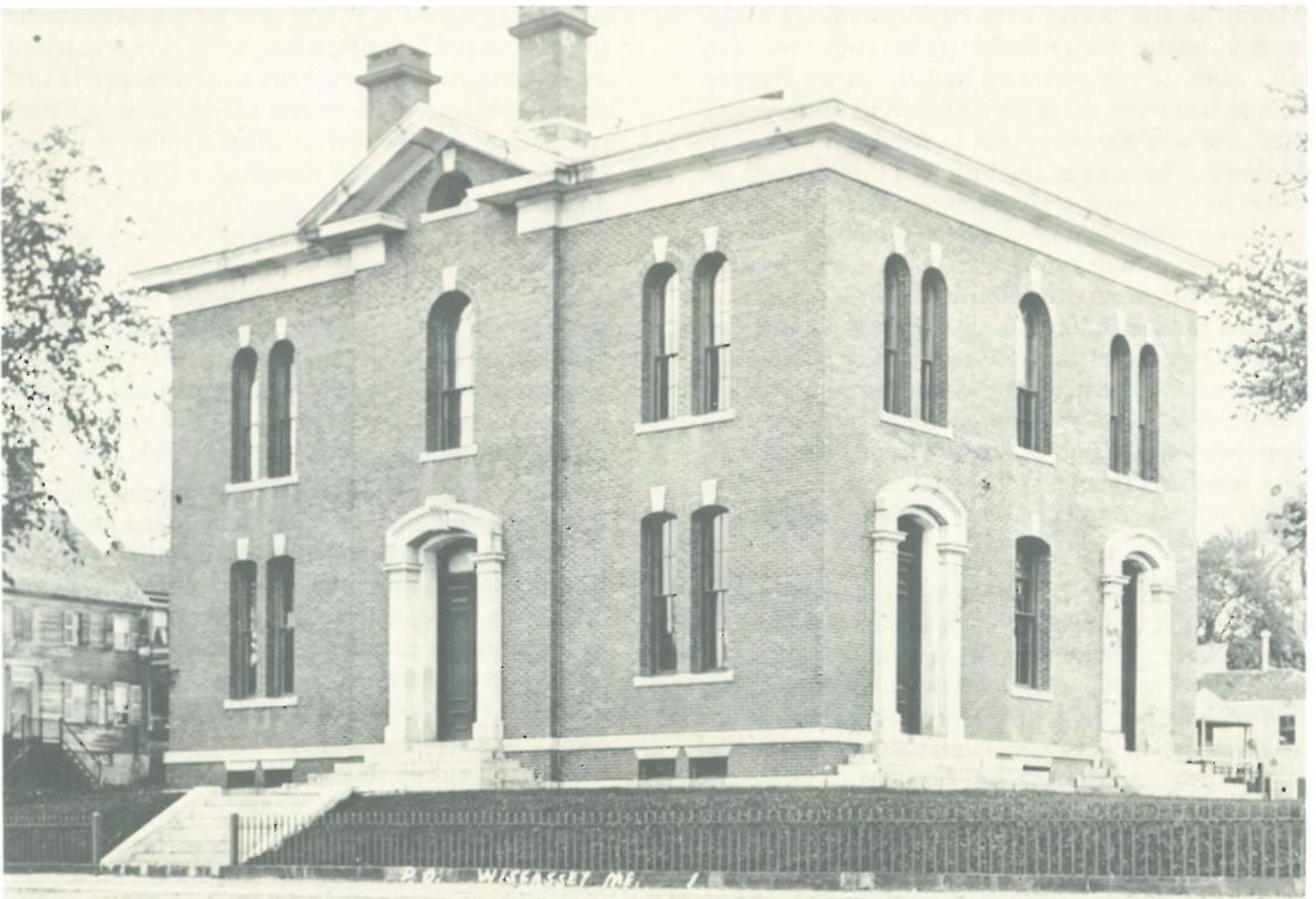


Figure 5. United States Custom House and Post Office, Wiscasset, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

ed granite with "hammered trimming." (Figure 7) These small federal government buildings reflect Mullett's design repertory that included a range of styles popular in the 1860s and 1870s as well as his ability to adapt public building design to the scale and local traditions of small communities.

Mullett's work in Maine also included repairs and additions to several federal buildings that had been built in the 1850s after the designs of Ammi B. Young or had been acquired by the federal government before Young's period. Mullett supervised the extension and remodeling of the 1851-55 custom house at Bangor; the addition and repairs to the custom house at Castine (acquired in 1833); repairs to the 1855-59 marine hospital at Portland; repairs and alterations to the 1853-58 custom house at Bath; repairs and alterations to the 1855-57 custom house at Belfast; repairs to the custom house at Eastport (built in 1850 and burned in 1886); repairs and alterations to the 1855-58 custom house at Ellsworth; repairs to the custom house at Kennebunkport (acquired in 1832); and repairs and alterations to the 1855-57 custom house at Waldoboro.

While Mullett was superintending the federal government's investments in public buildings in Maine, he also oversaw the cutting of stone in the state for major federal buildings in other cities. For this work, it was assumed that he would employ Maine residents as stone cutters and supervisory staff. He was also expected to heed the wishes of Maine's politicians in the hiring of their friends on other federal works. For example, in exchange for guiding appropriations for federal buildings through the House of Representatives, U.S. Congressman and later Speaker of the House James G. Blaine persuaded Mullett to hire his ally, Rodney L. Fogg, as time-keeper at Dix Island, Maine, where granite was being cut for the massive Second Empire post office in New York City. Mullett initially opposed the appointment as Fogg's competence in clerical matters was questionable. However, Blaine's political influence was immense, and Mullett chose not to offend him.⁹

By 1874 Mullett's major works were making their presence felt in nearly all major urban centers across the country. The emerging American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) viewed Mullett's monopoly over federal building design with increasing alarm as few of its members were associated with these large architectural commissions beyond service as superintendents of construction on the site. In 1874 the A.I.A. embarked on a highly-publicized quest to break the hold of the Supervising Architect's Office over federal building design through Congressional legislation. This effort extended over nearly

two decades and appeared to be successful in 1893 with the passage of the Tarsney Act which provided the Secretary of the Treasury with discretionary power to obtain designs for federal buildings through competition by private architects. However, the Tarsney Act was not implemented until 1897.¹⁰

Mullett also received adverse press coverage for his association with the Board of Public Works of the District of Columbia on which he served from 1871 to 1872. The Board, headed by "Boss" Alexander R. Shepherd, was regarded as free-spending and was investigated for corruption. Mullett was also eyed for his close association with the administration of Ulysses S. Grant and the tendency of the president's friends to receive "exclusive" contracts for building materials and services. With the arrival of Benjamin H. Bristow as Secretary of the Treasury in June of 1874, Mullett's support from Treasury officials waned. Bristow was not a member of Grant's inner circle and refused to abide by its rules. Mullett sensed that his days were numbered and resigned in late 1874.¹¹

After his departure from federal service, Mullett devoted much of his remaining sixteen years to attempting to regain the position of Supervising Architect and to receive compensation for the work on the State, War and Navy Building in Washington based on his understanding that the work was performed above and beyond his duties as Supervising Architect. He also established an active architectural practice in Washington and designed many residences and office buildings throughout the city. For a brief period in 1882, he was also listed in New York City directories in partnership with architects Hugo Kafka and William G. Steinmetz. The latter was a former associate in the Supervising Architect's Office. In 1889, when his sons Thomas A. and Frederick W. were of an age to enter professional life, Mullett formed the architectural firm of A. B. Mullett & Co., a firm that endured well into the 1930s.

Despite these professional achievements, Mullett's financial condition was precarious. Many observers felt that his impoverished situation was proof of his honesty and integrity throughout his career. By the mid-1880s, his health began to decline. Frustrated in his attempts to collect his professional fees and weakened by a severe case of grip during the winter of 1889-1890, Mullett shot himself on October 20, 1890. Ironically, his death occurred two days before the A.I.A. met in Washington for its 24th annual convention.

Mullett's legacy in Maine can be found in the federal buildings located in Portland and in former ports of entry along its coastline. A closer examination of the relationship between Mullett and Maine's



Figure 6. United States Custom House and Post Office, Machias, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

leading politicians of the Gilded Age reveals the source of Mullett's success as Supervising Architect. The state's powerful politicians supported an expanded federal architecture program. However, the demands made upon Mullett to make the state, its residents, and its friends the beneficiaries of the program placed the Supervising Architect's Office in a compromising situation and subject to the intense scrutiny of the architectural profession and the press. Criticism of Mullett led to his departure as Supervising Architect and to his inability to reassume the position in subsequent years when the job was vacant. Despite his professional difficulties, Mullett will be remembered as one of the first architects whose reputation reached from coast to coast and for his surviving and now much-admired federal buildings in Maine and elsewhere.

Antoinette J. Lee
Columbia Historical Society
January, 1985

NOTES

¹ Major secondary sources on the career of Alfred B. Mullett include: Donald J. Lehman, *Executive Office Building: General Services Administration, Historical Study No. 3* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970); Donald J. Lehman, "Alfred B. Mullett," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York: The Free Press, 1982); and Lawrence Wodehouse, "Alfred B. Mullett and His French Style Government Buildings," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 31 (March 1972), pp. 22-37. Less accessible sources include the *Annual Report of the Supervising Architect to the Secretary of the*

Treasury for the years 1866-1874 and voluminous correspondence covering Mullett's government career in the Records of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 56 and Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121, both at the National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. Mrs. Suzanne Mullett Smith of Washington, D.C. kindly permitted the author to review a small collection of Mullett correspondence and two diaries written by Mullett in 1860 and 1865 still in possession of the family. The Archives of the American Institute of Architects in Washington, D.C. holds several valuable scrapbooks containing articles and other ephemera concerning Mullett's career.

² Business card for Alfred B. Mullett, Architect, Suzanne Mullett Smith Collection.

³ Alfred B. Mullett, 1860 diary, Suzanne Mullett Smith Collection.

⁴ Alfred B. Mullett Obituary, L.A. Rixford Scrapbook, 1885-1897, Cincinnati Historical Society.

⁵ See Mullett's personnel records in Records of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 56, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Correspondence covering the Mullett-Rogers feud can be found in Letters Sent, Chiefly by the Supervising Architect, 1855-1911, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷ P. B. Wight, "Government Architecture and Government Architects," *American Architect and Building News*, 1 (March 18, 1876), p. 92.

⁸ *Annual Report of the Supervising Architect to the Secretary of the Treasury for the Year 1869*, p. 13.

⁹ Correspondence between Mullett and Blaine can be found in Letters Sent, Chiefly by the Supervising Architect, 1855-1911, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ The AIA's role in attempting to restructure the work of the Supervising Architect's Office can be traced through the Proceedings of the Annual Conventions of the AIA, 1870-1897.

¹¹ Ross Allan Webb, *Benjamin Helm Bristow: Border State Politician* (Lexington, Ky.: The University of Kentucky Press, 1969), p. 137.

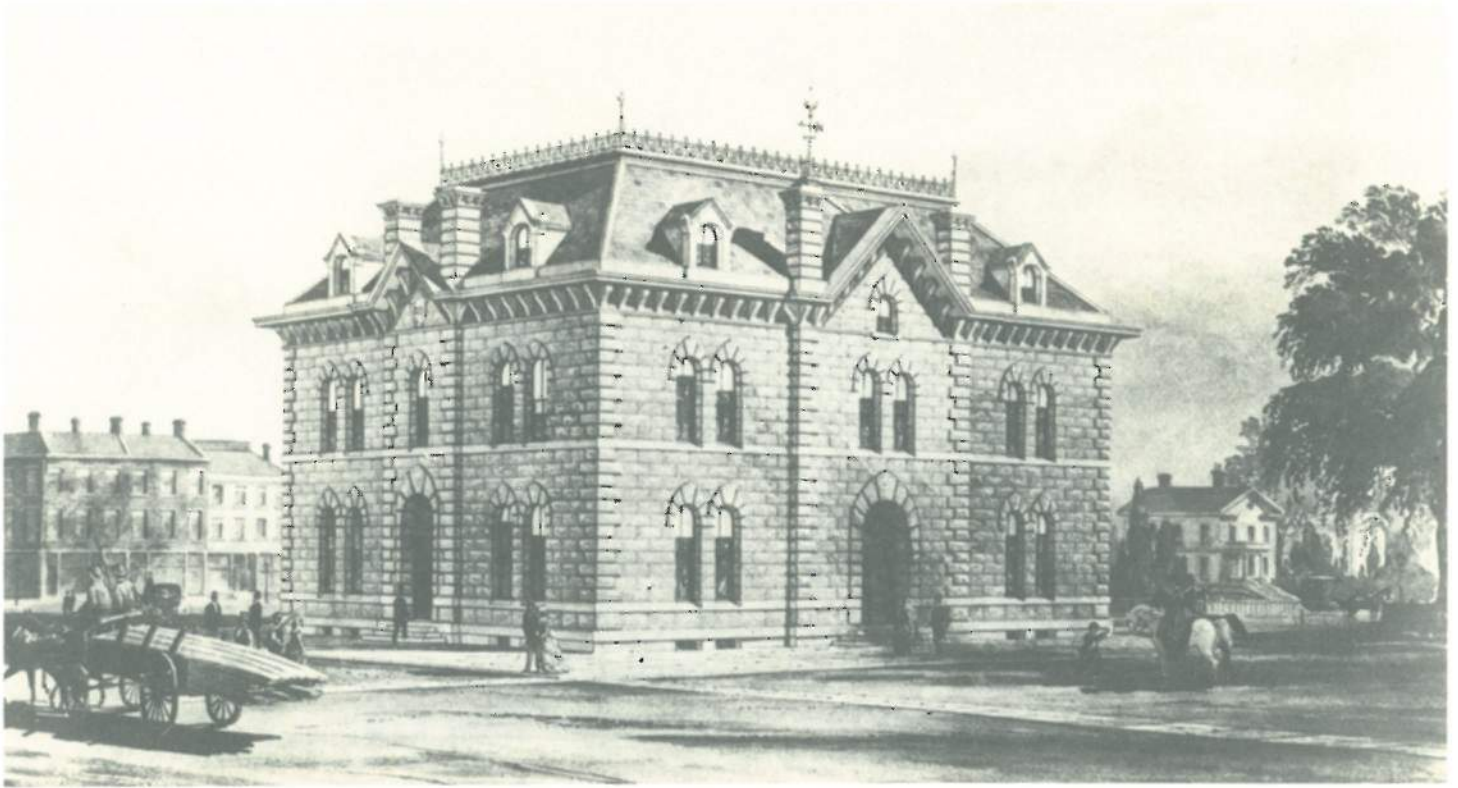


Figure 7. United States Custom House and Post Office, Rockland, c. 1873 rendering (MHPC).

List of Known Commissions in Maine By Alfred B. Mullett

United States Custom House, Portland, 1866-1872, Extant.
 United States Courthouse and Post Office, Portland, 1866-1873,
 Destroyed.
 United States Custom House and Post Office, Wiscasset,
 1868-1870, Extant.
 United States Custom House and Post Office, Machias,
 1871-72, Extant.
 United States Custom House and Post Office, Rockland,
 1873-74, Destroyed.
 Repairs to United States Marine Hospital, Portland, Extant,
 1866.
 Alterations to United States Custom House, Belfast, Extant,
 1868.
 Repairs to United States Custom House, Eastport, Destroyed,
 1868.

Repairs and Alterations to United States Custom House,
 Ellsworth, Destroyed, 1868.
 Repairs to United States Custom House, Kennebunkport,
 Extant, 1868.
 Repairs and Alterations to United States Custom House,
 Waldoboro, Extant, 1868.
 Repairs and Alterations to United States Custom House,
 Bath, Extant, 1868.
 Additions to United States Custom House and Post Office,
 Bangor, Destroyed, 1868-69.
 Additions to United States Custom House, Castine, Extant,
 1869-70.

Architectural Drawings

The surviving architectural drawings for Mullett's federal buildings are located in Record Group 121, the Cartographic and Architectural Branch of the National Archives. Not all drawings in this collection have been inventoried, and not all buildings have a complete set of drawings and specifications.

*Photograph of Alfred B. Mullett
 Courtesy of Suzanne Mullett Smith*

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