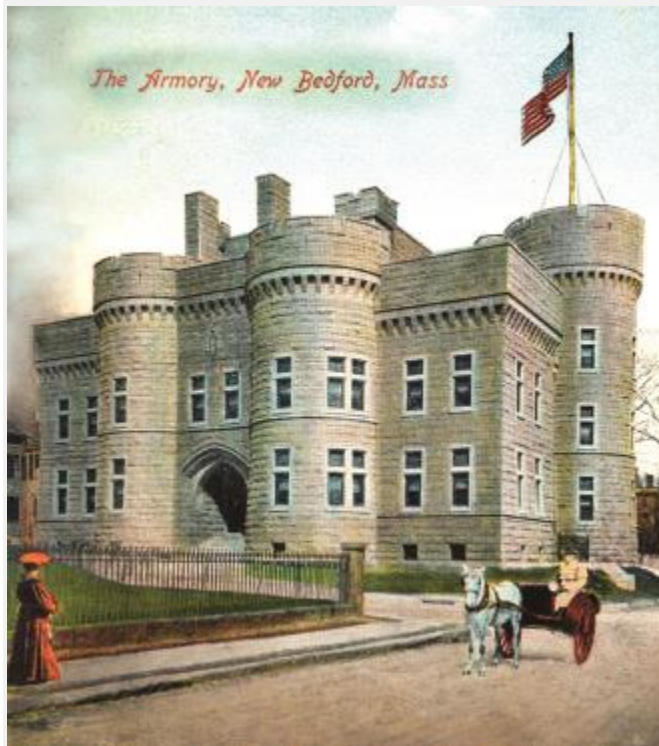


New Bedford Armory History

Posted on [August 1, 2014](#) by [Arthur Motta](#) | [3 Comments](#)



A CASTLE FOR NEW BEDFORD: *The Building of the New Bedford Armory, 1898-1904*

by Arthur P. Motta, Jr.

Introduction

In chess, the rook is shaped like a castle and is a potent player on the board. Moved in conjunction with the king, the rook executes a unique defensive maneuver called *castling*, the only time in which two pieces may be moved in one turn. Skilled players have used castling to facilitate the balance of offensive and defensive advantages. Indeed, the lengthy dispute about where to build the New Bedford Armory resembled a chess game, the city grid its chessboard, with Mayor Charles S. Ashley and Armory Commissioner George Howland Cox, the well matched players.



Charles S. Ashley
Mayor, New Bedford, Mass.



George Howland Cox
State Armory Commissioner

From the start, the armory project was contentious and the intense debate it generated illustrates the tidal influences of politics and the press on public policy and urban design. Ashley and Cox's very public chess match ultimately ended after many compromises but in a clear win for the Mayor. He celebrated that victory just as publicly on May 5, 1904 along with thousands of citizens attending perhaps the grandest dedication of a public building in city history. The armory remains one of New Bedford's largest and most elaborate public buildings.

City leaders initiate the armory project

In 1898, Lieutenant G. N. Gardiner, a member of the Common Council argued that the city should take its place among the leading urban centers of America and build a proper armory for the local militia, the New Bedford City Guards. His call came as unrest among mill operatives was growing over an impending 10 percent pay cut announced by several textile mill owners. A large strike took place early in that year, which succeeded in shutting down the mills for a time – a prelude to the devastating Strike of 1928. Although the 1898 strike eventually collapsed in the spring, it was not before violence and vandalism required Mayor Ashley to call on the Guards, local and state police to provide protection for the mills. It was clear then that if the situation spiraled out of control city forces could be overwhelmed by the mill operatives, which numbered more than 10,000 in 1898.



Established in 1852, the New Bedford City Guards were then headquartered in Mechanics' Hall (now site of the Duff Building) at City Hall Square. The Guards became part of E Battery, 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery in 1898. Councillor Gardiner, a member of E Battery, continued to advocate for an armory for three years. With the support of Mayor Ashley, Gardiner put forward a motion to provide the money necessary to begin the work. On July 18, 1901, the City Council designated \$125,000 in the amount of a loan in order to acquire land and build an armory. The loan was executed under the provision of the Commonwealth's Acts of 1888, which dealt with the establishment of state armories. The Evening Standard detailed the financing: "After the city has designated the sum of money it is willing to spend on an armory, the state issues 30 year bonds for this amount. The city must pay not only the interest on these bonds, but also the sinking fund; in other words, the cost of the armory and land falls wholly on the city. The armory is under the control of the state authorities; the state is not required to pay rent for the occupancy of it, but does stand the expense of the care, furnishing and repairs. – Editor of Standard." (Feb. 15, 1902).

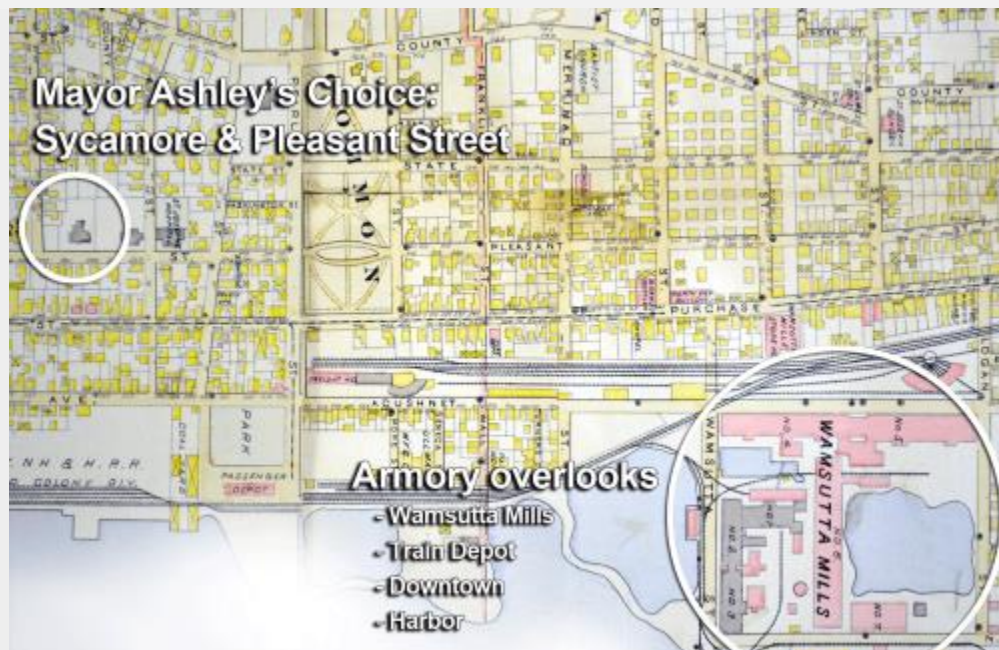
Armory site, design, and price tag generates controversy



Mayor Chas. S. Ashley

Several sites around the city were considered and debate about which location would be the best was an ongoing topic in the press. From the start, Mayor Ashley was unwavering in his choice for the armory site: Sycamore and Pleasant Streets. Ashley wanted to see the center of the city expand north, just as the burgeoning city was expanding northward. He envisioned an

opportunity to aggrandize the skyline with the turrets and towers of a great castle high on the hill. Passengers alighting from trains at Pearl Street Station would behold an urban horizon resplendent with a multitude of church spires, lofty mansions and fine public buildings. To this end, Ashley wanted New Bedford's armory to be the envy of all others in the state, both in size and splendor. Indeed, the massive project required additional infusions of cash by the city. On June 26, 1902, the Council voted on additional \$38,000, and again on January 14, 1904 another \$15,000, making the total amount \$178,000.



This 1895 map shows the future armory's location in relation to Wamsutta Mills and the Pearl Street Station, with reconnaissance views of the downtown & harbor.

Pursuant to the Act of 1888, all existing and proposed armories came under the jurisdiction of the State Armory Commission. Nine armories had been built under the Act, and New Bedford was to be the tenth. At the time, the Commission consisted of three members appointed by the governor: Mr. Joseph N. Peterson (of Salem) was Chairman; Adjutant General Samuel Dalton (of Boston), and General Josiah Pickett (of Worcester). Governor W. Murray Crane, a Republican, appointed an additional member, George Howland Cox of Cambridge in 1902.



Geo. Howland Cox

Long the chairman of the Cambridge Park Board, Cox came to New Bedford with definite views about where to locate the armory to best effect. His interest in New Bedford went deeper than the other commissioners. Born in Fairhaven in 1854, his mother was Mercy Nye Howland. Cox married Ella P. Wittermore in New Bedford in 1877. Cox attended West Point, and though he did not graduate, his military demeanor never ceased. An engineer for 27 years with the Calumet & Hecla Mining Co., based in Boston, Cox transitioned to finance, becoming president of the Cambridge Trust Company, where he was known to stand in the center of the bank lobby and bellow orders at clerks and customers alike. His disregard for Mayor Ashley's ideas and authority immediately generated tensions that the press eagerly reported. Under the headline, "Armory Site Becoming a Political Issue," the Boston Globe reported, "Mr. Cox, the friends of Mayor Ashley say, arrived with some preconceived ideas concerning the Mayor. One was, they say, a belief on the part of Mr. Cox that the mayor represents the people, but not the heaviest taxpayers. Mr. Cox, they say, has taken his suggestions from the mayor's opponents." (February 16, 1902). This was a reference to Cox's first choice for the location of the armory: the foot of William Street, which included the Double



The Double Bank Building, foot of William Street (photo: Arthur Motta)

Bank Building and the entire block between Rodman and Hamilton Streets, running east to the water's edge The Double Bank Building still stands today as the former Fishermen's Pension Trust, now J.J. Best Banc. & Company. The Double Bank's directors and abutters (Geo. F. Barrett and the Knowles estate) sent a petition urging the selection of this site. Their asking price was the limit allowed for the purchase of land for the project: \$20,000. In 1902, the Water Street commercial district was showing its age. Other financial houses were moving up the hill. The New Bedford Institution for Savings had vacated 33 William Street for its gleaming new temple at Union and Purchase a few years earlier. The directors were part of the old establishment and they resented the Mayor's opposition to their desire for a profitable exit. Critics of the Mayor suggested that his advocacy of Sycamore & Pleasant was personally motivated as it was in his neighborhood; Ashley's residence at 91 State Street was just a block west of the site he wanted for the armory.

The Mayor's location satisfied another aim: deterrence. The armory's main tower would overlook the city's largest mill, Wamsutta. Thousands of mill operatives coming and going each day from the Wamsutta Street gates would look up at the hillside fortress and be reminded of the power of the state.

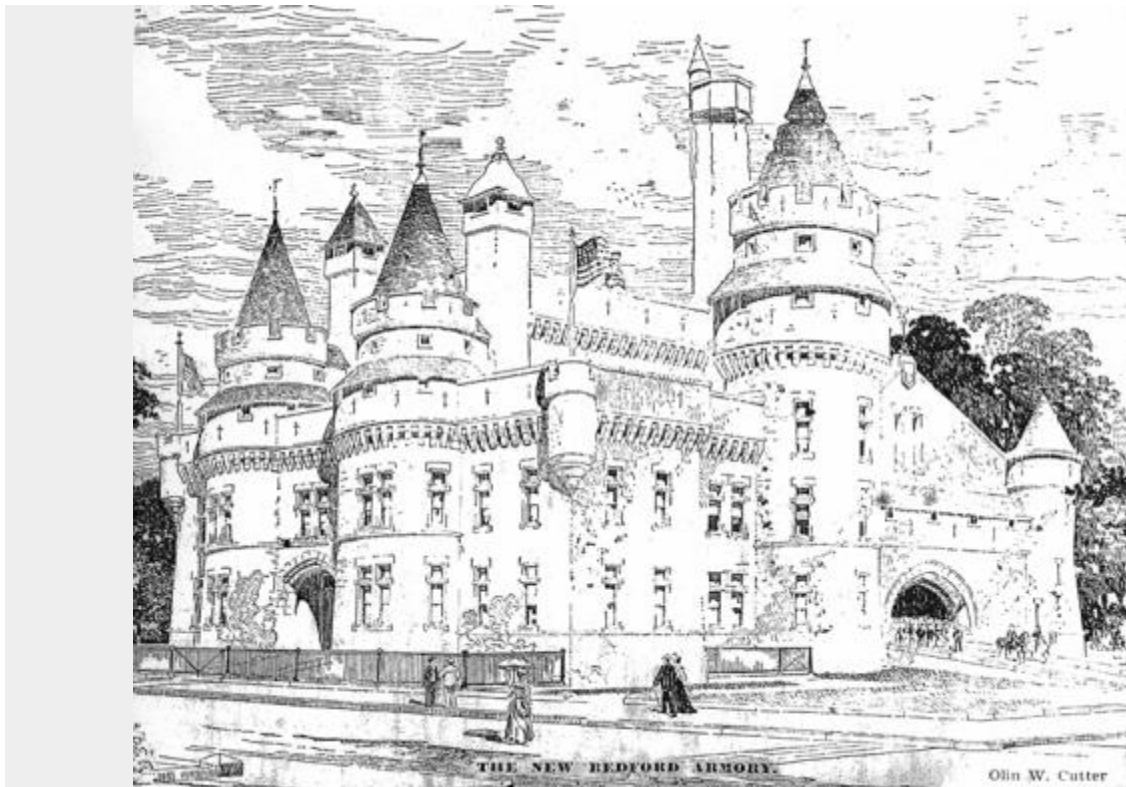


Looking northeast to Wamsutta Mills from the main tower. (photo: Arthur Motta, 2007)

It did not go unnoticed at City Hall that Cox's ties to Beacon Hill helped garner him the armory commission appointment and provided him with a stipend to be paid from the city's armory budget. Cox's ties were again evident when the commission chose Olin W. Cutter, a Boston architect to design the armory. Cutter had recently designed the Registry of Deeds and Probate Court at East Cambridge (1897), the Middlesex County Courthouse at Lowell (1899), and supervised the building of Boston's Irvington Street Armory.

A grand fortress for the city is advocated

Undaunted, Mayor Ashley pursued the architect, providing ideas for a grand edifice at Sycamore and Pleasant. Thus, Cutter's initial design called for an elaborate fortress featuring double turrets and multiple elements of medieval architecture, including bartizans, crenellated battlements and macholated towers. Indeed, the New Bedford armory had all the features similar to castles such as the Chateau de Pierrefonds in France.



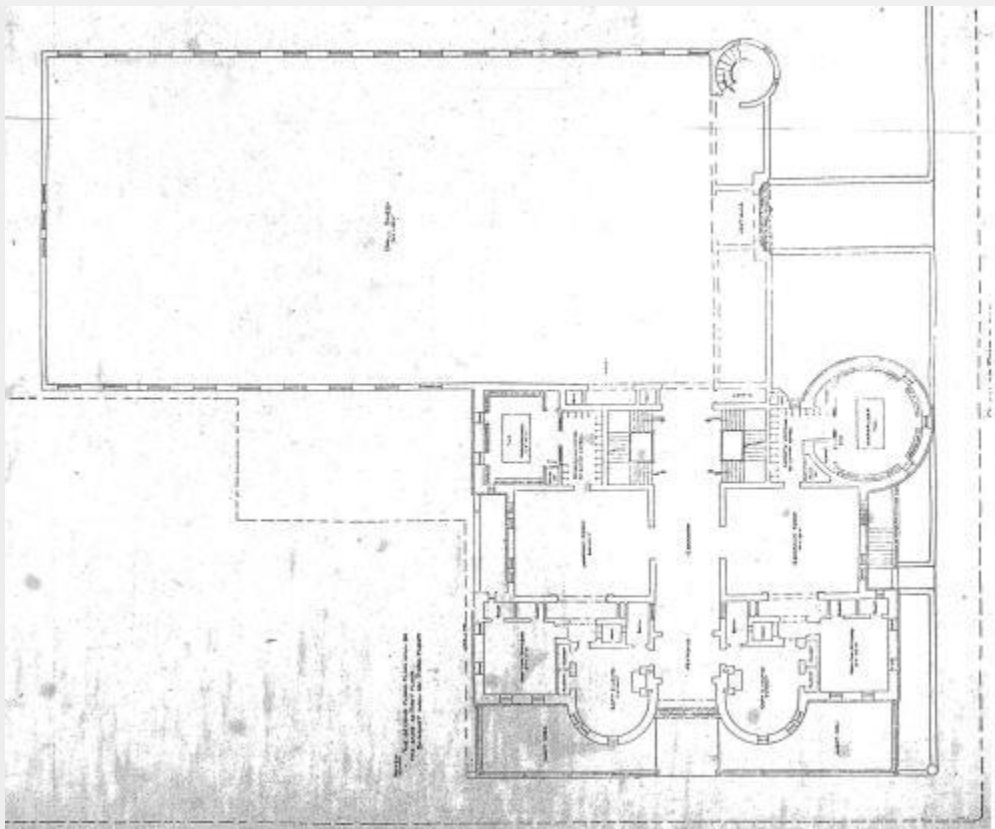
The New Bedford Armory's original plan by Olin Cutter

On the design, The New Bedford Mercury reported that the armory “will be one of the handsomest in the state; one much more attractive in appearance than the Fall River armory, which has commanded no little praise. ...The plan calls for a building of stone with rock-faced finish, the walls being crowned with battlements and surrounded by graceful conical-roofed towers. The general effect is that of a castle in feudal times.” (Feb. 6, 1902). Pleased with his labor, Cutter commented that the Sycamore & Pleasant site would be “capable of better treatment, architecturally.”

But the ornate design gained little appreciation from the Boston-based Armory Commission. Many in New Bedford suspected the Commission's lack of enthusiasm was borne of a desire that the capitol city's armories not be bested. While reviewing Cutter's ornate plan, Adjutant General Dalton quipped to the press, “What would happen the first time a mob got a piece of artillery or fired a piece of railroad iron up on the roof... An armory is intended to be a practical structure, for use in time of trouble, just as the militia companies are.” (Feb. 11, 1902). In response, the Evening Standard editorialized:

““One can but feel a touch of regret at Adjutant General Dalton’s unappreciative question, “What are those things on top of that building?” referring to the ornate plan of an armory which has had some publicity in New Bedford, and his curt remark that “if military requirements have anything to do with this plan, they will have to go.” What was wanted was a triumph of architecture; not less, but more. If the architect failed in his drawing anywhere, he failed in luxuriance. Adjutant General Dalton may not know it, but an armory is wanted as an ornament to the city...” (February 13, 1902)

The editorial neglected to consider Dalton’s lengthy military career, which began before the Civil War with the 14th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, and later with the 1st Regiment, Heavy Artillery. Dalton’s mob-scenario stemmed from his knowledge of the murderous draft riots of 1863 in New York and Boston, during which armed mobs attacked the armories in both those cities in revolt over President Lincoln’s Enrollment Act in March of that year. Indeed, the Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Chicago Haymarket Riot of 1886 fueled national fears of class warfare and advanced efforts to erect armories in all the major cities.



Mayor Ashley’s site required an unusual perpendicular plan

Cox supported Dalton's remarks, pointing out that the Mayor's site (two lots perpendicular to each other), would require the massive drill shed be built perpendicular to the castle structure, called the Head House. Standard armory plans called for the drill shed to be parallel and directly behind the head house. Mayor Ashley countered that Sycamore and Pleasant (known as the Humphrey-Mason lots) could be had for \$5000 less than the Double Bank Building site. Not to be put off, Cox argued, "I believe when it comes to contracting for a building, it will be found that the value of the stone in the two big stone buildings [will be] perfectly adaptable for head house walls, [and] will more than offset the difference in the cost of the lots. If the city will throw out those two sidewalks adjoining the lot, it will be amply large for an armory." (Eve. Standard, Feb. 12, 1902). The mayor seized upon Cox's admission that the sidewalks would have to go and immediately contacted the Standard to expose the flaw. In the paper's editorial column the next day, it blasted Cox's ideas as "absurd" and chided the out-of-towner for his presumptuous attitude in attempting to redesign New Bedford's downtown: "Mr. Cox assumes too much when he incorporates in his scheme a library or a High School at 'the other end of the vista.' ...Finally the city authorities will never, we trust, narrow the streets by discontinuing the sidewalks on either side of the lot."

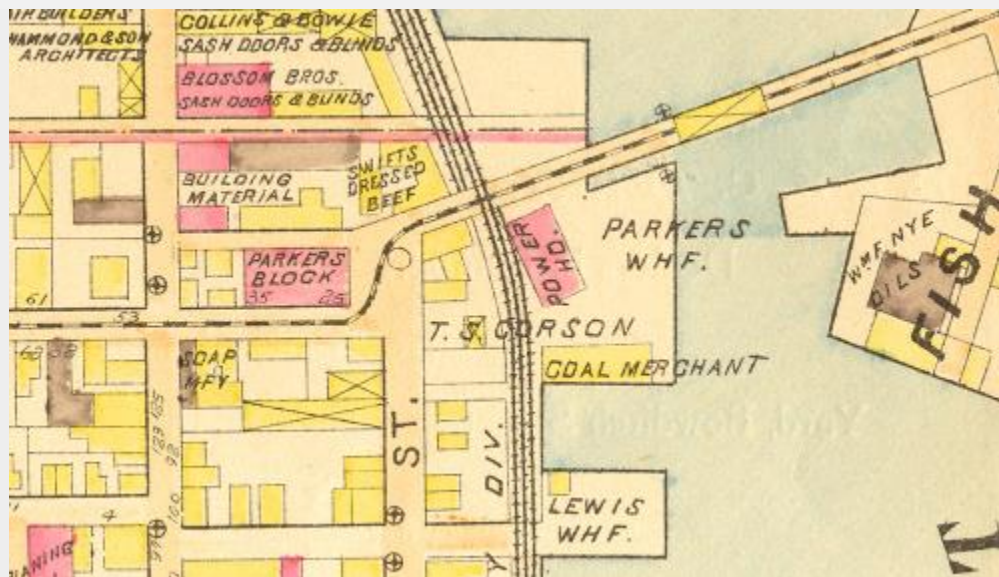


An alternative armory design for the bridge site

Cox was not deterred. He continued to argue that an armory at the foot of William would be the logical site for an armory that was to be larger than most as not only E Battery, but also Naval

Company G would occupy it, and its adjacency to the water would be an important asset. Indeed, a massive building was being planned to accommodate four companies, but the paper's admonishment and public opinion forced Cox to concede. When the Armory Commission presented its final report on potential sites to Governor Crane on February 26, 1902, it bowed to public opinion and dropped the William Street site. But Cox announced that his second choice was yet another waterfront location, called the Bridge Site, at the western end of the New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge.

Local detractors dubbed Cox's new choice the Ark Lane Site, for its proximity to an old lane which ran east from Second Street to the water, so named for the Ark, a derelict whaleship which in the early days of whaling had become a particularly infamous house of ill repute, and was finally burned by the townspeople in 1829. Cox instructed Cutter to draw up an armory plan for this site, which would address all the concerns expressed by Dalton regarding the Mayor's plan.



The 'Parker's Block' site adjacent the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge

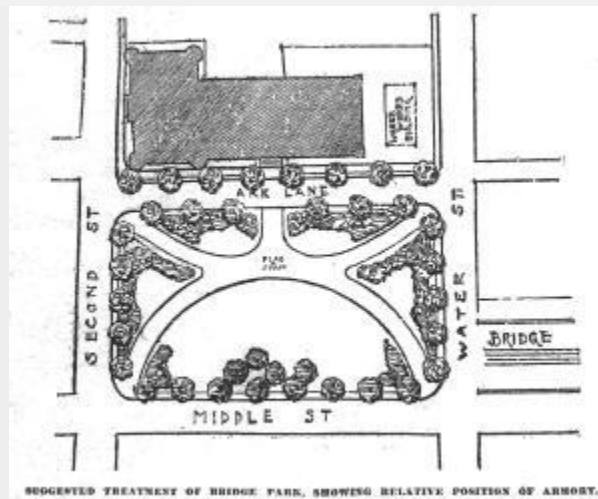
The bridge site, also known as Parker's Block, consisted of several private owners, including the city, where the Water Works Department kept a work shed and pipe stockpile. To make the site a more attractive alternative to the mayor's site, Cox proposed creating a park along the south side of the armory to serve as verdent entrance to the city at the New Bedford Fairhaven Bridge.

Using the Mayor's strategy, Cox provided the new proposal to the press. The new plan showed

the head house facing west on Second Street with the drill shed behind it reaching east to Water Street and a park spanning south to Middle Street.

The new armory plan's more modern treatment discarded much of the medieval ornament of the mayor's vision. It also took some inspiration from the Worcester Armory, no doubt to attract the vote of Commissioner General Pickett of that city. But Pickett was less concerned with the myriad details, so long as A. J. Bishop Company of Worcester and Providence was in the running to be the contractor. Bishop built Pickett's armory in 1895.

Other locations were also being discussed. They included the Brownell & Ashley lot (Acushnet Ave., Spring & Fourth Streets), the McCullough lot (Acushnet Ave., Maxfield & Purchase), the First Street site (First & Spring Streets), and the Eliot Estate lot (between Court and Union).



The Bridge Site was discarded but Bridge Park became a reality

Throughout the controversial debate, Mayor Ashley remained steadfast in his advocacy for the Sycamore & Pleasant Street site and was ultimately victorious. The Boston Herald wrote "This will make another attractive public building for New Bedford, and will redound to the credit of Mayor Ashley, who stubbornly fought for the present excellent site, against heavy odds."

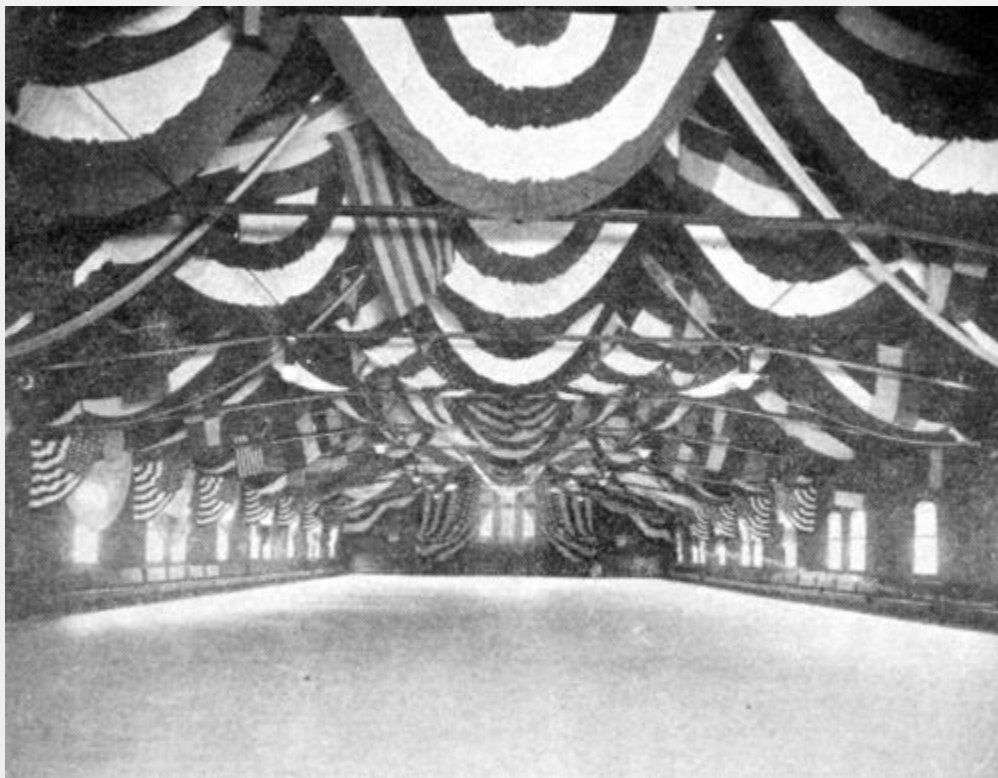
(Morning Mercury, March 14, 1904). However, Adjutant General Dalton's call for less ornamentation was addressed in the final plan for the armory, in which the turrets with their conical roofs were discarded. As for Cox's many creative suggestions in urban design, Mayor

Ashley and his city planners took note. Bridge Park at the western approach to the bridge became and reality as did the building in 1913 of a new high school at the head of William Street.

The Commonwealth began its official occupancy of the armory on Thursday, March 10, 1904; just six weeks after President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Dick Act, which created a truly *National* Guard. Named for Senator Charles Dick, the legislation replaced the antiquated Militia Act of 1792 and declared the National Guard as the Army's primary organized reserve.

A grand dedication

The completed building was an object of great civic pride. Built as a defensible battalion armory, it was constructed of the most durable materials. The rusticated exterior was of native granite, some of which (it was reported) was mined from the ledge upon which the armory stands. The elaborate woodwork and wainscoting were of solid cypress, and the staircases were of maple. All of the custom furniture was of quartered oak. The commanders' offices featured massive hearths, typical of a medieval castle. With an area of 12,876 square feet, the drill hall to this day remains the largest uninterrupted floor space in the city.



The Drill Hall decorated for the Armory Dedication, May 5, 1904. With an area of 12,876 sq. ft. it remains the largest uninterrupted floor space in the city.

The May 5th dedication was the social event of 1904. More than 2000 participated in the celebration, which included Governor John Bates and the top-ranking military officers in New England. The Mercury counted “more than 100 officers of high rank, and the gold lace was so plentiful that eyes were dazzled by the brilliancy of the spectacle.” The evening celebration included opening ceremonies, a concert by Clarke’s Providence Band, elaborate refreshments throughout the upstairs rooms and a huge dance, which went on until two o’clock in the morning. At 8: 00 p.m., Governor Bates, who spent some of his boyhood years in the city, arrived amid great fanfare at the drill hall, which was festooned with hundreds of red, white and blue buntings. The Governor, Mayor Ashley and their wives, led a grand promenade of 320 couples around the periphery of the hall. The following morning, the Mercury reported that the affair was “perhaps the most picturesque dance that has ever been given in the city. It was certainly the largest social event that has been held here, and the capacity of the huge drill hall was taxed... Not for years has the rattle of cab-horse hoofs so disturbed the early morning hours in New Bedford as at 2 a.m. today, when those who aided in making the dedication of the new state armory a success, began turning homeward.” (May 6, 1904).

Epilogue



The Armory's main tower overlooks Wamsutta Mills and the full expanse of New Bedford harbor
(photo: Arthur Motta)

In his 1989 book, *America's Armories*, historian Robert Fogelson wrote that these modern-day castles were "supposed to stand as a symbol of authority, of the overwhelming power of the state, of its determination to maintain order and, if need be, its readiness to use force."

Twenty-four years after its dedication, the armory would play an important role in the state's display of overwhelming power in the suppression of picketers during the violent textile strikes of 1928, in which the Riot Act was read aloud for the first time in the city by the New Bedford Chief of Police to warrant mass arrests. In his book, "The Strike of 1928" Daniel Georgianna relates how Battery F of the National Guard was not called upon during the July confrontations as many of its members had friends and family among the strikers. (p. 107).



Sally port of the Armory Drill Hall, Purchase Street (photo: Arthur Motta)

The close of 2004 marked a poignant anniversary during the Armory's centenary year. The Massachusetts National Guard vacated it for more efficient quarters, clearing its rooms of all contents, including artifacts related to New Bedford history. The Commonwealth intended to sell the city landmark to the highest bidder, without restriction and with no public input on its future use or impact on the neighborhood. For many years the National Guard allowed community

events to take place in the Drill Hall. Public calls of concern over the loss of the largest indoor public assembly space in the city prompted officials to remove it from auction block.

Unfortunately, poor security thereafter invited repeated vandalism, and finally, arson. The head house sustained severe fire and water damage in March 2009. The drill house was unharmed but the site continues to await a restoration and adaptive reuse plan. A city convention hall is one of the proposed uses.

Appendix

Chronology of Battery “E” Regiment, Heavy Artillery, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia (formerly the New Bedford City Guards)

1852 – Organized as the New Bedford Guards on July 22nd, 1852, George A. Bourne, Chairman.

1861 – Entered U.S. Service as Co. “L” 3d Mass. Infantry., April 17th, 1861.

1862 – Mustered out, May 28th, 1862. Re-entered U.S. as Co. “E” 3d Mass. Inf., Sept. 18th, 1862.

1863 – Mustered out, June 26th, 1863.

1898 – Re-entered U.S. Service as Battery “E.” 1st Mass. H.A., April 26, 1898. Mustered out, November 14th, 1898. Complimented by Col. Carl A. Woodruff, A.C., U.S.A., commanding officer at Fort Warren, for efficiency and soldierly conduct.

Note – New Bedford ranked with the best companies of the Commonwealth in rifle work & marksmanship: Awarded 14 state and regimental trophies, and 7 silver cups (1852-1904).

Roster of the first company of Battery E to occupy the New Bedford Armory

Capt. Joseph L. Gibbs, 1st Lieut. John C. De Wolf, 2d Lieut. Ernest L. Snell, 1st Sergt. Ernest L. Soule, Q. M. Sergt. Edward K. McIntyre, **Sergeants:** Wm. Nelson, Harry C. Ellis, Frederick Perry, Wm. Stitt. Corporals: John J. Miller, Alfred Fredette, Richard E. Noyer, Burton G. Davoll, Thomas A. Loftus. **Cook:** Charles E. Duchesney. **Bugler:** William J. Moore. **Privates:** David Adams, Alexander J. Aiken, Eugene Barneby, Arthur H. Benoit, Max F. Boehler, James A. Brown, Henry Butts, Henry C. Campbell, Geo. F. Chadwick, Sam Cooper, Napoleon Desjardins, Edward E. Devoll, James Dodds, James Doran, Wm. F. Farrell, Joseph A. Fernandes, Hector S. Floret, Frank Francis, Bartholomew P. Fury, Joseph R. Girard, William Gray, James Harrison, Solomon C. Haskell, Patrick M. Haugey, Ernest Hegele, Harry A. Jameson, Sr., John F. Johnson, Dennis Kelley, Thomas J. Kelley, Wm. F. McClure, Luc Moquin, E. Lloyd Munroe, Guy L. Murdock, Wm. T. Meagher, Lewis S. Moore, Nelson Paradise, John B. Perry, Phillip A.

Powers, Albert Reeves, Edward J. Rourke, Herbert L. Rush, Wm. E. Russell, Freeman S. Ryonson, Gilbert G. Southworth, William Southworth, John A. Stitt, James F. Vera.



Armory head house entrance, Sycamore Street (photo: Arthur Motta, 2004)

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3 RESPONSES TO “NEW BEDFORD ARMORY HISTORY”


1.  **Peggi Medeiros** | [August 2, 2014 at 1:34 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Wonderful, brilliant piece. When will the City get its act together and SAVE the Armory. There is no excuse for its neglect.

2.  **Kingston Wm. Heath** | [August 2, 2014 at 6:33 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Such well researched and engaging studies of New Bedford’s major monuments, as Mr. Motta has offered the reader, are so helpful in raising the public’s interest in heritage stewardship. Let’s ensure that this one finds a prideful rebirth.

Kingston Wm. Heath

3.  **Peggi Medeiros** | [August 2, 2014 at 7:50 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I agree completely. I truly fear that if the Armory does not receive some badly needed stewardship soon it will be lost forever.