

# The State Normal School As Architecture

This building blends many architectural styles popular in New England at this time. Stephen J. Raiche, of the Connecticut Historical Commission, in his 1975 nomination document for the Walnut Hill District to become listed by the National Register of Historic Places, states, “the school building is an eclectic blend of Eastlake, Queen Anne, and Second Empire influences.” The “Walnut Hill Historic District Proposal - New Britain, Connecticut” adds, “and American architectural ‘poetic license.’”

Resting on the eastern slope of Walnut Hill, the State Normal School building is grand and compact (126 feet by 85 feet), and also warm and approachable. As a Governor’s commission reported in 1883, “the harmonious blending of hues and color, combined with a quiet massiveness, render it most attractive.” On a foundation of Portland brownstone, the structural elements (vertical setbacks, stacked windows in groups of threes on the front and twos on the other sides, gables on the front, chimneys, and the high, squared bell tower with sharply pitched roof, 108 feet) carry the eye upwards, while the red brick walls of New Britain selected brick, with numerous thin buff bands edged in black and, just below the roof line, a wide buff and black checkerboard band carry the eye from side to side. The checkerboard pattern is repeated in the faces of the two east-side gables.

The main entrance, set out from the main building structure and framed by sturdy columns with the buff and black bands of brick and capped by an imposing round arch (a dominant feature of Richardson Romanesque) and gabled roof, is on the east side at the northeast corner, projecting out from the tower structure. At the top of the gable and carved in the limestone facing is a recessed circle; this decorative element is also at the top of the two gables on the east face, to the left of the entrance, where they balance the central chimney. (William F. Brooks used the same decorative element in designing the 1901 New Britain Institute, the library at the corner of High and West Main Streets.) And above the entrance roof, on the east side of the tower, is the carved limestone marker, “S.N.S.A.D.1882.” This corner main entrance with the majestic bell tower provides a rhythmic, asymmetric sweep to the entire structure, echoing its placement on the side of a hill.

The granite entrance steps takes one up to the second floor level and onto an open porch where nine foot high, heavy windowed doors open to a closed vestibule. Above the doors is a semicircular window, repeating the curve of the masonry arch just walked under. The vestibule is almost square. The floor is of unglazed ceramic tiles in a stylized garden design highlighted by a central eight-pointed star of flowers in four shades of brown, four shades of blue, red, black, and white. This central garden design is bordered on all four sides by simpler geometric patterns in softer shades of browns. The entire design gives the vestibule floor the look of an oriental carpet of beautiful tiles. The vestibule walls both continue the garden theme and provide contrast by continuing the exterior bands of red, buff, and black brick. The lower band of red brick is especially striking: vigorously designed decorative bricks in stylized flower and garden patterns. Above that are the bands of buff, black, and, at the top, with the brick variously set, red again, in even more exuberant patterns. The walls are broken by the doors from the outside on the east, the doors to the building to the west, and, above the red “garden” band to the north, two tall windows. The ceiling is both simple and rich, consisting of dark square panels of reverse painting on glass to simulate marble and set at the diagonal, with triangle panels at the walls to fill the space. At the center of the square panel is a tin and glass hanging light fixture.

Again, through high, heavy, windowed doors, one enters the enclosed entrance hall, approximately 19 by 37 feet, with a height of 10 feet 6 inches, dominated by an imposing and elaborate wooden newel post (with patterns recalling the “garden” in the vestibule), 7 feet high. From the newel post, wide stairs with elaborate balusters lead to the floors above. (In recent years, very likely at the time of renovation to condominiums, plexiglass has been applied to the baluster for safety reasons.) A door leads to enclosed stairs to go to the floor below. Across the room, a door leads to other areas on

this floor. The walls of the entrance hall are decorated with wainscoting in its original finish, and in the center of the room is a duplicate of the glass hanging light fixture that was seen in the vestibule. Also, a recent addition is the floor covered with carpet upon which is an oriental rug, 11 feet, 9 inch by 7 feet, 3 inch. This rug is primarily a wine red in color and in an all-over pattern with 10 borders.

Throughout the main building and the annex, built 1891 primarily to add a gymnasium, and after renovations to condominiums, 1989-1991, one can still find many elements (such as wainscoting, elaborate wooden staircases and balconies, monumental fireplaces, and chalk trays) original to the State Normal School as Briggs knew it.

Stephen J. Raiche, of the Connecticut Historical Commission, in his 1975 nomination document for the Walnut Hill District to become listed by the National Register of Historic Places, notes the School Administration building (formerly the Normal School) as a “critical’ building, . . . dominant because of [its] exceptionally fine architecture.”