

CHARLES WALLACE AS UNDERTAKER OF THE STATE HOUSE

By MORRIS L. RADOFF

AT the end of the long harassing years devoted to building the present State House at Annapolis, a Committee of the General Assembly which had been appointed to examine the progress of the work reported that the building was almost done. It also pointed out that the original copper roof had been blown off by the hurricane of September, 1775, and that the contractor Charles Wallace finding it impossible to restore it had sold the copper "as by his memorial will appear."¹ When the writer was preparing a study of the public buildings at Annapolis a search was made for this memorial in the expectation that it would clarify the baffling history of the State House roof.² The search was fruitless, however, and the story of the successive roofs had to be reconstructed from widely scattered and less authoritative evidence.

Now the memorial has been found. It not only explains the roofs, which was the most that had been hoped for, but it gives a step by step account of Charles Wallace's work as "undertaker" of the State House beginning with the signing of a contract with the State, June 20, 1771, and ending December 28, 1779, a few short months before the building was occupied. There is even a prologue which provides answers for some additional questions. On January 4, 1770, the superintendents of the new buildings, which had been authorized the month before³ advertised for plans and bids.⁴ We have long thought that if we found some records

¹ *Notes and Proceedings of the House of Delegates*, November Session, 1779 (December 28, 1779), p. 78.

² Morris L. Radoff, *Buildings of the State of Maryland at Annapolis* (Annapolis, 1954).

³ Chapter 14, Acts of 1769, November Session.

⁴ See the *Maryland Gazette* for that date, the advertisement appeared every week at first, then from time to time until the end of February after which it ceased

of the response to this advertisement we would discover who was the architect. It now appears, according to Wallace, that no plans were submitted since the amount of money appropriated for the purpose was generally considered insufficient. His own proposal was not made and accepted until June of the next year, but whether the plans were his own or prepared for him by someone else is still an unresolved question.

Otherwise the memorial will speak for itself. The editor ought to add that there is no reason to doubt any of the facts given by Wallace. He was a prominent merchant of Annapolis who enjoyed an excellent character. Moreover, wherever there is other evidence of the facts which he recites his version is fully sustained in every case.

Because the memorial has suffered badly at the folds it was not always possible to be sure of the reading. In the transcript which follows the uncertainties are clearly indicated.

To The Honorable The General Assembly of Maryland
The Humble Petition of Charles Wallace

Sheweth

That soon after the passing the Act of Assembly in 1769 for building a State House, the Superintendants for that purpose who then acted gave repeated public invitations to Architects and Workmen to lay before them Plans Estimates and Proposals for building and finishing the said house but nothing conclusive or satisfactory was done or offered by any person nor was likely to be proposed for carrying on the said Building, the common opinion being that the £7,000 granted was hardly sufficient for the purpose and your petitioner impressed with an idea that the building might be completed for the Money with good Management, though fully satisfied that no great profit could be made by any undertaker proposed to the then acting Superintendents to undertake the Building and finishing the said State House for the said £7,000 Sterling which proposals were agreed to, and in consequence thereof, on or about the Twentieth Day of June 1771 your petitioner entered into Articles with the then Acting Superintendants, whereby he agreed for the said £7,000 to build and finish or procure to be built and finished in a substantial workman like and neat manner the State House upon the plan annexed to the said articles. Your petitioner drew pursuant to the said articles and for which he gave his bonds with security according and subject to the said agreement on the said 20th day of June £2,500 sterling and £3,000 sterling and on the 18th day of April 1772 £1,500 sterling making

to appear. The date on which plans were to be submitted, April 17, passed without comment in the *Gazette*.

in the whole the £7,000 sterling being [?] the money appointed by the said Act.

That your petitioner prosecuted the work with such diligence that in the year 1772 the basement and first story were up and early in 1773 the second story was up, and the building would have been covered in that year if the best and indeed universal opinion had not been that a slate cover would not answer the purpose. In June in the same year the two houses of the then Assembly disagreed whether the building should be covered with shingles or copper so that your petitioner could not go on with either, and by the advice of gentlemen of both houses, in expectation that the two houses would afterward agree, he forbore to proceed till the next session which happened in November, sometime in that session and late in December an Act passed directing the covering to be of copper and appropriating for that purpose £1,440 sterling. Your petitioner immediately sent for it, got it in the summer of 1774, proceeded on with the building, got it covered in and four of the upper rooms finished, but the September storm in 1775 blew the cover off and ruined the inside work. The copper was so spoiled that it could not be applied again to the same use none could be imported and the roof was much too flat for shingling, wherefore your petitioner employed all the hands he could, and at a very heavy expence in the course of the winter framed a new roof and covered it with shingles.

From that time till the month of August 1777 when the British Fleet came [?] up the Bay your petitioner had in his employ a number of exceeding good workmen, but upon the Fleet's coming up the Bay most of the inhabitants left Annapolis for a while amongst them your petitioner and most of the workmen then in his service and upwards of twenty of them have not returned to him. Since that time your petitioner could procure but very few workmen whose wages have rose with the Depreciation of the money as far as from 5/ [?] your petitioner's estimates and what he actually paid to six pounds per day.

That in the year 1777 your petitioner undertook for five hundred pounds current money to build two galleries, one in the room of each House of the Assembly, since which the depreciation of the money has been rapid and continual, and to enable your Petitioner the better to sustain the many charges occasioned by a variety of unexpected events he disposed of and sold the copper which was blown off and spoiled as aforesaid.

Your petitioner has finished the State House (except four of the commonest Rooms and some ornaments in the front which the plan will show) and the galleries in a much more expensive and elegant manner than could be claimed from his contract or he believes was expected, and, as he hopes to give satisfaction to your Honors and reflect credit on the State.

He has prosecuted the work with diligence and can truly affirm that instead of his being a gainer by seven years application and fatigue on a public work, he is a very great loser, for though the sterling money for

the several purposes aforesaid was drawn when it was at par it could not be wholly laid out whilst it and would have depreciated had it been kept in cash, as it has with your petitioner's other property in the hands of many of his debtors. He therefore prays your Honors will direct that his contracts and bonds be given up to him, that he be discharged therefrom, and from doing anything further on the said building and that he may be indemnified in selling and disposing of the copper aforesaid and in applying it as aforesaid and that he may be paid a sum of money equal to the £500 in 1777 which is yet due for building the galleries or a sum adequate to that service independent of any agreement.

And your petitioner as in duty bound will pray.

Verso

Petition of Charles Wallace December 28, 1779 Read the first time.