

FRIENDS OF THE STATE HOUSE

1792



1992

Spring 2001

200 Year Old State House Documents Found

By Joseph Klett

In January, the Friends learned of an invaluable collection of Maskell Ewing papers relating to the construction of the 1792 State House. The collection, offered for sale by a Florida manuscript dealer, spans the earliest period of State House history, 1790-92. Included are some 40 pages of documents relating to both construction and the raising of private subscriptions to help fund the project. These documents were apparently retained among personal papers of Maskell Ewing, then Clerk of the New Jersey General Assembly and a member of the commission appointed to oversee the construction project.

Following authentication by State Archives staff, in February the Friends resolved to raise the funds necessary to purchase the collection with the intention of donating the materials to the Archives. There the documents will be permanently preserved and made accessible for historical and architectural research, and public display.

It is important to note that the Ewing papers shed new light on various aspects of State House history. Several manuscripts document how private subscribers in Trenton and surrounding townships helped finance the construction. The collection also includes the earliest-known account of building expenses, plus letters of State House master builder Jonathan Doan showing detailed dimensions for the original structure. Historians, architects, and others who cherish and interpret the history of New Jersey's capitol will benefit greatly from this previously inaccessible information.

Since the State House bicentennial in 1992, the Friends' commitment to preserve and promote the history of the State House has enriched the experience of many thousands of visitors to Trenton. The Friends have proudly taken the lead in the effort to bring the Maskell Ewing papers home to the state capital, where they belong.

The Friends Honor Senator Littell

Senator Robert E. Littell is a true friend of the New Jersey State House and *The Friends of the State House* show their appreciation for his efforts by honoring him at a dinner on Monday, May 14, 2001, 6:00 p.m., at the Princeton Marriott.

Bob Littell has channeled his love for history into a sustained commitment to preserve and enhance the luster to the New Jersey historical treasures in the capital city: the State House, State House Annex, and the surrounding campus and landscape. His personal drive to restore dignity to the capital area and develop it for cultural tourism has been a *sine qua non* for several projects, including the construction of the new State Archives, opened in 2000.

For dinner reservations, call (609)716-9700.



Governor Harold G. Hoffman, Charles A. Lindbergh and 'The Trial Of The Century'

By Frederick M. Herrmann, Ph.D.

For the current generation, the O.J. Simpson trial was the "Trial of the Century." But for their parents and grandparents that designation will always belong to the Lindbergh kidnapping case. It was such a momentous event that H.L. Mencken quipped that it was the greatest story since biblical times. The cast of characters involved in the proceedings was stellar by any standards.

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It featured not only important New Jersey personalities but also national ones.

Prosecuting the case was the Garden State's young Attorney General, David Wilentz, the father of future State Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz. The defense attorney was Edward J. Reilly, popularly known as the "Bull of Brooklyn" and one of America's top trial attorneys. Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the founder of the New Jersey State Police and also the father of the Gulf War commander, played a key role in investigating the case. And, of course, Charles A. Lindbergh, the father of the victim and one of the nation's greatest heroes at the time, was at center stage. Finally, New Jersey's Governor Harold G. Hoffman participated in a most fascinating and still puzzling way.

The tragic kidnapping became entwined with the careers of all these men and others. Even Al Capone became involved. But, it was Lindbergh and Hoffman whose promising early lives were fated to become ruined in the wake of its aftermath. Their story involves not only the history of New Jersey but also its historic State House.

Harold G. Hoffman was born on February 7, 1896 in South Amboy. He attended public schools there and while still in high school worked as a stringer for The New York Times and the Daily Home News of New Brunswick. Upon graduation, he joined the Perth Amboy Evening News as a fulltime employee and rose to the position of sports editor. As a lieutenant in World War I, he saw action in the Meuse-Argonne offensive and received a battlefield promotion to captain.

After the war, Hoffman returned to South Amboy as a war hero and assumed a prominent place in the town's business community, becoming well known in New Jersey banking circles. He soon became active in local and state government as South Amboy City Treasurer (1920-1925), Middlesex County Assemblyman (1923-1924), and Mayor of South Amboy (1925-1926). Hoffman was then elected to Congress serving two terms from 1927-1931. He left Congress to become Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles. Speaking at functions throughout the state, Hoffman became known as a brilliant speaker, debater, and campaigner. He was even able to build a national reputation as a spokesperson for highway safety.

In 1934, Hoffman ran for governor and won the general election in an upset victory. The 39-year-old governor-elect had achieved a broad personal following and

was even seriously mentioned as a possible contender for national office. Hoffman risked his popularity, however, by championing a state sales tax to meet the increased demand for governmental services during the depression. The well-organized opposition to his tax measure eventually forced him to repeal the tax after it was enacted. A defeated but unbowed governor signed the repealer in red ink to symbolize what he foresaw as creating an "unbalanced budget and maybe hungry people."

Charles A. Lindbergh was born on February 4, 1902, in Detroit almost exactly six years to the day after the birth of Hoffman. He grew up in Minnesota, the son of

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a pacifist congressman who would run unsuccessfully for governor of his state in 1918. As a child, Lindbergh demonstrated exceptional mechanical ability. At the age of 18, he entered the University of Wisconsin to study engineering. After two years of school, Lindbergh left in 1922 to become a barnstorming pilot who performed daredevil feats at county fairs. In 1924, he enlisted in the army and trained as a flying cadet later becoming an airmail pilot.

It was in 1927 that Lindbergh made the fateful decision to win the \$25,000 in prize money offered to the first aviator to fly nonstop from New York to Paris. Several pilots had been killed or injured while competing for this prize from the time it had been first offered in 1919. On May 20, 1927, he took off in The Spirit of St. Louis from Roosevelt Field near New York City. Almost a day-and-a-half and more than 3600 miles later, the courageous pilot landed as a worldwide hero at Le Bourget Field near Paris.

Nearly five years later, on March 31, 1932, Lindbergh's 20-month-old son, Charles Jr., was kidnapped from the family home in Hopewell. After ten weeks his body was found. In 1934, the police arrested a carpenter, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, charging him with the murder. A sensational trial began in Flemington on January 15, 1935, the same day that Hoffman was sworn into office. Following a 32-day trial and 11 hours of deliberation, the jury found Hauptmann guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced him to death.

In late 1935, the focus of the action moved to the State House. With Hauptmann awaiting execution at Trenton State Prison, Governor Hoffman decided to reopen the case in the interest of "Jersey Justice." Hoffman believed that the convicted murderer had not committed his crime alone and decided to make a dramatic visit to his death cell in the hope of inducing the condemned kidnapper to name his accomplices. Just before Hauptmann's scheduled execution date, the Governor granted him a 30-day reprieve, ordering the State Police to reopen its investigation. Although criticized for his actions with some even calling for his impeachment, the Governor remained firm stating "my heart, my conscience, and my sense of duty impel me."

Whether or not Hoffman was acting out of a genuine concern or misguided opportunism or perhaps some combination of both has never been resolved. But if it were to promote his own political ambitions, the remark of one New Jersey third grader at the time may be the

measure of his success. When asked by his teacher to name the governor of the state, he responded without hesitation "Governor Hauptmann." In any event, the reprieve and the reopened investigation failed to save the kidnapper, who was electrocuted on April 30, 1936.

After the trial, Lindbergh, his wife, and their surviving son moved to England in search of privacy and safety. However, their "exile" received mixed reviews in the press with some editorials sympathizing with their plight while others attacked them for leaving their homeland. His real problems began, however, when the governments of France and Germany invited him to tour their aircraft industries. Lindbergh became enamoured with German air superiority and, in 1938, even accepted a medal from Hermann Goering.

Returning to the United States in 1939, he made anti-war speeches for the America First Committee. His comments were considered by many to be pro-Nazi. Although Lindbergh stopped this activity after Pearl Harbor and eventually flew 50 combat missions as a civilian in the Pacific Theater, his positive pre-war comments about the Third Reich and his pacifism tarnished a once impeccable reputation. After the war, he withdrew from

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public attention, emerging only in the late 1960's as a spokesman for the conservation movement. Ironically, the "Lone Eagle" died somewhat of a recluse on the Hawaiian island of Maui on August 26, 1974.

Hoffman's once shining star faded as well after his involvement with the Lindbergh case. He never attained national public office or even state elected office again. He served in the Army Transport Command in World War II, held two mid-level appointed state government posts, and was much in demand as a paid speaker, frequently as a toastmaster for the "Order of Circus Saints and Sinners." Tragically, after his death on June 4, 1954, it was revealed that he had embezzled approximately

\$300,000 from the South Amboy Trust Company in order to pay off early campaign debts. From at least 1949 on, he had used state funds under his control to cover his bank's shortages. In a sad letter written to his daughter shortly before his death, the former governor noted in despair that "morality, in its ultimate determination, is a funny thing."

In a way, the Lindbergh kidnapping case undermined the future careers of two men who had been true heroes before the fateful event. Lindbergh by happenstance and Hoffman by choice became involved in the Trial of the Century. It changed the course of both their lives in a way that destroyed much of the promise of their early accomplishments. The Lindbergh baby then was not the only victim of a crime that affected New Jersey and national history as well as that of the State House.

"Save The Dates"

Senator Robert E. Littell Testimonial Dinner

Monday, May 14, 2001, 6:00 p.m.

Princeton Marriott

For reservations, call: (609) 716-9700

Tickets: \$100 per person

Governor Hoffman & The Lindbergh Trial

Monday, September 24, 2001, 5:30 p.m.

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Open To The Public

Free Admission

The Friends of the State House

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