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Narrative #9 -- King's College Campus

The Site

The 5 acres that constituted the campus of King's College (and subsequently, the original site of Columbia College) was formally deeded to the College governors in 1755 by the vestrymen of Trinity Church, on the condition that the college's head be of the Anglican communion and that all religious services of the College use the Anglican liturgy. (These stipulations were cited in the College's first royal charter, signed October 31, 1754, but would be omitted from the state charters of 1784 and 1787 that brought Columbia College into being.) These acres had formed the northern part of the 32-acre "Queen's Farm," [after Queen Anne] which ran up the western side of Manhattan Island along the Hudson River. In 1697 the farm was leased to the newly opened Trinity Church at the order of Governor Fletcher. In 1705, upon the expiration of the lease, Fletcher's successor, Governor Edward Cornbury, deeded the Farm outright to Trinity Church. At the time of the gift, the prominent Trinity vestryman Lewis Morris pronounced it "a fit place for a colledge.." although it remained into the 1740s well north of the settled sections of the City. Trinity's claim (and, subsequently, the College's) to the farm, however, was never so clear as to avoid challenges from descendants of its Dutch owners who have challenged the right of the English authorities to dispose of it. The site, now immediately to the west of City Hall Park, is bounded by Murray Street to the north, Church Street to the east, Barclay Street to the south and Greenwich Street to the west.

The College's acreage was effectively increased in 1767 when the City approved the petition of the College's governors, in keeping with common practice, to develop "water lots" extending westward from their waterfront property line some 200 feet out into the Hudson. These lots were subsequently filled in and leased, effectively doubling the property owned by the College. Still later landfill now places the college site several blocks from the Hudson, about parallel with the northern shoreline of Battery Park City.

Postscript: On January 29, 1857, at the direction of the trustees of Columbia College, the site of the college building was divided into 13 parcels and auctioned off for just under \$600,000. It was by then surrounded by warehouses and other commercial buildings.

The Building(s)

The Trinity Schoolhouse -- The first instruction offered by what only came in the 1760s to be called King's College -- it was earlier referred to as "The College of New York," while "King's College" identified only the college's building -- took place in the vestryroom of a schoolhouse owned by and adjacent to Trinity Church. Built in 1748 as the English Charity Schoolhouse, it was made available to President Samuel Johnson when he held his first classes in July 1754, and remained in use by the College until the opening of the "King's College" building in 1760. The schoolhouse, along with the original Trinity Church, burned in the fire that consumed much of the settled west side Manhattan in September 1776, just days after the British occupation of the City.

[Edward Chrystie Painting/Halsey, p. 28.]

The King's College Building-- At their second meeting, on May 13, 1755, the College Governors appointed a building committee to look into constructing "suitable edifices." On April, 8, 1756, the architect of the recently completed St. George's Chapel, Robert Crommelin, was hired to draw up plans for a three-storied building 180 feet x 30 feet. The building, which was to have a cupola, was to form the northern side of a campus rectangle, with western and eastern sides to follow as funding and enrollments allowed. These plans were approved by Governor Hardy in July and the building's cornerstone laid on August 23, 1756. Construction thereafter proceeded apace and was nearly completed in 1760 when the English traveler Andrew Burnaby passed through New York. He has provided the earliest recorded account of the building:

The college, when finished, will be exceedingly handsome: it is to be built on three sides of a quadrangle, fronting Hudson's or North River, and will be the most beautifully situated

of any college, I believe, in the world.... At present only one wing is finished, which is of stone, and consists of twenty-four sets of apartments, each having a large sitting room, with a study, and bed chamber. They are obliged to make use of some of these apartments for a master's lodge, library, chapel, hall &c, but as soon as the whole shall be completed, there will be proper apartments for each of these offices. The name of it is King's College.

By May 1760, the building was sufficiently completed for President Johnson and his new wife to take up occupancy. A month later the College's commencement, its fourth, was held for the first time in the new College Hall. Thereafter, the building readily accommodated Johnson and his bachelor successor, Myles Cooper, two or three resident faculty and twenty-odd residential students annually until the College was closed in 1775. Instruction was given in the president's and faculty lodgings, rather than in space set aside as classrooms.

The building cost £12,000, and was quickly paid for through the use of public funds appropriated by the provincial government prior to the College's founding and subsequently by private benefactions raised locally primarily from Trinity Churchmen, and from fund-raising efforts in England and the West Indies.

As late as 1765-66, the College, by then fenced in at the direction of President Cooper, was surrounded on all four sides by open land and had an unobstructed view of the Hudson River. Less than a decade later, however, Robinson Street, which led directly to the western edge of the campus, had become, according to a Scottish visitor, "one of the streets where the most noted prostitutes live. This is certainly a temptation to the youth that have occasion to pass so often that way."

With Cooper's hasty departure from New York City just ahead of a Revolutionary mob in May 1775, the College essentially ceased operations. In April 1776 the building was confiscated by the Revolutionary Committee of Safety and converted to a hospital. It continued to serve as a hospital during the British occupation of New York City, from September 1776 to November 1783. The building survived the occupation, and was to be returned to its original collegiate purposes in 1784, but with a new charter and a new corporate name -- "Columbia College in the City of New York."

[[Images -- All that can be scanned from the Thomas article and the Humphrey book]]

Postscript: Reopened in 1784, under terms of a new charter from the state, the main building of what was now Columbia College housed both the Trinity Charity School and what had been the Grammar School of King's College. Repairs were made in 1785, including the construction of a porter's lodge on the western edge of the campus. In 1787, following the issuance of another charter, which essentially restored the College to its *status quo ante bellum*, President Samuel William Johnson took up residence in the College Hall.

In 1795 construction of a two-story west wing was begun in the false expectation of imminent state funding. It was not completed until 1806 and was so shabbily constructed as soon to be declared unsafe for occupancy. By then the students' living quarters had been entirely preempted by the faculty, making the College wholly non-residential. Not until 1817 was a serious renovation and expansion undertaken, and the two wings discussed more than a half century earlier, properly completed at the cost of \$80,000.

Nonetheless, in 1853 the trustees voted that "the College should be removed from its present locality, with all reasonable diligence." The first thought was to relocate on to a portion of the 20 acres of land -- David Hosack's Botanical Garden in the then rural ninth ward of the City, between 46th and 50th Streets and between Fifth and Madison Avenues -- given the College by the state legislature in 1814 in lieu of the direct support it provided Hamilton and Union Colleges. It was decided instead to buy the property of the Institution of the Deaf and Dumb at 49th and Madison for \$63,000, while reserving the more valuable Botanical Garden property for commercial leases. Within five months of the sale of the original site of the College in January 1857, College Hall was demolished, with only its cornerstone saved.

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August 1998

For some early maps of Lower Manhattan, showing King's College: http://www.microcolour.com/usa_maps.htm

Sources: Morgan Dix, A History of the Parish of Trinity Church in the City of New York (1898); Milton Halsey Thomas, "The King's College Building, with some notes on its later tenants," New-York Historical Society Quarterly (January 1955) , XXXIX, pp, 23-60; David C.. Humphrey, From King's College to Columbia, 1746-1800, Columbia University Press, 1976; Phelps, Iconography of Manhattan Island, Vol. I, pp. ; Ann Buttenweiser, Manhattan Water-Bound (New York: NYU Press, 1987)