

A Walk Through Mead Hall

From James C. Massey, Historic Mead Hall, Drew University

Mead Hall is not a museum but a working university building with offices, classrooms and meeting rooms throughout. At various times in Drew's long history, the building has housed faculty members and seminary students, a chapel and library, meeting rooms and classrooms. Mead Hall is now the administrative core of the University, a well-loved symbol of the school and a focal point for students, faculty and community.

This tour will describe the architecture and history of the building and some of the many functions of its various rooms.

North (Main) Façade



Its imposing size (145 x 90) and impressive architectural features have earned Mead Hall an important place among New Jersey 's largest and finest Greek Revival-style houses. Along the main façade, a full-height portico is supported by six massive Ionic columns of fluted and carved wood, each 36 feet high. The brick walls of the house were once painted, probably in a light-gray color simulating stone. The paint was removed in 1958, to complement other redbrick buildings on the Drew Campus. (The Rose Memorial Library immediately east of Mead Hall was constructed in 1939, with many Greek Revival features that echo those of Mead Hall.) At either end of the portico are brownstone mounting blocks, tangible reminders of William Gibbons' interest in horses. The white-painted lintels incised with Greek-key designs that rest above the tall windows are of brownstone; originally, the stone was exposed. The portico floor retains its original gray marble tiles. The paneled wood front door, with its silver-plated hardware, is also original. Overall, the design of the T-shaped house hints of the southern origins of its builder, recalling the gracious proportions and high ceilings of antebellum plantation houses below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Main Hall



The grandeur of Mead Hall is expressed in the ample size of its T-shaped main hall. The gray-and-white marble tiles on the floor were removed, cleaned, and replaced during the 1989-1992 rehabilitation. Solid paneled doors of Santo Domingo mahogany survived the fire. They are fitted with silver plated hardware and doorknobs, which were deliberately darkened during Drew's early seminary period to tone down the opulence of their effect. Evidence of the central furnace installed during the building's construction can be seen in the circular brass grilles with adjustable openings in the lower walls of the hall. The hall's ceiling cornice is of plaster painted a rich brown. Because of the great height of the ceiling, the cornice appears to match the mahogany doors. Like most of the plaster moldings in Mead Hall, the cornice was weakened beyond repair by water damage during the 1989 fire and was carefully replicated during the rehabilitation. In the center of the hall ceiling, an oval opening to the second floor is surrounded by a gallery-like mahogany balustrade and gives a glimpse of the skylight above. At the rear of the hall, the formal staircase, with its weighty urn-shaped mahogany balusters and shapely handrail, lends even greater importance to the hall. On either side of the entrance hall, original gilded mirrors hang above gilded console tables; they were salvaged and refinished after the fire. The wallpaper in this grand space is an adaptation of a historical pattern discovered behind the mirrors. Portraits on the walls are of presidents of Drew Theological Seminary and Drew University, as well as Daniel Drew and his wife, the former Roxanna Mead. A two-faced clock flanked by gilded consoles above the door at the rear of the hall is visible from both the hall and the dining room.

Wendel Room (Drawing Room)

To the right of the front door is the Gibbons' elegant double parlor, now known as the Wendel Room in honor of the Wendel family of New York who were major 20th-century benefactors of Drew University. Note the classical symmetry of the room's design, and its elaborate Greek Revival doorway enframements. The two black marble mantelpieces are original features that were removed, restored, and reinstalled following the fire. Similar mantelpieces of black marble are found throughout the mansion. The fireplaces contain early iron hob grates set in brass frames. The hob grates are designed to burn coal rather than wood. Here and in Mead Hall's other major rooms, the wood floors are of remilled heart pine covering the original flooring, which was too badly worn for use in its modern context. The replacement floors replicate exactly the width, length, and nailing patterns of the originals. During the Gibbons' tenure, the floors were covered in wall-to-wall carpeting, but the carpets were removed when the house was prepared for seminary use, being deemed too luxurious for unworldly ministers-to-be. The upholstered window seats may be original to Mead Hall. The paneled wood interior blinds at the windows fold back into pockets in the window reveals. The plaster ceiling medallion in this room is original and survived the fire and subsequent watering. However, the handsome mid- 19th-century gasolier (now converted to electricity) was not installed until the mid-20th century.

William Gibbons' Office and Library

The first of the two well-finished rooms to the left of the front door served as William Gibbons' office, where he dealt with the affairs of his large and active farm, his horse-breeding operations, his southern plantation, and his ferryboat enterprises. The second room was his library. Both contain handsome black marble fireplaces and impressive Greek Revival doorways.

Founders Room (Dining Room)



Above the entrance to the dining room, the Gibbons' two-faced clock peers out to both the front and the rear of the house. The expansive dining room covers nearly the entire breadth of the building, with a butler's pantry and service halls to the sides. On the south wall of the room, the sashes in the tall jib windows slide upward to create doors to the rear porch, where generations of Drew graduates have received their diplomas. The scenic wallpaper in this room was printed from 19th-century blocks by the Zuber firm of France and installed when the room was redecorated after the fire. Although it is not known how the walls of the dining room were treated originally, it seems likely that they were papered, as were most of the other rooms in Mead Hall.

Cross Hall and Side Halls

The T-shaped main hall, with its cross hall extensions, is supplemented by side service halls. One of the service halls was closed off at some point in the building's history and was reopened during the rehabilitation. Both side halls exit to the rear porch. The one at the west end of the building contains a wheelchair-accessible elevator that connects all three floors of Mead Hall.

Second Floor

The second floor of Mead Hall was once devoted to bedrooms and other intimate family spaces, including, presumably, the "bathing room" which William Gibbons' records indicate was installed here. The office of Drew's president is in the Gibbons family sitting room.

Ground Floor (Basement)

The high-ceilinged basement of Mead Hall was as busy during the Gibbons' day as it is now. Lit by oval windows on the outside walls, and with interior windows giving visual and physical access between its many parts, the space once contained the wide range of working spaces required to carry on the varied activities of a largely self-sufficient estate. There were at least two kitchens and laundry facilities, the central furnace, servants' living quarters, and, probably, William Gibbons' fabled wine cellar, which his son-in-law reported to have held enough Madeira wine "to float a frigate". In one of the former kitchens is a large brick-lined cooking fireplace complete with swinging crane and an iron wall oven at shoulder-height beside the fireplace. Physical evidence indicates that the fireplace held a small iron cooking range at some early point.

Accessibility

Mead Hall is a fully accessible building. A wheelchair ramp to the ground floor (basement) is located at the east end of the main façade, adjacent to the Rose Memorial Library. From here, a wheelchair-accessible elevator provides access to the first and second floors.

Accessible restrooms are near the center of the ground floor (basement).