

HERCULES, SOCRATES, AND THE QUEEN

Prologue:

Cincinnatians, it has been my observation, are not necessarily focused on glory or grandeur. Be it cultural or geographical or hereditary, a measure of humility is a distinct component of our constitution.

That being the case, I have sometimes wondered if our City Hall – the nearly 125-year-old Romanesque Revival building that occupies an entire square block of West Downtown – is too ornate, too boastful, too aspirational for our taste. Architecturally, it is anything but humble.

To stand on Plum Street, between 8th and 9th, and to look up at the façade of our City Hall is, for a moment, to let go of our native humility. It is to be immersed in a time when visions of grandeur and notions of glory were very much on Cincinnati's mind.

This paper is about City Hall, the building; it is about City Council, the people who have occupied the building; and it is about how our local government works. This is my story – one person's version – of what a City Hall can mean to its community.

Part One: The Place

Buildings make statements. They convey values. They reflect personalities. So what does our City Hall say? Or what did it say? Or, perhaps most important, what could it say. I believe it says: We are ambitious. It says: We have a history. And it says: We *do* want to be a great city.

Allow me, for a few minutes, to lead you on a verbal tour of the architectural masterpiece that sits proudly at 801 Plumm in which I will stick to the highlights rather than drawing you into every last janitor's closet. I might add that I feel some debt to the building itself, since a perfectly-to-scale papier maché replica of City Hall was featured prominently in my campaign commercial with a number of little kids – meant to be immature Council members – playing in a sandbox around the replica.

When Samuel Hannaford – Cincinnati's leading 19th century architect who also designed our Music Hall and Memorial Hall, among his many masterpieces – was commissioned to lead the project in 1888,

he set out to design what would be one of the grandest City Halls in the country. Five years – and \$1.6 million later – he had accomplished his goal. When the building was completed in 1893 it offered a clear message: Cincinnati is major American city. And now we have a City Hall to match our stature. Indeed, at the time, with a population of three hundred thousand people, we were the ninth biggest city in the country. Today, with an almost identical population, we are the 62nd biggest city in the country.

As one student of Hannaford, Betty Ann Smiddy, has put it, “The building lifts your eyes up. You are drawn to the clock tower. Turrets and gables break up the mansard roof line. Varieties of exterior stone were carefully picked for their color and surface texture. The carved arch doorways, the decorative gargoyles, even the building’s size makes you feel the significance.” (<http://tinyurl.com/cdue3eg>)

Deep carvings texture most of the building’s exterior, including on the center of the entry archway, the City’s crest. A sword and Caduceus meet at the bottom of the crest with the Scales of Justice depicted above

them, and above that, the Latin inscription “Juncta Juvant,” the City’s official motto, which loosely translates to “Strength In Unity.”

Once inside the building, visitors continue to be encouraged to look up, this time at a ceiling painting depicting the seven daughters of Zeus. One’s feet slide across the earthy-toned mosaic floor, the materials for it imported from Tennessee, while the granite for the building’s muscular, deep grey internal pillars was brought in from Wisconsin.

Once inside, the second most impressive feature of City Hall is the grand marble staircase that winds gradually up the building. Hannaford, intent on using only the best, imported the marble from Italy.

The most impressive feature of the building, the indisputable *piece de resistance* of City Hall, and the feature that inspired the title of this paper, is the building’s stained glass, influenced by and reminiscent of the finest European capital cathedrals. The multi-chrome hue that the windows cast into the interior is so striking that it’s hard to imagine that the building initially was without these stained glass panes. Following its construction, a nearby smoke stack would cloud the original windows

with soot, compelling the switch to stained glass. The giant window panes were produced in New York City and, all told, cost \$29,000.

Now remember that City Hall is meant to tell a story and to send a message. It is the first stained glass window which visitors encounter, the only one they're guaranteed to see, that I believe says, "*This* is the character of our city."

There they are: Hercules, Socrates, and the Queen. A trio that is respectively representative of those qualities that can propel civic greatness.

Hercules, on the left side of the frame, stands with his sword dangling idly in his right hand, as he looks upward to the Queen seated above him on her throne. Hercules is bronzed, his body strapped with muscles and wrapped in royal-blue cloths, as a testament to his strength.

On the right hand side of the window, adorned in dark purple robes, stands Socrates. The deep lines of a long life are carved into this face, the physical manifestation of his wisdom, while his head of thick white hair and white beard frame his face. His look is indeed distinguished to the point he could be a potential Literarian.

Between her men, between these icons of strength and wisdom, presides the Queen. She sits atop an elevated throne, her strawberry blond hair and red robes complementing her fair skin. In her right hand, she holds a golden scepter, while her left hand rests upon the open book Socrates is holding, as though administering an oath.

Across the very bottom of the stained glass it reads: “The Queen of the West In Her Garland Drest On the Banks of the Beautiful River.” These were the words written by the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his poem “Catawba Wine” after he received a gift of such wine from Nicholas Longworth’s vineyards along the Ohio River.

In addition to Hercules, Socrates, and the Queen, one final character makes the scene. Reclining in the grass at the foot of the throne rests Mercury. He leans against a rock gazing upward toward the Queen, as an open sack of gold coins sits beneath his left hand. Among a cast of characters which conveys Cincinnati’s intent to be strong and wise and to aspire to greatness, it is perhaps appropriate that these halls of government also depict Mercury, who in Greek

mythology is the God of Commerce as well as the God of Thievery, which accommodates various feelings about the role of government.

The marble stairs sweep upward, to the second floor, which houses Law and Finance Departments, before the ascent continues on to the third floor, which is where the proverbial sausage gets made. At the top of the steps, a right turn leads to the corridor where Council members have their offices: nine neighboring units with windowless cozy front rooms, which typically house an aide or two or three, and then a modest-sized back office, which accommodates the Council member. It is in these offices that motions are written, initiatives are envisioned, press conferences are plotted, arms are twisted, ears are bent and all the other standard navigation of governing and power-brokering occurs.

Rather than turning right upon reaching the third floor, straight ahead is Council Chambers, ornate and imposing with its 40-foot ceilings. A long raised wooden dais extends across nearly the entire width of the room. The Mayor's chair sits at the center of the dais, flanked by a chair on each side for the Clerks of Council. Council

members and top city administrator's – most notably the City Manager and City Solicitor – sit to the right and left of the center of the dais.

The rumor, blessedly untested, is that the dais is bullet proof. An emergency button is also available beneath the dais next to the mayor's chair – a button that a few mischievous elementary school students have managed to press over the years during field trips to City Hall.

Above the dais, seven arched stained-glass windows illuminate the 40-foot high chambers. Facing the platform is a three-seat wooden desk, where city administrators make presentations, give budget updates, and encounter both flattery and grilling by Council members. This is also the spot where outside experts give context to the issues before Council, and most important, the place where citizens come, and for two minutes each, share their opinions on matters then being considered by Council members.

Behind the desk for public comment, are single seats for about 125 visitors. Above those seats, a marble balcony provides seating for another 125. On days with a yawn-worthy agenda, there might be as few as a handful of citizens in attendance wishing to speak or simply

observe. When more debated issues are taken up, chambers can be completely packed.

The 1893 dedication booklet for the building says of Cincinnati, “Unless one has been privileged to visit her sights [and] to participate in her business...one can hardly understand the love which each citizen has for his Queen, and it is just that love which makes Cincinnati what she is; which has given her the opportunity for becoming great...which has last of all given her a City Hall of which every citizen of the community is today speaking with pride.”

Part Two: The People

The feel, the dynamic, the result of what happens inside City Hall is a function of both its occupants and also the systems and structures that guide and circumscribe their decisions.

It is impossible to talk about the structure of governing that is in place today without first talking about one of the all-time giants of Cincinnati politics: George Barnsdale Cox – better known as “Boss Cox.”

Before becoming “the boss,” young George was born in 1853 the son of a poor English immigrant. His father died when George was only eight years old. Faced with the new reality of a fatherless household, George abandoned his schooling to work odd jobs in order to help support his widowed mother. He displayed precociousness and savvy and parlayed one street job into another, until he was running a local saloon.

Within his bar, called “Dead Man’s Corner,” George cultivated a natural constituency – large enough to win himself a seat on City Council in the late 1870s while still in his 20s. Though he served only two terms, George quickly mastered the rules of navigating – and manipulating – political machinery. He proceeded to turn himself into the nexus of political power, so much so that at the peak of his power he was reported to control 2,000 political patronage jobs, ranging from court bailiffs to stenographers to street cleaners – and also, it was said, controlled 25,000 votes.

“Every public employee had to pay at least 2.5 percent of his salary to the party fund, and businessmen were expected to give in proportion to favors shown or patronage received,” writes the

anonymous author in his essay on Boss Cox in the 1943 Work Projects Administration Guide to Cincinnati (119). The essay continues: “He kept the Republican party in power in Cincinnati for more than 30 years. Hardly anyone in the party dared to run for office without the approval of this big, reticent man, who had few personal friends” (121).

That corruption, however, was bound to be countered, and at the beginning of the 1920s, it was. The city’s low taxes did not match its high payroll. Unsustainable levels of borrowing put the city on the edge of bankruptcy. The Cincinnati Association, of whom several people of this room are current members, exposed that Cincinnati’s per capita expenditures were the fourth largest among the nation’s leading cities (*Cincinnati WPA Guide*, 128).

The answer to the undisciplined excesses of Coxism was the City Charter movement. In 1923, the City Charter Committee proposed a series of amendments to implement a city-manager form of government and create a smaller city council elected by proportional representation via non-partisan ballots. In the November 1924 election, the charter plan passed 92,510 votes to 41,015 votes” (*Cincinnati WPA Guide*, 128).

Away went a Council of 31 Republicans and one Democrat, and in came a new Council with six Charterites and three Republicans. Murray Seasongood and Colonel Clarence Sherrill assumed the helm, as the first mayor and first city manager, respectively, under the new system.

The Charter movement “transformed the city almost overnight from one of the worst-governed to one of the best-governed municipalities in America” (*Cincinnati WPA Guide*, 128). The stage and the structure were set for the form of city government we broadly know today.

It can be speculated that good government attracts good people, and, at least in hindsight, the middle years of the 20th century, seem by consensus, to have attracted an especially high caliber of Council members.

So who have been the characters, the committed citizens, the ambitious politicians, the colorful sons and daughters of Cincinnati who have occupied our City Hall? And what does it say about us as a community that they are the people we have chosen to put there? Today, the seats of Council chambers are occupied by a realtor, two

former police officers, a preacher, a non-profit director, a former TV reporter, a marketing consultant, a lawyer and a financial advisor. Five members are African-American, the most ever. Three are women. Three are under the age of thirty-five. And one is the first openly gay member of Council.

To claim a spot at City Hall, one, first of course, has to run, so allow me a quick word about those moments when you're waiting to find out whether or not voters have given you the nod. And let me also acknowledge that while there were many former Council members whom I was not able to talk to, my primary goal was to capture a cross-section that spans decades, backgrounds, and party lines.

Bill Gradison, who served on Council in the 60s and 70s, and whose father also served on Council for many years, waited during his first time as a candidate at the Alms Hotel, where they counted ballots. When the first batch came in, he was in 11th place. Not necessarily encouraged, he looked to his father who said, "You're going to win," and then explained to his son that first ballots counted were the ones geographically closest to hotel, which would be his worst areas.

Bill Keating, Jr., left the bench to run for City Council in 1967. Keating learned that toward the end of the campaign, the Republican Party conducted a poll in which he was running 11th. Keating recalled driving around town in his Chevy station wagon with a ladder so that he could climb up and hang his campaign signs from high perches. As he was doing so at 6AM one morning, a lady walking her dog strolled passed and muttered under her breath yet loud enough for Keating to hear, “He ain’t gonna win.” Keating ended up finishing first.

The late Councilman and Vice-Mayor Peter Strauss took his seat on Council in 1981. Says Strauss’s widow, Kitty, “Peter loved researching and legislating. He didn’t like the campaigning part. He was too private a person.” And yet, Strauss wasn’t so shy that, despite being Jewish, he would annually sponsor the ham booth at one of the City’s many church festivals.

Marian Spencer, who served for a term in 1983, grew up in the house built by her grandfather, who was a freed slave. Her grandfather’s general store was used as a voting location, and he always stressed to his granddaughter how critically important it was to vote. Half a century later, Council members Bobbie Sterne; Arn Bortz,

and Tom Brush came to talk to Spencer. Sitting in her living room they asked her: “Will you consider making a run for City Council?”

Spencer, then 63 years-old, thought to herself: “Why did it take you so long to ask?” Spencer also said, “I didn’t know whether or not I could win because no black woman had ever run and won.” That November, Spencer made history.

David Mann managed the campaign for the Democratic slate in 1971, before giving it a shot himself as a candidate in 1973. The young, ambitious attorney’s prediction for the outcome on Election Day: “I thought I was going to win,” he said. Mann finished 13th. The following year he was appointed to a vacant seat, which he kept with a 9th place finish in 1975.

When the final votes are tallied and the dust settles after Election Day, that’s when the real work begins. Today, Council oversees a total budget of \$1.3 billion, and an organization of nearly 6,000 city employees, and many of the services and laws that most directly touch and impact our everyday lives, from fire and police, to trash pick-up, to road repairs.

In the course of directing the activities of the city, hardly a day goes by without one lively happening or another. Allow me to recount just a few:

In 1959, newly elected Cincinnati City Councilman Gene Ruehlmann found himself, like most new members of Council, placed on the City's Traffic Committee. Compared to the powerful Finance or Public Safety Committees, the Traffic Committee was regarded as the least glamorous or important, and thus was the designated destination for Council rookies.

During Ruehlmann's first couple days on the job, he received a request from a constituent that a new traffic light be placed in their neighborhood. Unbeknownst to Ruehlmann, plans for the new traffic light had already been underway. Much to the amazement and delight of the constituent and the neighborhood, the replacement happened the very next day after the request was made. Word spread like wildfire: 'This Ruehlmann guy gets stuff done!'

"People in Cincinnati," says Charlie Luken, another former Cincinnati Mayor and Council member, "are grateful for the fact they

can reach out and grab a Councilman – or two or nine. And they do so routinely.”

Luken remembers convening after the 1985 Council elections with the group that would come to be known as the “Gang of Five.” They gathered to hatch a plan for a majority coalition that would make Luken, a Democrat, the mayor, while giving the committee chairmanships to Council’s Republicans, even though they were in the minority. The meeting occurred at the old Holiday Inn on Queensgate Avenue. Clustered into one hotel room were Steve Chabot, John Mirlesena, Jim Cissel, fellow Literarian Ken Blackwell, and, of course, Luken. So as not to break Sunshine Laws, which prevent a majority of Council from meeting together behind closed doors, the group asked John Mirlesena if he would wait in the hotel room bathroom.

Luken recalls, “At one point while we were all talking, we saw Mirlesena stick his big round face out the bathroom door and ask, “Can I come out now?” We were so caught up in the conversation that we forgot he’d probably been waiting in the bathroom for an hour and a half.”

The prior year, in 1982, then Mayor David Mann, unexpectedly found himself welcoming to Cincinnati the Mayor of Buffalo. The two men had made a friendly bet when their teams played each other in the first round of the NFL playoffs. If the Bengals won, the Mayor of Buffalo said Mann's prize would be an order of Buffalo wings. Mann did not anticipate that the mayor intended to catch a flight to Cincinnati and hand-deliver them.

Also mixing sports and politics was the legendary Charlie Taft, son of U.S. President, brother of a U.S. Senator, and himself Mayor of Cincinnati when *Fortune* magazine declared us the best-managed city in the country in the 1950s. Taft was such an enthusiastic Reds fan that he was known to listen to the games during Council meetings via a transistor radio and an earpiece.

To this day, Marian Spencer prides herself that during her term of service she never missed a single Council meeting. "It's all about showing up," says Spencer. Spencer's first office staffer: a young woman named Roxanne Qualls, whom her boss noticed took more than a passive interest in the dynamics of the city. Says Spencer of Qualls:

“She learned how everything worked and where everything was – from the basement to the attic.”

Today, Vice-Mayor Qualls is my immediate office neighbor on the third floor of City Hall, as well as my seat neighbor in Budget and Finance Committee meetings.

To consider the colorful happenings, the continuity of characters across the years, the public debates that sometimes start and sometimes end at 801 Plum Street, is to feel very lucky that I am currently getting to experience this unique perch from which to view Cincinnati.

And indeed, I’ve been able to generate at least a couple color anecdotes of my own. Early in my term, my office unexpectedly found ourselves in a crusade to crack down on unlawful tow truck companies who were making a business model out of ripping off citizens.

I awoke one morning to read the Enquirer which recapped the following: “The councilman,” read the newspaper article, “also drew fire from a tow-truck driver who threatened to remove Sittenfeld’s vehicle from City Hall. During Scott Sloan’s radio show on WLW, Sittenfeld warned a caller named “John” that he was breaking the law if he thought he could charge whatever he wanted for a tow and said: “If

you take advantage of the citizens I represent, you're going to get it.”

The caller replied: “I'm going to come to City Hall and tow your ass.

Gentlemen, should the need arise, perhaps one of you would be so kind as to give me a ride home tonight?

Epilogue: The Possibility

Like our neighbors, or extended family, Council members can, in their own way, become fixtures in our lives. By dint of being social creatures and simply by popping up in so many settings, they are people who we see and talk to and correspond with more than a typical stranger; perhaps even more than with some friends and acquaintances.

Who occupies City Hall matters beyond simply the way they vote. The personalities matter, too, because for better or worse, we're stuck with those personalities – at least for two years. Local politics, more than any other arm of our government, is a personal enterprise.

“City Hall,” says Charlie Luken, “is the point of entry for citizen involvement in politics. In the State Legislature or Congress, so much of what happens is behind closed doors. The people are cut out. At

City Hall, the process isn't always pretty, but at least it's inclusive.

What happens is there for everyone to see.”

Bill Gradison said that if the conservative bloc on Council hadn't lost its majority in 1973, he wouldn't have run for Congress and would have preferred to remain mayor.

He explained that in city government “you're closer to the problems and closer to the people. In Congress, with casework, a member can help people in a personal way, but most of it is at a totally different level. You're dealing more with general applications. The Federal budget is so abstract. It's hard for citizens to monitor what's going on. The laws are so numerous and complicated that too often people can't understand them. On Council, we were dealing with things that you really could do something about.”

My own hope is that City Hall will preserve this openness, that Council members will maintain a personal touch with those they represent, and that the problem solving that occurs will continue to be an inclusive, collaborative process.

As City Hall's stained glass so stunningly projects, we can still summon the strength and act on the wisdom to make Cincinnati great – to be worthy of our billing as the Queen City.

Though we can't know how future Councils will conduct themselves, who they will be comprised of, what challenges they will face, or what rules they will operate under, we can still have a wish for them. I'm reminded of something Bill Gradison told me. He mentioned buying a little wooden plaque for his father, when his dad was still on Council. The plaque read: "Politicians think of the next election. Statesmen think of the next generation."

May our current and future Councils lean toward the latter.

Thank you.