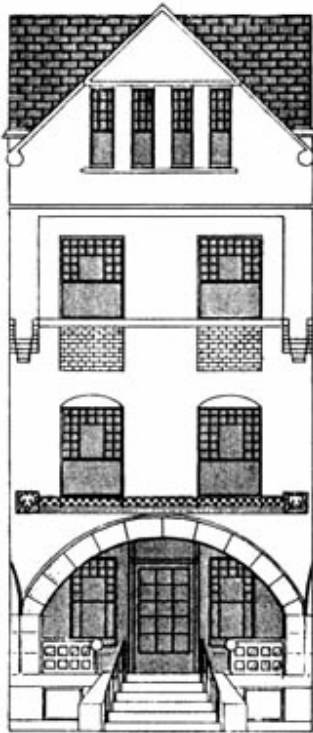


## THE HISTORY OF THE LEAGUE HEADQUARTERS AT 204 WEST STATE STREET

By Andrea L. Kahn



A look through the archives of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey to learn about our building's history provides an interesting peek into the past. Perhaps it can also stimulate plans for the future

### **Mrs. Werner**

An August 17, 1978 article in the *Trenton Times*, reveals that the building was then owned by Evelyn and William Werner, and it was the only private home left in a row of seven houses known as the Pride of Lions, built by Ferdinand W. Roebling in 1885. The house was surrounded by offices of doctors, dentists and the State. Mrs. Werner had lived in the house since 1918 when she came there as a teenager with her mother. Asked when she would be moving out, Mrs. Werner replied, "Well, it's home." Now it is the home of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey, thanks to many dedicated and generous League members. This is the story of these advocates and our building.

### **Roebling Way - Pride of Lions**

The building is one of seven buildings making up the Roebling Way (198 to 210 West State Street), with the League's building located in the center at 204 West State Street across from the State Museum. The row of Romanesque Revival brownstone homes was designed by the architect, William A. Poland, a Mercer County native considered the dean of Trenton architects, who designed a number of structures in Trenton. Most of Poland's other buildings have been demolished. The building's rusticated, crudely chipped stone arches and base, sometimes called "medieval revival," were made popular by H.H. Richardson, a famous architect of the 18th century. An interesting feature of the house is that each building works individually, but they were designed as a whole. Roebling Way is also known as the Pride of Lions because of the two terracotta lions heads on the facade of what is now the League building. 204 West State Street is now also referred to often as the Pride of the Lions.

### **The Roebblings of Trenton**

The Roebblings built a number of buildings along State Street, and family members lived in many. The Roebling Way buildings were built by Ferdinand W. Roebling as investment properties. Most of the buildings used by the family have been destroyed. The buildings recall the heyday of Trenton, and the significance of the Roebling family in Trenton.

Ferdinand W. Roebling (1842-1917) built this row of buildings in 1885. The Roeblings were leaders in industrial America and innovators of metal rope suspension bridges as well as prominent members of Trenton society. Their homes and industrial properties were located in downtown Trenton along State Street and on sites occupied today by certain State buildings and other prominent landmarks.

Ferdinand W. Roebling was a son of John Augustus Roebling, a German born engineer who emigrated to the United States in 1831 and brought his wire rope industry to Trenton in 1848. John Augustus Roebling built a number of suspension bridges, but he is best known for designing and building the Brooklyn Bridge. He died of tetanus from an injury sustained while building it, and his first born son, Washington Augustus Roebling, carried on as the bridge's chief engineer. Washington A. Roebling was called Colonel Roebling because of his Civil War service. Washington A. Roebling and his brothers, Charles Gustavus Roebling and Ferdinand Wilbur Roebling ran the John A. Roebling's Sons Company in Trenton. Charles' son, Washington Augustus Roebling II, died when the Titanic sank in 1912. Charles' house was sold to the Cartaret Club, which was razed to make room for the Cartaret Arms Apartments.

Eleven pieces of solid, hand carved teak furniture on display for many years at the State Museum are also associated with the history of the building. The furniture had been purchased in Japan by Washington A. Roebling II, the nephew of the Pride of Lions builder, Ferdinand W. Roebling, and shipped back to Trenton in 1912. Accompanied by his chauffeur and a friend, Washington Augustus Roebling II had set out for a trip to Europe to complete his education as was typical of the day. After buying the furniture in Japan and shipping it to Trenton, he continued traveling. In England, Washington, the chief backer of the Mercer Car Company, and his friend raced and exhibited two Mercer raceabout models. The models, Washington Roebling and his friend boarded the Titanic for its April 1912 maiden voyage to return home. The two men and two cars went down, along with John Jacob Astor and a thousand other passengers when the unsinkable Titanic hit an iceberg. When the furniture arrived, the family did not know what to do with it. An aunt, Mrs. Cornelius Hook, who lived a block away from the Werner house, stored the furniture, but never uncrated it, not being able to bear to look at it. In 1918 Mrs. Hook had the furniture, still uncrated, placed up for auction when she moved from her own house. Mrs. Werner's mother bid on the furniture and used it in her own home at 204 West State Street across from the State Museum. After Mrs. Werner moved from 204 West State Street, she donated the furniture to the State Museum.

Washington's father, Charles Gustavus Roebling, was a prominent member of the Trinity Episcopal Church in Trenton. He rebuilt the west wall of the cathedral as a memorial to his son after the Titanic disaster.

### **The Trenton Landmark's Commission and the State Street Historic District**

In 1972, the City of Trenton was the first city to pass an ordinance establishing a Landmarks Commission. The Commission is empowered to preserve neighborhoods by granting them historic district status based upon the architectural significance of the buildings within the neighborhood. The State Street Historic District is one of the first

historic districts named in the city by Trenton's Landmarks Commission. 204 West State Street is located within the State Street Historic District.

### **The League's History with the Building**

The League's history with the building begins in 1980. The League had its main office in Montclair and a one room lobbying office in Trenton. In 1980 it consolidated its office space in 1,000 square feet of rented office space in Trenton near the State House. The advantages of the move to Trenton were immediately clear, but the costs and availability of suitable space presented difficulties. In 1983, a "Friends of the League" was formed under Shari Weiner to explore the possibility of purchasing a building. A committee of past and then present State Board members chaired by Rita Cohen, the former State League President, then explored the feasibility of purchasing a building. They concluded that they ought to buy into their own building in Trenton across from the seat of government and to raise money from the first ever League sponsored capital fund drive.

Rita Cohen, the building drive Chair, wrote that:

1. The League needed to remain in the State Capitol;
2. The League had recently created the education fund which could own property and receive tax deductible gifts;
3. Trenton's revitalization was just beginning, and she noted that the League could still afford to be part of the renewal of the Historic District;
4. Presciently, she also noted that space in the area near the State House was at a premium and was fast being bought up as investment property.

"Unless we act quickly, we run the risk of being outpriced in the rental market or even forced to vacate as we were once before in 1975 when our former building was sold," she wrote. She noted that the existing conditions were overcrowded and inefficient and that purchase and rental prices were both going up to challenge the League's finances. She wrote: "Stabilizing our future rent by owning our own building would benefit our members by keeping PMP low. Renovating a building to our own specification would make the office a more efficient place to work. Assuring the League a location within walking distance of the capitol would enhance our visibility and add to our prestige. And, in a worst case scenario, resale would always be possible because a building in the capitol district is a definite asset. New Jersey state government is a permanent fixture and space near the state house will continue to be economically viable."

They kicked off a building drive with a goal of \$150,000 for the purchase, renovation and furnishing "of a building of our own." "If the response from every member is as warm and generous as the advance giving was, what had seemed an impossible dream in 1982 will be a reality in 1984," Rita wrote.

In a fundraising letter dated September 7, 1983, Gloria Jones, Chair of the Education Fund Executive Committee, reported that consolidating the League offices in Trenton two years earlier made the League's efforts more visible and effective and that it was "time to make permanent the headquarters of the organization at the doorstep of government." Expressing concern that the League would be out priced in the rental market or even evicted, that the crowded conditions of their existing space seriously hampered their ability to accomplish their mission and that upward pressures on rental space in this

prime location threatened the League with ever increasing operating costs, she reasoned that the purchase of a building was a sensible alternative. Since Trenton's revitalization was just beginning, she concluded, the League could still afford to be part of the renewal of the historic State House district. "A building within walking distance of the capitol will always be an asset because lobbyists, organizations and all those who do business with the State of New Jersey clamor to be near the seat of power," she wrote. Recognizing the importance of the League presence in Trenton, then sitting Governor Thomas H. Kean and former Governor Brendan T. Byrne agreed to serve as honorary cochairmen of the drive, she announced.

What a job they did! On January 4, 1985, the League of Women Voters of New Jersey Education Fund purchased 204 West State Street from New Jersey PIRG for \$100,000. The purchase was made without a mortgage because of the success of the fund drive headed by Rita Cohen.

LWVNJ has performed major restorations over the years, supported by grants from the Trenton Downtown Association, the City of Trenton's façade restoration program, and by donations from members and supporters. During the next 15 years, the League repainted the brick work, repaired the slate mansard roof and water damage, repaired some windows, shutters and wood trim and corrected a drainage problem in the rear addition. The building placed the League of Women Voters of New Jersey in the heart of state government and was lauded as an invaluable asset in the Leagues efforts to involve voters in New Jersey public policy. It continues to offer a support base for immediate access to government leaders and legislators.

## **Dedication**

Many thanks are owed to these people. Plaques in the League office acknowledge the commitment and generosity of these leaders.

### **First Building Campaign**

In her grand opening remarks on May 5, 1985 Rita Cohen gave special thanks to many who participated in the acquisition, financing and renovation of the building: Joan Crowley and members of the board of directors at the time whose leadership and audacity lead LWVNJ to be the first League in the nation to purchase its own headquarters building; Joan Crowley for her vision, planning and initiative, and Gloria Jones, her successor, and the successive Board for seeing the project through the purchase, renovations and move; Lorraine Cohen who was the first State development chair for the League, and Rita Cohen, who was her successor; Joan Ertel who reached out to former State Board Presidents and Board Members in a tremendously successful fundraising drive and organized yearly luncheons to celebrate their renewed friendship; Joan Noakes, the Treasurer who knew "the magic of making money grow"; Charlotte Callahan, Marie Curtis, Sue Lederman, Linda Stansfield and Margaret Manhardt who were instrumental in planning the strategy and carrying out the hard work of fundraising; Gloria Cherry who provided legal advice; Bonnie Magnuson who provided invaluable assistance in fundraising; Libby Elmendorf who helped with record keeping and oversaw the design and execution of the permanent record of contributors; Jessamine Merrill, a former State President, one of the prime

movers in Trenton's Historic Preservation and the voice of the League in Trenton for many years who provided advice, hard work and contributions; Ruth Harrison and Don Curtis who made a study of the new building and helped the staff organize the space for its efficient use and assisted in moving in; Shari Weiner who went from house hunting to Clerk of the Works and liaison to the architect Eric Sali and served as the point person for the League with the building department, fire inspectors and Historic Society; and Peggy Dellinger, Dallas Grove and Joan Crowley who served as decorating consultants to preserve as much as the beautiful old house, while still making it useful as an office.

By the late 1990's the League had to commit to repair and upgrade or to consider selling the building. In 1995, the League approached local leagues and league leaders to establish a 75th Anniversary Building Fund. The goal was to raise \$75,000 to serve as an endowment for both future building maintenance and telecommunications upgrades. The League raised \$18,220. At the 1999 convention, the delegates voiced strong support of the building. In January 2000, the Capital Campaign under the leadership of Peggy Farabaugh reported reaching the \$100,000 bench mark the State Board had set to move forward. The bench mark was reached with pledges secured by the Capital Campaign Committee, a campaign led by Lorraine Cohen in Bergen County for gifts and pledges in memory of Rita Cohen and a summer 1999 garden party. The Board voted at its February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2000 meeting to retain and restore 204 West State Street. The Capital Campaign Committee was then encouraged to move forward to provide for work needed in the building and an endowment fund in the amount of \$100,000, the interest of which would be used for the future upkeep of the building. Over \$160,000 was raised.

### **Campaign Leaders**

Thanks are owed to those who provided the leadership for the major fundraising efforts:  
Anne Auerback - 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Campaign;  
LWV North Valley-Garden Party to honor former LWV NJ Presidents Rita Cohen and Mary Louise Nuelson at the home of Natalie Beaumont.  
Lorraine Cohen - Capital Campaign Committee in Memory of Rita Cohen  
Rita Ludlum and Mary Tanner - Russian Exhibit at New Jersey State Museum Fundraiser  
Fran Sacks - Fundraiser in honor of Katherine Becker at the home of Anita and Ben Wolfe.  
Peggy Farabaugh - Capital Campaign Committee

It was League leaders and primarily gifts from League members that allowed the League to purchase the building with cash, renovate the building and start a fund for its future upkeep. Many thanks are due to the many, many League members and supporters who made generous contributions to these efforts.

### **Today**

The building has helped the League keep costs down by allowing the League to operate rent free and free from inflationary increases of rent. The building also generates rental income. Our current tenants include New Jersey Environmental Lobby, American Littoral Society, Family Policy Council, New Jersey Conservation Foundation and National Association Social Workers. A sufficient endowment will insure us against maintenance costs. An active building committee can help make sure that our paid staff use their time

appropriately for the League's main mission of educating the public, advocating the League's interests in Trenton and representing the League all over the State of New Jersey to further the mission.

With this we appeal to members of the League all over New Jersey to support the building and for those of you who have the interest and desire to join the Building Committee to make it a stronger and effective organization. People with an interest in history and government can find this especially rewarding.

We also want to encourage the local leagues to stop by the building to visit and to consider using the building for the purpose for which it was purchased. It is a perfect setting for a meeting or a talk or a chat, or a place to organize before marching onto the steps of the State House or the chambers of the legislature.

If you had an interest in working with the Building Committee, please contact Andrea L. Kahn at [akahn@mandslaw.com](mailto:akahn@mandslaw.com) or 732-297-4049.

The building is owned by the New Jersey League of Women Voters of New Jersey Education Fund, a tax exempt 501(c)3 corporation. Contributions to the Education Fund for the building are deductible from Federal income taxes. Contributions of \$500 or more for the Building Fund result in membership in The Lions Pride, which will be acknowledged with a special Lion's Head Bookend. The names of Pride Members will be featured prominently on a plaque in the front room of 204 West State Street. Pride Members will also enjoy special invitations to future building events. This new campaign was announced recently at LWNJ's first "Soiree Between the Lions," a fund raising get-together arranged by Jeanne Van Steen and Andrea Kahn, held on November 10, 2007, starting with a tour of the State House and ending with a wine and cheese party at the building, good company and good fun.