

HISTORY OF FORMER STRUCTURES

3.3.1 ASSEMBLY HALL

The town of Washington became the seat of government of the Mississippi Territory by act of the territorial legislature on 1 February 1802.¹ The General Assembly of the territory met in Washington from 1802 until Mississippi became a state in 1817. Various buildings were used for public offices, but the territorial government did not build or purchase a building to serve as a legislative hall. Instead, the Legislature met in rented rooms. Several different buildings served sequentially as the legislative meeting place. From 1808 to 1811, the Legislature met in a rented tavern building, owned by Charles DeFrance, that later became known as Assembly Hall.²

Assembly Hall, which was destroyed by a fire in 1993, was located on Lot 1 of Square 8 in the Town of Washington, at the northeast corner of Main Street (later U.S. Highway 61) and Assembly Street.³ It was a two-story, wood-frame building constructed about 1801. The original building has essentially the form of an extended I-house, but it has a center chimney and no center corridor.⁴ By about the 1820s the building was enlarged by the addition of an additional range of two rooms on the upper story, on the western side, above an open gallery that was later screened-in. According to Samuel Wilson, Jr., in "The Architecture of Natchez before 1830," in *Natchez before 1830*, "It was apparently built by Ebenezer Reese who acquired the site for \$80 in 1801 and sold it in 1808 to Charles DeFrance for \$6,000."⁵ DeFrance sold the building in April 1814 to Charles Miles, who sold it to Richard Fletcher for use as a tavern in February 1815.⁶ The building is often referred to in historical records as Fletcher's Tavern. The building was used as a tavern until about 1831. It was subsequently used as a private residence until about 1972, when it became vacant.⁷

Assembly Hall was listed on the National Register on 19 April 1978. The National Register nomination was prepared by Gregory B. Free, then a preservation specialist with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and was completed in October 1977.

¹ Dunbar Rowland, *History of Mississippi: The Heart of the South*, Volume I (Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Historical Publishing Association, 1925; reprinted Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Co., 1978), p. 384. [MDAH library call number 976.2/R79mi4/v.1]

² Thurston H.G. Hahn, III, Brad M. Duplantis, and Mary W. Miller, *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986): Archaeological and Historical Investigations at the Site of the 1808-1811 Seat of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, Washington, Adams County, Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Coastal Environments, Inc., for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, October 2002), pp. 38-39.

³ Thurston H.G. Hahn, *et al.*, *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986)*, p. 29.

⁴ Thurston H.G. Hahn, *et al.*, *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986)*, p. 43.

⁵ Samuel Wilson, Jr., "The Architecture of Natchez before 1830," in *Natchez before 1830*, edited by Noel Polk (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. Reprinted 2010.), p. 144, citing Adams County Deed Book E, folio 19, 1 June 1808.

⁶ Wilson, "The Architecture of Natchez before 1830," p. 144, citing Adams County Deed Book H, folio 36, 6 February 1815.

⁷ Thurston H.G. Hahn, *et al.*, *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986)*, p. 1.

Despite its historical significance, by the 1990s Assembly Hall had stood vacant and unused for two decades. It appeared that some significant movement toward the preservation of the landmark building was about to be made when the Mississippi Legislature passed a bill in 1993 to provide funds for its restoration, but before any work could be done, Assembly Hall was burned to the ground on the night of 16-17 December 1993.⁸ The fire was apparently started by an itinerant person who had broken into the vacant building and had lit a fire for heat.⁹

The Assembly Hall site was designated as a Mississippi Landmark on 21 March 1995, and recorded as such on 27 April 2006 (in Adams County Deed Book 23Q, page 327).¹⁰ From 1997 to 2002, a detailed historical and archaeological study of the site and the remains of the building was done by Coastal Environments, Incorporated. A detailed site examination was done between 2 October and 4 November 1997. A draft report was issued in November 1998, and the final report was issued in October 2002. A copy of the report, titled *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986): Archaeological and Historical Investigations at the Site of the 1808-1811 seat of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, Washington, Adams County, Mississippi*, is filed in the archaeological reports collection of the Historic Preservation Division, MDAH.¹¹

Although the building has been destroyed, the site still retains considerable archaeological significance, and also has potential for interpretation of the role of Town of Washington as the territorial capitol of Mississippi.

⁸ "Fire reduces landmark Assembly Hall to 2 brick chimneys," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Miss.), Saturday, 18 December 1993. A xerographic copy of this article is filed in the MDAH subject file, [Assembly Hall \(Washington, Miss.\)](#).

⁹ Various newspaper articles in the MDAH subject file, [Assembly Hall \(Washington, Miss.\)](#).

¹⁰ MDAH Historic Resources Inventory database, accessed on-line on 19 March 2012.

¹¹ Thurston H.G. Hahn, III, Brad M. Duplantis, and Mary W. Miller, *Assembly Hall (22 AD 986): Archaeological and Historical Investigations at the Site of the 1808-1811 Seat of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, Washington, Adams County, Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Coastal Environments, Inc., for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, October 2002).