

FOLLOWING THE THREAD OF HISTORY



Built starting in 1671, the Hôtel de la Marine – first known as the « King's House » – was initially designed as a place for Louis XIV to stay during a visit to the arsenal that never materialized. By the end of the seventeenth century, it had become a residence for the intendants. On the eve of the French Revolution (1781), naval commanders took possession of this emblematic seat of power, leaving the Hôtel de Cheusses (now the Naval Museum) to the intendants. The building became a naval prefecture in 1800 and remained under Naval responsibility until 2002. Purchased by the town, it currently houses the French National Police Schools command.

Remarkably enough, the Hôtel de la Marine has always been used in the same way over time. In spite of its multiple functions and an innumerable series of reorganizations, it still functions as a command unit where administrative offices coexist with official reception rooms and official accommodations.

1. Dining room

Relocated several times over the centuries, the dining room was found in the eighteenth century on the ground floor of the main building on the site of a former chapel. A few years later, an expansion of the administrative areas led to the removal of this room, which had been sumptuously decorated by Pierre Touffaire. During this epoch, the current dining room was installed on the first floor above the former dining room, in the place where the billiard room had been located, the billiard room being transferred to the former covered terrace (8). Seriously damaged in the 1895 fire, the dining room was quickly restored. It was once again redecorated early in the twenty-first century.



2. Small salon or music room

Although the archives scarcely mention this room, which was restored as a dining room (1) and a large salon (3) after the 1895 fire, they do mention the existence of a piano starting in the mid-nineteenth century, which was replaced by a grand piano from the House of Pleyel in 1881. In the mid-sixties, this piano became well known when it was used to organize concerts designed to finance the «resurrection» of the Royal Rope Works, burned to the ground by occupying forces in 1944.



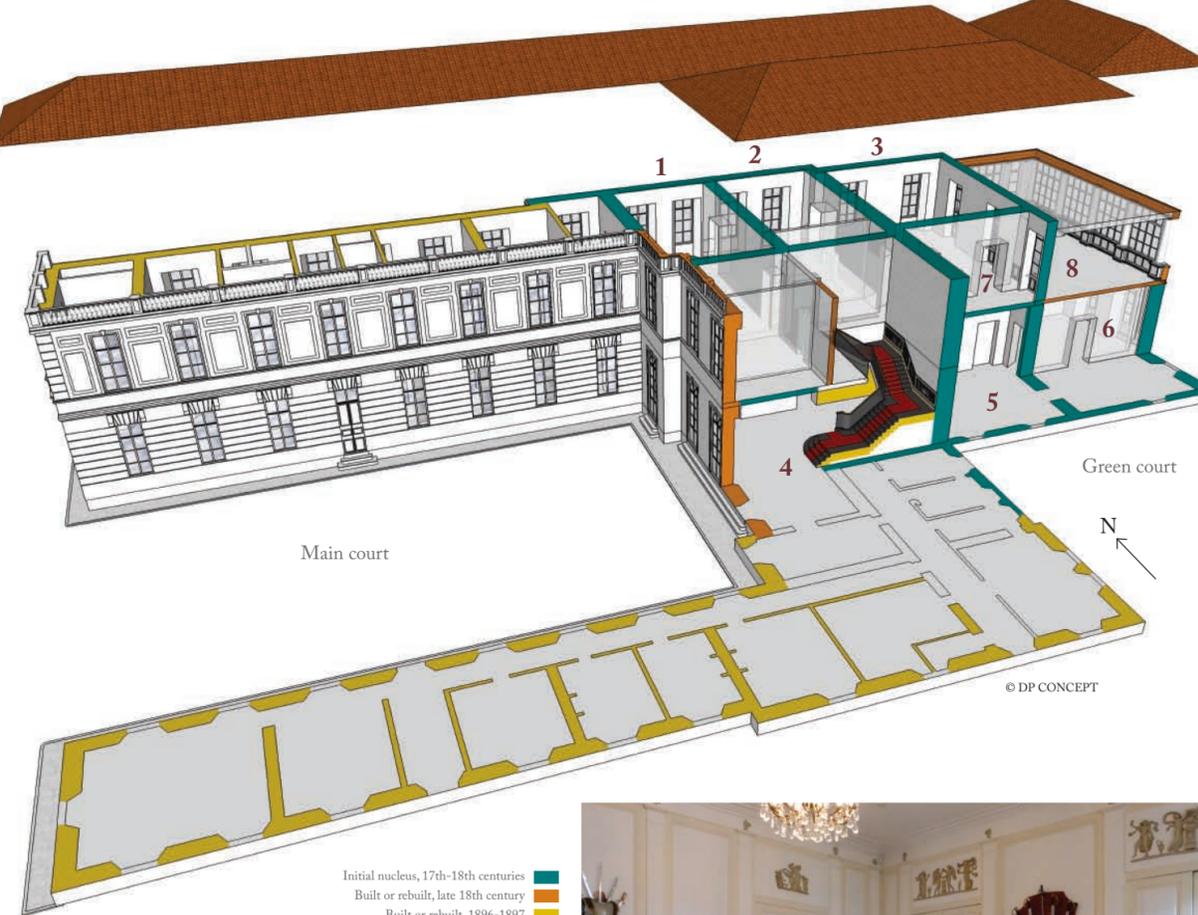
3. Grand salon

Featuring a remarkable Versailles-style parquet floor made of various types of wood, the grand salon was redesigned in 1858. The first project, which planned for the purchase of a white Italian marble fireplace, was refused by the central administration in favor of a simpler decoration favor consisting of four large mirrors facing each other. The furnishings left by the Navy, which can be identified by the sculpted anchors specific to their decoration, are still reflected in these mirrors.



4. Main staircase

Seriously damaged by the 1895 fire, which burned its frame, ceiling and steps, the main staircase was first meant to be restored using a simple stucco decoration plastered to the walls. Finally, this project was abandoned. A covering of plaster with protruding linear accents (upper parts) was preferred to the stucco, along with an artificial marble decor (lower parts) inspired by what had just been done on the municipal casino at Royan, which no longer exists.



5. Council room

Also used as an antechamber for the commander's office, this room opens on the south to the Cour Verte (Green Courtyard), the original site of access to the king's house. The irregular arrangement of the windows shows that the wainscoting was applied as an afterthought. The motifs above the door are characteristic of the First Empire and recall the motifs in the guest bedroom. They probably date from the short stay of Napoleon I and Empress Josephine at Rochefort in August 1808.



6. Commander's office

Built in the 1780s on the site of a small courtyard located between two small, low annexes, the office of the commander and, later, of the naval Prefect has kept its original decoration. Attributed to Pierre Touffaire, the wood paneling was made with rounded angles to play down the irregularity of the room. Featuring a rhythmic sequence of Ionic pilasters and decorated with sculpted garlands gilded in gold leaf, they provided a setting for the seventeenth-century office, which is said to have been offered by Jean-Baptiste Colbert to his cousin, Charles Colbert du Terron (1618-1684), Rochefort's first naval intendant.



8. Billiard room

Erected in 1788 according to the plans made by Pierre Touffaire, the billiard room was originally a terrace with balusters protected by a roof resting on a series of columns. When it was closed in with large windows in the nineteenth century, it became an independent reception room with a billiard table, which had been transferred from what is now the dining room (1). Although the framework of the room escaped the flames of the fire of 1895, the billiard room was nonetheless repaired the following year because of dilapidation.



7. Guest bedroom

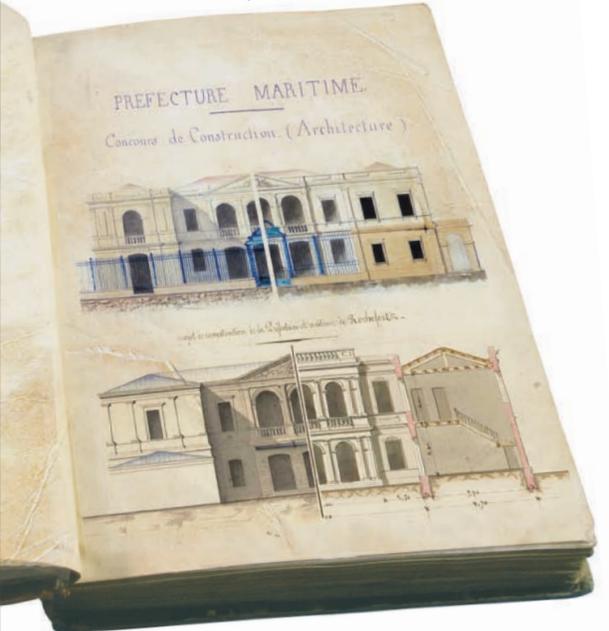
Designed for distinguished guests, this bedroom is also called the «Emperor's Room» in reference to two short stays by Napoleon I at Rochefort, the first in August 1808 and the second in July 1815, just before his exile. Although the windows were redone during the nineteenth century, the rest of the room has kept its Empire furnishings. Nevertheless, the room required restoration after the 1895 fire, which damaged the framework, the ceiling and part of the furniture, including the bed and bed curtains. The chevron-patterned oak parquetry was redone in 1907.





A collection of projects

It took an explosion that occurred on March 4, 1895, in the admiral's bathroom and a subsequent fire to finally trigger the decision to implement the transformation of the Hôtel de la Marine that the inhabitants of Rochefort had been dreaming of for more than a century!



Projet de reconstruction 1853-1854

The first person to propose a rational reconstruction of the building was the engineer Pierre Touffaire. This reconstruction was in line with the major ideas on the urban reorganization of Rochefort that had been put forward when construction began on the second Hôpital de la Marine in 1782. Since Touffaire lacked the necessary means, his interventions were only partial (rework of the main facade, creation of a dining room on the ground floor, the commander's office, a covered walkway and the arrangement of the *Chambre Bleue*, known as the La Fayette bedroom, on the first floor). Although the rational reconstruction project was revived in 1847, it was totally blocked by the Revolution of 1848 and the arrival of the Second Republic.

The question of reconstruction resurfaced in 1853-1854, when the students at *Ponts et Chaussées* (the French National School of Civil Engineering) were asked to think up a new naval prefecture for Rochefort. But the project winner had no more success than his predecessors, even though all the reports sent to the supervisory authorities insisted on the dilapidated condition and irregularity of the two wings framing the main courtyard. The south wing was described as an old, defective building with no relationship to the north wing. Lacking «cornices and Athenian elegance», it gave an impression of even greater dilapidation.

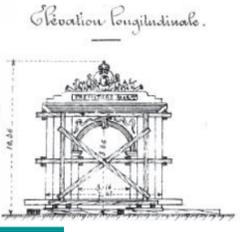
In the end, these projects, which had long been perceived as useless, would provide a solid background for the indispensable reconstruction following the fire of 1895 and allow quickly getting to work.



1897 : small steps for the grand portal

The restructuring projects for the Hôtel de la Marine planned for an approximately five meter shift in the placement of the south wing. This work implied an enlargement of the main courtyard, as well as finishing the main facade, which would acquire the symmetry it had been lacking for so long. Carried out from 1896 to 1897, this work inevitably had the effect of a clumsy misalignment of the monumental carriage entrance built in 1770 in the axis of the small alleyways.

However, the administration wanted to keep the portal and decided to move it. A stone-by-stone deconstruction followed by an identical reconstruction was not possible because numerous iron clamps had been placed at various points in the masonry, so the portal was transferred in a single block to its current location by means of a technical tour de force. After runners were slid under the foundations, it was possible to move the entire structure.



An incredible portrait gallery

An emblematic seat of power, the Hôtel de la Marine housed a series of public figures, which was led by a number of great intendants. The most impressive of these was Michel Bégon (1688-1710), the author of urban regulations that determined the appearance of the town of Rochefort. Among the naval prefects, history has retained the name of Admiral Dupont (1909-2007), who instigated the rescue of the Royal Rope Works.

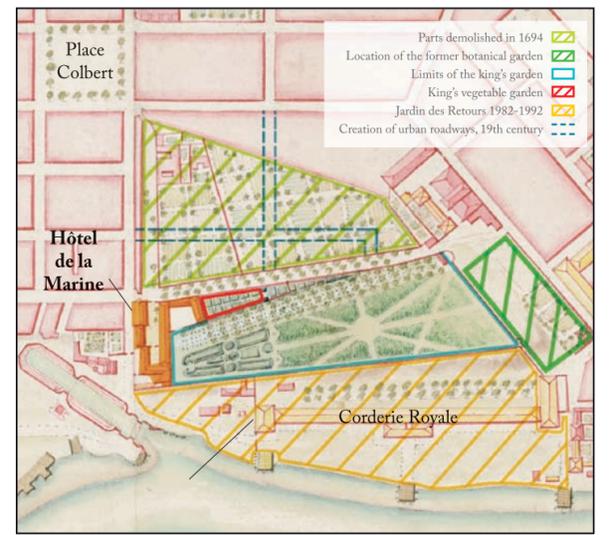


Decorated in the late eighteenth century to provide an independent reception area, the Hôtel de la Marine welcomed a certain number of State leaders in the nineteenth century, including Napoleon I (1808 and 1815), the future Napoleon III (1852) and President Félix Faure (1897), whose official train arrived at the foot of the monument.

Less well known is the fact that various military alliances attracted numerous foreign figures to Rochefort to visit the arsenal accompanied by the naval prefect, either officially or incognito. Thus, in the nineteenth century the Hôtel de la Marine had the honor of hosting the Egyptian Ibrahim Pacha (1846), Konstantin Nikolayevitch, the Grand Duke of Rissia (1857), Prince Alfred of England (1858), Prince Adalbert of Prussia (1862), Archduke Albert of Habsburg and Augusto de Carvalho, director of naval construction in Brazil (1870), to mention only the most well known!



...And the local boy
Pierre Loti was assigned several times to the naval prefecture from 1893 to 903 as the prefect's secretary or aide-de-camp, which enabled him to follow the work he had done on his home in Rochefort.



The king's garden

Located on the former emplacement of the Château de Rochefort, the Hôtel de la Marine is closely tied to the king's garden. The successor to the chateau garden, which no longer exists, the king's garden imposed itself from the time the town was created as an essential urban component, just like the arsenal.

Giving rise to two majestic alleyways that were replanted after the 1999 hurricane, this garden has never ceased to evolve according to needs, fashions and real estate pressure. Thus, the western part of the garden was cut off in 1694 and divided into plots. The avenue leading to the king's house, which became the Hôtel de la Marine, was transformed into an urban roadway known as *Petites Allées*, which is now Rue de l'Amiral Courbet. During the same epoch, intendant Michel Bégon ordered the creation of a vegetable garden that still exists. In 1738, a botanical garden was designed on the site of the current police barracks. Rearranged at great expense in 1771 at the request of intendant d'Aubenton, the king's garden opened toward the Charente River starting in 1976 when a monumental staircase was built to create a link with the verdant setting that landscaper Bernard Lassus had designed around the restored Royal Rope Works. In 1982, the king's garden was included in a vast landscaped park known as *Le Jardin des Retours*.



Hôtel de la Marine a captivating story

Hôtel de La Marine - Chronology

<p>1671-1672 Construction of the first residence for intendants</p> <p>December 22, 1672 Blessing of the chapel, dedicated to St. Charles</p>	<p>1685 Transformations with transfer of the entrance and creation of an entrance hall</p>	<p>January 15, 1694 Sale of part of the gardens as buildable land</p>	<p>1781 Departure of the intendant and installation of the naval commander</p>	<p>1800 Establishment of the naval prefecture</p>	<p>July 3-8, 1815 Second stay of Napoleon I, on the road to exile</p>	<p>1847-1848 Partial reconstruction project</p>	<p>1853-1854 Total reconstruction project</p>	<p>1857 Visit of Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevitch, Grand Admiral of Russia, brother of Czar Alexander II</p>	<p>1858 Restoration of the Grand Salon Visit of Alfred of Saxe-Coburg, son of Queen Victoria</p>	<p>1862 Visit of Prince Heinrich Wilhelm Adalbert of Prussia</p>	<p>1862 Visit of Prince Heinrich Wilhelm Adalbert of Prussia</p>	<p>1870 Visit of Albert of Habsburg, Archduke of Austria</p>	<p>1873 Restoration of the north facade</p>	<p>1870 Visit of Albert of Habsburg, Archduke of Austria</p>	<p>1873 Restoration of the north facade</p>	<p>1880 New reconstruction project</p>	<p>1895 Fire in the north wing</p>	<p>1897 Visit of President Félix Faure</p>	<p>1896-1897 Repair of the central part and rebuilding of the wings; moving of the carriage entrance</p>	<p>2000 Acquisition by the Town of Rochefort</p>	<p>2002 Departure of the navy</p>	<p>2004 Installation of the French National Police Schools command</p>
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Exceptional visits proposed by the Heritage Service

Learn the story of Rochefort, a town of art and history... in the company of a lecturer-guide certificated by the Ministry of Culture. Your guide knows all about Rochefort and will give you the keys to understanding the scale of a square, the layout of a neighbourhood or the successive metamorphoses of a landscape. If you have any questions, your guide will be pleased to answer them.

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