

Important Building Dates

- 1504–1514 Construction of Town Hall (front part of the building with arcades onto Market Square) **(1)**
- 1521 Construction of Assembly Hall in the original courtyard building
- 1535–1536 Construction of the Back Chambers (former courtyard building left of the Assembly Hall, partially standing today)
- 1606–1608 Construction of the Front Chambers (left annex of Town Hall standing today) **(2)**
- 1824–1828 Reconstruction of Assembly Hall in the courtyard building (demolished in 1901)
- 1899–1901 Extension works on Market Square: new left wing **(3)** and tower on the right **(4)**
- 1901–1904 Construction of new Assembly Hall including adjoining rooms

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HERAUSGEBERIN

Staatskanzlei des Kantons Basel-Stadt
Abteilung Kommunikation
Rathaus, Marktplatz 9
CH-4001 Basel

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- 1 Front part of the building with arcades (1504–1514)**
- 2 Front Chambers (1606–1608)**
- 3 Extension works (1899–1901)**
- 4 Town Hall tower (1899–1901)**
- 5 Proclamation balcony**
- 6 Clock (1511/12). Above: The Emperor Heinrich II and his wife Kunigunde, in the centre Justitia**
- 7 Flèche (1507)**



Kanton Basel-Stadt

Basel Town Hall



History of the Construction of the Basel Town Hall

When Basel joined the Swiss Confederation in 1501, the City wished to express this politically important step with a profoundly visible gesture. The Cantonal Parliament decided to replace the old Town Hall with a grander and more representative building in 1503. It was agreed that no expense was to be spared to underline the City's new importance. Hence, between **1504–1514** a new town hall with a connecting annex to the courtyard building was constructed. The oldest part **(1)** consists of three pointed arcades, above which the richly decorated Legislature Hall is located.

Extensions were added to the older building in the back between **1517–1521**, thus creating the earlier Assembly Hall. In 1521, Hans Holbein the Younger was commissioned to decorate the Assembly Hall. New Back Chambers were built in **1535/36**, which partially remain today. They are located to the left of today's Assembly Hall.

In **1606–1608**, further extensions were carried out left of the arcades to hold the Front Chambers **(2)** using the same late-Gothic elements of like a 100 years earlier. Mural paintings and plasterwork (mock architecture) was used in order to produce a unified style of the exterior façade.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Town of Basel had grown to a considerable size and the implementation of a new Cantonal Constitution in 1875 required new administrative buildings. Thus, in **1899–1901**, the Tower **(4)** as well as the wide block-shaped building on the left **(3)** were added to the Town Hall. The idea of the much higher tower was quite controversial and gave rise to many disputes. In a public election, the citizens of Basel finally agreed to build it. The Assembly Hall was re-built, the old Hall from the 16th century demolished in the course of the reconstruction and extension works carried out between **1901–1904** on the new Town Hall. Here, a new-Gothic and new-Renaissance style was used.

Sculptures and Paintings

The **sculpture** of *Munatius Plancus*, the founder of the Roman city of Augusta Raurica (some 10 km from Basel) on the left side of the stairs leading up to the Assembly Hall in the courtyard is by far the most prominent one in this building. The large sandstone figure was created and donated by Hans Michel to show his gratitude to the City of Basel for offering him free citizenship. *The Emperor Heinrich II and his wife Kunigunde* – the patrons of the City of Basel – appear several times, such as for instance on the clock built in 1511, on the main façade **(6)**.

The **paintings** on the interior and exterior façade of the Town Hall bear two basic themes. Firstly: *Law and Legislation* depicted in oil paintings by Hans Bock. There are two paintings on the side-walls under the arcades in the courtyard: “*Josaphat cautions the Judges*” and “*Herodes in Hyrcanus*” (both completed in 1608/09) as well as “*The Final Judgement*” on top of the courtyard stairs. The second theme is: *Basel's membership of the Swiss Confederation in 1501*. The heraldry of confederation members and associate cantons along with a number of historic and legendary figures (painted in 1504/14) are depicted on the **exterior façade** of the building. On the **interior façade** in the courtyard, we can witness the Deputies of the Confederation arriving in Basel. The picture of the Town's Patron, Emperor Heinrich II reminds us that this happened on a July 13th – the so-called *Heinrichstag*. This monumental mural painting by Wilhelm Balmer dates back to 1903.

The **exterior façade of the Town Hall** shows a frieze of childlike warriors on the left; over the arcade vaults, angels of victory crown Basel's shields with laurel wreaths; the figure of Justitia at the height of the Front Chambers is meant to be a reminder of its function of law; on a mock balcony at the top: weapon bearers with Basel shields and peaceful citizens and children. When Wilhelm Balmer and Franz Baur re-painted the Exterior façade in 1901 according to Bock, they replaced the gate guard with a woman with a distaff to express Basel's new-found sense of security as a member of the Confederation in relation to their Austrian neighbours. The proclamation balcony on the tower **(5)** bears the words: “*Hie Schweiz Grund und Boden*” (“here begins Swiss soil”). These were the words, with which the Confederation Deputies were greeted at the Town Gates before they were gloriously accompanied to the Town to proclaim their oath.

The **Southern tower wall**, best visible from Freie Strasse, depicts Hans Bär, a vanguard who fell in the battle of Marignano in 1515. Other than that, no paintings of battles are shown, which is highly unusual for that time.

The **interior of the Assembly Hall** (only accessible with special permission or during Assembly meetings), is dominated by the theme of the membership of the Confederation. At the front wall of the Hall, three wall panels describe how Basel became a member of the Swiss Confederation – its central panel depicting the Oath – is located above the seat of the Chairman of the Cantonal Parliament. On the opposite wall by the entrance, scenes of science and commerce and a historic event (the first chairman of the university after its re-establishment following the Reformation) are shown.

The use of the Town Hall today

The Cantonal Administration of the 19th century needed a mere few dozen employees, who almost all worked within the walls of the Town Hall. Despite the extension works carried out around 1900, more and more departments of the administration had to be housed elsewhere. Today, only the Chancellery, the Parliamentary Services and parts of the Department of Presidential Affairs are located within the Town Hall. The Cantonal Parliament as well as the Government still hold their regular meetings in the Town Hall.

The **Cantonal Parliament** is the legislative body and consists of 100 members, meeting twice a month for debate in the Assembly Hall. It is – unusually for Switzerland – a cantonal as well as communal parliament, because the municipality of Basel has had no separate administration since 1875.

The **Cantonal Government** is the highest executive body in the Canton of Basel-Stadt (as well as the Town of Basel), consisting of 7 equal members. They meet every Tuesday. The members of the Government as well as all members of the Parliament are elected by the public every four years.