THE GREEK REVIVAL IN THE UNITED STATES

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The background of the Greek Revival in the United States was one of progress and commercial expansion. Americans of the period from 1820 to 1860 enjoyed for the first time the mixed blessings of baseball, Coney Island hotels, a shorter working day, women’s rights, soft felt hats, bath tubs (used in Boston in 1845 only by doctors’ orders), fast clipper ships to China, utopian communities at Oneida and Fruita, liquor prohibition in thirteen states, illuminating gas, chain stores, telegraphy, and steam-railroad travel. Only etiquette seemed to lag with the ultimatum: “The Perfect Hostess will see to it that the works of male and female authors be properly separated on her bookshelves. Their proximity unless they happen to be married should not be tolerated.”

Although the general pattern of the Greek Revival buildings was the temple form, its variations were as numerous as other innovations of living in response to the new demands of an expanded national economy. The need for banks, factories, prisons, hotels, department stores, and group housing proposed fresh problems of engineering and planning for our native builders.

The Greek Revival style did not begin as a sudden, hybrid growth but had its roots in pre-Revolutionary days when Thomas Jefferson propounded his vision of a unified classic architecture for the whole country. Jefferson never went to Greece, but he saw the Roman remains in France and northern Italy; these inspired his famous State Capitol in Richmond and Monticello in Charlottesville, the first of our classic buildings. By the time Dr. Thornton won the competition for the design of the National Capitol in 1793, the day of the amateur architect was drawing to a close. Three years later Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who had been trained in England as an engineer and architect, arrived in Philadelphia. Describing himself as a “bigoted Greek,” it was he and his pupils who, with a more literal use of Greek form and ornament derived from archaeological sources, launched the Greek Revival style in the United States.

It was natural that the new style should come to us from England, whose long classic tradition, entrenched there from the time of Wren and Inigo Jones, had given a Palladian cast to our finest colonial houses. With the outbreak of the War of 1812, when close contact between the United States and England ceased, the Greek Revival continued here independently and flourished to a degree beyond that in Europe.

There were many reasons for the general popularity of the Greek style in this country. Nicholas Biddle, who went to Greece in 1806, was the first American actually to visit the country and to appreciate its architecture. He was rich, cultivated, and well known, and his published praise of Greek temples as models for an American style was received with enthusiasm at a time when national growth was beginning in earnest. The Louisiana Purchase had just been completed, offering a vast new territory for expansion. This coincided with the exodus from the Atlantic seaboard of pioneers to new homesteads in Ohio, Michigan, and the West. The invention by Eli Whitney of the cotton gin brought an era of prosperity to landowners in the deep south which inaugurated the rise of great plantation mansions. In the 1820’s the Greek War of Independence against Turkish domination aroused the sympathy of our citizens, who saw in the Greek struggle for freedom a parallel to our own War of Independence, an event still green in many memories; Lord Byron’s heroic
death in Greece lent a romantic aspect to the same cause.

Very few Americans went to Greece, but those who were active in advancing the new style of architecture here made good use of the illustrated books that gradually increased as the result of several Europeans' study of Greek temples. One of the first of them came from France, when Le Roy's book Les Ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce was published in 1758. This was followed by Thomas Major's Ruins of Paestum, based on Soufflot's measurements, and the German Winckelmann's History of Ancient Art. In England the Greek style received scant welcome from Lord Burlington and his Roman school of architects; as late as 1778 the Adam brothers ignored Greek art completely as source material in their published designs. The champions of the Greek Revival there were the architects Stuart and Revett, who applied the fruits of their study in Greece to numerous London buildings and country houses. The first two volumes of their great work The Antiquities of Athens, dated 1762 and 1787, largely influenced the Greek Revival style in the United States. Although Benjamin Franklin alone among Americans was sufficiently enterprising to subscribe for this important book, it later furnished the principal elements of Greek design to our native builders, as well as to the authors of books on architecture.

The earliest American books to mention the Greek style were the three volumes of John Haviland’s Builders’ Assistant, published in Philadelphia from 1818 to 1821, and Minard Lafever’s Young Builder’s General Instructor, issued at Newark in 1829; here the Greek elements are timidly and furtively combined with old-fashioned fan-lighted doors and rusticated walls. Within a few years, when Lafever issued his Beauties of Modern Architecture in 1835 and Chester Hills brought out the Builder’s Guide in 1836, the style was full blown. In the meantime Asher Benjamin, whose earlier handbooks had had wide circulation, had caught up with the new style in 1830 with the Practical House Carpenter. By 1847 his Practice of Architecture coincided in date with Thomas Ustick Walter's Guide to Workers in Metal and Stone. Walter’s book was illustrated with many practical patterns for ironwork and silverware and was one of the few American publications on the decorative arts. Another was The Cabinet Makers' Assistant, brought out in 1840 by John Hall in Baltimore to introduce the heavy, uninspired style of furniture that enjoyed a brief popularity before the full tide of Victorianism set in.

With the dawn of the nineteenth century an increasing number of Americans prepared themselves for the practice of architecture, the first group to approach the subject as a profession in the modern sense. Following Benjamin Latrobe, who introduced the Greek temple form here and originated the beautiful tobacco and Indian corn capitals, came his pupil William Strickland, the leading architect of the new revival in Philadelphia and later in Tennessee. James Bucklin, Ithiel Town, Alexander Jackson Davis, and Richard Upjohn were among the trained designers in New England; the last two eventually turned with enthusiasm to sponsor the Gothic movement in New York. Robert Mills, the protégé of Jefferson, completed numerous public commissions in Baltimore, Washington, and South Carolina. Gideon Shryock was a leader of the style in Kentucky, and in Ohio Jonathan Goldsmith is remembered for his commercial and domestic buildings. Thomas Ustick Walter executed two great projects—Girard College in Philadelphia, often called the finest Greek Revival building in America, and the final additions to the National Capitol. William Jay and Henry McAlpin were the architects of some of Georgia’s outstanding Greek buildings, and James Dakin and James Gallier, followers of Alexander J. Davis and Ithiel Town in New York, were responsible for many handsome houses in New Orleans.

Some noticeable differences between the Greek Revival and the earlier Jeffersonian Roman style are superficial details of ornament that can be traced to Greek sources. In addition to the temple form, which provided the theme of the style, there was an adherence to the three Greek orders, Doric, Ionic, and
Drawing room with contemporary woodwork and furniture in The Greek Revival in the United States, a special loan exhibition on view through February 29
Corinthian. The Tuscan and Composite orders were inventions of the later, Roman period and rarely appear on American buildings in the Greek Revival manner. The anthemion, or honeysuckle design, the spiral form sparsely foliated, the patera, or petaled disk, and the vertical console are typical elements of ancient Greek ornament that are seen repeatedly on American buildings. The kind of acanthus leaf used in ancient Greece—the long-lobed, pointed *acanthus spinosus*—was employed here in preference to the thick, short-leaved *acanthus mollis*. These details of ornament were used in endless new ways, often in combination with classical forms of construction already in use such as the arch, the dome, and the vault, which are typical of the triumphant Roman style.

The faithfulness of the American builder to the source of Greek design was constant wherever the revival flourished. The four-columned Ionic portico from the Temple on the Ilissus reappears on the Barney house in Nantucket, the Sebring house in Plainfield, New Jersey, and the Old Chapel in Danville, Kentucky. The strangely simple Corinthian columns of the Tower of the Winds in Athens are re-organized in a novel way in the porch of the Hermitage in Savannah, the entrance hall of the Clarkson house in Flatbush, and the façade of the Avery house in Granville, Ohio. The Monument of Lysicrates furnished a lantern to surmount Strickland's lovely State Capitol in Nashville and his Merchants' Exchange in Philadelphia. From the same Athenian source came the crown of anthemion for the porch of the Thomas house in Savannah, and the cresting of triple spirals for Shryock's Bank in Louisville, Kentucky. The east façade of the Erechtheum furnished Latrobe's first Ionic portico for the Bank of Pennsylvania; it likewise inspired the eared door architraves of the Croghan ballroom in Pittsburgh and the Logan and Bienvenue entrance doors in New Orleans. The inverted olive wreaths which ornamented the frieze of the Monument of Thrasyllus are similarly employed on the Small house in Macon, Saint John's Chapel in Portsmouth, and the entrance hall of the Clarkson house in Flatbush. The Doric portico of the Parthenon was borrowed for the monumental Berry Hill in Virginia and the Sub-Treasury in Manhattan.

Impractical as this adaptation of antique forms may seem to some contemporary eyes, a sympathetic approach to American architecture of a century ago brings a conviction that both our professional architects and the unknown carpenters of obscure dwellings recaptured in good measure the antique ideal of simplicity and beauty while making a lasting contribution of their own. In the deep south the all-encircling double gallery, or porch for outdoor living, is quite different from the recessed porch between two wings in northern Ohio and Michigan. In Eastern cities close-built houses of unified design facing a green park introduced an element of *rus in urbe*, revived in today's city planning. Even in remote districts the most frugal kind of temple form was achieved by turning the gable end to the front and breaking the wall surface with simple antae instead of a portico. Everywhere there was an appreciation of simple expanses of wall, sparse ornament strategically placed, just proportions, and often superb craftsmanship.

As the Greek Revival style unfolded and developed in the United States it became as indigenous to the soil as our system of law based on the Roman code and our democratic system of government, which was founded on the ancient ideal of individual freedom. It was our first national style of architecture. In Professor Walter A. Taylor's words, "Why should contemporary historians or critics scold our forebears for not having achieved what has never been done by any race or nation in the known history of art and architecture; i.e., being collectively, completely original?" How fortunate that they returned to so impeccable a source as Greek temples and laid the foundation of their style on the most subtle architecture in the world!