Random Reflections on the Colonial Revival

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RANDOM REFLECTIONS ON THE COLONIAL REVIVAL

Wayne Andrews

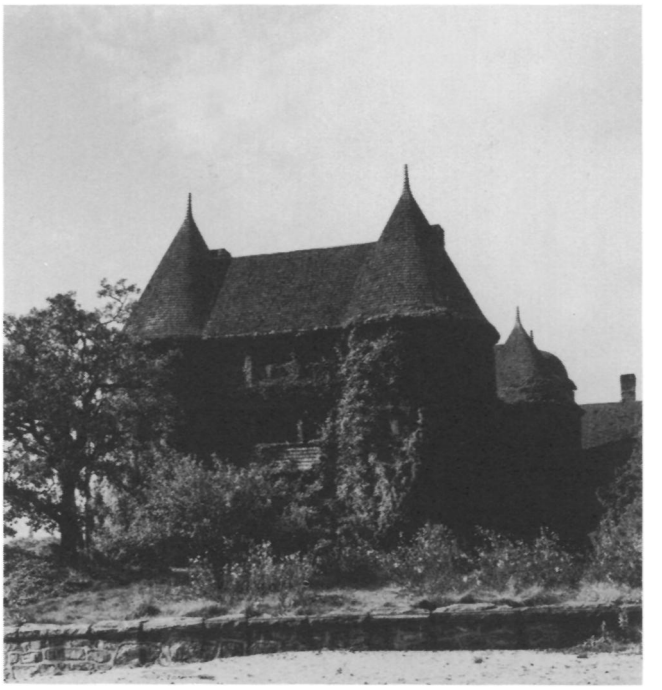
Although the colonial style is as respectable in 1964 as a draft on the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company, this was not always the case. Wayne Andrews reminds us that there were Americans in the nineteenth century who had no respect for the achievements of our colonial builders and architects. The revival of interest —the acceptance of the idea that it might be interesting to live in a house inspired by the work of our colonial craftsmen—was due to the earnest endeavors of a number of men, some wise, some silly. This is not surprising; no change in taste comes about without the encouragement of fanatics.

The colonial revival—like all other revivals—cannot be written off as a mere matter of building replicas. In all the eclectic revivals a certain freedom was enjoyed by the greater architects in their greater works. The author points out that McKim, Mead & White, who may be said to have launched the colonial revival in 1886, can not be accused of being copycats.

To Edith Wharton no readers were more impertinent than those who inquired what incidents in "real life" she recalled in her fiction. "All novelists who describe (whether from within or without) what is called *society life* are pursued," she complained, in her autobiography, "by the exasperating accusation of putting flesh-and-blood people into their books. Anyone gifted with the least creative faculty knows the absurdity of such a charge. Real people transported into a work of the imagination would instantly cease to be real; only those born of the creator's brain can give the least illusion of reality."

Any architect who claimed to be an artist, if summoned to define what he remembered before approaching the drafting board, would have to respond as vehemently as Mrs. Wharton. As scholars of the various revivals in American architecture are beginning to understand, the old accusation that our great eclectic monuments may be traced one after another to this or that drawing or photograph, is nothing short of nonsense. A genius may borrow, but he cannot steal. Now that modern architecture is firmly established, there is no longer any point in repeating the tiresome arguments of the naive champions of originality.

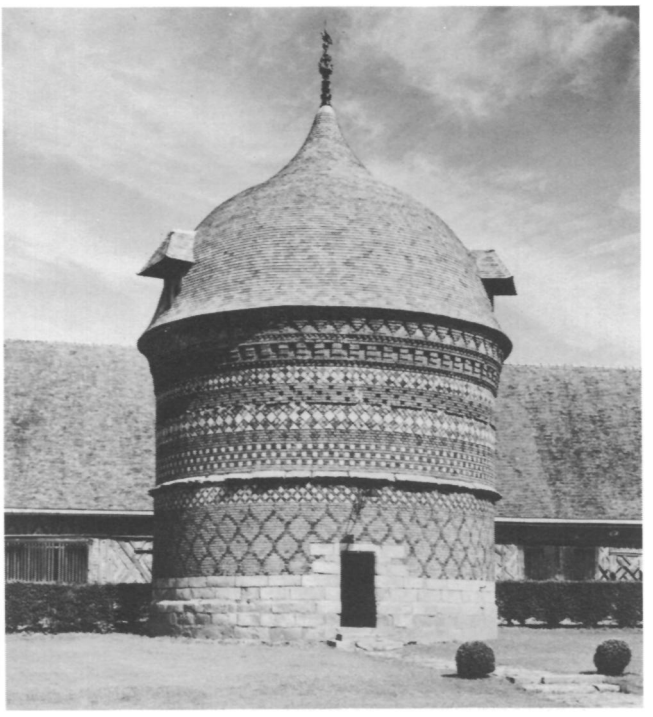
Yet it is entertaining and even rewarding to try to guess what images flash through an architect's mind before the first sketch is formed. And since the firm of McKim, Mead & White is commonly credited with introducing the colonial revival to America, it might be worthwhile to examine for a moment the type of inspiration to which the partners were subject. It might even be wise to glance at a typical building in the shingle style for which McKim, Mead & White were famous in the early 1880's. Consider, for instance, the residence of C. J. Osborn at Mamaroneck, New York, dating from 1885. What *may* have suggested the Osborn house and others in this style is the Manoir d'Ango at Varengeville in Normandy, dating from 1530-1545, which White and McKim *may* have inspected on their tour of France with Saint-Gaudens in 1878. The tower in the courtyard of the Manoir was never literally copied, but the hoods over the windows may have prompted similar hoods in the Osborn house, just as the polychromy of the brickwork may have fired White's decorative instincts. In any event an unprejudiced observer would have to admit that the partners had made a singularly free translation of the original. And this is precisely the manner in which they were to handle the colonial revival.



Wayne Andrews

Residence of C. J. Osborn, Mamaroneck, N. Y. 1885
McKim, Mead & White, Architects

Note "hood" on far right, which may be compared with the "hoods" over the windows in the tower of the Manoir d'Ango



Wayne Andrews

Manoir d'Ango, Varengeville 1530-1545.

But first a word about the ancestry of this style. Like all other revivals, the colonial owes much to the arguments of earnest men, and it was not introduced without controversy. Thomas Jefferson damned the achievements of our colonial architects in his *Notes on Virginia;* there were many critics in the years to come who shared his bias. A certain Louisa C. Tuthill, who bravely published in Philadelphia in 1848 a history of architecture from the earliest times to "its present condition in Europe and the United States," decided that the meeting houses of colonial New England "though truly grateful and even beautiful to the eye of piety" were "outrageous deformities to the eye of taste." She noted that "court houses and academies were built in the same uncouth style. Happily," she continued, "they were all of such perishable materials that they will not much longer remain to annoy travelers *in search of the picturesque* through the beautiful villages of New England."

Mrs. Tuthill was writing in the heyday of the Greek, the Gothic, and the other revivals of the romantic period. Perhaps the first defender of the colonial tradition was the Boston architect Arthur Delavan Gilman, who argued that "the introduction of Grecian architecture among us has been a great mistake." Gilman was also bored by the work of Latrobe, Bulfinch, and the other leading figures of the federal period. The Capitol in Washington and the Boston State House were "flaunting and meretricious edifices," he concluded. "It is indeed a sad truth," he wrote in the *North American Review* for April 1844, "that if we look about us for anything correct and pleasing, we do not find it so much in the work of our own time as in those which were executed sixty or eighty years ago." Gilman found that he could praise Christ Church in Cambridge and King's Chapel in Boston. These we now know to be the work of Peter Harrison.

But in the 1840's a colonial revival was far in the distance. And it was equally inconceivable in 1869, when Richard Upjohn, the architect of Trinity, New York, the greatest of all our Gothic revival churches, addressed the third annual convention of the American Institute of Architects. His colleagues may have been surprised, but this Gothicist had a kind word to say about what was accomplished before American independence. "An investigation of the buildings of the colonial period," he reminded his audience, "may show us what foundations we had to start upon, and will call up serious reflections as to whether or not we have made those improvements upon the works of our predecessors which the general progress of knowledge throughout the world seems to have demanded."

Upjohn, and he spoke with real authority, felt that "the ecclesiastical architecture of the ante-Revolutionary days was, in almost every instance, far superior to that of the period subsequent to the Revolution. Then every trace of refinement, of truthful expression and fitness of purpose was lost sight of. Not a vestige of sacred thought can be discovered in the houses of worship of this period."

So much for the meeting houses designed early in the century by Bulfinch. Upjohn went on. "May we not gain a valuable lesson while contemplating these works of our forefathers? Old and quaint as they are, will we not see by comparing them with the works of our own hands that their authors regarded the law of harmony between a building and its surroundings better than we do?"

Seven years later when Richard Morris Hunt addressed another convention of the AIA, there was still no sign of a colonial revival. In his review of the Philadelphia Centennial, Hunt singled out the exhibits of Massachusetts and Connecticut as being "in the style of the old colonial buildings of New England," but it is evident that this prominent architect knew not of what he spoke. Massachusetts had put up a belated example of a Gothic villa with an Italian tower; Connecticut was equally under the influence of the romantic revivals.

There were stirrings, however. In 1879 the Rhode Island chapter of the AIA offered a prize for the best set of drawings of the colonial remains in that state. No one chose to enter the competition, but by 1881 George C. Mason was praying "humbly and earnestly" in the pages of the *American Architect and Building News* that "we may brush away the dust and mystery" surrounding our pre-Revolutionary architecture. The

time had come, he wrote, to "delve among old papers, files and accounts . . . and thus elicit data which when brought together and well sifted will reward us with an insight into the causes which led to the adoption of forms of construction which we now admire." Mason, who had unearthed the contract for the Ayrault house at Newport, could not conceal his reverence for Richard Munday's Old Colony House.

Mason was a gentle antiquarian. The first furious blast in favor of a colonial revival came from the caustic art critic Clarence Cook in September 1882. Writing in the *North American Review,* Cook made plain that an architect (Richard Morris Hunt) was responsible for the lavish residence of the W. K. Vanderbilts on Fifth Avenue. Were architects necessary? A glance at the Vanderbilt palace convinced the critic that they were an unmitigated evil.

"The general excellence that marks the dwellings of any people is a proof of the non-existence of professional architects among that people," Cook argued. "Did architects design the houses of Venice? Architects may have designed the bad ones, but never the good ones. As soon as architects got themselves established in Venice, her shabby days began."

All this was a little like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's celebrated essay of 1749 accusing the arts and sciences of depraving mankind, the very essay that prompted Voltaire to ask whether we should not begin to crawl once more on hands and legs. But publicity is an art with its own rules, and Cook's message reached an audience.

"The most beautiful house," he proclaimed, "is not that on which art has most labored . . . but that which . . . shows itself fitted in its plan and by proportions for human occupation. That is why, in every land, the cottage attracts the eye more strongly than the palace; it expresses in simple form . . . the homely every-day needs and employment of its inhabitants. The kitchen, the wood-shed, the ironing-room are in plain sight; the bread oven swells from the wall as if it was the life-giving breast of the home."

Architects might rage, but there were Americans who listened to Cook's homely words. He insisted that the cottages and small houses of the eighteenth century were the "best models for imitation or for suggestions." They were, he pointed out, "for a long time despised or neglected, while we, in our callow youth, were going through our *classic* mumps and *gothic* measles, and near to perishing with the dreadful visitation of the *mansard* malaria."

Cook must have been disappointed by the H. A. C. Taylor house in Newport, the building which may be said to have inaugurated the colonial revival in 1886. First of all, it was designed by a firm of architects—McKim, Mead & White. Secondly, it was an imposing mansion rather than a cozy cottage. Thirdly, it was no copy of a colonial structure, but an invention that proved the partners had traveled widely and seen much. McKim was more than a restorer. Although intimately acquainted with our colonial architecture—he had, after all, carefully reconstituted the kitchen of the Thomas Robinson house in Newport in 1872, and approximately four years later remodeled yet another Newport interior, that of the Dennis house—he did not choose to be antiquarian. The huge chimneys might have been inspired by a castle of the age of Francis I, and if the clapboarding was "colonial," the front porch was too elegant to have been conceived before the federal period, and the frieze was far from being "colonial" in origin.

Wayne Andrews

Residence of H. A. C. Taylor, Newport, R. I. 1886. McKim, Mead & White, Architects.

The house has now been destroyed.

As McKim, Mead & White had learned the year before while designing the Villard Houses in New York City, the project that marked their return to the Renaissance for guidance after their original, informal achievements in the shingle style, the past might suggest much, but the past could not dictate to the nineteenth century. A genuine re-creation was imperative. Possibly the most compelling colonial architecture in the back of the partners' mind while the H. A. C. Taylor house was being planned was the Thomas Thompson house at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This is something which McKim and White may have seen on their tour in 1877 of the New England coast. But the Thompson house is on a far more modest scale, and the question may be raised whether it is a "colonial" example in the first place, since it was supposedly built in 1789.

In their other important "colonial" works McKim, Mead & White were so carefree as to infuriate antiquarians. The James Breese house at Southampton, planned by White in 1906, is an admirable exhibit of their independence. The roof over the portico may have been prompted by a colonial farmhouse in New York or New Jersey, but no colonial gentleman, not even George Washington, could have dreamed of a frame house of such dignity and elegance.

McKim, Mead & White may have had their faults, but they can not be blamed for the epidemic in our own time of "colonial" houses erected by aggressive builders. They were casual in their borrowings. They would doubtless have approved of Edith Wharton's denunciation of the style in *The Decoration of Houses,* published in 1897.

In this book, written in collaboration with Ogden Codman, Mrs. Wharton not only made her first appearance in hard covers, but made it most plain that she did not share the sentimentality of Clarence Cook. "The early American fireplace," she explained, "was merely a cheap provincial copy of English models of the same period. The application of the word *colonial* to pre-Revolutionary architecture and decoration has created a vague impression that there existed at that time an American architectural style. As a matter of fact, *colonial* architecture is simply a modest copy of Georgian models."

Mrs. Wharton believed that our architects might turn to the eighteenth century for inspiration and might even remember, ever so faintly, an American example. But the word she preferred for such an effort was *Georgian* rather than *colonial.* Sketching the career of the young architect Dallas Archer at the very end of *The Age of Innocence,* she noted that Dallas's set "was protesting at the meangingless use of the word *colonial.* Nobody nowadays had colonial houses except the millionnaire grocers of the suburbs."

The quotation from Edith Wharton's autobiography *A Backward Glance* (copyright 1934, 1962) is reproduced through the kind permission of Charles Scribner's Sons, who are reissuing the book in 1964.

Wayne Andrews

Residence of James L. Breese, Southampton, N. Y. 1906. McKim, Mead & White, Architects.

This house was willed to Amherst College by its last owner, the stockbroker Charles E. Merrill.