



A PAST WORTHY OF STUDY

THE CLASSICISM OF PEABODY & STEARNS

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Stand on Boylston Street at the northern edge of Boston's Copley Square and you will see two architectural heavyweights squaring off. To the left, toward Clarendon Street, rise the craggy towers of Trinity Church, Henry Hobson Richardson's Romanesque masterpiece, completed in 1877. To the right, across Dartmouth Street, spreads the serene classical arcade of the Boston Public Library, designed by Charles McKim a decade later and completed in 1895. Trinity Church represents the apex of Victorian architecture in America: an eclectic and often highly personal architectural expression, obsessed with picturesque visual effects and enthralled, above all, by a romantic vision of the Middle Ages. The Boston Public Library, on the other hand, announces a new architectural era, guided by the principles of classical design as taught by the *École des Beaux-Arts*: rational planning, symmetry, and an unswerving allegiance to the authority of classical antiquity (p. 15, fig. 9, and p. 58, fig. 2).

The contrast between the two buildings is heightened by the knowledge that McKim worked as a draftsman in Richardson's office until 1872 and likely contributed to the drawings for Trinity Church, which began construction that year. After leaving Richardson, McKim partnered with William Mead and Stanford White to form an architectural practice that would set the standard for Beaux-Arts classicism in America into the first decades of the twentieth century. In this context, the Boston Public Library feels not merely novel but revolutionary, refuting the entire design approach of McKim's mentor.

The juxtaposition at Copley Square indeed marks an abrupt shift in the development of American archi-

ture, the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. And yet, within the slim decade between the completion of Trinity Church and the conception of the Boston Public Library, it is possible to find in New England a curious synthesis of those two seemingly irreconcilable traditions. In those years a handful of architects, led by the Boston firm of Peabody & Stearns, explored a new vein of classicism that was inspired by America's colonial past yet still shaped by an affinity for the buildings of medieval Europe. The resulting fusion generated new architectural forms that stretched the expressive capacity of the classical language in a creative synthesis that belongs distinctly to New England.

The Colonial Revival, perhaps the most influential and enduring movement in the history of American architecture, was sparked, in large part, by the U.S. centennial commemorations of 1876.¹ Among the attractions of the Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia was the Connecticut State Building, designed by Donald Grant Mitchell and David R. Brown. An appealingly romanticized vision of colonial life in New England, it contained a cavernous wood-paneled room with a collection of colonial antiques (spinning wheel, grandfather clock, hunting rifle, and so on) huddled around a central hearth.² On the exterior, however, Mitchell and Brown transformed the simple colonial saltbox form into a strangely medieval fantasy, exaggerating the overhangs of the second and third floors and replacing American clapboards with English half-timbering. The resulting building appears something like the architectural version of Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

What Mitchell and Brown's design points out, though, is that the architecture of colonial New England was itself stylistically heterogeneous, and indeed often blended. Seventeenth-century American buildings

Fig. 1. College Hall, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, by Peabody & Stearns, 1875.



Photo: Courtesy Pocumuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, MA

Fig. 2. Dickinson High School and Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, Massachusetts, by Peabody & Stearns, 1878 (no longer extant).

were fundamentally still medieval, with Georgian classicism only gradually taking hold during the eighteenth century. In some parts of New England, medieval elements such as the overhanging second and third floors can be found as late as the mid-eighteenth century, now invariably accompanied by classical door and window surrounds.

The nineteenth-century interest in the medieval origins of colonial architecture was reinforced by a trend already gaining momentum in England—namely, the Queen Anne style, most famously advanced by Richard Norman Shaw. Though the style was ostensibly inspired by the English Baroque architecture from the turn of the eighteenth century, the designs of Shaw and his contemporaries were, in reality, an eclectic mixture of styles ranging from the Tudor to the Georgian.³ In America, a thoroughly medieval version of the Queen Anne style had been adopted

by Richardson for his 1874 Watts Sherman House in Newport, Rhode Island, and it was on display again at the Centennial Exposition in the form of the British executive commissioner and delegates' residence and staff office, designed by Thomas Harris.⁴

In the wake of the centennial, Robert Peabody and his partner, John Stearns, were among the architects who took inspiration from colonial and Queen Anne architecture, and they were the first to embrace the classical facets of these styles.⁵ This might come as a surprise, considering that their training and early work had been firmly rooted in the Gothic Revival. In 1875, for example, they designed College Hall for newly established Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, in a picturesquely Victorian version of the Gothic (fig. 1). Steeply pitched roofs, pointed arches, and a slender clock tower with soaring pinnacles embody an essentially Gothic verticality. The massing is as varied and



Photo: Historic Deerfield Library, Deerfield, Massachusetts

Fig. 3. Schoolhouse design for Dickinson High School and Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, Massachusetts, by Peabody & Stearns, 1878 (no longer extant), accompanied by details from the Ensign John Sheldon House (1699). From *American Architect and Building News*.

asymmetrical as possible, deploying projecting gables, bay windows, dormers, and chimneys to maximize visual excitement. This formal extravagance is further accentuated by a palette of materials that combines

red brick with contrasting limestone, often in alternating bands of color. In all of these respects, one perceives the strong influence of such contemporary English medievalists as William Butterfield and Alfred Waterhouse.⁶

In 1877, however, Robert Peabody gave a talk to the Boston Society of Architects, subsequently published in *American Architect and Building News*, discussing the Queen Anne style in England and advocating its adoption in America. Central to his argument was its eclectic nature. He noted that “it is probably still an heretical thing in England to say that a man can design both classical and Gothic work. Yet here we see Mr. Shaw varying his sources of inspiration very greatly, and yet always remaining a great artist.” Queen Anne is, he declares, “a very fit importation into our offices,” but he immediately goes on to explain that “there is no revival so little of an affectation on our soil, as that of the beautiful work of the Colonial days . . . It is our legitimate field for imitation.”⁷ In a subsequent article entitled “Georgian Houses of New England,” he again praised the English Queen Anne designers and asked: “With our Centennial year have we not discovered that we too have a past worthy of study?”⁸ From

the outset, Peabody recognized that America had the potential to generate its own parallel to the English Queen Anne style, one drawing primarily from the eclectic architecture of the colonial period.



Fig. 4. Lorillard House (The Breakers, original), Newport, Rhode Island, by Peabody & Stearns, 1878 (destroyed by fire, 1892).

But what would such an architecture look like? As Peabody's articles were being published, the firm had several projects on the boards that would bring to life this new revival and synthesis of styles. As a group, these projects embody an approach to design in which the composition and massing is still essentially Victorian Gothic, but the detailing is classical. It is revealing to compare the 1875 College Hall at Smith with the firm's 1878 schoolhouse for the combined Deerfield Academy and Dickinson High School in Deerfield, Massachusetts (fig. 2).⁹ The two buildings share a similar palette of materials and a similarly picturesque composition of gabled masses, forming a balanced asymmetry, with an off-center clock tower as the focal point.¹⁰ But in the Dickinson schoolhouse, the pointed arches, pinnacles, and other explicitly Gothic details have been replaced by classical equivalents: round arches, Palladian

windows, Doric pilasters, scrolled brackets, and so on. The steeply pitched medieval roofs remain, but the gables are articulated as classical pediments. One senses here the ingrained Victorian aversion to architectural simplicity. Peabody had written of New England's Georgian houses (presumably those we would now call Federal) that "the later and richer mansions were large and square, and with so little detail outside, that one built now would, without the glamour of age, seem unpleasantly angular and box-like."¹¹ On completion of the Dickinson schoolhouse, the local newspaper noted the "old-fashioned character" of the design, observing that "while the plan is well adapted to school and library purposes, the small-paned sashes, the classical wooden cornices, the door pediment, the belfry, the elliptical arches, recall colonial work and bring the building into harmony with the old mansions and trees of the town."¹²

It is telling that when the building was published in *American Architect and Building News*, in 1878, it was paired with illustrations of another Deerfield building, the 1699 Ensign John Sheldon House,¹³ including a perspective view and several architectural details, such as a window surround, decorative bargeboards, and carved brackets supporting the second-story overhang (fig. 3). All of these elements straddle the stylistic boundary between medieval and Georgian, and Peabody & Stearns used all of them as sources for its own decorative detailing in the Dickinson schoolhouse.

That same year, Peabody & Stearns also produced two houses in a similar stylistic vein. The house for Pierre Lorillard IV in Newport, Rhode Island, features a composition remarkably similar to the Dickinson schoolhouse, with a picturesque assemblage of gables and the main entrance nestled against an off-center tower (fig. 4). One finds even steeper roof pitches here, but they are still articulated as classical pediments, the central one supported by attenuated Ionic pilasters. The overall emphasis on verticality is reinforced by flared chimneys reminiscent of Shaw's Tudor Revival work. A significant departure from the Dickinson schoolhouse in the Lorillard House is the use of cedar shingles as the dominant wall and roof material, which, along with the consistent use of six-over-six double-hung windows, explicitly link the design to the colonial houses of coastal New England.¹⁴ Over the following years, this use of shingles would develop into

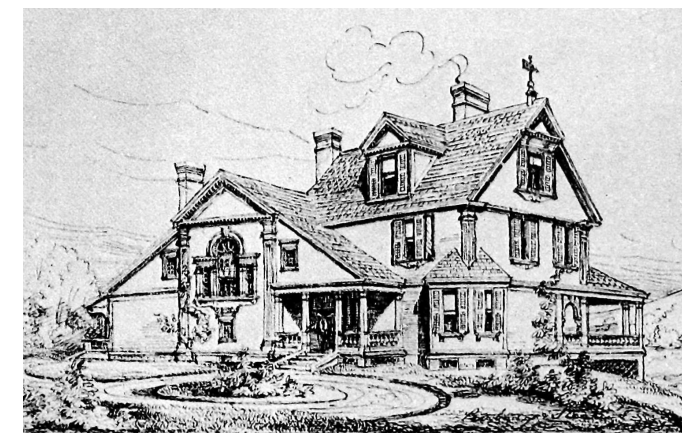


Fig. 5. Denny House, Milton, Massachusetts, by Peabody & Stearns, 1878, as published in *American Architect and Building News*, February 16, 1878 (no longer extant).

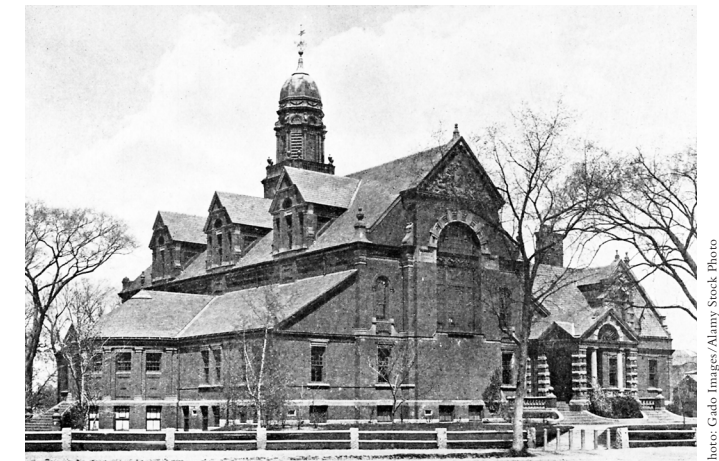


Fig. 6. Hemenway Gymnasium, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Peabody & Stearns, c. 1865, photographed in 1895 (demolished 1938).

what became known as the Shingle Style, a distinct branch of the Colonial Revival.

On a smaller scale but similarly eclectic in its sources is the 1878 house for John W. Denny in Milton, Massachusetts (fig. 5). Once again, the massing is contrived for picturesque effect, through a varied assortment of gables, dormers, porches, and bay windows. This house is perhaps the most directly colonial of Peabody & Stearns's early work, but even here, the Victorian Gothic influence is present: the angled corner bay with its distinctively cleft hipped roof was a favorite motif in the Gothic designs of Alfred Waterhouse, for whom Peabody had worked as an intern in 1869 before starting his own office.¹⁵ Immediately to the left of this corner bay, however, is the most classical of features, a quotation of the nested temple-front composition that Palladio employed to organize the facades of his Venetian churches, San Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore.¹⁶ The major order here frames a Palladian window, while the minor order is fully expressed only on the right-hand side of the otherwise symmetrical composition, where a porch leads to the main entrance (once again off-center, in a decidedly un-Palladian gesture). This masterful play of symmetry and asymmetry is a recurring feature throughout the building.

In 1880, Peabody & Stearns completed another academic building, the spectacular Hemenway Gymnasium at Harvard College (fig. 6). The basil-

ica-like massing and steep roof pitch are derived from large Gothic churches, but again all of the Gothic details are reinterpreted in a classical vocabulary.¹⁷ Peabody & Stearns seem to have derived inspiration from two historical moments in which medieval building types were being reconceived using classical elements. The first is that found in Dutch architecture of the early seventeenth century, a popular source for the leading Queen Anne architects in England.¹⁸ The second, as at the Denny House, is Palladio's effort to classicize the Venetian Gothic, especially by means of the nested-temple-front motif, which is deployed at several scales throughout the composition.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Peabody & Stearns's design maintains a Gothic emphasis on verticality by breaking the entablatures forward above the pilasters and surmounting them by elaborate finials. Even the classical cupola is stretched vertically to complement the building's Gothic proportions.

By the time the Hemenway Gymnasium was completed (only four years after the Centennial Exposition), the Colonial Revival had become a significant architectural movement. Architects such as Charles McKim, Stanford White, William Ralph Emerson, and Arthur Little were enthusiastically exploring the style's creative potential (fig. 7). Over the following decades, it became the most popular style for residential architecture, not just in New England but across the country, a status it retains today. It is a sad irony, then, that some of Peabody & Stearns's earliest essays in the style eventually became victims of their own success. As the Colonial Revival developed through the first decades of the twentieth century, its



Fig. 7. Redwood, Bar Harbor, Maine, by William Ralph Emerson, 1879.

adherents acquired an increasing taste for historical accuracy and classical propriety over the playful eclecticism of the 1870s. In the 1930s, both the Dickinson schoolhouse and the Hemenway Gymnasium were demolished and replaced by more stylistically pure (and decidedly less interesting) neo-Georgian buildings.²⁰

Despite these losses, the legacy of Peabody & Stearns's early classical work is nonetheless substantial. Its influ-

ence is especially visible in the subsequent development of the Shingle Style, in which classical detailing was subdued (but not eliminated) and the emphasis placed on picturesque massing unified by the consistent use of cedar shingles. A century later, the firm's whimsical eclecticism and playful attitude toward historical precedent would reemerge as a touchstone for post-modernism. And over the past fifty years, as classical architecture has experienced yet another rebirth in America, many contemporary New England architects have drawn inspiration from both the Shingle Style and postmodernism in their pursuit of a regional brand of classicism that is both literate and inven-

tive. In this effort, today's architects demonstrate again, as did Peabody & Stearns one hundred fifty years ago, the infinite ability of classicism to adapt and expand, and to absorb ideas from the widest range of architectural traditions.

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Notes

1. For a detailed account of the early Colonial Revival, see Vincent J. Scully Jr. *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Downing to the Origins of Wright* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971). For a discussion of Colonial Revival residential design, see Richard Guy Wilson, *The Colonial Revival House* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004) and Leland M. Roth, *Shingle Styles: Innovation and Tradition in American Architecture, 1874 to 1982* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

2. See <https://connecticuthistory.org/take-me-to-the-fair-connecticut-exhibits-at-the-international-expositions/>. The centrality of the colonial hearth had loomed large in the American imagination since long before the Centennial Exposition. Donald Grant Mitchell, who was even better known as a writer than as a designer, served in the 1850s as the first editor of *Harper's Magazine*, where he published a number of works by Herman Melville. In Melville's 1856 short story *I and My Chimney*, the protagonist doggedly defends his antique house and its massive central chimney against the remodeling ambitions of his wife.

3. For more on the Queen Anne style in England, see Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The "Queen Anne" Movement 1860–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4. Scully, *Shingle Style and the Stick Style*, 10–33.

5. The other leading proponent of the Colonial Revival at this time was Charles McKim, who had begun to study colonial buildings in the mid-1870s, leading a sketching tour through New England in 1877. The influence of these studies is evident in several houses designed by McKim in the late 1870s, though his work displays little in the way of overtly classical detailing until the following decade.

6. Butterfield's lively polychrome Gothic works at Rugby School and at Keble College, Oxford, were completed in 1875 and 1876, respectively, and Peabody cites both projects in "A Talk About 'Queen Anne'" (*American Architect and Building News*, April 28, 1877, 134). During the same years, Waterhouse (for whom Peabody had worked briefly in 1869) designed several buildings for Pembroke College, Cambridge, in a similarly picturesque Gothic with alternating bands of stone

and red brick. In America, the firm of Ware & Van Brunt, where both Peabody and Stearns had worked as draftsmen in the 1860s, had adopted a similar version of the Gothic for Harvard's Memorial Hall, completed in 1878. For more on the training and careers of Peabody and Stearns, see Annie Robinson, *Peabody & Stearns: Country Houses and Seaside Cottages* (New York: Norton, 2010), and Wheaton A. Holden, "The Peabody Touch: Peabody & Stearns of Boston, 1870–1917," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 32, no. 2 (May 1973): 114–131.

7. Peabody, "A Talk about 'Queen Anne,'" 134.

8. Robert S. Peabody, "Georgian Houses of New England," *American Architect and Building News* (October 20, 1877): 338.

9. This structure was built to house two combined secondary schools, the private Deerfield Academy and the public Dickinson High School, as well as a public library for the town of Deerfield. See Aaron M. Helfand, *Deerfield Academy: The Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2020), 33–36.

10. It is worth noting that there is hardly any surviving precedent for a tower as an architectural form in classical antiquity. New England's ubiquitous classical church steeples are derived from the ingenious efforts of English Baroque architects (including Wren, Gibbs, and others) to classicize the quintessentially Gothic form of a church spire. Peabody & Stearns's classical towers are perhaps more closely related to the Italian campanile (another characteristically medieval form that underwent a classical transformation by Renaissance architects).

11. Peabody, "A Talk about 'Queen Anne,'" 338.

12. *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*, December 3, 1878.

13. The Ensign John Sheldon House was known as the "Old Indian House" for having survived a deadly French and Indian raid in 1704, during which much of the town of Deerfield had been burned. The house was demolished in 1848 but had been documented with an early daguerreotype, and a number of architectural fragments had been salvaged. These were being prepared for display in a new museum of local history (the Pocumtuck

Valley Memorial Association [PVMA]) at the time the Dickinson schoolhouse was being designed. A replica of the house was constructed in 1929, not far from its original site, and is still maintained by the PVMA.

14. The Lorillard House was destroyed by fire in 1892, only fourteen years after it was completed. Its replacement is the most extravagant of Newport's mansions, designed by Richard Morris Hunt for Cornelius Vanderbilt and completed in 1895. (Both houses were named The Breakers.)

15. The angled corner bay motif is found in Waterhouse's designs for two Gothic Revival buildings at the University of Cambridge: one at Gonville & Caius College in 1867, and a second at Jesus College in 1869 (the year Peabody was working for Waterhouse).

16. Peabody & Stearns likely had in mind, as well, the notable colonial usage of this facade composition, at Peter Harrison's 1748 Redwood Library in Newport, Rhode Island.

17. The adaptation of an ecclesiastical form to a secular academic function was not without local precedent: Ware & Van Brunt's 1878 Memorial Hall (see note 6), just around the corner from the Hemenway Gymnasium, is essentially a Gothic cathedral subdivided into three discrete spaces: a dining hall occupying the nave, a war memorial in the transept, and a concert hall in the choir/apse.

18. In this case, the exuberant finials, the limestone banding at the entrance piers and arch voussoirs, and especially the prominent trio of dormers are all reminiscent of the 1603 Vleeshal in Haarlem. The adjacent Grote Kerk, meanwhile, might well have provided some of the inspiration for the massing.

19. One might compare both the Hemenway Gym and Palladio's San Giorgio Maggiore to the Venetian Gothic church of San Giovanni e Paolo.

20. The Dickinson schoolhouse was replaced in 1930 by a handsome (if less playful) school building for Deerfield Academy, designed by Charles Platt. The Hemenway Gymnasium was replaced in 1938 by a rather dull new gym designed by Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch & Abbott.