

Architecture Around Us

By Lu Donnelly

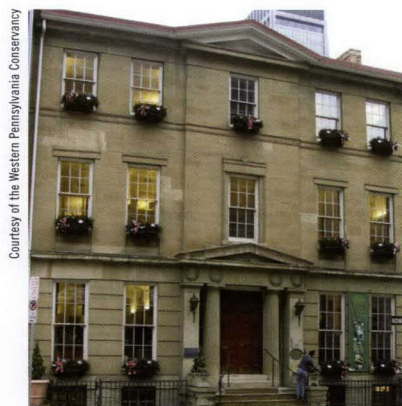
Greek Revival Style

America's interest in formal architecture was growing at the dawn of the 19th century. The first professional architects strove to justify their choice of certain styles, which increased both the literature about architecture and the pattern books illustrating styles and elements. In the second decade of the 19th-century, two styles competed for dominance: Greek Revival and Gothic Revival. Many of the finest practitioners chose freely between the two, using Gothic Revival for chapels and cottages and Greek Revival for banks and formal manor houses.

How does Greek Revival differ from the earlier Georgian and Federal styles? Most obviously, the styles span different periods: Georgian c. 1700-1780, Federal c. 1780-1820, Greek Revival c. 1820-1860. Like the previous styles, the Greek Revival building is generally symmetrical in plan, but the geometric ornament is simple and bold.

Builders using the Greek Revival style, which they called "modern," also looked at different models of antiquity. While intellectuals of the 1780s understood that the roots of ancient Roman architecture were the temples of ancient Greece, few had personally seen examples because for 300 years, Greece had been part of the Ottoman Empire. No westerners had been there to measure and study the remarkable ruins we see today in every publicity photo of Athens. That is, until 1751, when two archaeologists, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, were commissioned by the London Society of Dilettanti to measure and record the buildings on the Athenian Acropolis. They published books of their measured drawings in 1762 and continued to update these publications throughout the remainder of the 18th century.

In 1806, Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin, brought actual sections of the Parthenon, including friezes and pedimental figures, to England where they have been for the last 200 years. While Stuart and Revett's books influenced several English architects who designed buildings using Greek models, these publications preceded the popularity of Greek Revival architecture in the United States by almost 60 years. Why did local architects suddenly decide that every bank in the U.S.



Burke's Building (1836), John Chislett, architect, 209 Fourth Avenue, Pittsburgh, shown 2002.



Meadville Unitarian Church (1836), General George W. Cullum, designer, 346 Chestnut Street, Meadville, Crawford County.



Erie Art Museum, aka Old Custom House and Bank of Pennsylvania (1839), William Kelly, 411 State Street, Erie.

needed to look like something out of fifth-century Greece?

Two events coincided to ignite the explosion of Greek Revival buildings across Western Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and the Upper South. First, the Greeks began their own revolution in 1822 and fought for eight years to win independence from the Turks and Ottoman Empire. Their plight was poetically documented in English by George Gordon, Lord Byron, especially in his romantic poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Following the revolution, Greece became a symbol of democracy, no longer an ancient empire. To emulate something Greek was a statement commemorating our own heroic struggle of 50 years earlier. Secondly, the population of the United States more than tripled between 1820 and 1860. Waves of settlers passed through the states named above establishing towns with names of Greek origin such as Syracuse and Athens, and in Western Pennsylvania, Apollo (Armstrong County), Paris (Washington County), Troy (Clearfield County), and Utica (Venango County). Clearly, the settlers carried in their minds images of earlier Greek Revival buildings in New York and Philadelphia.

Two fine local examples of the Greek Revival style are the Burke's Building (John Chislett, 1836) at 209 Fourth Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh and the Meadville Unitarian Church (General George W. Cullum, 1836). These two buildings show the contrast between a vernacular interpretation of the style in a city building (Burke's Building) and the purest temple form of the style by a military engineer whose sister belonged to the congregation (Meadville Unitarian). Within a block of the Unitarian church sat the first Crawford County Courthouse (now demolished) designed by Philadelphia's William Strickland (1787-1854) between 1824-1828. Strickland was one of the pre-eminent Greek Revivalists and trained under the United States' first practitioner of the style, Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Latrobe's



Erie Club, aka Charles Manning Reed House (1846-1848), Edward B. Smith of Buffalo, architect, 524 Peach Street at 6th Street, Erie.



Erie County Courthouse (1855), attributed to Thomas U. Walter, Peach Street, Erie. The echoing building beyond is a 1928-1929 addition by Walter R. Monahan.



River House, aka George Dickinson House (c. 1855), 104 West Main Street, Ridgway, Elk County.

major Greek Revival work in Philadelphia, the 1798 Bank of Pennsylvania, set the precedent for the style years before it became popular.

One of the best places to learn about the Greek Revival style in Western Pennsylvania is in Erie. Within blocks of one another there are three pre-Civil War era buildings illustrating the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian styles of capitals. The Old Custom House, built as a Bank of Pennsylvania branch in 1839, has six Doric columns on the façade. Around the corner, the 1846 Charles Manning Reed House, now the Erie Club, has four Ionic columns supporting its pediment. Finally, the Erie County Courthouse, which is attributed to Thomas U. Walter (one of Strickland's students) was built in 1855 and employs six Corinthian columns across its façade. Each of these buildings warrants their own article, but it will have to suffice to show them merely as illustrations of the style then sweeping the nation. There are many other buildings referring to Greek precedents in the region, including a subset of vernacular houses and a rash of county courthouses built in the 1850s that are becoming increasingly rare through alteration and demolition. ☼

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.



Fulton County Courthouse (1850-1852), Jacob Stoner, builder/cabinet maker, Courthouse Square, McConnellsburg, Fulton County.

An excerpt from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Canto the Second

LXXIII

Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!
Immortal though no more; though fallen, great!
Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth,
And long accustom'd bondage uncreate?
Not such thy sons who wholesome did await,
The hopeless warriors of a willing doom,
In bleak Therompylae's sepulchral strait -
Oh! Who that gallant spirit shall resume,
Leap from Eurota's banks, and call thee from the tomb?

LXXIV

Spirit of Freedom! When on Phyle's brow
Thous sat'st with Thrasybulus and his train,
Couldst thou forebode the dismal hour which now
Dims the green beauties of thine Attic plain?
Not thirty tyrants now enforce the chain,
But every carle can lord it o'er thy land;
Nor rise thy sons, but idly rain in vain,
Trembling beneath the scourge of Turkish hand,
From birth till death enslaved; in word, in deed,
unmann'd.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage was written 1812-1818 by George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824). Byron died in Missolonghi attempting to help the Greeks achieve their liberty.