AMERICA’S ROMANCE WITH GREEK REVIVAL

In the 19th century, the Greek style suited Americans more than any other, for Greece was a repository of wise laws, good government, and above all, physical beauty.

By TULA LEWNES

In eighteenth-century America, people talked and wrote constantly of order. It was of the utmost importance for them to achieve it in their domestic and public life. During a time when the nation was struggling to assert itself, it became drawn to “a cult of Greek democracy.” Finally, by the early nineteenth century, it embraced the three classic “orders” — the Doric (the simplest and the stockiest of columns used by the Greeks, topped by plain capitals, which carried the message of “manliness”), the Ionic (whose capitals have whorls at the corners like a ram’s horns, and are much thinner than the Doric; hence, feminine), and the Corinthian (the most elaborate and ornamental of all, and the one considered “botanical” because of the foliate effusions in its capitals).

Although various styles were available during the eclectic age, the Greek suited more Americans than any other, for Greece was a repository of wise laws, good government, and above all, physical beauty. The American connection to antiquity was neither dainty, nor diletantish, nor snobbish. Architectural Hellenism was popular, polemical, political, and theoretical. It was associated with mature men, heroic exertion and wisdom—not with adolescents, whose chief virtue was that they were pretty. Through classical architecture, America expressed its cultural independence and proclaimed its pride for a dignified way of life.

The first tier of society during colonial times was the “classici.” It was in the residences of this “noble gentry” that grand-scale classicism reigned supreme. The temple-form depicted the maintenance of order and was the ubiquitous style of the time.

Between 1770 and 1840 there had been Greek Revivals in England, Italy, Denmark, France, Hungary, Poland, and Russia; and as the Germans recovered from centuries of French deprivations, their two chief ruling dynasties adopted Teuto-Hellenistic buildings.

They contended that it was not ludicrous to think of themselves as heroic as...
The Greek Revival in Erie, Pa. (Stotz, Buhl, Carnegie Lib. of Pittsburgh.) Above, old Branch Bank of the United States (now Erie County Historical Society).

Milford in Columbia, South Carolina (1838-41) designed by Charles F. Reichardt and Russell Warren.

the ancient Greeks. In Scotland's Edinburgh, which dubbed itself, "the Athens of the North," there was an Acropolis and Grecian townhouses graced its streets.

In America, it was the Scottish scholars who initiated the pan-Hellenic traditional style as a tribute to an ideal society. The father of the Greek Revival was Thomas Jefferson, who enjoyed Homer immensely. He was most grateful to his father who had directed his early education and who had included this "rich source of delight." His study of the classical languages had enriched him considerably and later, Latin and Greek served as models of pure taste in writing. The "classic" in America was
Corinthian columns, Crochan-Schenley rooms, University of Pittsburgh.

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associated with republican simplicity and Spartan austerity. Palladian villas and Parthenonic temples began to emerge and became an urban, rural and suburban phenomenon. The style became widespread from Maine to Oregon and as far as Hawaii and from New England through Troy in upstate New York down to the Deep South where it appeared in such cities as Mobile, Natchez, Galveston, and New Orleans. From there, it continued to the midwest and finally reached California. It had become very dominant in such cities as Cincinnati and Milwaukee in the midwest, and appeared in Utah in the west where freemasons and Mormon carpenters built Masonic temples.

In the antebellum South, the Greek Revival style of architecture was never the popular residential form that it was in the North, but was reserved almost entirely for official buildings, such as town halls, courthouses and state capitol. Many Americans at that time maintained houses in London and Paris. Two sophisticated collectors, Nicholas Biddle and Allen Smith, actually mea-

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Boon Hall Plantation, Charleston, S.C.

Marble Hall, New Orleans Customs House, detail.
The interior spaces and details of Mississippi's Old State Capitol, in Jackson. The portions shown were designed by Williams Nichols in 1839.
The Fairmont Waterworks in Philadelphia (1812-22), designed by Frederick C. Graff.

Brooklyn Borough Hall, the magnificently restored Greek Revival landmark, dates back to 1848. The monumentality of its marble columns in the Portico and Grand Rotunda aptly expressed an admiration of public life and democracy. Its six-fluted Ionic columns adorning the Portico make it one of the grandest Greek-inspired temple fronts in New York City.

Biddle adored Greece with a passion and his ambition to become an orator and statesman swelled as he walked in the footsteps of Pericles and Solon, breathing the air of eloquence. Instead, he became a banker, but remained a serious student of antiquity and a translator of Greek.

In the 1820's, European talent was abundant to assist in constructing America. New York had so many French architects: Pierre Pharoux, Charles L'Enfant, the two Mangin brothers, Adrian Boucher and Etienne Hallet. Also, there was ample money besides talent in New York and Philadelphia to create a Greek Revival style with Doric grandeur to replace the delicate, provincial Federal style.

Biddle solicited Grecian works for Philadelphia to make it the "Athens of America" since Adams aspired to make Boston a "Christian Sparta."

In 1820, Albert Gallatin urged an American expeditionary force to be sent to the aid of the Greeks in their revolt against the Turks. From Paris he wrote to President Monroe to send a naval
expedition over there. William Harrison of Indiana proclaimed: “The Star-Spangled Banner must wave in the Aegean!” And as many humbler Americans began volunteering to fight for the cause of Greek independence, James Monroe was informed by James Madison that it would be appropriate to recognize the Greek insurgents as an independent government.

All over Europe, Latin America and the United States, there was an ebullience of genuine sympathy for Greece. The Star-Spangled Banner never waved over the Aegean, but the French called for the “Standard of the Cross” to fly over the roofs of Constantinople and
over the Parthenon. Finally, the combined navies of Britain, France, and Russia eliminated the Turkish fleet at Navarino in 1827 and the Turks on land were deprived of their supply lines.

Public opinion had saved Greece as classically trained idealists in America invested modern Greeks with ancient virtues and rallied to the cause of their independence from the Ottomans.

Thomas Jefferson stated: “I cannot help looking forward to the re-establishment of the Greeks as a people, and the language of Homer becoming again a living language.”

In Louisiana, towns were named Athens, Sparta, and Homer and this became a trend in other states, too.

Stately, enormous buildings marched across the landscape of America—with great arcades and colonnades, their columns set under flat entablatures without pediments. There was a kind of civility that was symbolized by a columnar stability.

Arlington House was the nation’s first temple-form residence. It was constructed by George Custis in 1803 and was to serve as the first Washington monument. Banks and churches copied this style, particularly in Natchez, Mississippi. Other notable examples were Andrew Jackson’s home, “The Hermitage” in Donelson, Tennessee, the Second Bank of the United States in

*Belle Helene or "Ashland" Designed by James Gallier, Sr. (1840-41). Located near Napoleonville, Louisiana.*
The spectacular Belmont in Nashville, Tennessee designed 1850-60 by Adolphus Heimann for Adelicia Cheatham.

Philadelphia, designed by Strickland in 1824 and the following great mansions: "The Forest" (built 1832) in Madison, NJ, with its 36-foot columns across a 150-foot front; "Milford" (built 1838) in Columbia, South Carolina, and "Houmas House" (built 1840) in Burnside, Louisiana.

The spectacular "Belmont" (built 1850-1860) in Nashville, Tennessee— for Adelicia Cheatham—was designed by Adolphus Heimann.

And, of course, the seat of Virginia's government, located in Richmond, is a most striking structure because of its enormous scale. Its columns are nearly forty feet in height.

Lavishly ornamented interiors with Corinthian columns are still to be found at "Gaineswood" in Demopolis, Alabama and at the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning.

Today, the most distinguished of the Greek Revival edifices are west of the Appalachians and are still in the hands of private owners who have inherited a propensity for grandiosity. Some of them feature "that hidden wonder"—the internal rotunda—which is not implied by the exterior form of the structure. The largest and most sophisticated houses are known by the names of the owners, not those of their architects.

The dignity and grandeur of these Doric temples gives them an aura of longevity—"eternal duration"—as they stand apart from nature, dominant in their own precinct, containing a contrary world of their own—strong and pure and uncontaminated—imbuing a disorderly world with order.