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“Charmed with the French”: Reassessing the Early Career of Charles Bulfinch, Architect

By

Thomas E. Conroy

Charles Bulfinch casts a long shadow on Boston, his hometown and the major seat of American Federalist architecture. In the last half-century, he received enough scholarly attention to put him on par with other important Bostonians born in the colonial period. Nearly as many full-length biographies have been written about Boston's first famous architect as have been written about the town's most notable founders, influential colonial divines, and important American Revolutionaries. Similarly, Bulfinch's career has been explored more often than those of other early American architects working in and around Boston. Compelled primarily by his architectural work, and secondarily by his long political service on the Boston Board of Selectmen, scholars have extensively explored his dual career from the mid-1790s to his removal to Washington, DC in 1817 when he was called on by President Monroe to be the Architect of the Capitol.¹ Almost universally, these studies portray Bulfinch as the man who single-handedly transformed the face of post-revolutionary Boston by turning the colonial town into a model of modern English architecture. As one writer has put it, after returning from a mid-1780s European Tour, Bulfinch wanted to “remake Boston in the image of Neo-Classical London.”²

¹ Charles A. Place, *Charles Bulfinch: Architect and Citizen* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1925), 241; Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 15.

² Kirker, 16.

However, there are some significant problems with this interpretation that have long gone unaddressed. For example, although he was a “better sort” Bostonian with a respectable fortune, Bulfinch went bankrupt in the mid-1790s and never fully recovered. In 1811, he was briefly imprisoned for debt.³ Therefore, he lacked the financial resources to transform Boston along the lines asserted without the substantial financial backing of others. Building, after all, is an expensive pursuit. At the same time, while Bulfinch’s considerable architectural output was impressive, the buildings he designed were generally clustered -- even concentrated -- in a few areas of the early republic town. He did not remake all of Boston along the lines frequently claimed because he left whole sections of the town, such as the North End, virtually untouched.

Charles Bulfinch was born on August 8, 1763, in Boston, the son of a family of doctors and a family of merchants.⁴ Bulfinches had lived in the town since the late-seventeenth century, when they settled in the then less crowded and more fashionable North End. Charles’ father, Thomas, graduated from Harvard College in 1749 and trained as a physician in London and Edinburgh. His paternal grandfather, also a doctor named Thomas, had trained in London and Paris a generation earlier. The Apthorps, Charles’ maternal line, were wealthy Tory merchants who were closely connected to Crown enterprises and to the Anglican King’s Chapel in Boston before the American Revolution. Charles’ maternal grandfather, one of the richest men in mid-eighteenth century Boston, had given “most of the money” to build the chapel. His mother worshiped there, and his father became its senior warden after the Revolution.⁵ By the time of Charles’ birth, the Bulfinches had moved into an elegant high-style Georgian mansion on the eastern edge of Boston’s West End that more effectively communicated the family’s rising wealth and elevated class status. A three-story wooden structure, the 1724 house had a pedimented entryway,

³ Place, 68-75, 114; Kirker, 14, 78-85.

⁴ Ellen Bulfinch, *The Life and Letters of Charles Bulfinch, Architect* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896), 11.

⁵ Place, 1-2; Kirker, 3.

corner quoins, balanced facade, and gambrel roof with chimneys located toward the ends, though not at the edge of the building.⁶

Born when he was, Bulfinch's early life was punctuated by the increasingly revolutionary struggle between Massachusetts and Great Britain, but neither he nor his family were much involved in it. In an autobiographical sketch written sometime after 1831, Bulfinch counted among his earliest recollections the resistance to the Stamp Act in 1765 (when he was two years old), the Boston Massacre (at six), and the Boston Tea Party (at ten). He said that he witnessed the arrival and encampment of British troops (probably in 1774), the 1775 fights at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, and the British evacuation of Boston in 1776.⁷ But the Bulfinches appear not to have been what the revolutionary age called "warm patriots." Rather, they were conservative Whigs who walked the fine line between Toryism and support for the patriot resistance before 1776, and did not distinguish themselves by vigorously championing the American cause during the war. The Apthorps were far more openly Tory and consequently fled Boston by 1776.⁸

Charles spent most of the war (1778-1781) at Harvard "pursu[ing] an expensive education."⁹ But by laying low until the end of the Revolution, Bulfinch and his family weathered the revolutionary storm and emerged as members of the Boston elite with all the marks of social and economic distinction: status, education, wealth, and a fine house that was, like much of Boston's built environment, acutely outdated by developing European architectural standards in 1783. However, they lacked political distinction because they had no revolutionary experience at which to point.

As formative to Bulfinch's young life must have been the profound cultural changes that blossomed during the Revolutionary War years, changes that had to do with the way Bostonians viewed European powers. Over two decades, from 1763-1783, the British Crown and government was effectively (and officially) transformed from beloved king and caring

⁶ Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 30-31; Kirker, 1-9.

⁷ Place, 4-5. Place maintains that Charles Bulfinch penned the sketch sometime after he returned from Washington DC in 1830. (Place, 276)

⁸ Bulfinch, 10-19; Place, 1-2.

⁹ Bulfinch, 10-19; Place, 4-5.

Ministry into heartless tyrant and malevolent bureaucracy.¹⁰ At the same time, the French went from being New England’s primary political enemy and chief nemesis in multiple colonial wars to partners in American liberation.¹¹ Elbridge Gerry succinctly explained the “marvelous change in the system of the political world” that Bostonians (and Americans) were witnessing:

The government of England, advocates for despotism and endeavoring to enslave their once most loyal subjects of their king; the government of France advocates for liberty, espousing the cause of Lutherans and Calvinists, and risking a war to establish their independence; the King of England branded by every Whig in the nation as a tyrant; the King of France by every Whig in America, applauded as the great protector of the rights of mankind; the King of Britain establishing Popery, the King of France endeavoring to free his people from this Ecclesiastical Tyranny; Britain at war, and France in alliance with America.¹²

Although the changes in politics and culture did not immediately affect all social levels at the same time, by the early-1780s a fundamental shift in Bostonians’ attitudes toward Europe was clearly underway. Indeed, French sentiment in Boston experienced a revolution of its own as Bostonians came to highly esteem their ancient enemies as trusted and necessary allies against Great Britain.¹³

¹⁰ “Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and France,” February 6, 1778, Articles 1, 6 and 7.

¹¹ William M. Fowler, Jr., *The Baron of Beacon Hill: A Biography of John Hancock* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 235.

¹² Elbridge Gerry to James Warren, May 26, 1778, in *A Study in Dissent: The Warren-Gerry Correspondence, 1776-1792*, ed. C. Harvey Gardiner (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 119-121.

¹³ *Independent Chronicle*, May 4, 1780.

Political events during and after the war showed how dramatic the alteration in Franco-Boston relations was. Within two months of the arrival of French troops in 1778, no less than four riots broke out between Bostonians and the French soldiery. But by 1782, when the French Army marched through Boston on their victorious final exit from America, “a great part of the population” turned out to cheer. As Count Segur noted, “our stay was marked by continued rejoicings, by feasts and balls, which succeeded each other, day by day.”¹⁴ Baron DeClosen claimed that for three weeks “we were received everywhere with the greatest hospitality and the Bostonians are undoubtedly one of the...most loyal friends to France.”¹⁵ Such favorable feelings persisted after the peace. Boston’s Fourth of July orators praised “the brave allied armies,” lauded the French contributions to American Independence throughout the 1780s, and predicted that the French alliance and allied victory “shall leave impressions of esteem and friendship which time and age shall not be able to efface.”¹⁶ Toasts in Independence Day celebrations included prominently placed references to “our illustrious all[ies]” and “our friends, the French.”¹⁷ Poets in the post-war Boston press called the French “Columbia’s Champions,” anecdotes endowed ordinary French men and women with especially admirable qualities, and articles frequently portrayed French Kings as good, fair, magnanimous, and noble monarchs not given to flattery, tyranny, or decorous display.¹⁸ A 1784 visit by Lafayette, Boston’s favorite French son, provides the best single example of how radically anti-

¹⁴ Samuel Breck, *Recollections of Samuel Breck, with Passages from his Notebooks*, ed. H. E. Scudder (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1877), 25; Allan Forbes and Paul Cadman, *France and New England* (Boston: State Street Trust Co., 1925), Vol. I, 179; *Independent Centinel*, May 4, 1780.

¹⁵ Forbes, Vol. I, 186.

¹⁶ John Warren, *An Oration Delivered July 4th, 1783...* (Boston: John Gill, 1783), 24-25.

¹⁷ *Independent Centinel*, July 10, 1783; *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 20, 1784; *Boston Gazette*, October 25, 1784.

¹⁸ *Massachusetts Centinel*, March 24 and June 16, 1784, and January 12 and March 9, 1785; *Boston Gazette*, May 31, 1784.

French feeling had changed course by mid-decade. His return touched off a tidal wave of pro-French sentiment evidenced by crowded streets, loud huzzahs, artillery salutes, fireworks, elaborate banquets, late night bell ringing, and public toasts that vaunted the French and expressed sanguine hopes for future relations.

At the same time, a variety of more subtle indicators suggest that French culture had made a substantial impact on 1780s Boston. French fashions and goods entered the Boston marketplace in increased numbers in the post-war period in large part because France opened its ports to American commerce while England excluded American shipping.¹⁹ Boston-baked French bread found its way onto the Boston Selectmen’s bread assize list as early as 1784 and remained there for years.²⁰ French language schools increasingly became a part of Boston’s private educational landscape; some in Boston even proposed that Harvard create a French language professorship.²¹ In addition to political and economic reasons, France had become an important ally and trade partner which meant that knowing French became a smart political and economic move. French fluency had also become a mark of gentility and sophistication in the post-revolutionary town.²² Consequently, Boston merchants sold French dictionaries and grammar books after the war.²³ Advertisements written in French occasionally appeared in the Boston press as well, which suggests either growing French fluency or an increase of French-speakers in town.²⁴ By the

¹⁹ Van Beck Hall, *The Commonwealth and the New Nation: Massachusetts 1780-1790*, (Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Wisconsin, 1964), 1-29.

²⁰ To 1784, the list of regulated breads included only biscuits, white brick, ¹/₄ white -- ¹/₄ rye, and ¹/₂ Indian meal bread, but in that year selectmen began to regulate French bread. *Boston Gazette*, January 12, March 1, and May 10, 1784.

²¹ *Boston Gazette*, December 13, 1784; *Massachusetts Centinel*, May 28, 1785.

²² *Independent Centinel*, January 23, 1783; Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson, *The Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 49.

²³ *Independent Centinel*, February 5, 1784; and William C. Stinchcombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 210.

²⁴ *Independent Centinel*, March 6 and April 24, 1783; *Boston Gazette*, February 23, 1784.

late-1780s, Jan Nancrede launched a French newspaper, the *Courier de Boston*, claiming it was necessary for successful trade outside the British Empire, eased cultural exchange, showed one's refinement, and ensured accurate communication between allied countries.²⁵

This revolution of French sentiment acted on Charles Bulfinch and his generation, allowing them to see France, the French, and French culture in a more flattering light than older Bostonians could have. It is doubtless that Bulfinch witnessed the transformation of his hometown. As a young member of an old Boston family, he must have known of the parties and celebrations that featured France and Frenchmen prominently. The presence of Frenchmen in Boston and France's importance to Boston's economy certainly did not escape his attention. From Joseph Barrell's counting house, where he had been placed after graduating Harvard, Bulfinch noted that provisioning the French fleet constituted Barrell's only activity.²⁶ While this was the only extant comment he made about France before 1784, within two years Bulfinch discovered that he had much more to say about France, the French people, and especially French architecture as he toured the country that helped deliver America from British despotism.

While scholars often claim that Bulfinch had a penchant for architecture at a young age by pointing to a sketch he drew of a Corinthian column when he was ten years old, they also correctly note that he had no formal design training.²⁷ Into his twenties, in fact, he had little opportunity to further his knowledge of building because of the tumults associated with the revolutionary period. Boston had been in economic decline since mid-century, which all but halted building. Further, although the town had seen less military action than most American port towns, its built environment nonetheless suffered from wartime wounds and neglect. As Bulfinch later wrote, Boston "had become exceedingly dilapidated during the war."²⁸ The only opportunity Bulfinch had to observe a major Boston building project during his first twenty years had been in 1772 when Thomas Dawes, a local mason-designer, built the Brattle Street Meeting House, a significant but

²⁵ Prospectus for the *Courier de Boston*, March or April, 1789; April 23, 1789.

²⁶ Bulfinch, 41-42; Place, 5-6.

²⁷ Kirker, 2; Frederic C. Detwiller, "Thomas Dawes's Church in Brattle Square," *Old Time New England*, Vol. LXIX, 3-4 (Winter-Spring 1979), 5.

²⁸ Bulfinch, 41.

hardly exceptional structure.²⁹ Bulfinch was nine years old at the time, and the Corinthian column he drew a year later was probably from Dawes’ church.

This lack of building had another consequence that limited Bulfinch’s early architectural education: Boston was seriously behind the stylistic times. For the most part, Boston’s built environment in 1783 consisted largely of practical first period structures or of modest buildings that fused first period ideas with the Georgian ones that had been introduced in the first part of the eighteenth century. There were only a handful of truly impressive Boston buildings to which Bulfinch might look for study and inspiration, but all were acutely out of step with modern architectural style in Europe. Indeed, rather than looking like either the cradle of American liberty or the third largest port of a new nation, Boston’s built environment retained its colonial caste immediately after the war. Yet in 1785, Bulfinch’s access to architectural paragons and his interest in design took a radically different turn when he headed to Europe and, as one architectural historian has noted, “fell in love with architecture.”³⁰

While records of Bulfinch’s European tour are admittedly limited, they nonetheless suggest that the seventeen months he spent abroad inspired him immensely. Landing in Portsmouth, England, on July 20, 1785, he headed for London. Arriving in the British capital at night made a considerable impression. As he wrote to his father, night time is “the best time to enter London, you are astonished with the splendor from the immense number of lamps and there is a sufficient degree of obscurity to make a sublime scene.”³¹ He spent his first month in the English capital gratifying his “curiosity with the sight of buildings & c.”; four months later he wrote he was headed to Paris and the continent for a three or four month tour.³² This was the extent of what extant records reveal of his interaction with English architecture while in Europe. In fact, he mentioned nothing of British architecture in his autobiographical sketch decades later: “The time of my

²⁹ Detwiller, “Thomas Dawes’s Church in Brattle Square”; Frederic C. Detwiller, “Thomas Dawes: Boston’s Patriot Architect,” *Old Time New England*, Vol. LXVII, 1-2 (Summer-Fall 1977), 1-18.

³⁰ Bulfinch, 2. (Introduction by Charles Cummings)

³¹ Charles Bulfinch to Thomas Bulfinch, London, August 12, 1785, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³² *Ibid.*, Charles Bulfinch to Thomas Bulfinch, London, December 12, 1785.

visit to Europe was passed, partly in London and in visits to friends of my family in different parts of England."³³ His experience on the European continent, however, produced an entirely different immediate reaction and a longer lasting impression.

Bulfinch arrived in France early in 1786, and from his first encounters he claimed to have "met with the greatest incidents of politeness and civility." He was, he said, immediately "charmed with the French."³⁴ As he wrote to his mother in May, "the people of France and their manners please me exceedingly, a constant politeness gives a charm to their society, and I have found in several instances that this politeness is not merely professional."³⁵ Three months later, he again wrote his mother,

The men are all polite and are oftener sincerer in their professions than we usually suppose. The women do not possess the regularity of English features, but must be allowed to be generally handsome; they possess great liveliness, frankness, and wit, which is very seldom mixed with slander or ill nature.³⁶

No doubt in part because of his enchantment with the French he extended his continental visit to nearly eight months with a considerable amount of time spent in Paris on two separate tours.³⁷ Yet surviving records also suggest he extended his continental visit because of what he saw as much as whom he met.

³³ Bulfinch, 42.

³⁴ Charles Bulfinch to George Storer, Marseilles, May 12, 1786; Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch, London, August 27, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁵ Bulfinch, 50-55.

³⁶ Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch, London, August 27, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁷ Place, 7. Thomas Jefferson recorded that he sent goods back with Bulfinch to the United States when Bulfinch passed through Paris on his return trip from Italy. Jefferson also granted Bulfinch a passport on August 16, 1786, which suggests Bulfinch's continental visit lasted almost eight months. Thomas Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954-8), 15: 484-485.

His extensive travels in France and Paris, sometimes suggested by Francophile Thomas Jefferson, took Bulfinch to French architectural and landscape marvels that impressed him tremendously.³⁸ A lengthy letter from May 1786 is the most complete account we have of how any European built environment affected Bulfinch. It focused principally on France. About Nantes, he wrote “the public buildings were not neglected. There are a few there worth notice, and by their situation produce a good effect.” He described Bordeaux as “a large commercial city, and in some parts very elegant.” Of particular note was Bordeaux’s Grand Theater, “the most superb in France.” He rode the 100-mile “grand canal of Languedoc” to “have an idea of that great work...[which] passes through valleys, over hills, across rivers, and under an arch formed through a mountain.” At the end of the canal, Bulfinch noted Narbonne contained “many good houses, but it is almost impossible to have a peep at them, on account of the narrowness of the streets,” which perhaps conjured up images of Boston’s crowded North End. He described the central part of Narbonne as “a very beautiful square, ornamented on one side by the magnificent fountain, on another with a triumphal arch, and the center is occupied by a noble equestrian statue of Louis XIV on a white marble pedestal.”³⁹ Finding himself in the south of France by late-spring of 1786, Bulfinch turned east and continued his continental tour in a three-week excursion through “Rome and the greater part of Italy,” where he continued to be astounded.⁴⁰

The Classical and the Renaissance art of Italy overwhelmed Bulfinch. As he told his mother, Italy was “unrivaled for works both of the sublime and beautiful and contains models which the greatest geniuses of the present day are humbly forced to copy.” He asserted, “Italy must be acknowledged to be the seat of the polite arts.” Unfortunately, he wrote far less about the Italian leg of his journey than he did of other locations, summing up his Italian experience by writing, “It would be in vain to attempt to give here a particular account of such a country, the subject is too copious and must be left till we meet.”⁴¹ But even as he wrote these

³⁸ Bulfinch, 42; Place, 5-6; Kirker, 10-13.

³⁹ Bulfinch, 50-55; 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴¹ Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch, London, August 27, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

words about Italy -- words written later from London -- his thoughts returned to France, ending a letter begun by discussing Italian art by returning to how highly he regarded the French.

From Italy, Bulfinch wended his way back through Paris and, thinking about returning to Boston, made return plans from England. In London by late-August 1786, he spent his last months in England at elite and leisurely pursuits such as getting his portrait painted and seeing to political business for his father with John Adams.⁴² He most likely continued to gratify his developing taste for architecture during this second spell in England, but his extant letters and later autobiographical sketch mention no architectural pursuits whatsoever.

What is particularly noteworthy about his European trip were his continental journeys because they have seldom been treated seriously. His favorable experience in Europe, coupled with the anti-British/pro-French spirit of the Boston in which he came of age, affected his outlook on style at least insofar as it complicates any interpretation of him as a solely English-influenced designer. In fact, it bears pointing out that when Bulfinch said he was “fond of Europe” in a 1786 letter, he did not mention England specifically. Rather, he referenced the continent, which included France and Italy, two locations where he had just enjoyed positive architectural and personal experiences.⁴³ This context is important to remember when looking at his early career, which began shortly after his return to his hometown.

Back in Boston in January 1787, there was nothing particularly enticing on Bulfinch’s horizon and he lacked an outlet for his talent and recent stylistic stimulation. To be sure, Boston must have seemed rather parochial and dull after his European experience, at least insofar as its architecture was concerned, despite efforts of the Boston Selectmen to repair and alter some parts of the post-war town. Accordingly, Bulfinch claimed to have “passed a season of leisure...giving advice in architecture and looking forward to an establishment in life” while also trying his hand at speculative merchant ventures.⁴⁴ With no prospects immediately before him, he accepted an elected position as one of the twelve clerks of the Boston market in the March town elections, but appears to have done little in this capacity and did

⁴² Bulfinch, 56.

⁴³ Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch, London, August 27, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴⁴ Place, 15-20.

not return --or was not returned -- to the post the following year.⁴⁵ So, fresh back from Europe, Bulfinch was on track to becoming a Boston merchant and was unenthusiastically involved in town government.

All this changed that spring. On April 20, 1787, a major fire that began in a Boston Neck malt house consumed a considerable portion of southern Boston. Seven fire companies responded to the alarm and no lives were lost, but the damage was extraordinary. More than 100 structures perished in the worst Boston conflagration in twenty-five years.⁴⁶ Although tragic, the Great Fire of 1787 kicked off a necessary rebuilding on the Boston Neck that resulted in Bulfinch’s first major commission, for among the destroyed buildings was the Hollis Street Meeting House. By the summer of 1787, the congregation hired Bulfinch, the Bostonian best-versed in recent European design, to draft rebuilding plans.⁴⁷ Bulfinch received his first major opportunity to practice the avocation that would make him famous.

The new Hollis Street Meeting House that Bulfinch designed was unlike any building in Boston. A five-by-six bay structure that was symmetrically balanced on all sides, it measured a considerable 72 by 60 feet. The front facade had a Tuscan portico with four massive Doric pillars supporting a pediment and cornice, and two large cupola towers at each end. The inside was a large square room, measuring 60 by 60 feet, with adorned balcony galleries, a slightly elevated pulpit, and a large domed ceiling for sound projection.⁴⁸ The rear wall had a Venetian

⁴⁵ *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 31, entry on March 12, 1787.

⁴⁶ *Boston Gazette*, April 23 and April 30, May 7, 1787; *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston containing the Selectmen’s Minutes from 1776-1810* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1894-1904), April 21 and April 30, 1787; *The Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Benjamin Edes and Sons, 1890), 1786 -- Chapter 5; Thomas Pemberton, “A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston, 1794” in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, Series I, 3 (1794): 272.; Justin Winsor, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), III: vii; IV: 48.

⁴⁷ *Columbian Magazine*, April 1788; Place, 20-23; Kirker, 17.

⁴⁸ *Massachusetts Magazine*, December 1793; Pemberton, 262; Whitehill, 50; Kirker, 17-22.

window ornamented with fluted Corinthian pillars. Although it was amateurish and derivative by European standards, to a town that saw nothing substantial built in decades -- and little outside of first period and early Georgian-influenced buildings -- it was widely renowned for its originality and innovation. Years later, the *Massachusetts Magazine* commented, "upon the whole, [its] appearance is light, pleasing and elegant."⁴⁹ For Thomas Pemberton, writing a topographical and historical description of Boston in 1794, the building was "an entirely new and elegant model, the draught of [an] ingenious architect."⁵⁰

As Bulfinch had been back in Boston only six months when construction on the building began, his architectural experiences in Europe heavily influenced his first design. But which part of Europe influenced him remains contested. Bulfinch scholars most often claim he drew inspiration from Sir Christopher Wren's Saint Stephen's Church in Walbrook, London, and from plates in two British patternbooks: #43 of Isaac Ware's *Designs of Inigo Jones* (1731) and #50 in James Gibbs' *A Book of Architecture* (1729).⁵¹ In other words, they argue that Bulfinch drew exclusively from British precedent in this design. While there are notable similarities between Bulfinch's building and the English work, such narrow attributions overlook Bulfinch's experience with continental European architecture. Given that this was his first major commission and that it came so close after his European tour, it seems unlikely that he relied solely on English precedent in this project.

In fact, other potent influences were acting on Bulfinch as he drafted Boston's newest church, which were not necessarily English. Certainly the interior of Bulfinch's building resembled the floor-plan and design of the Wren church: both have a similar geometric order, sound-projection domes, and cross-configurations in their floor-plans, similarities often used to establish exclusive British influence. However, there was nothing exclusively English about these elements. Greek and Roman architects such as Vitruvius stressed geometry, sound projection, and symmetrical orientation.⁵² By the Renaissance, Italians led by Sebastiano Serlio and

⁴⁹ *Massachusetts Magazine*, December, 1793.

⁵⁰ Pemberton, 262.

⁵¹ Place, 23; Kirker, 387-388.

⁵² Vitruvius, *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture* trans. Morris Hicky Morgan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

Andrea Palladio built on and diffused Vitruvius’ ideas in their own published works.⁵³ By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, French designers and pattern-book makers such as Sebastien LeClerc and Jacques Francois Blondel, building on ancient and Renaissance foundations, similarly concerned themselves with acoustics, symmetry, and geometry.⁵⁴ Of course, English architects likewise did, and they also drew from continental wells. Around the turn of the seventeenth century, Englishman Inigo Jones, who had twice spent extended periods in Italy studying Renaissance architecture firsthand, used Palladian ideas extensively in his designs and became a major promoter of the Italian’s work in England. Decades later, Wren drew heavily from the same Italian sources and he even journeyed to Paris in July 1665 where he met great French and Italian architects then at work in the French capital. This was seven years before he began designing St. Stephen’s.⁵⁵ In short, the interior layout and design of Bulfinch’s first commission do not suggest exclusive British ancestry.

At the same time, the exterior of Bulfinch’s church design bore much stronger resemblance to structures in Italy and France, and in Italian and French pattern-books, than to contemporary English work. Bulfinch’s placement of the Ionic columns produced a wide pediment more akin to Vitruvius’ work than to Jones’ in the Ware pattern-book from which Bulfinch supposedly copied.⁵⁶ The twin end-towers on Bulfinch’s church differed markedly from British church architecture set down by Ware and by Gibbs, who called almost exclusively for centrally-situated single-steeple arrangements. Italian Renaissance architects such as Serlio often used two-tower arrangements, a pattern that had found its way into French architecture by the time of Bulfinch’s visit to France. The most important example was Paris’ St. Sulpice Church, a building designed by Italian Jean Nicolas Servandoni in the 1740s. Bulfinch may have seen Servandoni’s

⁵³ Sebastiano Serlio, *The Five Books of Architecture*, reprint of the 1611 English edition (NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1982); Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, reprint of the 1738 English edition by Isaac Ware (NY: Dover Publications, 1965).

⁵⁴ Sebastien LeClerc published *Traite d’architecture* in Paris in 1714.

⁵⁵ David Watson, *English Architecture: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1979), 96-153.

⁵⁶ Vitruvius, Book IV, Chapter VII.

plan in the French pattern-books of Jacques Blondel (1752 and 1772), but he most likely saw the actual building because St. Sulpice was not completed until 1781, only five years before he arrived in France.⁵⁷ Consequently, it was one of Paris' most modern, or at least most recently-completed, buildings when Bulfinch toured France, and it clearly impressed Boston's would-be architect enough to have him borrow extensively from it a year later.

Bulfinch's architectural library also suggests the importance of continental precedents in his early career. While one cannot be sure precisely when he acquired certain volumes and if all the books he possessed during his life survived to his death in 1844, some assumptions can reasonably be made.⁵⁸ In 1844, his library contained at least 26 books on architecture. Most were of British buildings and were published in London. But in 1787, when Bulfinch designed the Hollis Street Meeting House, only eight of them had been published, among which were two published in Paris, an English translation of Palladio, and another London-published collection of views from Bath and Bristol, English towns known for their Roman and Roman-inspired architecture.⁵⁹ One of the French-authored books was Sebastian LeClerc's *A Treatise of Architecture* (1723-1724), originally owned by Bulfinch's uncle, Charles Ward Apthorp, and most likely in Bulfinch's possession before his trip to Europe.⁶⁰ Moreover, in 1791, Bulfinch asked Boston merchant James Cutler to procure four additional French pattern-books from Europe.⁶¹ Whether or not Bulfinch received these books -- they are not listed among the 26 -- his request suggests that as late as the early-1790s he sought continental design examples for his personal architectural library.

Following his first project, no Bulfinch-designed building was erected in Boston for a couple of years, and in this period he spent time developing

⁵⁷ Jacques Francois Blondel published *L'architecture francaise* in 1752 and *Cours d'architecture; ou, traite de la decoration, distribution, et construction des batiments contenant les lecons donnees*, a six-volume work, in 1771-77.

⁵⁸ Kirker, 3-5; Appendix III, 387-388.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 387-388.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹ Letter from Charles Bulfinch to James Cutler, Boston, May 2, 1791, *Amory Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

his ideas on architectural design and style in part by taking in the work of other designers in American port towns. After marrying Hannah Apthorp in November 1788, Bulfinch and his new bride toured the northeastern states with his sister and old friend George Storer. In Philadelphia, Bulfinch admired and sketched the recently completed William Bingham House. Purportedly copied from the Manchester House in London, the Bingham House was, according to Bulfinch, “in a style which would be esteemed splendid even in the most luxurious parts of Europe,” and “far too rich for any man in this country.”⁶² Returning through New York to see Washington’s inauguration on April 30, Bulfinch marveled at that town’s newest buildings, especially Federal Hall, recently remodeled by Pierre L’Enfant, the French architect who was about to lay out the Federal City.⁶³ Although he left no comment about it, Bulfinch was impressed enough with the L’Enfant building to sketch it, and by June other Bostonians could appreciate L’Enfant’s remodeling when the *Massachusetts Magazine* published Bulfinch’s sketch with a short but gratifying history of the structure.⁶⁴

In 1789, when Bulfinch next received any design commissions, he drafted two pieces of municipal architecture. The first was a triumphal arch to commemorate Washington’s October visit to Boston. Spanning the lower end of Washington Street and abutting the west face of the State House, the 18-foot high structure had a 14-foot center arch and two 7-foot side arches. It was adorned with multiple American symbols, including a frieze of 13 stars on a blue background and an American eagle perched atop a 20-foot canopy. The second, designed between late-1789 and 1790, was a column to commemorate the Revolutionary War and replace the storm-damaged signal post that once stood on Beacon Hill.⁶⁵ No

⁶² Charles Bulfinch to Thomas and Susan Bulfinch, Philadelphia, April 2, 1789, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society. On Bulfinch and the Bingham House, see Place, 27 and Kirker, 118-120.

⁶³ Roger Kennedy, *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1780-1820* (NY: Knopf, 1989), 96-99.

⁶⁴ *Massachusetts Magazine*, June 1789. On Bulfinch sketching the building, see Place, 29.

⁶⁵ *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 28, 1789; Kirker, 23-24; Herbert S. Allan, *John Hancock: Patriot in Purple* (NY: The MacMillan Co., 1948), 342-345;

architectural wonder -- the column was, as a Boston newspaper called it, "a plain column of the Doric order" with an eagle atop -- it nonetheless lorded high above the town.⁶⁶

European precedents influenced Bulfinch's work on both municipal projects. The sole opportunity Bulfinch may have had to experience these types of structures before 1785 was in printed depictions of them because Boston had neither an arch nor a column. And while he most likely saw the arch Charles Peale designed in Philadelphia for Washington's arrival, Bulfinch had already had multiple occasions to see many arches and columns in Europe, principally on the continental leg of his tour. In Narbonne, in fact, he noted that a Roman triumphal arch impressed him enormously.⁶⁷ In Paris, it would have been difficult to miss Trajan's Column if only because it was an important structure that was more than 100 feet high.⁶⁸ Of course, the built environment of Italy, which had left Bulfinch so speechless, was full of arches and columns, especially in Rome where the arches of Titus, Septimius Severus, and Constantine, and the column of Antonius still stood.⁶⁹ A cursory comparison of these continental structures to Bulfinch's work suggests that he had these continental precedents in mind because of their similar proportions and forms.

On the other hand, Bulfinch's next two projects -- two churches in Pittsfield and Taunton -- were more reminiscent of the Wrenesque churches of early eighteenth century Boston than either modern British or European design.⁷⁰ Where Bulfinch had boldly introduced modern continentally-inspired ideas to Boston through his Hollis Street Meeting House, he retreated from them in these buildings. Instead, these structures were modestly-adorned re-articulations of Boston's early eighteenth century single-steeple churches. Drafting plans in this architectural style most likely had to do with client preference more than with Bulfinch's personal

Fowler, 276-277; Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74-75.

⁶⁶ Bulfinch, 85-90; Place, 31, 93, 154; Kirker and Kirker, 80-82; Kirker, 33-36.

⁶⁷ *Massachusetts Magazine*, December 1790.

⁶⁸ Bulfinch, 50-55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch. letter dated London, August 27, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

inclination: Bulfinch’s innovative work was perhaps too bold for these less cosmopolitan towns.⁷¹ Even if inclined to continue his Hollis Street work and veer from English single-steeple precedent, he probably would have encountered resistance in smaller towns.

That Bulfinch drafted such traditional structures after his pioneering first project is important because of what it suggests about him as a designer. Far from an architectural ideologue, Bulfinch could subsume his personal stylistic tastes to the wishes and tastes of his clients. In other words, his views on architectural style were subservient to the stylistic preferences of the clients for whom he worked. Thus, while he brought a partiality toward continental models to the buildings of his early career, he was neither given exclusively to a single style or influence nor did he work solely within a single design tradition as a designer. Rather, he borrowed from numerous sources depending on the client(s).⁷²

This trait derived from two things: the status of designers in post-revolutionary Boston and Bulfinch’s personal disposition. As most designers in the late-eighteenth century were housewrights armed with a pattern-book or two and were at base highly specialized tradesmen, they were neither artists with visions that had to be preserved intact nor possessed of artistic insight that had to be obeyed.⁷³ Like the mechanic class from which they rose, they were craftsmen employed to work for a client. Bulfinch also worked within the stylistic preferences of his clients, although he probably offered some advice on style when solicited. His personality reinforced his willingness to work within the stylistic bounds of his clients. Bulfinch biographers, including his granddaughter, note that he was unassuming, quiet, somewhat ascetic, and reserved. Bulfinch even called himself “sedate” in his autobiographical sketch.⁷⁴ Coupled with the status of designers at the time, such a personality made Bulfinch reticent and even inhibited in the design process and, therefore, willing to accommodate his ideas to the preferences of clients, even when their preferences departed with

⁷¹ Bulfinch, 127; Place, 32-36; Kirker, 25-31.

⁷² Scholars working on architecture outside large American port towns, particularly in western Massachusetts, have found that established stylistic traditions persisted in hinterland areas much longer than in port towns and that they often trumped architectural advancement and originality.

⁷³ *Boston Directory*, 1789.

⁷⁴ Bulfinch, 58-59, 70-71.

his sense of style gleaned from his European experience. Understanding this crucial aspect of Bulfinch as a designer helps one understand both the rest of his early career and his move toward more British-influenced style in the late-1790s.

In the early-1790s, Bulfinch drafted his first residential projects. His first such structure, a house for Dr. John Joy (1791), was only his second Boston building.⁷⁵ Facing Boston Common, the Joy House was as stately and commodious a house as Boston had seen in decades, yet, there was nothing exceptionally new or strikingly innovative about its style. Architectural historians readily admit it was no paragon of modern European architecture either on or off the continent. Rather, the Joy House, with its full-length front pilasters, massive pediment, and widow's walk, fit well with the structures built in Boston a half-century earlier. Nor was there anything remarkably gratifying about the Joy House's location, which was a telling appraisal of Boston's post-war social geography. The West End and Beacon Street were still so undeveloped and remote that Mrs. Joy reportedly felt "no little dismay at the prospect of living so far out," and hoped to return to a more populated part of town before long.⁷⁶

Bulfinch's second residential design in Boston, a house built for his cousin, Joseph Coolidge, Sr., in 1792, moved the designer further away from colonial precedents, but not necessarily headlong in the direction of either English or continental ones. Architectural historians often trumpet the Coolidge House as the building through which Bulfinch first introduced British Neoclassical ideas to New England because he purportedly copied it from Robert Adam's Royal Society of Arts building (1772-1774) while adding some colonial-era touches.⁷⁷ The Bulfinch structure certainly resembled the Adam building, at least in its central bays where the pilasters ran half the height of each three-story building. But the London building was not one that extant records suggest impressed Bulfinch. In fact, a more recent American building was a far more likely model for the Coolidge House: L'Enfant's similarly-proportioned Federal Hall, a building Bulfinch had sketched only three years earlier and one

⁷⁵ Place, 99, 115; Kirker and Kirker, 87, 146, 147-151; Kirker, 37-40.

⁷⁶ Kirker, 37.

⁷⁷ Coolidge was descended from Adino Bulfinch, Charles' great grandfather, and his son, Joseph Coolidge, Jr., was married to Bulfinch's sister, Elizabeth; Bulfinch, 11-33.

Coolidge could have seen in the June 1789 *Massachusetts Magazine*.⁷⁸ Moreover, Federal Hall was better known to client and designer than the Royal Society of Arts building.⁷⁹

Bulfinch’s third Boston-area residence further suggests he was not yet given exclusively to British Neoclassicism, for if the Coolidge House represented a move toward English precedent, the Somerville house Bulfinch drafted for Joseph Barrell in 1792 marked a considerable retreat. The two-story residence had a huge entrance portico framed by four pillars that opened onto a veranda, two entrances on the sides of the house -- forms common in continental design but uncommon in Massachusetts and in London architecture -- and an oval salon projecting past the end of the house. There were also two horizontally-ordered staircases on the plan where vertically-ordered ones had been the English-inspired norm.⁸⁰ Additionally, one of Bulfinch’s elevations included a sketch of the house and outbuildings that resembled Palladio-designed Italian villas. Barrell’s house so obviously drew on continental precedent that a Boston press commentator called it a “chateau.”⁸¹

In 1793, Bulfinch designed three structures that were important illustrations of the stylistic influences acting on him in his early career: the Boston Theater, the Charles Bulfinch House, and the Tontine Crescent. Boston had been without a theater since the town’s founding and attempts to build one had been publicly beaten back as recently as 1785. But in 1792, in violation of state law, some Bostonians began to support theater productions and by 1793, a group of promoters resolved to have Bulfinch

⁷⁸ Place, 41, 70; Kirker and Kirker, 32-3; Kirker, 41-44.

⁷⁹ *Massachusetts Magazine*, June 1789.

⁸⁰ John Summerson, *The Architecture of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969); David Watkin, *English Architecture: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979).

⁸¹ *Columbian Centinel*, December 12, 1792; Bulfinch, 41-45, 64, 77-80; Place 147-151; Kirker and Kirker, 42-48; Kirker, 45-53. Frank Chouteau Brown, “The Joseph Barrell Estate, Somerville, Massachusetts, Charles Bulfinch’s First Country House,” *Old Time New England*, Vol. XXXVIII, Number 3 (January, 1948), 53-62.

design a theater on Federal Street.⁸² For his part, Bulfinch was probably thrilled: he was enthralled with theater while in Europe, and enthusiastically attended performances while in Philadelphia and New York in 1789.⁸³ The only theater mentioned in his extant writing from Europe was the Grand Theater of Bordeaux, which he greatly admired. In 1791, probably with some advance knowledge that a Boston Theater was on the horizon, Bulfinch tried to procure Pierre Patte's *Essai sur l'architecture theatrale*, a volume devoted almost exclusively to continental theaters -- it was among the books that he asked Cutler to obtain. While it is unclear whether or not Cutler was successful, the Boston Theater Bulfinch designed nevertheless borrowed from continental sources.

Surprisingly, architectural historians have only fleetingly explored Bulfinch's second 1793 structure, a house he designed for his family, though it affords a unique opportunity to examine his personal views on style in a way no other structure allows. This was the sole moment in Bulfinch's career when he was both designer and client, which allowed him to design as he pleased more than in any other work. Built next to the house in which he grew up on the edge of the West End, its dimensions and cost were typical of an elite Boston mansion.⁸⁴ However, its facade was considerably different from Boston's other houses. Rather than emphasize the central bay, which was elemental to Georgian and Federal styles, Bulfinch relegated nearly all embellishments to the end bays, which left only a modestly adorned center. The closest any have come to assigning an antecedent is an indirect attribution to British precedent by Harold Kirker, who claimed it was "rather similar" to Bulfinch's 1795 Joseph Coolidge, Sr. House, a building with an elaborately embellished central bay.⁸⁵ Continental European buildings and books, though, offered multiple examples of facades

⁸² *Columbian Centinel*, April 10, 1793; Pemberton, 255; Bulfinch, 93-97; Place, 40, 59-63; Kirker and Kirker, 54, 59-60; Kirker, 66-73; Richard Stoddard, "A Reconstruction of Charles Bulfinch's First Federal Street Theatre, Boston," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 6 (1970), 185-208.

⁸³ Charles Bulfinch to his parents, letter dated New York, April 19, 1789, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸⁴ Place, 29-31; Abbott Lowell Cummings, "Charles Bulfinch and Boston's Vanishing West End," *Old Time New England*, Vol. LII, Number 2 (October-December, 1961), 31-49; Kirker, 74-77.

⁸⁵ Kirker, 115.

with adorned end bays and Bulfinch possessed at least one -- LeClerc's *Traite d'architecture* -- by 1793.⁸⁶ In a project where the designer was the client, Bulfinch designed a structure that more closely hewed to continental models.

The third building Bulfinch designed in 1793 was both a visionary and fateful project: Boston's Tontine Crescent. Bulfinch scholars have thoroughly explored this project, although always through the lens of a determined artiste and prophetic town planner attempting to overcome parochialism, thin business skills, and financial disaster.⁸⁷ In 1793, Bulfinch entered into a partnership to build two crescent-shaped rows of attached houses, sixteen in each row, on an undeveloped pasture in Boston's South End. Problems emerged almost immediately. The General Court, far from enthralled with “Tontine” financing, refused to incorporate the partners. Undeterred, they solicited subscriptions “for building a number of convenient, and elegant houses, in a central situation.”⁸⁸ In August, with approximately half the subscriptions sold and some contracts cut with building tradesmen, the partners laid the cornerstone.⁸⁹ But this turned out to be ill-advised because Bulfinch's partners backed out of the project by 1794.⁹⁰ As he remembered it years later, the project “required me to surrender my property, even that obtained by marriage.”⁹¹ Plunging toward financial ruin by late 1794, he was forced to scale back the project to a single crescent and a small row of houses.

From the beginning, the Tontine Crescent was a European-inspired project. Crescent buildings were unprecedented in the United States, and architectural historians claim Bulfinch's Crescent was based on British

⁸⁶ The other was J. F. Neufforge's *Recueil elementaire d'architecture* (Paris: 1757-1780), which Bulfinch had asked James Cutler to procure in May, 1791.

⁸⁷ Bulfinch, 88, 98; Place, 56-59, 63-69; Kirker and Kirker, 46-7; Kirker, 78-85, 89-92.

⁸⁸ *Columbian Centinel*, July 8, 1793.

⁸⁹ Kirker, 78-92.

⁹⁰ Bulfinch, 88, 98; Place, 56-59, 63-69; Kirker and Kirker, 46-7; Kirker, 78-85, 89-92.

⁹¹ Bulfinch, 99.

precedent and on “certain examples [he] had seen in Paris.”⁹² But there was also a great deal of French in the Tontine Crescent’s purpose as well as its style. In letters from Europe, Bulfinch repeatedly noted that French architecture possessed positive social benefits. In one of his most effusive passages on the subject, he claimed,

Every town in France has one or more public walks, shaded with trees and kept in constant repair; these walks are usually surrounded by ye public buildings of ye place, which are an additional beauty at the same time that they serve as a shelter from the wind. I own myself much pleased with this mode of public walks, they contribute to the health of the people, and by bringing together at certain hours persons of all classes, they give that general polish so observable here.⁹³

As Bulfinch planned an open landscaped space between the buildings, the Tontine Crescent plan seems to pursue this idea. Contemporaries noted this space was “to serve the purposes of health by purifying the air...and we may anticipate, that when complete, it will be a favorite part of the town.”⁹⁴ In other words, Bulfinch may well have seen the Tontine Crescent project as an elite-occupied space -- after all, these were expensive residences -- but not necessarily an elite-only space that would preclude the sort of intermingling of orders that he liked about France.⁹⁵ This sentiment applied to architecture, moreover, fit well with republican sentiments of the post-revolutionary age because it created a space of interaction where social lines between elites and commoners became muddled for mutual social benefit.

The mid-1790s saw the building of Bulfinch’s most celebrated structure, the Massachusetts State House.⁹⁶ The first moves to erect a new

⁹² Kirker, 78.

⁹³ Charles Bulfinch to Susan Bulfinch, Marseilles, May 10, 1786, *Bulfinch Family Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁹⁴ Pemberton, 250.

⁹⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, July 8, 1793.

⁹⁶ Place, 75-93; Kirker, 101-114; Leroy Thwing, “The Bulfinch State House,” *Old-Time New England*, Vol. XLII (Winter 1952), 63-67; Harold Kirker,

state house actually came in the late-1780s.⁹⁷ By the fall of 1787, the project had proceeded far enough for the town meeting to allocate £3,000 toward construction and for the General Court to call for designs.⁹⁸ Fresh from Europe, Bulfinch submitted plans to a legislative committee on November 5, 1787.⁹⁹ The project stalled out, however, a victim of the worsening economic situation, lack of cash, and uncertainty as to whether the state capital would remain in Boston. Eight years later, when the state and town were able to move on the project, Bulfinch again submitted plans that were most likely modifications of his original designs.¹⁰⁰ Two influential studies, most recently from thirty-five years ago, claim Bulfinch copied the building from London’s Somerset House, a building begun by Sir William Chambers in 1775.¹⁰¹ But to fully appreciate the aesthetic underpinnings of his state house design, it is important to remember that Bulfinch rarely copied buildings without altering them, and that he often drew from multiple sources in his early work.

That Bulfinch described his state house plans as in a style celebrated “all over Europe” itself broadens the size of the inspirational pool to include areas outside of England.¹⁰² Accordingly, influences on his state house design -- initially drafted a year after returning from a favorable continental experience -- may have included the Somerset House but they just as likely

“Bulfinch’s design for the Massachusetts State House,” *Old-Time New England*, Vol. LV (Fall 1064), 43-45.

⁹⁷ *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston containing the Selectmen’s Minutes, 1776-1810* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1894-1904), September 26, 1786, July 3, August 22, September 4, 1787, June 11, 18, 25, 1788; *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), December 11, 1786, March 12, May 8, September 19, December 7, 1787; Kirker, 102.

⁹⁸ *Boston Gazette*, October 8, 1787; *Report...Selectmen’s Minutes*, December 7, 1787.

⁹⁹ Kirker, 101.

¹⁰⁰ Bulfinch, 112; Place, 67; Kirker, “Bulfinch’s design for the Massachusetts State House,” 43-46; Kirker, 101-102.

¹⁰¹ Kirker, 101-102.

¹⁰² Place, 89.

included sources from France, Europe, and other parts of America. Indeed, by 1795, Bulfinch had already designed the Connecticut State House, a building based in large part on Pierre L'Enfant's Federal Hall and one that shared features with the Massachusetts State House.¹⁰³ As Charles Place suggested, Bulfinch may also have relied on patterns in the Paris-published *Le Vignole Moderne* by J. R. Lucotte.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the building's most commanding feature, the oversized dome, suggests French inspiration. A feature of neither any American building nor the Chambers building, such a dome showed up in work of French architect Etienne-Louis Boullée in plans he drafted for a Metropolitan Cathedral around 1780.¹⁰⁵ Although Bulfinch never mentioned Boullée's work, he most likely knew of it through Thomas Jefferson, a great admirer of Boullée.¹⁰⁶ While the Somerset House was a recent enough building for Bulfinch to have noticed, there were also French designs from the period that were slightly more recent and drawn by a visionary French architect who impressed Jefferson, Bulfinch's occasional architectural guide in France. In other words, it is unlikely that Bulfinch relied solely on British models.

However, about the same time the Massachusetts State House was built (1795-1798), Bulfinch began turning toward British Adamesque precedent, a development that had everything to do with his worsening financial situation and his connection with Boston High Federalist Harrison Gray Otis. Otis was Boston's premiere land speculator and developer. Angling to showcase his increasing status and wealth in an obvious way and to make a move into politics, Otis had Bulfinch design a substantial mansion on recently acquired land behind Mount Vernon in 1795.¹⁰⁷ Bulfinch, by then

¹⁰³ G. L. Hersey, "Replication Replicated, or Notes on American Bastardy," *Perspecta*, Vol. 9-10 (1965), 216-217.

¹⁰⁴ Place, 92.

¹⁰⁵ Dominique de Menil, *Visionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu* (Santa Monica: Hennessey and Ingalls, 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Jefferson was known to point American visitors such as Bulfinch toward important French buildings and to write itineraries for them that included the most important new architecture of Paris. William Howard Adams, ed. *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1976).

¹⁰⁷ For Otis' business dealings, see *Harrison Gray Otis Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society and Historic New England/Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis, The Urbane Federalist, 1785-1848* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 57-96.

a designer of some renown and the only “architect” in Boston, designed a house based on his sketch of Philadelphia’s Bingham House, the one he had called too “rich” for any man in the United States. Within a decade, Bulfinch designed two more Boston houses for Otis, each more opulent, grandiose, and British than the one before, as Otis simultaneously superintended the creation of the state’s Federalist Party.¹⁰⁸

Through his association with Otis, Bulfinch entered a closely connected, extremely conservative, and decidedly pro-British circle of High Federalist elite patrons who kept him designing British-inspired buildings for their residential and commercial needs into the nineteenth century. These buildings also served Federalists’ political and social needs as they created avenues for political patronage, established systems of social control, and afforded means to establish and communicate class distinctions in what was supposed to be a classless society. By the time Bulfinch connected with Otis, he had already gone bankrupt and had lost the financial independence necessary to be more selective in his commissions if he were so inclined. He had to work to survive, and designing buildings for Boston’s wealthiest residents was steady work in a period when architects were not particularly well-paid.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the Boston Federalists installed Bulfinch as Chairman of the Boston Selectmen and Superintendent of Police which effectively put a capable designer and town planner into a distinctively powerful and dependent position from which he could alter the town’s built environment, monitor it according to their wishes, and enforce public behavior on its streets. Now dependent on Federalists’ commissions and appointments, Bulfinch designed multiple buildings that harmonized with their elite, hierarchical, conservative, and pro-British political and social outlooks: British Neo-classical buildings that broke sharply from his initial Boston structures.

¹⁰⁸ Kirker, 188-124, 158-160, 226-229; Richard C. Nylander, “The First Harrison Gray Otis House, Boston, Massachusetts,” *Magazine Antiques*, 129, Number 3 (1986), 618-621; Morison, 246-283; Matthew Crocker, *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston, 1800-1830* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 1-23; Thomas Conroy, “The Politics of Style: Building, Builders, and the Creation of Federal Boston” (2004 dissertation to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst), Chapter 5.

¹⁰⁹ In 1799, Federalists placed Bulfinch in a civic position, the Superintendent of Police, with had a steady annual income of \$600 that was increased to \$1000 in 1810; Place, 96, 112-113; Kirker, 14.

Therefore, what explains the remaking of Boston in the image of Neoclassical London, such as it was, was neither Bulfinch's sense of style nor his determination to build in a British-influenced style. Rather it had to do with his personal situation, changing client base, and inability or reluctance to take a more forceful role in the building process, which made the clients for whom he worked influential in the process. Indeed, his earliest clients were by and large former colonists who had lived through the American Revolution, experienced the Francophilic changes in Revolutionary Boston, remained basically parochial in their aesthetic needs, and, in Barrell's case, made money because of ties to post-war France. The houses that Bulfinch built for them reflected their personal histories and tastes for architecture that either harkened back to the earlier colonial period forms or used continental ideas that they did not spurn. After 1795, Bulfinch's view of style had not so much changed but his client list became populated with those who had different ideas about style and were influenced by political, social, and economic forces.

Bulfinch did not, however, abandon continental style altogether, and his turn to Britain's interpretation of Neoclassicism came slowly, probably with some reluctance. As late as 1796, he used continental ideas in the Dorchester houses of Perez Morton and James Swan.¹¹⁰ His acceptance of James Monroe's offer and his subsequent move to Washington, moreover, perhaps represented a return to working in continental styles. Much of the capital city had been designed and built by French and French-trained architects, beginning with L'Enfant and proceeding through to Continentally-educated Benjamin Latrobe, whom Bulfinch replaced. While it was a good professional and economic move, going to the capital was also a way to return to the design preferences that he favored early in his career. In fact, Bulfinch's design career ended in Washington -- he never designed another Boston building after his return home -- and he called his years in the national capital "the happiest of his life."¹¹¹ Perhaps tellingly, it was after he returned from the capital that he began working on his autobiographical sketch, a retrospective on his life that did not reference British architecture at all.

¹¹⁰ Kirker, 93-100, 128-140.

¹¹¹ Place, 241-275.

Looking at the full spectrum of Charles Bulfinch’s career and the context in which it began and ended, contributes to our understanding of aesthetics, society, and politics in the early American republic. It shows that continental architectural ideas originally held some sway in post-revolutionary Boston, a town that has long been depicted as one devoted exclusively to English building ideas, which prompts us to reconsider early republic aesthetics generally. What Bulfinch’s career suggests about post-revolutionary politics, society, and culture is just as important. The 1780s and 1790s were particularly contentious and confused decades for American politics, class organization, and cultural identity. Americans were closely tied to France politically and ideologically in the wake of the war, and designers such as Bulfinch preferred French and continental designs to those of Britain partly because of his personal experiences in Europe and partly because of France’s assistance during the war. As the political battles between Federalists and Democratic Republicans heated up in the 1790s, a small Federalist Boston elite that increasingly eschewed political and ideological attachment to France brought the town’s most capable designer into their service. By commissioning him to build their houses, cultural institutions, and political/economic exchanges in British styles, Federalists were successfully reversing the “Spirit of ‘76” by bringing builders into their patronage networks, removing French ideas from local architectural design, and establishing class differences through the built environment, even after a revolution fought in the name of equality with “Our Friends, the French” at their sides. In short, both Bulfinch and building were integral to creating early republic Federalist hegemony in Boston. What Boston’s conservative elites built through Bulfinch after the late-1790s was the physical face of Federalism—opulent, grandiose, English-inspired, highly ordered, and decidedly elite but that was most likely not what Bulfinch had hoped when he began his designing career in 1787.