



Column capital by Charles Platt, Deerfield, 1933

PHOTO ESSAY

In the Details: Style in New England Architecture

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Editor’s Introduction: *In our effort to expand HJM’s focus to include artistic and material culture, we offer a “Photo Essay” feature. This essay provides a tour of different periods of architectural history, analyzing a range of styles characteristic of New England residential architecture. Detailed captions explain the architectural significance of each photograph. Aaron M. Helfand is a recent graduate of Williams College and the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture, where he studied classical and traditional architecture and urban design. More of his photographs may be seen at www.aaronhelfand.com.*

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The images reproduced here are drawn primarily from an exhibit of color photographs that were displayed at the Historic Northampton Museum and Education Center in Northampton, Massachusetts, from November 2009 through March 2010. Although the exhibit encompassed a broad range of New England architecture, I have chosen a selection for this essay to illustrate two specific points: I hope these photos will show the critical role of often-overlooked and seemingly minor details in establishing architectural style and that they will speak to the importance of style as a means of connecting us, through our built environment, to the rich web of architectural history.



Jethro Coffin House, Nantucket, 1686

The Coffin House is a rare surviving example of the style of architecture typical in New England throughout the 17th century. Built in an era when few could afford the luxury of elaborate architectural decoration, the design is extremely simple. Yet even in such a frugally constructed building, subtle hints of style may be found in the details. In this case, the small diamond-shaped panes of glass are a vestige of the great Gothic tradition of medieval Europe. It is interesting to think that the Renaissance of classical architecture had begun to supersede the Gothic style in Italy three-and-a-half centuries earlier. Yet the new style was only gradually incorporated into English architecture over the course of the 16th century; and in the isolated American colonies, stylistic habits that were essentially Medieval persisted well into the 18th century.



Wells-Thorn House, Deerfield, 1756

By the mid-eighteenth century, architecture in New England had become thoroughly Georgian. That is to say, it sought to emulate the style then popular in England — a Baroque classicism first championed by Sir Christopher Wren. Although colonial architecture rarely approached the level of elaboration found in contemporary English architecture, aspirations in that direction are found even in modest colonial houses. Here, a window is ornamented with a robust classical entablature (the superstructure of horizontal moldings and bands), consisting of a cornice, a pulvinated (bulging) frieze, and an architrave that wraps around the frame of the window (the architrave is the lintel or beam which is usually supported by columns). This detail is similar to what would be found in England, except that here it is made of wood rather than masonry.



Royall House, Medford, 1732

A more elaborate version of the Wells-Thorn House, the Royall House employs a similar strategy of focusing architectural ornament on its doors and windows. In this case, the surrounds are crowned with full classical pediments (triangular over the windows and segmental over the front door). The door surround follows a Roman version of the Ionic order popularized by Scamozzi during the Renaissance and used extensively in Georgian England. Although this house, like the Wells-Thorn House, is made of wood, its siding is carved and painted to emulate stone blocks.



Consider Scott House, Charlemont, 1812

At the turn of the 19th century, a subtle shift occurred in American architectural style that is well illustrated in this house in Charlemont. The overall aesthetic, while still essentially classical, shifts to favor more delicate forms, often inspired by ancient Roman decorative motifs discovered in the ruins of Pompeii in the mid-eighteenth century and popularized in England by Robert Adam. The hallmarks of this aesthetic, known in America as the Federal style, are the use of more attenuated elements, often featuring elliptical profiles. This can be seen here in the profile of the scrolled brackets and in the series of moldings that make up the cornice. Above the cornice is an elliptical fan, though in many similar door surrounds, this feature would be a similarly shaped transom window, ornamented by a delicate web of tracery.



Hatfield, c. 1830

Only a few decades after the Federal style superseded the Georgian, another notable shift occurred. Though still within the broad classical tradition, this shift was spurred by documentation and publication of ancient Greek monuments. In this example, the entire house takes on the aspect of a Greek temple, complete with pediment and freestanding Ionic columns. While plenty of earlier American houses employed the Ionic order (like the Royall House), here the designer has made a point of emulating a specifically Greek version of the Ionic — that found in the Erechtheion in Athens. The Greek Revival was widely popular in New England from the 1820s through the 1840s and reflected an admiration for the ancient Greek ideals of reason and democracy.



Moore House, Deerfield, 1848

If the Jethro Coffin House (p. 36) represents the survival of the Gothic style, the Moore House of 150 years later marks a revival of the same style, fueled by a sudden popular appreciation of the romantic mystique of the Middle Ages. In the mid-nineteenth century, improved technology was beginning to make larger panes of glass affordable for houses. Because this was a desirable novelty, few would have thought to return to the tiny panes of medieval windows for stylistic reasons. Instead, the Gothic style is manifested in the steep pitch of the roof, the pointed arches of the attic windows, and in the Gothic profiles of the ornamental brackets of the porch. The use of flat boards on the first floor, in place of overlapping clapboards, is meant to make the wall less obviously wood, and more evocative of the masonry buildings of medieval Europe.



Marlborough, Early 18th Century

A quintessential New England farmhouse, remarkably well preserved.



Cummington, 1913 (Mellor & Meigs, Architects)

The decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century are marked by a return to simplicity in the prevailing aesthetic of residential architecture. This results from a new source of inspiration for design. Whereas before, all American architecture had sought to evoke European precedents, now architects for the first time became interested in America's own architectural history. They began to see colonial architecture not as merely a paler version of English Georgian but as an aesthetic ideal unto itself. This house in Cummington is typical of the Colonial Revival in the way it evokes 18th-century American houses through attention to detail. Here, once again, the essence of style is found in elements as subtle as the careful patterns and proportions of window panes.



Connecticut, c. 1920

Note the replacement windows and roof shingles, c. 1990.

Sadly, as this photograph illustrates, it is precisely those charming subtleties cherished by Mellor & Meigs that are frequently lost due to insensitive renovations. In this Colonial Revival house, the carefully designed original wood windows remain on the left but have been replaced with clumsy aluminum versions on the right. The original roofing material would have been cedar shingles, like the walls, but those have been replaced with asphalt shingles, which lack the textural richness of wood.



Salem, 1827

Note the mid-19th century modifications.

Although such degradations are all too common today, modifications to houses needn't be detrimental. Originally, both doors shown here would have looked like the one on the left: A sober Greek surround, with rectilinear transom and side lights. However, when French and Italian Renaissance styles became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, the door on the right was modified to include an arch with an ornate scrolled bracket (compare to the more delicate Federal brackets from the house in Charlemont). The bracket helps to visually support the new bay window above, which is carefully tied into the existing entablature. The resulting asymmetrical composition would have pleased the picturesque Victorian aesthetic as much as it would have galled the earlier generation's symmetrical sense of propriety. But fashion aside, both designers clearly took pride in creating something that was beautiful as well as functional; and because of that, it is now easy for us to appreciate both.

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