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## Notes on the Colonial Revival in Newport: Escaping the “Vandalism of Civilization”

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NOTES ON THE COLONIAL REVIVAL IN NEWPORT:  
ESCAPING THE "VANDALISM OF CIVILIZATION"

by

DAVID CHASE

Nineteenth century Americans were proud of their eighteenth century heritage, proud not only of the heroically won Revolution and all it stood for but also of what was recalled with great fondness and not a little wishful thinking as a social order in which prosperity, erudition and refinement were the rule; a quaint and thoroughly delightful society marked by good taste and bonhomie.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere was this past more present than in Newport. A major Colonial port, scene of important events of the Revolution, a center of Colonial culture and craftsmanship — Newport was both one of the best preserved Colonial capitols and one of the best known and best loved due to its ascendance as a summer resort. As has long been recognized,<sup>2</sup> one of Newport's unique assets is its retention of so many eighteenth century public buildings. This is not because of the twentieth century preservation ethic but a persistent and very localized nineteenth century mind which gloried in the opportunity to play out civic and institutional functions in time-honored settings. In an era when other communities boasted of their progressivism as they replaced old churches and public buildings with "modern" facilities, Newport clung to its Colonial landmarks.

This essay recounts the story of six pre-Revolutionary landmarks — Touro Synagogue, Trinity Church, the Colony House, Brick Market, Sabbatarian Meeting House and Redwood Library — and what befell them in the nineteenth century. Several will be treated fairly briefly, others at some length. The purpose is to illustrate local attitudes toward preservation and demonstrate that, in the era of the Colonial Revival, the era in which the entire nation became fascinated with things colonial and took up a still prevalent fashion in domestic architecture and furnishings, in the main Newport chose to keep its public facilities and image decidedly antique.

Touro Synagogue, oldest in the nation, was erected between 1759 and 1763 by a congregation founded in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> During the Revolution the congregation was dispersed and in the 1790s title to its Newport property passed to Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. The *Rhode Island American*





Touro Synagogue, Newport, R.I. (Peter Harrison, 1759-63).  
Interior view showing the ark, with painting above, as modified during  
the restoration of the 1820's.



& *General Advertiser* reported in 1822 that the last of Newport's Jewish residents had departed and offered the suggestion that the synagogue, "with little expense might be long preserved as a 'handsome specimen of ancient architecture.'"<sup>4</sup> A few months later, Abraham Touro, a wealthy merchant and son of Isaac Touro (the driving spirit behind construction of the synagogue), left \$10,000 to the state of Rhode Island as an endowment for the building. At an early date, the town of Newport took charge of the work of keeping the building in good repair and opening it for visitors and occasional services.

In addition to its extraordinary historic significance, Touro Synagogue has one of the most beautiful colonial interiors in America. It is the masterwork of its architect, the British-born and thoroughly Tory merchant Peter Harrison, resident in Newport from about 1738 to 1760, who also designed Redwood Library and the Brick Market. Harrison was recognized as the outstanding architect of the colonial era by Victorian critics like Thomas Tefft who delivered an address to the newly formed Newport Historical Society in November of 1853 on the town's early architecture.<sup>5</sup> Tefft, a well-educated architect based in Providence was a close friend of Historical Society founder George C. Mason, Sr., then engaged in building several Newport houses. Tefft spoke of Touro Synagogue, Redwood and the Market, aptly praising Peter Harrison:

The fine adaptation and classic taste that characterizes each one of these buildings bespeaks high accomplishment in the architect that designed them. They are severe and unpretending it is true, but there is an elegance and purity of detail and a correctness of proportion in each of these edifices that is rarely excelled.<sup>6</sup>

There are at least three aspects of nineteenth century efforts to preserve Touro Synagogue which are remarkable: first, that its aesthetic merit was held in equal regard with its historic importance; second, that efforts to safeguard the building occurred so early; third, that guardianship of this building amounted to a partnership unique in the annals of church-state relations.

The very same George C. Mason, Sr. who invited Thomas Tefft to address the Newport Historical Society in 1853 was the central figure in preservation activities concerning Trinity Church during the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Mason, Sr. and his son, George C. Mason, Jr. were prime movers in almost everything involving the care and interpretation of Newport's colonial



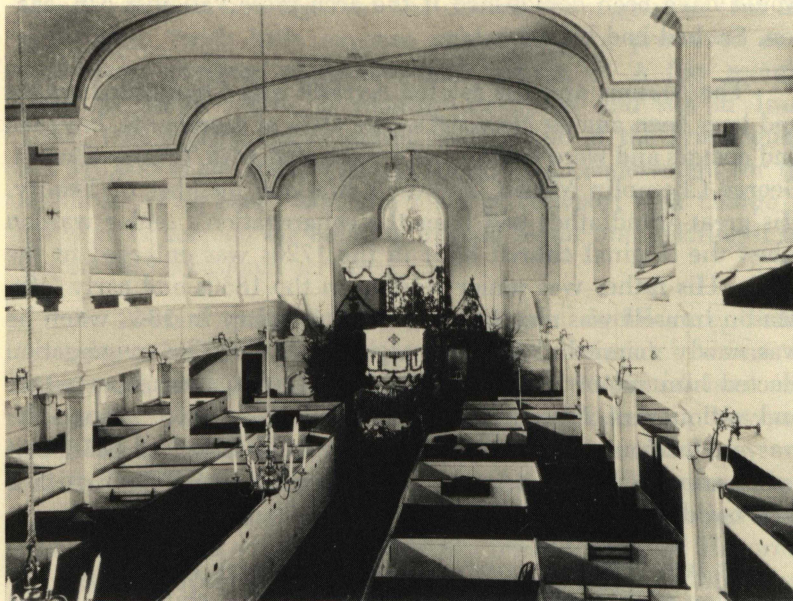
heritage between 1850 and 1895.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Trinity Church would have been demolished if the arch-preservationist Mr. Mason, Sr. had had his way.

The Masons and the related Ayrault and Champlin families had long been among Newport's elite class of merchants, lawyers, and doctors and were prominently associated with Trinity Church. George Champlin Mason, Sr. was a life-long member of Trinity. His great-grandfather had been the congregation's senior warden when the original church built in the 1720s was enlarged in the 1760s. His father was senior warden in the 1830s and early '40s. Mason himself was elected to the church vestry in 1848 when he was newly married and twenty-eight years old. The congregation elected him senior warden in 1855. An artist, newspaper editor and antiquarian, Mason became an architect in 1858. Always, he was a churchman first, and it was as a churchman in 1858 that senior warden Mason promoted replacing Trinity Church with a new building.

At two vestry meetings held late in April 1858 Mason led discussion of "the expediency of building a new church."<sup>8</sup> It was decided that Mason and Dr. David King would prepare a circular for presentation to the church's incorporators presenting the case for a new building.<sup>9</sup> Mason was then editor of the *Newport Mercury* and in the week between the two meetings he printed the first of a series of letters favoring replacement of the old church. On May first he published an editorial setting out his own views; Mason stated that Trinity was a venerable relic of Colonial days, noted his own ties to this building, and wrote that it had been his privilege to watch over the structure for several years and that he had done so "with reverential hands."<sup>10</sup> Why replace it? Because the existing building could not accommodate all who wished to worship there and the religious purposes of the parish should take precedence over antiquarian sentiment. Mason regretted the prospect of demolishing the old church, but in his view erecting a new church was the Christian duty of the congregation.

The circular to Trinity incorporators written by Mason and Dr. King went out May 3rd. It made a strong case for demolishing the existing edifice and constructing on its site a stone building modelled upon "the old English Parochial churches, as best adapted to Episcopal worship."<sup>11</sup> The circular asked incorporators if they favored erecting a new building, if they favored erecting it





Trinity Church, c. 1880.

Interior view of church decorated for the Christmas holidays. This Clarence Stanhope photograph shows the walls and ceilings of the church painted per George C. Mason, Sr.'s instructions in 1873-74.

Collection of Newport Historical Society

on the site of the existing building or at a new location, and if they would contribute to a building fund. Protest began at once and as Mason wrote many years later, "the response was anything but favorable to the project." On May fourth the Rector, who had been away, wrote the vestry that he did not object to building on a new site, but old Trinity must not be demolished: "*That* I earnestly hope . . . you will not conclude to do . . . It is a venerable relic, which it is a sort of virtue to preserve; and to destroy it would do violence to many hearts."<sup>12</sup>

In November, the vestry voted to consider a new church site but at the same time resolved to ascertain the cost of repairing the old church and making it sound for continued use.<sup>13</sup> Two committees took on these divergent tasks; Mason was not a member of either one. In February 1859 the *Newport Daily News* announced that the lithographic artist J.P. Newell had produced a print of old Trinity and took this occasion to recommend that the parish



stay in its present quarters "for 'Old Trinity' belongs not merely to its own parish but to all Newport, and is loved and admired by many besides those . . . who grew up attending church there."<sup>14</sup> On 1 March 1859 the committee appointed to examine the existing building reported that it could be put in good order for less than \$800 and the committee appointed to look into new sites and the cost of erecting a new church reported that they had determined that Mason's idea, presented eleven months before, was now "inexpedient." A week later the vestry voted to proceed with repairs. In April Mason, Sr. let it be known that he would decline reelection as senior warden.

Despite this setback, Mason's association with Trinity was not over. Two years later he was made senior warden once again and he held this post for twenty-six years, all the while supervising maintenance of the building he had sought to replace and executing his duties with the same love and reverence he wrote of in 1858. Mason carried out two major refurbishings of the church during his years as senior warden. They involved no radical changes but enlivened the previously all-white interior by tinting the walls in shades of tan and blue accented with pin striping. When the church was reopened after the first of these renovations in 1867, the *Mercury* (no longer edited by Mason) commented: "Thanks to the superior taste of the vestry, the vandalism of civilization was not permitted to enter the hallowed enclosure . . . Beautiful as when it was first offered to Heaven in consideration, it appeared yesterday."<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, one George Hendrick informed readers of the *Lowell Vox Populi* in 1879 that Trinity had not been subjected "to the hand of modern vandalism." When Hendrick admired Trinity's quaint three-tier pulpit, located front and center in the church, the Rector responded that he would prefer to have the pulpit moved to one side but his parishioners would not permit it, nor any other changes in their church.<sup>16</sup>

We have seen how religion and filial piety led to the preservation of Touro Synagogue and how piety almost led to the opposite result in the case of Trinity. Citizens naturally bring a different set of values to bear when dealing with government buildings and no government building better demonstrates how Newport consciously set herself apart by playing up her lustrous colonial past than the Colony House. In the nineteenth century it served three functions; state house for the May sessions of the General Assembly, court house; and, until the early 1840s, town





J.P. Newell, Trinity Church (Richard Munday, 1725) litho., 1859. Exterior view executed when demolition of the church was being considered.

Collection of Newport Historical Society

*Photo by Betsy D. Ray*



hall. Newport's Colony House was erected in 1739 from designs by Richard Munday; in 1760 a somewhat smaller and less elaborately finished copy of the Newport building was erected in Providence.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, as Providence grew to become a great city, Newport jealously guarded her status as the historic center of government, even though almost all state offices were located in Providence. From mid-century on, Providence boosters repeatedly tried to have their city declared the sole seat of state government and to have a grand new state house erected there. Newport would have none of this. Local legislators habitually took charge of maintaining the Newport building, seeing to it that the building was well kept and generally taking care to preserve its antique character. In 1869 the *Mercury* assured its readers that their "quaint and picturesque" state house "is kept in the most perfect state of preservation. If any portion at anytime needs repair, the restorations are precisely modelled on the original plan."<sup>18</sup> In fact, the interior of the Newport State House had been altered, most radically in the 1840s, and Richard Upjohn, dean of American architects, in the very year of the reassuring *Mercury* article decried this "mutilation." "These disfigurements," he said, "ought to be removed . . . and the ancient work should be restored."<sup>19</sup> In truth, Newport guardians of local heritage tolerated the changes Upjohn condemned because they continued the useful life of the building. But exterior alterations or replacement of the building were out of the question. The *Mercury* again reported Newport attitudes in regard to preservation of the State House in 1872:

The old Capitol is now in good repair and will probably for another century answer all the purposes for which it was built, for we are different from our friends at the North part of the state; they are for wiping out (their) old State House and putting in its place an expensive building of modern architecture, while we delight in retaining (our) old building that has had within its walls WASHINGTON, LAFAYETTE, ROCHAMBEAU, GREEN, and a number of other Revolutionary Patriots, the Perrys, and nine of the Presidents of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

In 1892, after plans for the enormous and palatial new marble state house at Providence had finally been approved, Newporters consoled themselves with the knowledge that their ancient State House was a great attraction to visitors, so much so that the county sheriff installed a register in his office for all to sign.<sup>21</sup>

When local government outgrew available space in the Colony House in 1842, town offices were moved into the Brick Market at the foot of Washington Square. Initially, ground floor tenants



Brick Market, Newport, R.I. (Peter Harrison, 1762).

Clarence Stanhope photograph showing the building at it is looked in the late nineteenth century while in use as the City Hall and before its coat of stucco was removed.

Collection of Newport Historical Society

were not displaced, but in 1865 the entire building was occupied by what had by then become the offices of city government.<sup>22</sup> Like Thomas Tefft in his 1853 speech quoted above, most people regarded the Brick Market as one of the handsomest buildings in the city and the local press echoed this sentiment. However, by the early 1870s municipal offices had outgrown the former market building and the *Mercury*, backed by local business interests, began a campaign to replace it. "The old Brick Market was well enough for its day," the *Mercury* huffed, "but it is not suitable for city purposes; Newport . . . should have for its Government House a conspicuous and highly finished architectural building . . ." <sup>23</sup>

The public did not listen. Newport taxpayers, who quite willingly approved expenditures for construction of new fire stations and schools in this era, would not approve the *Mercury*-backed proposal for a new city hall.<sup>24</sup> In yet another effort to gain support for its view, the *Mercury* published an editorial on the question of a new city hall on 9 December 1882 which, among other assertions, stated that the Brick Market was "no ornament to the city." That was too much for the leading authority on Newport's architectural heritage, George C. Mason, Jr.



The younger George C. Mason had been analyzing, measuring and publishing articles on eighteenth century Newport architecture since the early 1870s. His analysis of the Old Stone Mill, issued in 1879, brought him international acclaim and led to his appointment as chairman of a prestigious special committee of the American Institute of Architects formed to study and report on Colonial architecture.<sup>25</sup> Mason, Jr's report to the Institute was delivered in November of 1880 and subsequently published in the *American Architect & Building News*, leading American architectural periodical of the day.<sup>26</sup> His A.I.A. report dealt almost exclusively with Newport buildings and building contracts, many of the latter found among family documents saved by his father. The report placed special emphasis on the accomplishments of Peter Harrison, and it discussed the Brick Market at length.<sup>27</sup> Despite his Newport bias, Mason, Jr. presented in his report the



**Brick Market**

Exterior view of the building bedecked with flags and bunting in celebration of 'Lecture Day, May 30, 1899.

Collection of Newport Historical Society

*Photo by A. C. Sherman*

first comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Colonial architecture. In consequence, he was well prepared to respond to the *Mercury's* disparaging remarks about the Brick Market.

The Newport *Real Estate Record* for 16 December 1882 contained a front-page article signed by Mason, Jr. and titled "The City Hall." He was prompted to write, he related, because the voters were again about to consider the question of replacing the Brick Market with a new city hall and he wanted to be sure that they understood that demolition or substantial alteration of the building would be a serious loss:

The old City Hall marks a well defined period in our early Colonial architecture, and stands out in bold relief as a noble protest against the shams and affectations too prevalent in modern work. As an example of simple construction its influence is good. As a work of architecture — art building — it is better . . . Harrison left behind him many works of merit, but none which architects can point to with more pride, as combining the best elements of constructive truth, than old City Hall.

The building was spared. The vote failed and the idea of doing away with the Brick Market was put aside. When a new city hall was finally approved by the voters in 1898, the site was to be on Broadway.<sup>28</sup>

In 1884, two years after the Brick Market was spared, George C. Mason, Jr. served without fee as restoration architect for the Newport Historical Society which purchased and, under his direction, restored the Sabbatarian Meeting House of 1729, then located on Barney Street, as its headquarters. Selection of this building for this purpose was an act of some note, for this was the first time an American historical society elected to house itself in such suitably historic quarters.<sup>29</sup> Work on the Sabbatarian Meeting House was a labor Mason, Jr. came by naturally, for the Historical Society, like Trinity Church, was very much a family institution. Thirty-one years before, his father became so concerned about the loss and destruction of Newport records that he determined there must be a repository in Newport for their safekeeping. Then editor of the *Newport Mercury*, Mason, Sr. called for the establishment of a local historical society in an editorial he printed 22 January 1853. Response was favorable and on 8 March of that year Mason, Sr. held a meeting in his Thames Street home at which the Newport Historical Society was formed. He declined the Society's presidency in favor of Dr. David King and Mason, Sr. was elected corresponding secretary, an office he held for many years.<sup>30</sup> For three decades the Historical Society met and kept its collections at



the Redwood Library. In April 1883, however, the president of Redwood's Board of Trustees, James Eddy Mauran (himself a noted antiquarian, collector, member of the Historical Society and a former Mason client) persuaded his board to request that the Historical Society find other quarters, as space in the Library was at a premium. Mauran's initiative caused an uproar. Mason, Sr., a trustee of both the Historical Society and Redwood, managed to get the vote reversed after a few months and Mauran quickly resigned. Nevertheless, it was clear the time had come for the Historical Society to find space of its own.<sup>31</sup>

A special Historical Society committee considered a number of eligible properties and recommended purchase of the long-vacant Sabbatarian Meeting House, a building fitting in size and arrangement, appropriately historic, available with interesting early furnishings and records, and very inexpensive. The sale was



**Sabbatarian Meeting House, Newport, R.I.**  
(attributed to Richard Munday, 1729-30).

Exterior view as it looked after being moved from Barney St. to Touro St. in 1887 by the Newport Historical Society. The Society applied a pastiche of antique fragments to its exterior. The rear wing accommodating the Newport Natural History Society was added in 1889-90.

Collection of Newport Historical Society

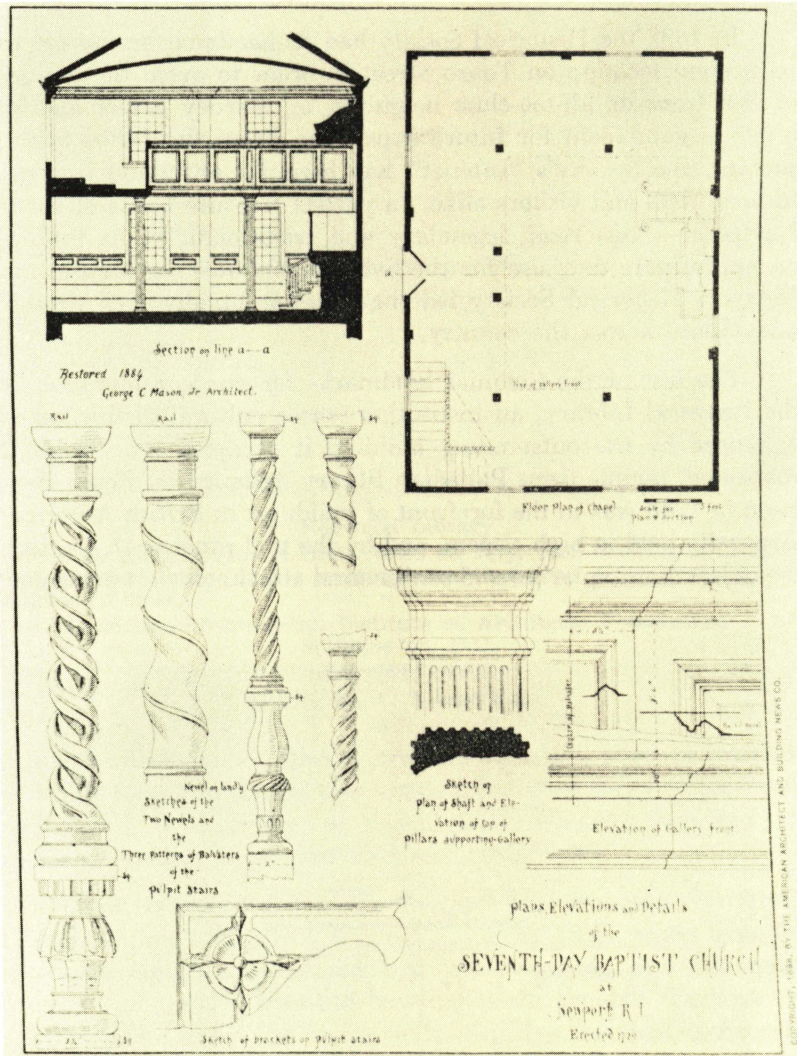
consummated in June of 1884 and renovations were completed in October.<sup>32</sup>

Mason, Jr. prepared measured drawings and took charge of necessary repairs and modifications. The only significant interior change involved removal of the box pews from the main floor and gallery of the meeting house and re-using the paneled pew backs to form a high wainscot around the room. On the exterior, the domestic plainness of the original three-bay, central-entrance, south elevation was transformed by installing salvaged eighteenth century window casings and reworked bits of elaborate trim in order, as the chairman of the building committee, J. M. K. Southwick, expressed it, to "give it more the appearance of a public building and at the same time add to its historic interest." Because Mason, Jr. took sick toward the end of the project, some of these exterior embellishments were handled by Mason's friend and fellow local architect, James Fludder.

In the context of the project as a whole, the whimsical anti-quarianism of the street-front trimmings had little significance, at least to Mason, Jr. His efforts centered on architectural analysis and on making the dilapidated fabric sound. The foundation was rebuilt. New sills and floor framing were laid. The walls were out of plumb and Mason had two transverse tension rods inserted at the level of the interior cornice to make them true. The roof framing was intact and a unique design which intrigued Mason, Jr., but it was so warped by rain damage that new framing was installed after the architect had carefully documented the original. A heating stove chimney was erected and the coved plaster ceiling was repaired. The wainscotting was put up, the interior received a fresh coat of white paint, and the original Claggett clock over the entrance was put in order.

As he had done with several other restoration projects, Mason, Jr. published his Sabbatarian Meeting House measured drawings with an analytical text remarkable for the breadth of his knowledge and the precision of his scholarship. He noted the exact correspondence between the mouldings of the meeting house and Trinity Church and concluded that the same craftsmen had built both buildings. He devoted special attention to the Sabbatarian Meeting House pulpit staircase, "richer in detail and more delicately wrought than any other staircase of the time . . ."<sup>33</sup> This and his other studies of Colonial buildings made Mason, Jr. the





Sabbatarian Meeting House

Measured drawing drawings by George C. Mason, Jr. as published in the American Architect and Building News, May 2, 1885.

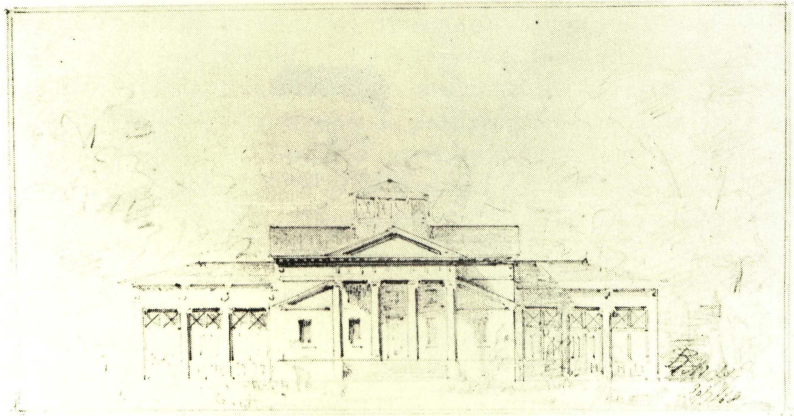
Photo by Betsy D. Ray



most accomplished architectural historian active during the early days of the Colonial Revival.

In 1887 the Historical Society had its headquarters moved to its present location on Touro Street in order to avoid the danger of fire from its all-too-close neighbors on Barney Street and in order to gain room for future expansion. From the 1880s to the present, the Society's "cabinet" has been an attraction to local history buffs and visitors alike, "a perfect treasure-house of early Newport — historical, legendary and traditional."<sup>34</sup> In finding an appropriate new use for the Sabbatarian Meeting House, the Newport Historical Society led the way for hundreds of similar adaptations across the country.

The last of the Colonial landmarks for our consideration is the Redwood Library, an institution whose cultural distinction is enhanced by the outstanding building it occupies. The original rusticated, temple-front Palladian library designed by Peter Harrison in 1748 was in the forefront of buildings in British America. Generally held in high esteem, and by the mid-nineteenth century the object of antiquarian and sentimental attachments, it presented



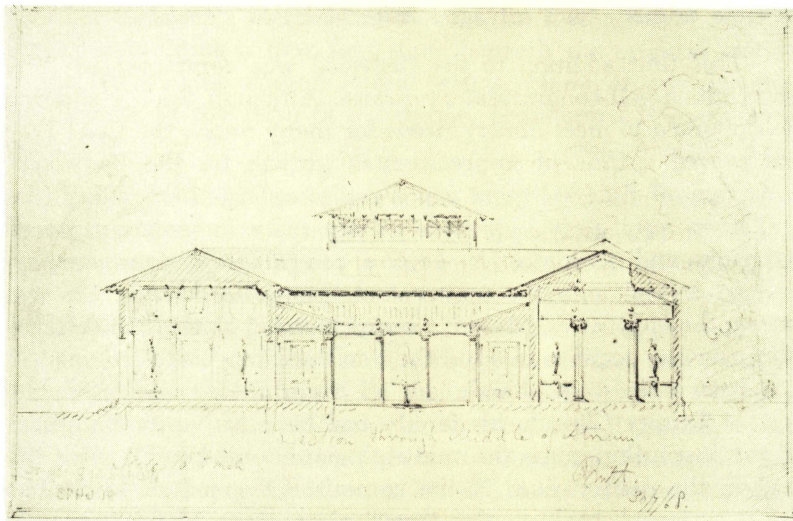
**Redwood Library**

Sketch by Richard Morris Hunt dated 30 July 1868 depicting the Redwood Library with proposed additions.

Collection of American Institute of Architects Foundation,  
Washington, D.C.

(dwg. #81.6097)

*Photo by A. Robert Cole*



**Redwood Library**

Sketch by Richard Morris Hunt dated 30 July, 1868 showing a section through the atrium of his proposed additions and alterations to the Redwood Library.

Collection of American Institute of Architects Foundation,  
Washington, D.C.

(dwg. #81.6473)

Photo by A. Robert Cole

a unique problem for library trustees with the need to provide enlarged facilities; should this small, frame structure be preserved and added to discretely, or should it be wholly reworked or replaced entirely by a new fireproof building?<sup>35</sup>

The first recorded instance in which this dilemma was faced by the library's board of trustees came in 1858, when greatly increased collections, membership and resources, and the poor condition of the 110-year-old building itself, brought the issue to a head. In an early and remarkably sensitive instance of American building activity adhering to the precepts of historic preservation, after considering the exigencies of replacing the old building, the board decided to repair it and construct an addition. Boston architect George Snell designed an addition "in which the leading principle . . . was to preserve as far as possible the original design of Peter Harrison."<sup>36</sup> Snell's wing was attached to the rear of the existing structure, its details duplicating those of the eighteenth century building. Snell's lateral elevations reproduced the now



covered rear wall of the Harrison library, incorporating where possible original trim salvaged from Harrison's facade.

This first addition to the Redwood was completed in 1859 amid much self-congratulatory praise. Although Snell's addition was planned to meet library needs for many years, the Civil War era proved a time of unprecedented growth for the Redwood's collections.<sup>37</sup> By 1863 there was a call to enlarge library facilities and more specifically to provide gallery space for newly acquired paintings and sculpture. In 1865 a committee of four was appointed to look into the matter and George C. Mason, Sr. was among the appointees. Mason, a board member since 1858 (elected just after the decision to build the Snell addition had been made), had been a Redwood shareholder all his adult life and, as in the case of Trinity Church, his family had been active in the affairs of the institution since the mid-eighteenth century. He took the lead in the deliberations of the committee formed in 1865. The group reported back to the board of trustees Mason's recommendation to construct a gallery at the rear of Snell's addition in harmony with the original structure. Mason, then Newport's only resident architect, gratuitously prepared two alternate plans illustrating his concept. Ultimately, Mason's proposal would prevail; in the meantime it met with quiet commendation, then with delays and counter-proposals, then with an entirely different approach which was approved for construction and almost built. But for the vicissitudes of fund-raising and cost-estimates, and the vigorous opposition of a local faction strongly in favor of retaining the original library as it was, Harrison's building would have been replaced altogether rather than enlarged as Mason had envisioned.

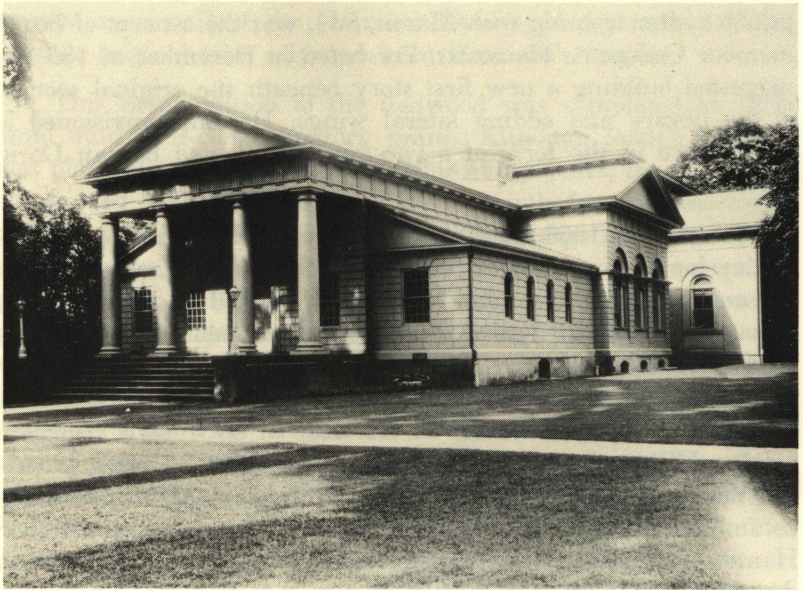
In June 1865 the library's board of trustees transmitted Mason's committee report to the shareholders and Mason was thanked for his special labors. A building committee was immediately appointed which included most of those on the committee of 1858-1859; Mason, however, was not added. The shareholders of the corporation then directed the newly formed building committee to solicit plans for enlargement of the library from anyone interested in submitting a proposal. For unknown reasons, the building committee did very little for three years. Several plans for enlarging the library were submitted, mostly very naive amateur efforts. All the proposals for which drawings survive called for radical changes to the existing building. One, drawn-up by Dudley Newton (who had just established his own architectural

practice after training with Mason, Sr.), was the concept of board member George A. Hammett. Presented in December of 1867, it suggested building a new first story beneath the original section of the library and adding lateral wings; Hammett envisioned a frontispiece in the form of a two-tier, pedimented Roman Doric portico.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, in 1868, members of the building committee decided to develop their own proposal and in September the committee presented an ambitious plan to the board related in concept to the layout of the South Kensington Museum in London and drawn-up by Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt was well known in Newport by this time. He had designed several important houses there and he and his family spent much of the year at their own Newport cottage, Hilltop, just a block up the Avenue from Redwood, where the Viking Hotel stands today. More to the point, Hunt, building committee chairman Charles H. Russell, and committee member Hamilton Hoppin were brothers-in-law; all three had married daughters of the wealthy New York merchant Samuel Shaw Howland.<sup>39</sup> From the first, Hamilton Hoppin was the chief proponent of the scheme drawn-up by Hunt which called for a radically redesigned Redwood. Initially, Russell was also a staunch advocate of this proposal, but eventually he altered his stand, throwing his substantial influence behind Mason's plan for a relatively self-effacing addition to Redwood's existing fabric. Despite his ties to Hunt and Hoppin, Russell, a Newport native, knew Mason well and employed him twice to design structures on his Bellevue Avenue estate.<sup>40</sup>

The Hunt-Hoppin plan of 1868 called for construction of a series of symmetrically arranged, interconnecting, single-story, marble-faced brick pavillions with light iron roofs, located beside and behind the existing library and with it forming an atrium graced by a fountain. A pair of recently identified Hunt sketches in the collection of the A.I.A. Foundation in Washington which are dated 30 July 1868 show that Hunt's Neo-Grecian pavilions are reminiscent of student work he did while at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and prefigured, to a degree, his design for the Lenox Library in New York.<sup>41</sup> As for the original building, in Hamilton Hoppin's words, it was to be "reproduced . . . in some more enduring material," a concept reiterated in Richard Upjohn's 1869 address concerning Colonial architecture delivered to the annual convention of the A.I.A.<sup>42</sup>





#### Redwood Library

Southwest view showing original porticoed entrance and reading room designed by Peter Harrison and built in 1748; in the middle is George Snell's addition of 1858 (with Palladian windows borrowed from Harrison's design); and at the right is the large, rear gallery wing designed by George C. Mason, Sr. and built in 1874-75.

After years of delay, Redwood's shareholders were at last presented with a plan for enlarged quarters recommended by the building committee and endorsed by the board of trustees. In September 1868 the stockholders created a special committee to investigate funding this ambitious plan. After a year of fundraising efforts, little money had been subscribed and the plan was dropped, only to be revived a few months later when Newport-born New York businessman George W. Gibbs offered to donate half the projected cost of \$20,000 for construction of the first of Hunt's pavilions if the library could raise a like sum on its own. By late in 1871 the full amount had been subscribed, the building committee was reconstituted and asked to proceed with construction.

But, with the passage of time, several committee members had changed their views. They were beginning to be won over by those within the corporation, on the board of trustees, and in the larger community who supported Mason's concept of preserving the original building unchanged. In short, just as had occurred

with the plans for a new Trinity, public opinion was on the side of preservation and influenced institutional decisions. In April of 1872 the building committee reversed its 1868 position and urged that construction of the Hunt-Hoppin design be delayed so that the whole matter could be reconsidered. The board directed the committee to proceed, but in July the committee reported back that there was strong sentiment on the part of many donors to the building fund and friends of the library that the Hunt-Hoppin plan should be dropped entirely in favor of building an addition on the east end of the existing structure as Mason, Sr. had proposed long before. Building committee chairman Charles Russell spoke to the issue as follows:

The failure to carry out the suggestion for an addition, as contemplated in 1868, has given time and opportunity to reconsider the subject with the possession of larger means now at the command of the Library Company, and to consult what appears to be the prevailing views, not only of the contributors of these means, but of many other friends of the Library, viz.: 'that any new erection should harmonize and be in accord with the architectural design of the existing edifice.'<sup>43</sup>

At this point the board decided to turn the question over to the corporation to resolve. At the September 1872 annual meeting of shareholders, Hamilton Hoppin vigorously defended the plan developed with brother-in-law Hunt and won the day again. The stockholders endorsed the 1868 Hunt-Hoppin plan and instructed the building committee to proceed at once.

The whole affair, from early in 1872 on, had become a raucous public debate aired by the press. Many Redwood board members resigned in protest — mostly those in opposition to the Hunt-Hoppin plan. It would have been carried out, nevertheless, had not Hunt's design turned out to be much costlier than the architect estimated. The lowest bid for the pavilion Hunt said would cost \$20,000 was \$28,900. In early 1873, Hunt and Hoppin offered reduced proposals but none were convincing. At the September 1873 annual meeting the corporation, thoroughly frustrated in its building efforts, voted to rescind all previous votes on the issue of new construction and directed the board of trustees to attempt to settle the issue conclusively.

Hamilton Hoppin resigned from the board and the building committee after the stockholders vote. Charles Russell was now in full command of both bodies and took it upon himself to resolve the matter.<sup>44</sup> In his position as building committee chairman, Russell proposed to the board in July 1874 an addition at the east





Redwood Library  
North Elevation  
Collection of Redwood Library  
*Photo by John T. Hopf*

end of the existing building as indicated on plans prepared at his request by George C. Mason, Sr. In August, Mason's plan was approved, nine years after his original proposal. His success must have been doubly gratifying for not only did his concept win out in the end, he was now to be paid for what he had offered free of charge. The new wing, now the main entrance to the Library, was completed in December 1875.

Exactly where all the key participants in this long and acrimonious affair stood is unclear. Many, no doubt, changed their views over time, this was certainly the case with Charles H. Russell. It appears that ultimately, the important backers of Mason's plan were a small group of influential and loyal friends and former clients including the King brothers (Edward King, Dr. David King and George Gordon King) and Henry Ledyard. Both George Gordon King and Henry Ledyard were presidents of the library board during the years the addition was under consideration.

Mason was one of the first board members to resign as a result of the controversy, quitting in 1870. Yet, despite continuing rancor, Mason as always seemed able to remain above the fray. In September 1875, just as his addition was being completed, Mason, Sr. was proposed for board membership on two opposing slates of candidates. He was elected and continued to serve on the board, supervising its building affairs, until his death.

Mason, Sr.'s Redwood Library addition is one of his most successful designs and a unique effort on his part to harmonize with the spirit and detail of a pre-existing structure. In this he was assisted by his gifted son, who had a much fuller knowledge of colonial architecture and who did a set of measured drawings of Peter Harrison's original library building for his father to work from as he designed the addition.<sup>45</sup>

It was with considerable pride that Mason, Sr. carried out the directive of his fellow board members in 1886 to have his own name inscribed beneath those of Peter Harrison and George Snell on a memorial tablet put up at the west entrance to the Library. As an historian and chronicler of local institutions, Mason viewed his efforts at Redwood as a legacy by which posterity would remember him.<sup>46</sup>

In 1760, a British traveler, the Reverend Andrew Burnaby, wrote that Newport's churches were "not worth looking at," but judged its other major buildings — the Synagogue (then under construction), Colony House, Redwood Library, and the Brick Market (the latter known to him only through plans) — as models of architectural taste.<sup>47</sup> As this essay has described, nineteenth century Newporters shared Rev. Burnaby's positive assessment, broadened it to include the churches he thought rude, and added to it the veneration patriotic associations and time itself had lent to these landmarks. Newport Victorians cultivated their ties with a proud past by preserving the public buildings which were the most conspicuous monuments of this heritage and by setting in them much of the civic and institutional life of the community. Repeatedly during the past century, citizens of Newport turned aside "the hand of modern vandalism" and by their deeds we are still enriched.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. This is the first in what is envisioned as a series of articles recounting Newport's role in the evolution of the Colonial Revival. It is based in part on research undertaken for a thesis at Brown



University with Professor William Jordy on George C. Mason & Son, architects. Portions of the text are based on work initiated for the catalogue of the exhibition "Rhode Island Buildings on Paper" jointly sponsored by the Rhode Island School of Design, Brown University and the Rhode Island Historical Society. I wish to express my thanks to the staffs of the Newport Historical Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Redwood Library in the conduct of my research on nineteenth-century Newport, and to the staff of the A.I.A. Foundation for assistance with research on the involvement of Richard Morris Hunt in planning alterations to the Redwood Library.

2. Antoinette Downing & Vincent Scully, *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island* (1952/1967), p.3. This is the most valuable source on all the buildings discussed herein.
3. Downing & Scully, pp.84-86; Esther I. Schwartz, "Touro Synagogue Restored, 1827-1829," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XVII #2, Summer 1958, pp.23-26; Rabbi Theodore Lewis, "Touro Synagogue — National Historic Site," *Newport History* XLVIII Part 3, Summer 1975, pp.281-319.
4. Schwartz, p.23.
5. Other nineteenth century admirers of Harrison's work included Arthur Gilman (1844), Richard Upjohn (1869), Robert S. Peabody (1877-78), George C. Mason, Jr. (1880), and Montgomery Schuyler (1895).
6. Original manuscript dated 22 November 1853, Rhode Island Historical Society Library.
7. The Masons' careers are too complex and important to adequately treat here, but a basic knowledge of their biographies is essential for a full understanding of this essay. George C. Mason, Sr. (1820-1894) was born into a moderately wealthy old-line Newport mercantile family. Trained in commerce, he chose to become an artist, then a journalist, real estate agent, architect, and historian. He edited the *Newport Mercury* from 1850 to 1858 and wrote columns on Newport affairs for out-of-town papers for many years, in addition to authoring half-a-dozen books. He opened his architectural office in 1858 and combined his business career with an active commitment to local institutions, particularly to Trinity Church, Redwood Library, Newport Hospital and the Newport Historical Society. George C. Mason, Jr. (1850-1924) trained as an architect with his father and became his partner in 1871. He took relatively little interest in civic affairs, concentrating his energies on his architectural practice, on advancing his career in professional circles, and on the study, interpretation, and restoration of Colonial architecture, being perhaps the first American architect recognized as an expert in this field. Like his father, he published widely, but almost all Mason, Jr.'s publications are devoted to architecture.
8. Trinity Church, Records of Vestry Meetings, 22 and 29 April 1858.
9. Dr. David King, an extraordinarily active antiquarian and collector, was closely associated with Mason in several organizations of mutual interest, including the Newport Historical Society and Redwood Library (see below).
10. *Newport Mercury*, 1 May 1858.
11. George C. Mason, Sr., *Annals of Trinity Church* (1894) II, pp.169-171. An unsigned letter calling for the same sort of building was printed in the *Newport Daily News* 1 May 1858.
12. *Ibid.* By July 1858 a controversy had arisen within the parish over Rector Mercer's wish to have the summers free so he might preach in All Saints Chapel, Newport, which he owned and in which he

- wanted to rent pews — in competition with Trinity and other established parishes. This extremely divisive issue continued until Mercer resigned the rectorship in 1860. The affair influenced the outcome of Mason's efforts to build a new Trinity church. (Mason, *Annals of Trinity II*, pp.180-184).
13. Mason, *Annals of Trinity II*, pp.174-178.
  14. *Newport Daily News*, 17 February 1859.
  15. *Newport Mercury*, 15 June 1867.
  16. Quoted in the *Newport Mercury*, 29 November 1879.
  17. The basic source on the Newport Colony House is Downing & Scully, *Architectural Heritage of Newport*, pp.60-63. The Providence building, now much altered and enlarged, is today known as the Old State House.
  18. *Newport Mercury*, 6 February 1869.
  19. *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the A.I.A.: 16 & 17 November. 1869* (1870), p.48.
  20. *Newport Mercury*, 14 September 1872.
  21. *Newport Mercury*, 13 August 1892.
  22. *Newport Mercury*, 1 July 1885. See too Downing & Scully, *Architectural Heritage of Newport*, pp.83-84.
  23. *Newport Mercury*, 1 March through 19 April 1879.
  24. Mason, Jr.'s Old Stone Mill article appeared in the *Magazine of American History* for September 1879 and was widely commented on — e.g. in *The Nation* for 4 September 1879, in the *American Architect & Building News* for 4 October 1879, and in an unidentified British periodical of 1879 or '80 (clipping in Mason, Jr.'s scrapbook now at the Redwood Library). The other members of Mason's committee were Robert Swain Peabody, W.P.P. Longfellow, J. Cleveland Cady, and Charles McKim (Norman Isham, *In Praise of Antiquaries* (1931), p.18).
  25. *American Architect & Building News*, 13 & 20 August 1881.
  26. Mason, Jr. discussed contracts for the Daniel Ayrault and Ninon Challoner houses in his 1880 report and in the 1920s he lent these documents to Fiske Kimball for the latter to use in his seminal book on Colonial architecture. Mason, Jr.'s widow gave his family papers to the Newport Historical Society and these plans were again published in *Architectural Heritage of Newport* in 1952.
  27. The present city hall, designed by J.D. Johnston, was completed in 1900. A rugged and not particularly noble Second Empire affair, critics soon called for its replacement — with something in the Colonial style! When City Hall was gutted by fire in 1925 the Colonialists got their wish, at least in part. What was left of the stone exterior was reworked and — with new window treatment, roofline and detail — produced the present, semi-Colonial edifice opened in 1927. W. Cornell Appleton of Boston designed the 1920s reworking of City Hall and went on from this project to design the neo-Colonial Newport County Court House on Washington Square. A year after the present City Hall was Colonialized, the former city hall (Brick Market) was restored through the generosity of John Nicholas Brown.
  28. See Downing & Scully, *Architectural Heritage of Newport*, pp.57-59. William B. Rhoads in *The Colonial Revival* (1978, p.274) states that the Concord Historical Society purchased an eighteenth-century house to be its headquarters in 1887; Rhoads thought this was the first instance of such an occurrence.



29. *Proceedings of the Newport Historical Society at its Annual Meeting*, 18 March 1886, p.6.
30. George C. Mason, Sr., *Annals of the Redwood Library* (1891), pp.401-404.
31. *Newport Mercury*, 7 June, 12 July, 11 October & 15 November 1884.
32. *American Architect & Building News* XVII #488, 2 May 1885, pp.210-211.
33. *Newport Mercury*, 20 November 1886 through 17 December 1887; *Philadelphia Ledger*, as reprinted in the *Mercury*, 22 September 1888.
34. For the early history of the Library, see Downing & Scully, *Architectural Heritage of Newport*, pp.80-83. This section of the article presents information on the Hunt and Mason, Sr. Redwood projects of the 1860s and early 1870s discovered since publication of Richard Howland's admirable chapter on the nineteenth century architecture of the Library appeared in *Redwood Papers: A Bicentennial Collection*, issued in 1976.
35. *Newport Mercury*, 9 January 1875.
36. This discussion of plans for a new library addition during the 1860s and '70s is based on George C. Mason, Sr.'s *Annals of the Redwood Library* (1891), pp.241-355, unless noted otherwise.
37. Drawings in the collections of the Redwood Library.
38. Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (1980), pp.124-125. The efforts of Russell and, more particularly, of members of the Hoppin family to promote Hunt's design for the Redwood in the period 1868-1873 are analogous to the efforts of much the same faction to gain for Hunt the commission for gateways leading into New York's Central Park, in the period 1863-1866 (Central Park project discussed by Baker, pp.148-161).
39. *Newport Mercury*, 18 January 1868; *Newport Daily News*, 2 January 1873.
40. Baker, figures 4, 26.
41. George C. Mason, Sr., *Annals of the Redwood Library*, pp. 270-273; *Newport Mercury*, 31 August 1872; *Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the A.I.A.*, 17 November 1869, p.48.
42. Mason, Sr., *Annals of the Redwood Library*, p.271.
43. *Newport Daily News*, 2 October 1872.
44. *Newport Daily News*, 22 October 1903.
45. Mason, Sr., *Annals of the Redwood Library*, p.432.
46. Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels in the Middle Settlements of North America . . .*, London, 1775; Cornell University Reprint, 1960, p.83.