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Some remarks on Philadelphia architectural history

BY DENNIS L. JOHNSON

Since the origins of the city, Philadelphia has been a magnet for young and ambitious architects.

During the Colonial Swedish period (1638-1664) the several hundred Swedish and Finnish settlers established scattered farms and villages along the Delaware River in the area that was later to become Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware.

They introduced the Scandinavian log house to the area, which was to become popular for later settlers in the forests of the eastern regions of North America. Wood churches were also built, soon to be replaced by 1700 with more stable brick structures in the Old Swede's Churches in Philadelphia and Wilmington, both of which exist today. After a brief period of Dutch rule, settlement by mostly English settlers in Philadelphia set the pattern for the city of brick homes and other buildings on a gridiron plan. The arrival of William Penn in 1664 set the plan of development for the next century as the city grew.

Most early buildings in Philadelphia followed English styles of construction and the designs were mainly done by carpenters, often using wood for decorative parts which would have been made in stone in England. A few estates had larger free-standing homes designed also in the English tradition such as Mt. Airy in northwest Philadelphia. These homes relied heavily on architects planbooks and builders' manuals brought from England. Architects were almost non-existent in Philadelphia.

Independence Hall (the center building) dates to this period and was designed by a lawyer, Andrew Hamilton. This was an imaginative design and provided for two side buildings which were added after the American Revolution.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the English influence became even more evident, particularly in larger buildings and in churches. English stylebooks came more into use, as the Georgian style became more common in England. One particularly influential English Architect, James Gibbs, designed St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in London and this church widely influenced others in England. His style book was

widely circulated in the U.S. and Christ Church in Philadelphia is one excellent example of the then widely popular Christopher Wren (famous British architect) influence as practiced by a Dr. Kearsley in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia continued to grow and many new building types began to appear on the scene. Until deep into the 19th century Philadelphia was the largest city in the United States and took the lead in developing these new structures – prisons, hospitals, banks, museums, and other public buildings, and institutions, schools, and colleges. The English influence continued as many well-trained English and continental architects came to the new nation's eastern cities to practice their art. Late Colonial styles gave way to the newly popular classical revival styles drawing upon Roman and Greek influence. A French architect, Pierre L'Enfant, designed Federal Hall in New York and then laid out the master plan for the new national capital in Washington, D.C. A British architect, William Thornton, won the competition for the design of the national capital in Washington and an Irishman, James Hoban, designed the White House. Benjamin Latrobe, a Huguenot living in England, whose mother was born in Pennsylvania, came to the U.S. in 1796. LaTrobe, after an excellent architectural education in England and the continent, became an important architect in the U.S., a teacher of many others, and the founder of the American architectural profession. A few other European architects established themselves in the U.S. but many others returned home.

A number of architects became known as the Philadelphia-Washington Group, and had wide influence. John Haviland was English-trained, did much work in the Greek Revival style, and became well known in the design of prisons. William Strickland did many important public buildings in Philadelphia; the Mint, the Exchange, and the Naval Hospital. Robert Mills became famous as a church designer and established the circular or octagonal auditorium church. He went on to do much work in Washington, where he established

the style for most later federal buildings. Alumni of Strickland's office were Gideon Shryock and Thomas U. Walter. Walter designed Girard College in Philadelphia and was later to become the last major architect of the U.S. capitol begun by Charles Bulfinch of Boston, adding the Senate and the House wings in the 1850's and the great cast-iron dome completed during the Civil War.

Philadelphia soon after the Civil War ended attracted a cluster of well-known architects to that city. The University of Pennsylvania began to offer architectural courses by 1868, and attracted a group of these architects to its faculty including Walter Cope, John Stewardson, Frank Miles Day, and Wilson Eyre. This group formed the first Philadelphia School. Some years later, this group was joined by a French architect, M. Paul Philippe Cret, a winner of seven national competitions. By 1914, lectures in city planning and landscape architecture were added to the curriculum, and within another decade, Fine Arts and Music joined with these to form a new School of Fine Arts modeled after the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. This activity placed the University of Pennsylvania in the top rank of schools of architecture in the U.S.

Founded in 1749 by Benjamin Franklin, this new university joined only four other colleges then in existence in the English Colonies; Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, and Princeton. These four were all founded as divinity schools primarily to educate the clergy. Franklin's goal was more broadly focused towards the arts and skills enabling citizens to make a living. These first colleges would later be joined by several others to become known as the "Ivy League" group of distinguished universities in the new American nation.

Another article by Dennis L. Johnson on a Swedish-American architect will be published in SAG 2016/4.