

The rise of Greek Revival

The neoclassical style reflected the changing culture of 19th-century New Orleans



The original St. Charles Exchange Hotel was designed by James Gallier and Charles Dakin in a magnificent Greek style. Built during 1834-1837, it was located at 200 St. Charles Ave., where the Place St. Charles skyscraper now stands. The hotel burned in 1851 and was replaced by two later buildings, the last razed in 1974. *Lithograph by B.W. Thayer, 1845, courtesy Louisiana State Museum.*

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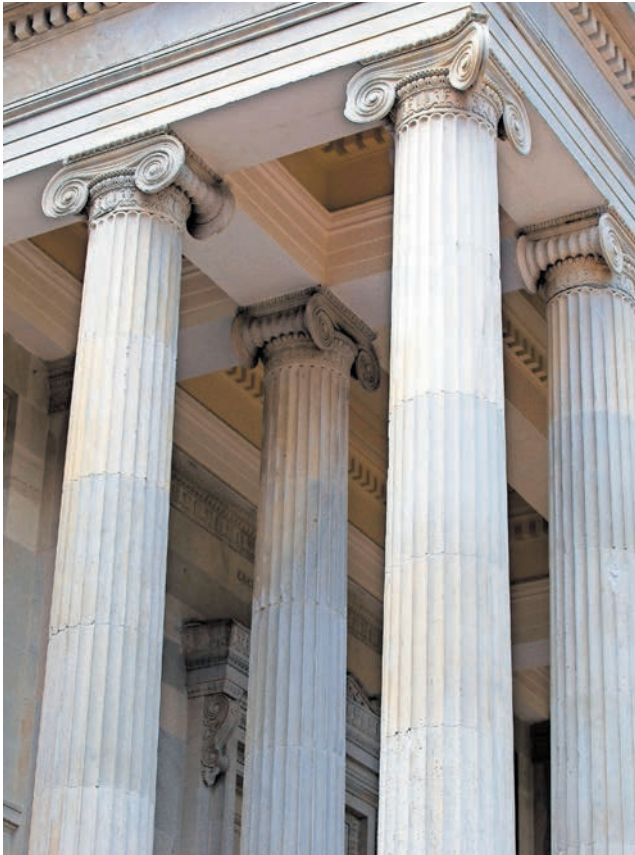


Two hundred years ago, Northerners started arriving by the thousands in New Orleans, and like all migrants, they brought their ethos with them. Over the next century, these predominantly Anglo-Irish Americans would transform a mostly francophone city, whose cultural compass pointed toward the “Creole Atlantic,” into a mostly English-speaking metropolis firmly positioned within the American South.

Part of that transformation entailed architecture. The overriding style brought by Americans to the Creole City in the early 1800s reflected a sensibility informed by the Enlightenment, which itself drew inspiration from classical antiquity two millennia earlier. For this reason, the new architecture came to be broadly known as neoclassicism, and one of its offshoots, Hellenism, explicitly paid homage

to the rationalism and democracy of ancient Greece.

Not coincidentally, this was a time when new archeological discoveries in Athens came to light, intriguing populations in Western Europe. Greek architectural ornaments — in porticos, pediments, columns, dentils, doorways and lintels — subsequently began to appear in buildings throughout England and greater Germany.



James Gallier designed Municipality Hall (known today as Gallier Hall) and built it of white marble from quarries in New York.
Chris Granger photos / cgranger@nola.com

The term “Greek Revival” would later be coined to describe this Hellenistic fashion, which soon crossed the Atlantic. Public buildings, commercial houses, churches and mansions resembling ancient Greek and Roman temples began to appear in places like New York and Virginia.

As Americans from those and other places began to trickle into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, they at first had little choice but to conform to Creole architectural styles and hire local builders. But when the trickle grew to a torrent, Americans increasingly brushed aside localism in favor of their own ideas — and their own architects.

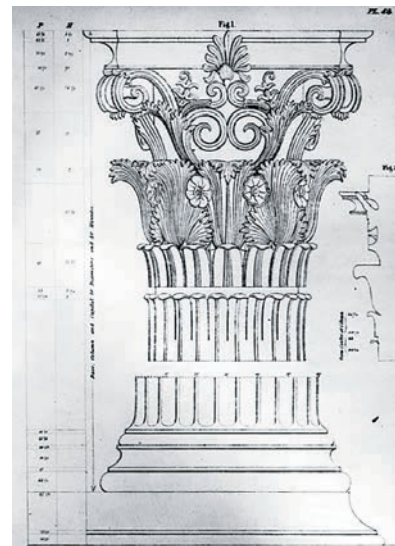
In New Orleans, the earliest known surviving structure with prominent Greek traits is the Thierry House (1814) at 721 Gov. Nicholls St., whose Doric columns and classical proportions were designed by Henry Latrobe (son of Benjamin Latrobe, designer of the U.S. Capitol and an emissary of neoclassicism) and Arsene Lacarriere Latour.

More followed, and by the 1820s, local draftsmen were producing Greek patterns for Louisiana townhouses, storehouses, institutions, country villas and plantation houses. Edmund Hogan, for example, advertised in the *Courrier de la Louisiane* in 1822 his “architectural sketches...in the Grecian, Gothic and fancy styles...arranged on the most approved principles, with plans of public buildings of every description.”

Greek Revival spread across the formerly Creole cityscape: Ionic porticos appeared on Canal Street; gable roofs came to outnumber hipped roofs; squared doorways replaced arched openings; heavy granite lintels were installed above apertures; delicate colonnades disappeared for classical columns of the Doric, Ionic or Corinthian order; and dentils appeared along entablatures.

Interiors were affected too: staircases previously set outside on the gallery now came indoors; and hallways — a rarity in the Creole city — were designed into floor plans, indicating the Anglo value placed on privacy.

This was also the era when architecture developed into a specialized profession, and trained architects from out-of-state, nearly all classicists, began to win contracts pre-



Architect Minard LaFever’s sketches, such as this one showing Corinthian columns and capitals, helped popularize the style.
‘The Beauties of Modern Architecture’ by Minard LaFever, 1839, courtesy Library of Congress.

viously held by Creole builders. Among the newcomers were Irish-born James Gallier and Henry Howard, both by way of Manhattan, and New York-born brothers James and Charles Dakin, all of who arrived at New Orleans in the mid-1830s and promptly set to work.

Two of Gallier’s most important works were the original St. Charles Hotel (co-designed with Charles Dakin and built 1834-1837, where the Place St. Charles skyscraper now stands) and Municipality Hall (1845-1853, now Gallier Hall), fronting Lafayette Square.

In his autobiography, Gallier describes each project in terms that betray just how exogenous these buildings were to New Orleans. His clients for the hotel, for example, were “Irish merchants” to whom he proposed a payment structure “as was usual...in England.” He had “the stone work...joiners’ work and iron work...prepared (up) north,” and he struggled with New Orleans’ “wholly alluvial” soil, into



Greek Revival formed the first major American architectural contribution to the New Orleans cityscape.
Chris Granger photos / cgranger@nola.com

which his massive edifice would eventually sink by 2 ½ feet. A substantial number of his workforce, meanwhile, perished due to “sun stroke or yellow fever,” the latter of which nearly killed Gallier himself.

But the result was stupendous: The St. Charles Hotel was an immense neoclassical dead-ringer for Latrobe’s U.S. Capitol, complete with a 185-foot-high dome and a “Corinthian portico,” pointedly positioned on the American side of town.

For Municipality Hall, Gallier had his “portico and ashlar” (fine masonry) made of “white marble procured from quarries near New York,” and the steps made of granite from Massachusetts. “The style of the architecture is Grecian Ionic,” he wrote, “and the portico is considered as a very chaste and highly finished example of that style.”

Even the purpose of the building bespoke the cultural changes afoot; it was slated to serve the Council of Alderman for the Second Municipality, an area dominated by Americans. After 1853, it would become City Hall, today’s Gallier Hall, a paragon of the Greek idiom.

Why did Greek Revival capture the American imagination? One reason is that its dignified majesty seemed to affirm the ideals of rationalism, order and democracy stewarded by what the founding fathers presumed to be an enlightened aristocracy.

Urban historian Lewis Mumford saw its appeal as indicative of “a desire for collective dignity and order, combined with the utmost decorum.” Architectural historian James Marston Fitch viewed neoclassicism’s Southern popularity in a darker light, seeing the reverence of “Imperial Rome (and) Periclean Greece (as a) reactionary use of the Classic idiom (which) regarded human slavery as the basis of Classic culture instead of...its blemish.”

Practical reasons also contributed to Greek Revival’s spread. Architects such as Minard LaFever sketched widely distributed pattern books of standard Greek motifs, which made their replication faster and cheaper. Ordinary folks came to expect that important buildings look this way, regardless of the theoretical rationale. Clients asked for the Greek look, and architects delivered it.

In Creole New Orleans, Greek Revival formed the first major American architectural contribution to the city’s built environment. By my count, Greek Revival as well as Federal ornamentation may be seen in the façades of at least 614 structures in the Vieux Carre, more than one in every four street-fronting buildings — and this in the “French” Quarter. Most were erected between the 1820s and 1850s.

Greek Revival began to fall out of fashion as the agrarian



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America envisioned by Thomas Jefferson gave way to Alexander Hamilton’s vision of commerce and industry, followed by the subsequent rise of Jacksonian democracy, which championed the common man and spurned the notion of aristocracy. Mumford tied its decline to “the decay of public life, (which) became so painfully evident after 1840.”

Classicism would give way to romanticism and its fêting of individualism and emotionalism, and by the 1850s, the solemn Greek temples dotting the landscape started to look dour and passé. Clients instead began requesting a new look, known as Italianate — the topic of next month’s Cityscapes. Greek Revival held on for a bit longer in the South, particularly in the plantation regions, but the demise of the slave-holding regime sealed its fate after the Civil War.

Years later, the historical style began to “re-revive” in pastiche form (sometimes described as Southern Colonial and seen throughout Uptown today), and storybooks and cinema would help resuscitate the relationship between Greek Revival and the Old South.

So, too, survives the psychological link between neoclassicism and gravitas. To this day, designers invoke Grecian and other classical forms to communicate stability and order in institutional buildings. Evidence of Greek Revival’s enduring credibility may be found all around Washington D.C., in courthouses and government offices nationwide, and as close as your neighborhood’s banks and churches.

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