



# “A Desire for Collective Dignity and Order”

*Greek Revival Architecture Marks 200 Years in Louisiana, 1814-2014*

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**T**HE THREE NEW ORLEANS BUILDINGS seen here — two prominent, one unidentified, all now demolished — reflect an architectural fashion traceable to the spirit of the Enlightenment and, two millennia earlier, to the aesthetics of ancient Greece and Rome. The movement is known broadly as Neoclassicism, and one of its latter phases, which emphasized Grecian cultural forms, came to be known as Hellenism and finally as Greek Revival.

Hellenism’s signature architectural elements — as inscribed in pediments, columns, dentils, keyhole doorways, heavy lintels, and in an overall sense of symmetry and order — began to appear in building designs throughout Germany and England in the late 18th century. The style and the philosophies behind it soon crossed the Atlantic, where they resonated with American ideals of rationalism, order, and Republican forms of government stewarded by an enlightened aristocracy with a spirit of *noblesse oblige*.

As Anglo-Americans from the North and upper South trickled into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, they at first had little choice but to conform to local French Creole architecture, with its steep West Indian-influenced hip roofs, Spanish-influenced arched openings, airy galleries with colonnades, outdoor staircases, and lack of hallways. But when the trickle grew to a torrent, Americans increasingly brushed aside localism in favor of their own imported concepts — and their own architects. Soon the lower South would start to see gable instead of hip roofs, squared or Greek “key” openings, heavy granite lintels, columns instead of colonnades, dentils on entablatures, and interior hallways and staircases. Some buildings, including two of the three shown here, were flat-out Greek temples.

The earliest known surviving structure in Louisiana with prominent Greek traits is the 200-year-old Thierry House (1814) at 721 Gov. Nicholls St., whose Doric columns and Classical proportions, designed by Henry Latrobe (son of Benjamin Latrobe, designer of the U.S. Capitol and an emissary of Neoclassicism) and Arsene Lacarriere Latour, were hidden for decades until restoration architects Richard Koch and Samuel Wilson uncovered them in 1940. By the 1820s, Greek façades and American interior designs (namely hallways) spread throughout the city and South, influencing townhouses, cottages, storehouses, churches, institutions, and most famously, plantation houses.

ABOVE: Photographer Walker Evans took this image of the middle unit of the “Three Sisters” on North Rampart around 1935, one hundred and one years after their construction. Courtesy Library of Congress

The spatial distribution of Greek Revival in antebellum New Orleans sheds light on underlying ethnic settlement geographies, in which Franco-phone Creoles generally resided downriver, in and below the central part of the French Quarter, and Anglophone Americans settled predominately in the upriver direction, starting in the upper French Quarter and particularly above Canal Street. The pattern was observed by, among others, famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who toured the city in 1854 as part of a regional tour documented in his book *The Cotton Kingdom*. In it, Olmsted described the cityscape he saw during a cab ride up Decatur Street from the foot of Elysian Fields Avenue through the French Quarter to the St. Charles Hotel. In the lower area, Olmsted witnessed “narrow dirty streets, among grimy old stuccoed walls; high arched windows and doors, balconies and entresols, and French noises and French smells, French signs, ten to one of English.” Stucco, arched openings, entresols, balconies: these are all signature traits of the city’s Spanish-influenced French Creole architecture. In the upper streets, but still within the Quarter, Olmsted wrote, “now the signs became English, and the new brick buildings American,” an allusion to Greek Revival and other Northern imports. Upon crossing Canal and heading up St. Charles Avenue, he saw “French, Spanish, and English signs, the latter predominating.”

Architectural styles still standing today bear out the pattern Law witnessed 160 years ago: while Creole (which Olmsted would call “French”) and Greek Revival (“American”) styles may be found today on practically any selected French Quarter block, Greek Revival specimens outnumber Creole examples in the upper “American” blocks, particularly above St. Louis Street, while the reverse is true in the “French” blocks below that street. (For maps and evidence, see my 2006 publication *Geographies of New Orleans*). St. Louis Street is significant because, in 1822, the famous Creole aristocrat Bernard Marigny identified it — and not Canal Street — as the *de facto* dividing line between American and Creole interests.

Why the Southern penchant for Greek Revival? Perhaps the appeal reflected “a desire for collective dignity and order,” as urban historian Lewis Mumford wrote, “combined with the utmost decorum.” Architectural historian James Marston Fitch viewed the style’s regional popularity in a darker light, seeing in it the “Southern identification with Imperial Rome [and] Periclean Greece[, a] reactionary use of the Classic idiom [which] regarded human slavery as the basis of Classic culture instead of being merely its



blemish.” In Creole New Orleans, Greek Revival formed the first major American architectural contribution to the city’s built environment, and specimens of it may be seen citywide today by the thousands. By my count, Greek Revival may be seen in the façades of 614 structures in the Vieux Carré today, more than one in every four neighborhood buildings — and this is in the “French” Quarter!

Not among them are the buildings featured here, all of which are now demolished. At right is the Citizen’s Bank on 620 Toulouse St. in the French Quarter, built in 1838 with quintessential Greek styling designed by J. N. B. de Pouilly and located directly behind its financial affiliate, the St. Louis Exchange Hotel. Post-bellum decline left the magnificent bank empty, and it later became a laundry and storage shed (not to mention a curiosity; note the words “Old Bank” scrawled on the column at right). In 1903 it was purchased with plans to incorporate it into the Hotel Royal operating in the old St. Louis Exchange, but the vision never came to fruition, and by 1910 the old Greek bank was gone. Today a modern façade masking a parking garage occupies the site.

Pictured on the opposite page is a stylistically similar edifice designed by James Gallier Sr. and built in the same era (1834), but as a residence rather than commerce. This particular building, seen here in a photograph by Walker Evans taken 101 years after construction, was the middle of three identical units known as The Three Sisters. For years the trio formed a majestic landmark along 228-238 North Rampart. The “sister” nearest the Bienville intersection had been lost years earlier, but the other two survived into the era when the French Quarter was officially protected from unapproved demolitions. Unfortunately, this particular block had been gerrymandered out of Vieux Carré Commission jurisdiction in 1946, and today the site of all Three Sisters is one big parking lot.

At left is a stately home near Lee Circle representative of hundreds of townhouses built for prosperous families during the late antebellum era.



The former Citizen’s Bank (1838) on 620 Toulouse St. looked like a Greek ruin in its last years. This scene dates to around 1898, ten years prior to the building’s demolition. Courtesy Library of Congress



This imposing townhouse near Lee Circle, likely demolished for the construction of the Mississippi River Bridge in the late 1950s, exhibits a transition from Greek Revival to Italianate style. It was photographed in January 1936 by Walker Evans. Courtesy Library of Congress

Its attic windows and proportions suggest Greek influence. But one key trait — the segmented arches above the windows — indicates its designer had moved beyond the austere order of Hellenism in favor of the florid beauty and emotionality of Romanticism. An outgrowth of Romanticism’s penchant for the picturesque and fascination with the Renaissance, this “Italianate” style arrived to America by way of England around 1840 and appealed to the budding American interest in what art historian Joan G. Caldwell described as the “aesthetic of luxury” — a notion that would have offended the rather prim and magisterial sensibilities of Classicism. Fanciful Italianate features such as decorative parapets, segmented arches, quoins and cornices supported by paired brackets were “applied like an overlay to traditional building types within the city,” effectively replacing the more staid Classical style while maintaining the underlying townhouse structural typology seen here. Popular in New Orleans from the 1850s to 1880s, Italianate itself melded and eventually gave way to broader Victorian styles around the turn of the century. Little is known of this particular townhouse and its lovely cast-iron filigree; it may have been one of the many historic buildings razed for the construction of the Mississippi River Bridge right-of-way in the late 1950s.

Greek Revival declined as the agrarian, Jeffersonian America of the early 1800s industrialized later in the century, as Classicism gave way to Romanticism, and, in Mumford’s words, as “the decay of public life...became so painfully evident after 1840.” The concordant rise of Jacksonian democracy, which championed the empowerment of the common man and looked askance at allusions to aristocracy, made majestic Greek-style temples increasingly passé by the 1850s. Classical grandiosity held on for a bit longer in the South, particularly in the plantation regions, but the demise of the slave-holding regime after the Civil War sealed its fate.

Years later, “Lost Cause” mythology, storybooks and cinematography would resuscitate the relationship between Greek Revival and the Old South, and the architectural style, for better or worse, began to reappear in nostalgic or scenographic form. Today, the two remain indelibly linked in the public imagination, especially in Louisiana — despite that Hellenistic styles were all but unknown here prior to the American arrival two centuries ago.

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