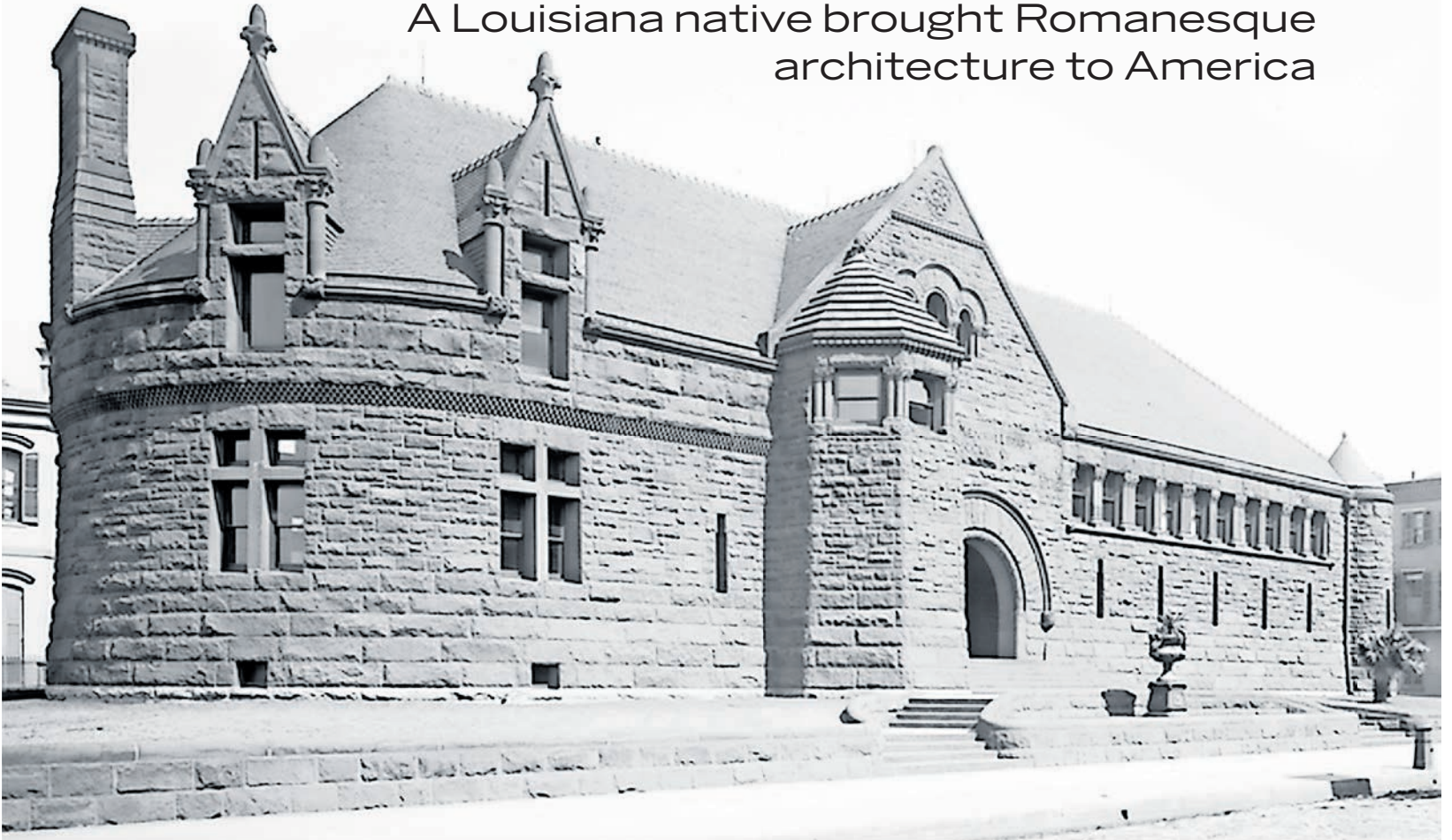


# STRENGTH AND GRACE

A Louisiana native brought Romanesque architecture to America



The Howard Memorial Library, pictured here in 1900, is New Orleans' only true H.H. Richardson-designed building. *Library of Congress.*

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uch of New Orleans culture derives from outside influences imported by newcomers, whose traditions and tastes gradually syncretized locally into something distinct. The city has returned the favor, exporting its own indigenous innovations, such as Creole cooking, jazz and bounce music.

Then there are cases of New Orleanians who went off to create great things elsewhere, and whose works subsequently found their way back home as part of a broader national diffusion.

One such example of that cultural “reim-

portation” is the Romanesque architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson, a man so associated with this distinctive style that colleagues started naming it in his honor within a few years of his death, a rarity in the industry.



A portrait of H.H. Richardson hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. *Photo by Richard Campanella*

H.H. Richardson was born in 1838 on Priestly Plantation in St. James Parish, now the St. Joseph Plantation House in Vacherie. He grew up in a Julia Row townhouse in New Orleans and briefly attended the University of Louisiana, a predecessor of Tulane. He then set off for Harvard University and spent the Civil War years studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris before returning to establish an architectural practice in New York City.

Over the next 20 years, Richardson would develop and refine a style he initially gleaned from the medieval churches and castles seen on his European sojourns.

Stout and venerable, the ancient Roman-influenced edifices exuded strength and permanence, with their massive stone walls, broad semicircular arches and vaults, short columns and fortress-like turrets and towers. Yet the structures also retained a romantic quality, appearing graceful and picture-perfect in the landscape.

That sense of romance appealed to 19th-century eyes. As the Enlightenment gave way to modernization and industrialization, Western artists and philosophers shifted away from their fascination with classical antiquity, which helped inspire the revival of Greek architecture (neoclassicism), and found a new muse in the aesthetics of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The shift reflected a new spirit called romanticism, which embraced beauty and emotionality and appreciated the picture-like qualities of the old ruins in the landscape — so much so that a “Picturesque Movement” began to affect the design of English parks and villages.

Romanticist and Picturesque tastes steered architects toward a revival of the building styles of the Middle Ages, including Italian, Gothic and Norman. These would become known respectively as Italianate, Gothic Revival and Romanesque Revival architecture. (The term “Romanesque” here did not connote ancient Rome per se but rather the Norman buildings erected after the fall of the Roman Empire. Latter-day observers tended to “roman-ticize” these Roman-influenced edifices — thus the term.)

Richardson studied in Paris at a time when romanticism and its architectural manifestations were peaking in Europe but still fairly new in the United States. He returned to a nation transformed by the Civil War, and the victorious North was ready for new ideas.

English Gothic and French Second Empire styles were all the rage, and Richardson, in partnership with his business manager Charles D. Gambrill, initially followed suit in his early work in New York.

But Richardson increasingly found himself experimenting with the Norman features he saw in Europe, adapting them to his own tastes and the ever-widening array of industrial materials now available. His efforts culminated with a breakthrough design for a church in Boston. Completed in 1874 to great acclaim, Trinity Episcopal Church made Richardson



something of a “starchitect,” and he moved to Boston where commissions awaited him.

Universities, in particular, were in need of architects at this time. College campuses were being designed across the nation, and administrators sought a distinguished look. Richardson’s brand of Romanesque seemed to nod to higher education in England, which American universities tended to emulate.

Harvard University commissioned Richardson to design a number of campus buildings, and because other institutions of higher learning often followed Harvard’s lead, “Richardson Romanesque” came into demand on campuses elsewhere. Other architects started replicating the look, and it spread.

Richardson designed scores of train stations, government and commercial buildings, courthouses, residences, lodges, monuments and, most of all, libraries across the country.

According to biographer Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, Richardson and his firm designed at least 150 projects, of which 85 were built.

In person, Richardson was the sort of man who left everyone dazzled. His portrait artist Hubert von Herkomer described the nation’s most famous architect “as solid in his friendship as in his figure. Big-bodied, big-hearted, large-minded, full-brained, loving as he is pugnacious.”

Some might say he was pure Louisiana.

But with so much success in the North, Richardson could hardly find time to return home to New Orleans or St. James Parish. It did not help that the region’s tenuous post-war economy promised few opportunities for architects of his stature.

Recalled writer Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, who knew Richardson personally, “he never even visited his native town again” after returning from France in 1865, “although I have heard him speak of a con-

stant wish to do so.”

Richardson did not realize that desire. He died of kidney disease at age 47. Yet his work would nonetheless find a way home.

His most direct contribution came posthumously — and accidentally. While ailing, he submitted designs for a library competition in East Saginaw, Mich. Because of a difference of design philosophy with the client, though, the job went to another firm. Shortly thereafter, Richardson died, and the partnership of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge gained control of his commissions.

The partners promptly reprised their mentor’s East Saginaw plans for a new project: a building to house a private book collection slated for a site near Lee Circle. Howard Memorial Library, built in 1888 and now the Taylor Library of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, is the only Richardson design erected in the region.

**Above:**  
**The Howard Memorial Library, built in 1888, is now the Taylor Library of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.** *Erika Goldring / archive*



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**Tilton Memorial Hall, completed in 1902, was originally Tulane University's Library.**

*Chris Granger / staff archive*



**Tulane University's Richardson Memorial Hall was built in 1908.** *Richard Campanella*



**Gargoyles and grotesques typical of medieval architecture appear in some of Richardson Romanesque designs. This one is on Tilton Hall at Tulane.** *Richard Campanella*

But Richardson's main contributions to New Orleans came vicariously, as his nationwide popularity got reimported locally. Architects influenced by his work began designing similar structures for local clients.

A Romanesque annex was built adjacent to Howard Memorial Library in 1891; this would become Confederate Memorial Hall, Louisiana's first museum.

Mansions with the same colossal look arose along St. Charles Avenue for clients, such as businessman and philanthropist Isidore Newman (completed in 1892 at 3607 St. Charles Ave.; now gone) and cotton merchant and banker W. P. Brown (completed in 1904 and now the largest house on the avenue, 4717 St. Charles).

Among the best local examples of Romanesque commercial, religious and institutional structures include 201 Camp St., designed by Thomas Sully and completed in 1888; St. Paul's Episcopal Church, designed by McDonald Berthas farther up Camp Street, completed in 1893 and demolished

in 1958 for the Pontchartrain Expressway; and the Jewish Orphans and Widows Home (1887), now site of the Jewish Community Center on St. Charles and Jefferson avenues.

The city in 1892 selected Dallas architect Max A. Orlopp Jr., who specialized in Richardson Romanesque courthouses, to design the Criminal Courts Building and Parish Prison. Completed in 1893, the structure, according to one Picayune journalist, "reminds one of an old-time chateau or Norman country house, [with] circular towers rising in the center... castellated, with turrets, battlements and slits for the archers.

"A closer view," he added, "shows...a mixing of the Romanesque [and] the Gothic." Demolished in 1949, the courthouse occupied the site of today's main branch of the New Orleans Public Library.

Perhaps Richardson's premier indirect local contribution was to the university he once attended, by this time renamed Tulane. Its administrators, including President William Preston Johnston, toured peer institutions and



**In 1892, New Orleans selected Dallas architect Max A. Orlopp Jr., who specialized in Richardson Romanesque courthouses, to design the Criminal Courts Building and Parish Prison, seen here in 1906 from Elk Place.** *Photo from the Library of Congress*

had initially considered an Italian Renaissance design for the new Uptown campus.

Instead, Johnston held a competition in which he requested "plain brick, pressed brick and stone" construction and a "unity of design" for the campus.

Local architects dominated the submissions, and the winner was Harrod and Andry, whose emphatically Romanesque design for the Main Building (now the iconic Gibson Hall) and the Physics and Chemistry buildings (now Hebert Hall and the Richardson Building) got under construction in January 1894.

My office is in the Richardson Building, and as I look out my window, I see a veritable campus-scape of Richardson Romanesque amid live oak trees and a grassy quad: seven monumental buildings dating from 1894 to 1942, all of gray rusticated stone or pressed brown brick, with broad arches and a heavy horizontality to them.

Among the loveliest is Tilton Hall (1902), whose intricately carved façade features gargoyles and reptilian grotesques reminiscent of medieval buildings.

Tilton Hall, originally the library, brings to mind Richardson's particular penchant for library projects. Tilton Library later merged its book collection with that of its Romanesque counterpart on Lee Circle, Howard Memorial Library, and today they form the core collection of Tulane's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library on Freret Street.

And whatever became of that project in East Saginaw to which a dying Richardson submitted one of his last designs, only to be rejected? That building, Hoyt Library, which opened in 1887, remains in operation today.

Its style: Richardson Romanesque.

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