

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **He Learned from a Lighthouse Builder**

Known as the "Father of American Architecture", famous for his designs of the United States Capitol, the Baltimore Basilica (first Roman Catholic Cathedral built in the United States) and the Louisiana State Bank in New Orleans, British-born American architect Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe was first apprenticed under John Smeaton (an engineer renowned for designing the historic Eddystone Lighthouse).

If one were to observe the obverse of a British copper penny, he would see the reigning monarch's profile. Queen Victoria was on the obverse of all coins from 1838 to 1901. On pennies minted before Britain's decimalization in 1971, one would also notice (on the reverse side) Smeaton's Eddystone Lighthouse to the left of Britannia (with a ship to her right). The lighthouse was added in 1859 by the Royal Mint to celebrate the centenary of Smeaton's Lighthouse. It perhaps alluded to the fact that one penny per ton was levied for this lighthouse on all ships passing (by the Act of 1708).

Anglo-Saxon silver pennies had been the currency used to pay the Vikings' protection money, the *Danegeld*. Payments were so large that they added up to almost three million troy ounces of silver, perhaps as high as £1 billion in today's purchasing power.

Britannia, the idealized female personification of Britain with her shield and trident (engraved by Rotier), is the image of Frances Teresa Stuart (or Stewart), Duchess of Richmond and Lennox (1647-1702). Diarist Samuel Pepys recounted that she was the greatest beauty he ever saw, and for this distinction she was known as *La Belle Stuart*. But her true fame came for refusing to become the mistress of Charles II, despite his enormous infatuation with her.

Eddystone Lighthouse is on the treacherous Eddystone Rocks in Devon, nine statute miles southwest of Rame Head in Cornwall. The current lighthouse is the fourth built on the site. Smeaton's was third. The first was a wooden structure (1696-1698) built by Henry Winstanley, who perished in the lighthouse's destruction in the early

hours of November 27, 1703. A French privateer had abducted poor Winstanley during construction, prompting Louis XIV to order his release with the comment:

“France is at war with England, not with humanity.”

Civil engineer John Smeaton modeled his lighthouse's shape upon an oak tree, built of granite blocks (secured by dovetail joints and marble dowels). And he pioneered a type of concrete (hydraulic lime) that would set under water. Construction began in 1756, and the light was lit in 1759. Latrobe did not enter his apprenticeship under Smeaton until 1784, and he was involved with him in the construction of the Basingtoke Canal in Surrey.

Latrobe (1764-1820) came to the United States in 1796 (after a bankruptcy), settling first in Virginia and later relocating to Philadelphia (his mother was born in Pennsylvania) to set up his architectural practice. His first major project in Philadelphia was to design the Bank of Pennsylvania, the first example of Greek Revival architecture in the United States. The Pump House was also designed in the Greek Revival style.

In 1803, Latrobe was hired as Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States, and spent much of the next fourteen years working on projects in Washington, D.C. He was responsible for several other design projects located around Lafayette Square, including Decatur House, St. John's Episcopal Church and the porticos of the White House. He was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and likely influenced Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia, and he knew many of the most illustrious people of his time. As a young architect, Robert Mills worked as Latrobe's assistant in the years 1803-1808. In 1814 Latrobe partnered with Robert Fulton in his successful steamship venture.

Latrobe's first project in New Orleans was the New Orleans Custom House, built in 1807 under Robert Alexander's supervision. In 1810, Latrobe sent his son, Henry Sellon Boneval Latrobe, to the Crescent City to present a plan for a waterworks system before the City Council. Latrobe's plan for the New Orleans waterworks system was based on a system he had earlier designed for Philadelphia. This system had been created as a response to the yellow fever epidemics affecting the city. The New Orleans project was designed to de-salt the water by means of steam-powered pumps.

While down in New Orleans, Latrobe's son participated in battles during the War of 1812, and he worked on projects that included the French Opera House, Charity Hospital and even building a lighthouse.

His other son, John Hazlehurst Boneval Latrobe, was a writer, lawyer

and inventor. He studied engineering at West Point and invented a unique stove, which fit into the fireplace and heated two rooms. His journey from New York to New Orleans, up the Mississippi River to Natchez and back (and across the southeastern states by stagecoach to Baltimore) was recorded in his biting, witty and informative 1834 journal. His fascination with the customs of New Orleans moved him to call the city, "a place after its own fashion". He married Charlotte Virginia Claiborne, and their great granddaughter married Samuel Wilson, Jr., New Orleans architectural preservationist (who taught so many the history of New Orleans architecture at Tulane - including this author).

On January 12, 1819, the brig *Clio* anchored off the levee at New Orleans following a three-week voyage from New York. Among her passengers was the father of these two sons (the well-traveled Benjamin Latrobe who had lived and worked in England, France, Germany, and Italy before conquering America), and he was eager to continue his contributions to the South's largest city and most important port. The process of designing and constructing the waterworks system in New Orleans had spanned eleven years. Latrobe also designed the central tower of the St. Louis Cathedral.

Latrobe's on Royal (also home for many years to Manheim's Antiques), in the former Louisiana State Bank Building (*La Banque de L'Etat de la Louisiane*) at 403 Royal Street, was Benjamin Latrobe's final design. He succumbed to yellow fever in 1820, before his plans would be completed by Benjamin Fox in 1822. Benjamin Latrobe was interred in Saint Louis Cemetery in New Orleans, where son Henry was buried three years before him (also dying from yellow fever).

Now restored and a popular venue for weddings, parties and social events, the hallmarks of Latrobe's on Royal include a large, vaulted "whisper dome", beautiful hand-painted wall murals and a traditional rear carriage house.

Perhaps a disc jockey at a Latrobe's event might play "Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)", a chart topper in 1970 by Edison Lighthouse, a "studio only" pop group in the UK. The recording session featured the songwriting talents of Tony Macaulay (nee Anthony Inston). The group Edison Lighthouse was named after the Eddystone Lighthouse off the coast of Cornwall, and Tony Macaulay wrote numerous hit songs, including: The 5th Dimension's "(Last Night) I Didn't Get To Sleep At All", David Soul's "Don't Give Up on Us" and The Foundations' "Build Me Up Buttercup".

Benjamin Latrobe was also responsible for introducing Gothic Revival architecture to the United States, and the American form of Greek Revival that he developed became associated with the political ideals

of democracy. Unlike the group Edison Lighthouse, Latrobe was much more than a "one hit wonder".

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