

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Henry Hobson Richardson

Ever had the unfortunate experience of ordering an “Old-Fashioned” and discovering that the bartender added soda to it? Still, soda water is a necessary additive to many cocktails, where its purpose is to extend the drink and provide that sparkling “fizz”. This process of diluting “short” drinks (such as spirits) makes them “long”, and the presence of carbon dioxide in a cocktail may actually speed up the absorption of alcohol into the blood. In southern and tropical colonial areas, the addition of carbonated water to dilute spirits was quite prevalent in hot climates and viewed as a rather “British” habit. This was especially true with gin and the addition of tonic (or Indian tonic water), which is carbonated water with quinine added. And soda water is, after all, the essential ingredient of a multitude of soft drinks, which is what they’re called in New Orleans (as well as “cold drinks”). In the rest of the country, they mostly say “sodas”.

All of this would not have been possible without the fertile scientific mind of Joseph Priestley (1733 – 1804) who invented soda water in 1767 by discovering a means of infusing water with carbon dioxide at a brewery in Leeds, England. The “fixed air” (carbon dioxide gas) blanketing the fermenting beer was known to kill mice, but Priestley found that (by impregnating the water with this “fixed air”) he had created a pleasant tasting and refreshing beverage. He produced the “fixed air” by dripping sulfuric acid onto chalk, which he encouraged to dissolve into an agitated bowl of water.



Joseph Priestley, Discoverer of Soda Water and Oxygen

Not long after, J. J. Scheppe developed a process to manufacture carbonated mineral water. His company, which began in Geneva in 1783 and moved to London in 1792, made a fortune from Priestley's discovery.

Priestley was also an English theologian who strongly advocated the free exchange of ideas and believed in religious toleration, which led him to help found Unitarianism in England. His theology and his science were integral to one another, and he consistently tried to fuse Enlightenment rationalism with Christian theism. He was a chemist, natural philosopher, educator and political theorist. He published over 150 works, including a most influential treatise on electricity. He also published a seminal work on English grammar, books on history and some very influential historical timelines. He is also credited with discovering several "airs" (gases), the most famous being oxygen (which he called "dephlogisticated air"). Having isolated oxygen in its gaseous state, Priestley is recognized as its discoverer (although Antoine Lavoisier and Carl Wilhelm Scheele also have such a claim). However, Priestley's determination to defend the obsolete phlogiston theory (believing in the existence of a fire-like element called phlogiston contained within combustible substances) and his rejection of what would become the chemical revolution found him at odds with and isolated from the scientific community. Ironically, phlogiston was described in a way that was basically the opposite of the role of oxygen in combustion.

That wasn't the only way he found himself in trouble. His various publications were controversial (he was a foe of the slave trade), and he was an outspoken proponent of the French Revolution. Arousing both public and governmental suspicion (a mob burned down his church and home), he was forced to flee, in 1791, first to London, and then to the United States (spending the last ten years of his life in

Pennsylvania). Priestley's friend Benjamin Franklin called him an "honest heretic". Priestley's son William (after marrying Margaret Foulke) moved to St. James Parish, Louisiana (after being accused of trying to poison his father in 1801), and established a sugar plantation in 1803. Both father and son denied the attempted patricide. William and Margaret's daughter, Caroline Catherine Priestly married Henry Dickinson Richardson. That is how Joseph Priestley's great-grandson came to live in New Orleans and become one of the most acclaimed architects of his time.

Henry Hobson Richardson (along with Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright) is one of "the recognized trinity of American architecture". He was born September 29, 1838, at Priestly Plantation in St. James Parish, Louisiana, and spent a good part of his childhood in New Orleans, where his family lived at No. 143 Julia Row. Reputedly designed by architect Alexander T. Wood (or James Dakin, according to his descendants) and completed in 1833 by builder Daniel Twogood, these "thirteen sisters" were a row of thirteen Federal side-hall style townhouses that spanned what is now the 600 block of Julia Street between St. Charles and Camp streets.



Julia Row home of Henry Hobson Richardson, second from the right

The Richardson townhouse was the second red brick "sister" from the corner of St. Charles, right across the street from the (octagonal and Gothic) Unitarian Church of Reverend Theodore Clapp (designed by notable architect John Barnett). It was not just coincidental that

Richardson's great-grandfather was one of the founders of Unitarianism in England. Pastor Clapp's Unitarian Church is no longer standing on the downtown riverside corner of St. Charles and Julia. In 1893, the congregation's new pastor advocated selling the downtown property in order to purchase a new site uptown. The next church was completed at the corner of South Rampart Street (now Danneel) and Jefferson Avenue in 1902. Today the church occupies a much larger facility at South Claiborne and Jefferson Avenues.

On April 17, 1774, the first Unitarian service was held in Britain. Joseph Priestley continued to support and write several *Defenses* of institutionalized Unitarianism and encouraged the foundation of new Unitarian chapels throughout Britain and the United States.

Young Richardson, called Fez by his family and friends, went on to study at Harvard College and Tulane University. He loved to boast that he was descended from the famous Joseph Priestley. At first, he was interested in studying civil engineering, but shifted to architecture, which led him to go to Paris in 1860 to attend the famed *École des Beux Arts* in the atelier of Louis-Jules André and in the office of Théodore Labrouste.



Henry Hobson Richardson, 1886 portrait by Sir Hubert von Herkomer from the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Returning to the United States just after the Civil War in 1865, there were a series of architectural questions being posed by both theorists and practitioners alike: How would new materials of the industrial age, such as plate glass and structural metal, be incorporated into new designs? What part would a “professional architect” play and what style would he build? How could an individual identity, as well as a national one in a pluralistic society, be established within the realm of architectural design? How much would American designers and builders follow the lead of Europe?

The style that Richardson developed over time, however, was not the more classical style of the *École*, but a more medieval-inspired style (influenced by John Ruskin, William Morris and others), adapting in particular the 11th century Romanesque precedents of France and Spain. Richardson popularized a unique and highly personal architectural style known as “Richardsonian Romanesque”. Significant to this idiom was his picturesque heavy massing and roofline profiles, richly varied rustication, rough-hewn stone and rounded semi-circular arches supported on clusters of short, squat columns. In England, one may remember, Romanesque arches are called Norman arches.

Richardson gained his architectural renown particularly in four building types: public libraries, commercial buildings, commuter train station buildings and single-family residences. In 1869, he designed the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane (now the H. H. Richardson Complex), the largest commission of his career and the first appearance of his eponymous style. The Trinity Church on Copley Square in Boston (1872) became his most acclaimed work. Also solidifying his reputation were the Albany City Hall, Sever Hall at Harvard University and the North Easton, Massachusetts Town Hall. Of his many buildings, the two he liked the best, the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh (1884 – 1888) and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store (Chicago, 1885 – 1887, demolished 1930), were completed posthumously by his assistants. One of Richardson’s chief assistants summed Henry Hobson Richardson up as “a combination of Southern grace and Northern energy”.

Numerous homes and buildings in the New Orleans area were built in the style of “Richardsonian Romanesque” (the stately St. Charles Avenue homes of Isadore and Charles Newman, Harris Hyman and William Perry Brown), but only one was done directly from his plans. It was erected after his death by his successor firm: Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge, which used a Richardson design which had been submitted earlier for a library in Saginaw, Michigan, but rejected. It was the Howard Memorial Library, constructed 1886-1889, often called “the only Richardson building located in the South”. The residents of the Crescent City just had to have an example of the work of their native son. But some argue that the building is not truly by Richardson since the location and the building were decided after the

architect's death with none of his input beyond its initial design. The structure is currently part of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.



Howard Memorial Library, later the Patrick F. Taylor Library

Richardson spent much of his later years in his house (with attached studio) in Brookline, Massachusetts. The accomplished architect died in 1886 at age 47 of Bright's disease (called chronic nephritis today). He was buried in Walnut Hills Cemetery in Brookline. Even though he earned an enormous income for an architect of his day, he had not managed his financial affairs in a sound manner. Richardson died in a great deal of debt, leaving virtually nothing to his widow and six children.

But, in the long term, Richardson left behind a family tht was significantly involved in the profession of architecture. Some dozen and a half of his direct and collateral descendants practiced and continue to practice in the fields of architecture, construction and landscape design. Just two months after her father's death, Richardson's daughter married George Shepley (one of his three trusted assistants). Their first son, Henry Richardson Shepley went on to Harvard and the *École*, as well, and eventually headed the architectural firm of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge.

Richardson's sister, Catherine Caroline Priestley Richardson, married John Witherspoon Labouisse. Their grandchild, diplomat Henry

Richardson Labouisse, Jr. (1904 – 1987), born in New Orleans, was married to Ève Denise Curie (1904 – 2007), French writer, journalist pianist and daughter of scientists Marie and Pierre Curie. Labouisse had been the principal U.S. Department of State official who helped implement the Marshall Plan after World War II. He served as U.S. Ambassador to France 1952-1954, as well as U.S. Ambassador to Greece 1962-1965. He was then appointed Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in June 1965, overseeing the emergency relief efforts for several major conflicts and natural disasters, and helping to alleviate poor conditions in numerous developing countries. For his efforts that year, he accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace on behalf of UNICEF. Ève Curie, who lived to be 102, sometimes joked that there were five Nobel Prizes in my family, “two for my mother, one for my father, one for (my) sister and brother-in-law and one for my husband. Only I was not successful ...” It’s fascinating how the Priestley and Curie descendants ended up marrying, and with a New Orleans connection.

Henry Hobson Richardson’s real enduring legacy was to American architecture in general, influencing such men as Stanford White and Charles F. McKim (who worked in Richardson's office as young men), Langford Warren, John Wellborn Root and John Galen Howard. Richardson’s style also influenced the Chicago school of architecture. Louis Sullivan, an ardent admirer of Richardson, adapted Richardson's lessons (of texture, massing and the expressive vernacular of stone walling) and these influences are noticeable in the work of Sullivan’s own student, Frank Lloyd Wright. In Finland, Eliel Saarinen was also influenced by Richardson.

Instead of transferring European forms to America, Richardson wanted to create an architecture rooted in the old, but adapted to a new emerging American urbanism. As interpreted by Richardson in the 1870s and 1880s, his “Romanesque” became a different, and uniquely American, style. From Priestley Plantation and New Orleans’ Julia Row to New England via France, Henry Hobson Richardson flourished for a short but prolific period and will continue to be viewed as an enduring architect for the ages.

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