

## **Greek Revival Roots**

### **Latrobe's Hammerwood Park**

Greek Revival influences abound in New Orleans' beautiful Garden District; and historic Gallier Hall on St. Charles Avenue, our city hall for more than a century, like most temple style Greek Revival buildings in Louisiana, features a pedimented portico attached to a broader façade. This architectural style, in its most elemental form, was popular from about 1820 to 1860 and dominated public buildings in the United States during that period. Beginning in Great Britain, how did this style make its way to New Orleans? To find the answer, we must first make a trip back in time to England, to East Sussex where a young architect named Benjamin Henry Latrobe, in 1792, designed one of the first houses in England built in the Greek Revival style.



*Benjamin Henry Latrobe (May 1, 1764 – September 3, 1820)*

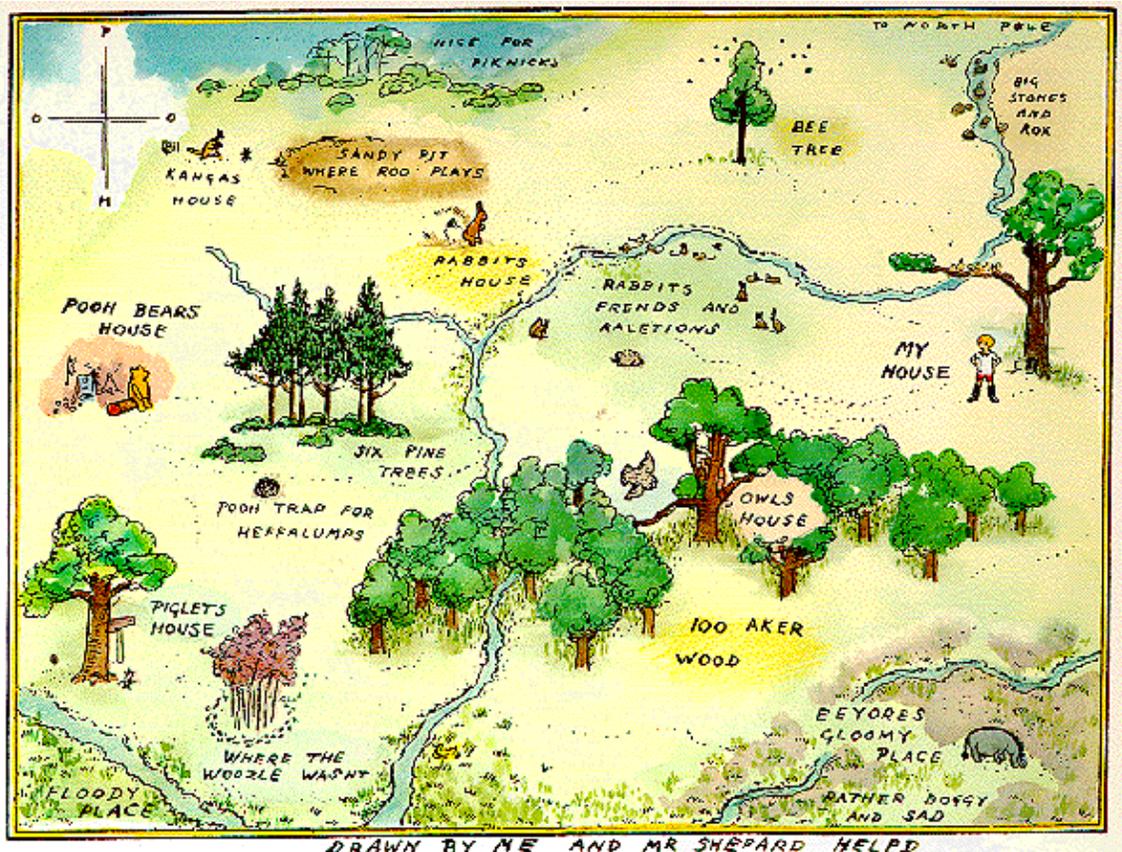
Many New Orleanians have attended weddings or parties at the event venue on Royal Street known as *Latrobe's*. Originally the Louisiana State Bank, or *La Banque de L'Etat de la Louisiane*, the building was designed by Latrobe in 1820, and constructed by Benjamin Fox in 1822. So how did Latrobe make his way from England to America and

have the distinction of being one of the first formally trained architects in the new United States (who served as architect on the design of our nation's Capitol in Washington, D.C., and was also responsible for the design of the White House porticos) – and how did he come to work in New Orleans?



*Latrobe's on Royal*

My uncle, a major in the British Army, York and Lancaster Regiment, was born in Colemans Hatch, a small hamlet in the civil parish of Hartfield in the Wealden district of East Sussex, on the edge of Ashdown Forest. Only 1.9 miles from Colemans Hatch is Gills Lap, which in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories of A.A. Milne is the "Enchanted Place" on the very top of the Forest. At the car park atop Gills Lap (the Galleon's Lap of the *Pooh* stories) there contains a display panel with a map of the surrounding area and the features from the *Pooh* stories marked upon it. Christopher Robin's "100 Aker Wood" is in actuality the *Five Hundred Acre Wood*, a dense beech wood in Ashdown Forest where the famous children's stories were set.



The "100 Aker Wood"

Ashdown Forest, originally a medieval deer park in Norman times, was home to Henry VIII's royal hunting lodge at Bolebroke Castle, Hartfield, in the Tudor era. From there Henry hunted wild boar and deer, and courted Anne Boleyn at nearby Hever Castle. Earlier, in the 13th century, the forest had become a fenced-in *pale* with a number of *gates* and *hatches* to allow local folk to go in and out of with livestock, or to collect firewood. That's how Colemans Hatch obtained its name.

Cotchford Farm, Hartfield, was once the home of A.A. Milne and was later owned by Brian Jones, guitarist and founder of the Rolling Stones, who was discovered dead there in the swimming pool in 1969.

Also on the edge of Ashdown Forest is an impressive country house known as Hammerwood Park. Situated between East Grinstead, Sussex, and Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, it was built in 1792, the first work of Benjamin Henry Latrobe and one of the earliest in England to be built in the Greek Revival style. A wealthy fur trader named John Sperling commissioned Latrobe to design and build the new home and

the young architect supervised the house's construction while also working on his second commission, Ashdown House, in nearby Forest Row.

A later owner of Hammerwood Park was Oswald Augustus Smith, (1826 – 1902) whose sister, Frances, was the grandmother of Elizabeth Angela Marguerite Bowes-Lyon. We know her as the late "Queen Mum", or mother of Elizabeth II, Queen of England.

After World War II the house was divided into eleven apartments, and in 1973 was purchased by the rock group *Led Zeppelin* who wished to add a recording studio and use it as flats for its band members. The stately home, however, had fallen further into disrepair and was sold in 1982.



*Hammerwood Park, near East Grinstead, Sussex, England*

Today, after having gone through an extensive award-winning restoration, the house and gardens are open to visitors by guided tour in the summer months and by appointment during the rest of the year.

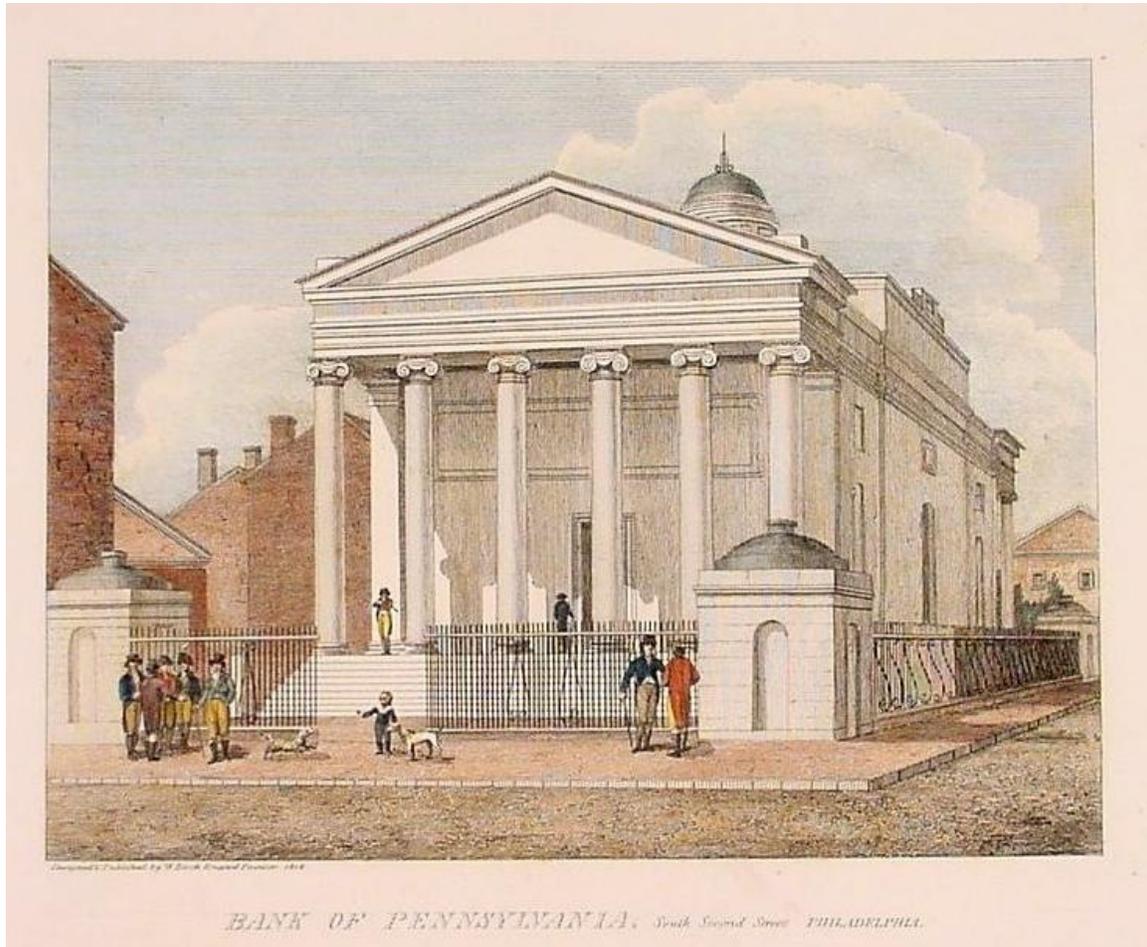
Not long after Latrobe designed Hammerwood Park and Ashdown House (both in the Greek Revival style), he had several reversals of fortune. His wife, Lydia Sellon, died in childbirth in 1793 and in 1795, due to difficulties in receiving payment for another project, Latrobe's financial problems forced him to declared bankruptcy. Unable to pay some of his workmen, he emigrated to the United States. Although Latrobe had been born in West Yorkshire, England, his mother was actually an American, born in Pennsylvania. Benjamin Henry Latrobe would come to be called the "Father of American Architecture".



*Ashdown House in Forest Row, Sussex, completed by Latrobe in 1794, is today a prep school. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson attended school here.*

This Greek Revival architectural style all began in Great Britain when British architects James Stuart and Nicolas Revett visited Greece in 1751. The two then published *Antiquities of Athens*, not a best seller but Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the first volume. In 1803, President Jefferson appointed Latrobe Surveyor of Public Buildings in the United States, and he went on to design a number of significant

buildings in Washington, D.C., as mentioned earlier, as well as the Bank of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and the Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Baltimore (built from 1806 to 1821).



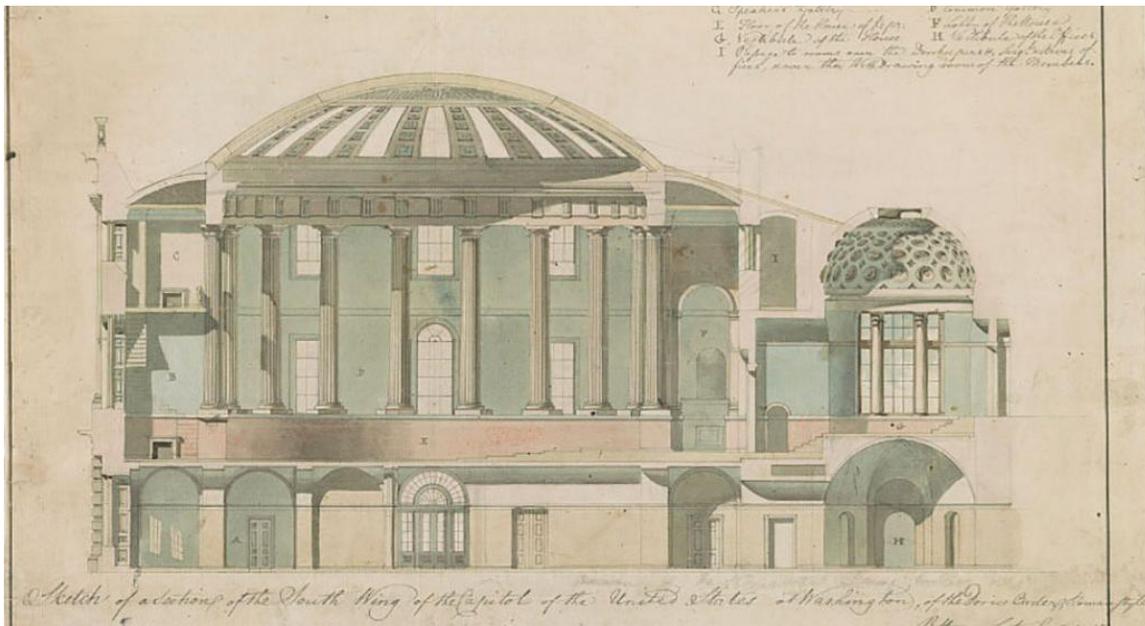
*Bank of Pennsylvania, designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe*

In New Orleans, Latrobe designed a center steeple for the St. Louis Cathedral, the Bank of Louisiana and worked on renovations to the *Place d'Armes* (today's Jackson Square). He sent his son, Henry Sellon Boneval Latrobe, to the Crescent City in order to secure a franchise from the city for a waterworks. The waterworks building was to house a steam engine which would pump water from the Mississippi River into elevated wooden casks. The senior Latrobe and his son spent several years on the project, with complications along the way, the largest delays having been caused by the War of 1812.



*Latrobe's classical design for a Waterworks in New Orleans*

Latrobe's pupils and younger colleagues would continue his work as important Greek revivalists, and it was Latrobe's influence that was to shape the next generation of American architects. Greek Revival was therefore referred to as the "national style" due to its widespread popularity. One of Latrobe's students was William Strickland, who was responsible for numerous buildings in Philadelphia. Strickland also designed the U.S. Mint building in New Orleans, which was constructed in red brick in the Greek Revival style. Another notable architect and Latrobe student to use Greek Revival designs was Robert Mills, who designed the Washington Monument. Others included George Hadfield and Gabriel Manigault.



*Latrobe drawing of the House Chamber, the U.S. Capitol*

In these days of a worldwide pandemic, we must remember that it was not uncommon for disease to take its toll in the nineteenth century, as well. There was another virus, a deadly killer carried by a mosquito. While Latrobe's son was working diligently on the waterworks project in New Orleans, he died of yellow fever in 1817. His father, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, arrived in the city to continue work on the structure. Sadly, the man who influenced Greek Revival both in Britain and the United States, as well as New Orleans, like his son before him, succumbed to yellow fever on September 3, 1820.

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
 "Greek Revival Roots"  
 Ned Hémard  
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