

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Early Architecture in the
Covington-Newport Area
of Kentucky

By

George F. Roth Jr.

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Full text of paper read by George F. Roth, Jr., prominent Covington and Cincinnati architect, at the monthly meeting of The Christopher Gist Historical Society, held Tuesday night, January 24, 1958, at the Covington YMCA. Subject: "Early Architecture in the Covington-Newport Area of Kentucky."

Mr. Roth, who was introduced by Robert S. Tate, president of the local historical society, said he was a member of the firm of Potter-Tyler-Martin and Roth, architects, Cincinnati, and had been the architect on the building of the new Saint Luke's Hospital in Fort Thomas, and would be the architect on the new public school house in Latonia, Covington, Kentucky.

Mr. Roth said: "One of the most interesting activities of the nation's of old age is the criticism of the cultural aspects of the American, particularly of the man of the 'states'. Revealing, to the European scholar, has been our, so-called, lack of inspired artistic creation, stifled, it is said, by a consuming interest in things commercial, meaning wealth; and things acquired, meaning purchased. The foreign masters of architecture find our young nation vapid, except for our or two startling motifs, of clearly defined national accomplishment in the field of building design. We have grown too rapidly; adopted too impulsively the things of foreign lands; been much too fervent in building and much too unwilling to think upon the truly aesthetic--meaning culture.

"And, there is no doubt, many tourists return from a sojourn amidst the decaying remains of foreign and remote civilizations, resplendent in a state of colorful ruin, to look upon the streets of Covington and

Newport with depression. No, we can hear, these streets are ours, but they are not beautiful. This is home, and we are here. Perhaps we like it, but, the traveler says it lacks something--something that is human, intangible, venerable.

" Could it be that we who daily traverse our city's streets see not humanity in old walls? Revere not the memory of those who created them? Covington has not been without artisans and creative thinkers. Newport has supplied background for some who have offered cultural leadership. And, if you can suffer my brief survey, I should like to present a meager panorama of the very concrete reflections of culture we own--displayed in what be built--our own architecture.

" Those who were trail cutters built protective structures. They found them necessary. Refinements were largely in the craftsmanship of functional job-doing elements. It was the second wave of colonizers who were secure and stable enough to create residences embodying the niceties of living, not relinquishing the lessons of practicalities but wedding with them the joys of aesthetic appointments. We can see, then, the change from the log structures, grouped in communal arrangement, to the masonry and frame buildings gracing the land grants.

" We begin, with the residents of the frontier society that brought with it the qualities of the eastern shore and Virginia; not the great scale of the regal centers of early American, but including the refined details of the prevailing Anglican, Georgian manner which, about the time of the Revolution was termed Federal; and to us late Federal, at that. Central Kentucky has many examples of the era just following the 1770's; northern Kentucky very few, if any of note. But, in Ludlow the house now known as the Thomas Candy Company was built as the Carneal House about 1817 or 1819. The exterior details are no longer displayed as they must have been in the original setting, reflecting the beautiful river valley

before the entry foyer. This foyer is reminiscent of the work of the brothers Robert and James Adam, the designers of the graceful interiors so popular in England in the latter part of the Eighteenth Century. Small lead scanthus leaves adorn a vaulted area, a reception hall, from which entry is possible to the parlors, each of which exhibit finely carved wood mantles most likely of eastern craftsmen. This estate, purchased by an Englishman named Bullock was later transferred to Jerall Ludlow, a surveyor hence, the city of Ludlow. But Bullock loved his 'white villa' on the beautiful river so much that he employed a Mr. Papworth, a city planner, to design an unique radial development of streets and useful areas to become a citadel to be known as 'Hygiea'. The hillside, not visible to the architect in England, would have been ^avery real obstacle to the radial plan. But Mr. Bullock died and his daughter relinquished the title and 'Hygiea'.

" The Carneals, however, built again. This building, at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio Rivers, now on Second and Kennedy Streets, built perhaps in 1821 is a most interesting example of the gathering interest in the romantic confusion of our early 19th century architecture. Mounted high above the thoroughfare, with an imposing portico on the north facing the Ohio, it exhibits a fine, delicate wood work, very like the craftsmanship of New Jersey. In fact, the door and original parlor mantles were in detail and general design very similar to some seen in early work in the east coast communities. Certain modifications have been made as the newer modes have brought their influences. I recall this house as the Rothier House and in my youth considered it haunted by a wraith that traversed the second level of the portico under certain ideal conditions.

" There were, and are still, other buildings of this early period, the Bullock House on Greenup Street and the octagonal Closson House in Ludlow, and certainly other examples which I do not record.

" By far the most violent period of building and the most inter-

esting to the growing northern Kentucky communities is the era that marks the fervent rush to the study of the glorious epochs of Greek culture.

This was with us during the thirty years following 1820 and was the first phase, a most powerful one, of the romantic era when we as a nation were rich enough to follow the vogue and pattern of the day in England and France. Architecture reflected the strong Greek study, but the classics of Hellas provided the key for our cultural efforts in all phases. We became 'Greek Revivalists'. And there were reasons for such fervor. Greece was striving for independence from Turkey. We had, not long before, fought for our independence. Some of us fought in Greek armies. Our poets, like Byron, Shelley and Keats caressed the precious forms of Greek temples, Grecian urns and even Grecian maidens in lyric poetry. We named our new towns Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Troy, and our babes Byron, Minerva, Helen. We required that the new colleges, such as Miami of Oxford, Ohio, teach Greek, philosophy and mathematics as basic studies, and we named the college clubs Erodelphain and Escritean Societies and the glee clubs 'Acolian'. Fraternities in a later period of the epoch were designated by Greek letters. In architecture we favored the Greek Doric and the Ionic Orders which we will see in the photographs displayed tonight.

"Carpenter craftsmen and builders came from the east bringing with them the handbooks of carpentry and joinery; books that displayed the Orders of Architecture, details of mouldings, cabinetry, stair construction, designs for doors, mantles, cornices, and even plans for complete buildings with cost estimates and specifications. One of these volumes, written and drawn by one Minard LaFener and published in 1829 is displayed here this evening. It is evident that we were archaeologists, following current fashion so whole-heartedly that we copied, almost without variation, from these guide manuals. The mill-wright was fast becoming a most important necessity to a building community and an artist, he was, in making wood look like stone of the Greek and Roman temples when painted white.

" How did Covington and Newport take all this?--Like all other towns, growing rapidly in the activity of western expansion, we created excellent examples. Let's point out a few of them.

" Now long ago the Stevenson mansion at Fourth and Garrard streets in Covington was removed. This brick structure, grand in scale, was in basic design a rectangular, almost square, plan with four wide pilasters at the front supporting a very heavy brick entablature or lintel panel and cornice above. Extremely large rectangular windows were placed between the pilasters with the center one the most developed. But the ample entrance motif and porch, four Greek Doric fluted columns and full entablature formed very correctly proportioned temple motif that was taken directly from the handbooks of design. The whole house was placed on a stone base, very severe, reminiscent of the Greek stylobate.

" Not far away, at Second and Garrard is the sturdy, serious dignity that sheltered, for many years, Doctor Southgate and her curious collection of Egyptology. A most remarkable person, she somehow reflected, in her interests in humanity, the vastness which characterized this dwelling. The hard limestone base and fence wall, and the Doric portal and pilaster capitals are still there and the whole design, inside and outside is a good example of the Greek Revival; perhaps of about 1840. Diagonally, across Garrard street, is a residence now owned by the Patton family. This mansion displaying typical classic detail, owned an excellent cast iron porch at the cornice of which were the small 'anthemians' or Greek honeysuckle motifs. The mid-porch leads to a room that, some years ago, contained a very fine marble mantle with 'ears', so typical of the 'architrave' about many Greek doors.

" An historic corner is this. But over toward the western hills there is another residence, on Banklick street at 11th., known as the Richmond House, now the headquarters of the Red Cross. The exterior is typical and

includes, what originally was a very fine Ionic Porch; the interior some excellent cabinetry. Still further to the west is the Davezac House, called the Arnold House, on the street of that name at 7th Street. And, at 10th and Madison Avenue was, at one time, the Crigler House, with a splendid cast iron porch.

" There are other dwellings which should be mentioned, and some of which I do not have knowledge. But there are examples of this phase of historic design in other types of structures also. The connected residences which were called ' Row Houses ' appeared early in Covington and Newport. I list too--the Lindsey's Row, which is no more, and Ball's Row which extends from Fourth and Garrard northward. A stone at the corner indicates the latter. The ' Colonial Apartments ' on Greenup Street (somewhere designated as ' Grunop ' Street) near 5th Street is of classic pattern with an ' attic ' story. The building which now houses the Mosler Safe and Lock Company on Scott at 3rd Street was originally a ~~complete~~ complete temple design with a stately ' Pedimented ' front facade and good Doric, inset columns at the doors. The pediment was removed and the front altered, but the doors remain.

" I should like, now, to turn to another phase of our architectural history; one which represents, in part, a recovery from the austerity and heavy, serious dignity of the Greek and Roman archaeological moulds, to the confusion of tastes that we have so often referred to as Victorian. I think Victoria became queen in 1837 and although the period of her reign affected taste and behavior greatly, we, in this country, went about our ~~persons~~ nervous activity, creating, inventing and discovering in a manner which, perhaps, disturbed her very much.

" By the middle of the century, we were wealthy enough to send our children abroad to study in Paris, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, not only the art of architecture but the letters and music as well. And they

returned, as we do today, with love in their hearts for the romance of antiquity of England, France, the Rhine Valley, Switzerland and Italy. Sir Walter Scott's beautiful pictures of medieval chivalry and the gardened castles were inspiring indeed. The stories, some years later of Thomas Hardy, who was somewhat an architect, expressed Gothic architecture as a fine art of form and almost mystic charm; and a strange philosopher named John Ruskin discovered a remote analysis for the worries of the medieval Romanesque of Italy at the pointed vaults of the French and English Gothic and wrote of the poetry of architecture. And we, as tourists visited parish churches of rural England, admired the country and its horticulture and gardening; watched with troubled hearts the French social and political struggles but lost ourselves in the wonders of French chateau and the works of the court's architects, Jules and Francois Mansart, Vaux, LeNotre, and the romantic little hamlet of Marie Antoinette; Gaspard in the rarified air of Switzerland with the joy of the picturesqueness of homes an architectural beauty; and bought books to retain the memory of the formal Italian Villas of the Palladio Country to the north and the ecclesiastical monumentality of Rome.

Things changed here at home. It was not a sudden transition; in fact, the confusion of tastes was developing during the previous years of the classic revivals. But now, before the War of the States, we seem to have 'let go'; and northern Kentucky went along. Many changes there were, not all architectural, including the sense of social problems, industrial personnel versus those who employed the worker and the rise of the trade union. Someone brought water from the outside well or cistern through a pump in the house. Someone developed an hydraulic lift and the Otis Elevator follows. Someone learned how to cast iron in structural sections not only ornamental panels; and even suggested a metal frame for

the tall multi-storied building. Charles Augustus Roebling built suspension bridges. The wood burner began to change over to coal; and coal began its economic rise to economic importance with industry demanding more and more of its power. And people suffocated from the fumes of the coal stoves, and all of us feared 'consumption'. Edward Bellamy of Harvard studied Karl Marx and wrote great volumes on 'security', forecasting much of what we have recently experienced. The great concentrations of wealth in the east were echoed in our area in such families as the Shinkles, Holmes, Parks, Devous, ^{Reidlings}, and others. And the 'architect' as a professional came into being.

" But, let us look at the things we built in reflection of our so-called 'Victorian' culture. The handbooks of architecture changed and became more numerous; Vanx and Andrew Jackson Downing produced the guide, most popular, for the design of country estates, villas and cottages; and John Sloan explained the delights of the English parish church with plans and details; and the 'American Architect', a magazine, was issued. So, guidance there was, sufficient in all fields of design, permitting the client a choice from many, many types. And, choose we did, freely and without regard for the neighbor.

" One of these very interesting country estates is the Robert Simmons property in Park Hills. Mr. Simmons told me, once, that the original design detailed a square, formal building, but during the time of construction a high wind destroyed the wood frame and that the present design with pitched roofs and many gables was substituted in order to avoid wind resisting surfaces and at the same time accept the more picturesque freedoms of the Queen Anne cottage. The little cottages with jig-saw ornament and decorative chimneys are not numerous in our cities, but there were many poorly designed houses reminiscent of the type. These, it is said, have Queen Anne fronts but Mary Ann behinds.

" On the hill overlooking 'Latonia Springs' the Parks family lived in frame dwellings, replete with all the finesse of the cabinet maker and millwright. Unusually delightful woods were used and the exterior battened siding with lace-like eave ornaments lent a most picturesque Swiss Chalet character to the estate. In Latonia also is the Coppin House which also exhibits the admirable traits of the time. The house at 6th and Philadelphia Streets, I think perhaps the Ruh House, is an example of the crenelated English mansion, highly ornate and unique in detail. The Holmes 'castle', which many of us remember as a part of Holmes High School was a most complete 'baronial' mansion with towers and oriel windows, porches of gothic detail, and, on the interior, marble and parquet floors, grand stairs and paneled walls including large mirrors; numerous parlors, fore room, aquarium bay, library and music rooms--all in the 'grand plan.' This mansion was designed by Arthur Bates who was one of the founders of the Cincinnati Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1870. And, then, the Shinkle House--Amos Shinkle, I think--which for a while served as Booth Hospital, was a wonderfully developed fabric of eclectic architecture, quite French in many details, but a monument to the culture of the time. The stone and iron fence remains. I would mention the Chase residence at 5th and Garrard Streets, and the Lovells and Buffingtons built solidly and with stateliness on 2nd Street near the rivers. These were Italianesque Villa mansions with coach houses and out-buildings. In Newport the Wiedemann House and the Italian towers of the residence now the property of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Covington display the wide freedom in design developed by the architects of the era.

" The churches that came into construction in the fifties and sixties indicated the fervor with which our population was rapidly rounding out a community to the development of good and substantial family life. In ecclesiastical architecture we have some excellent history.

" Of the anglician type churches one of the most dramatic is the excellent stone structure of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in Newport, the front of which faces the confused facades of the Newport Court House. The spire of this church is entirely stone, and well constructed. The original, dignified and simple facade of the Trinity Episcopal Church of Covington, was replaced in 1887, by a decorative confusion of forms designed by a Mr. Picket an architect of Cincinnati. Ten bells were placed in the tower, the first carillon of Covington, by the family of John Baker whose residence, now the Baker-Hunt Foundation at 620 Greenup Street is a good example of the 'Victorian' town house. In 1864 the First Methodist Church at 5th and Greenup Streets was dedicated. This structure, built on property provided by Amos Shinkle, coffee, tea and spice merchant, was designed by architects Walter and Hamilton. It is possible that the "Walter" was William Walter who in the forties designed the Cathedral Church of St. Peter in Chains on Plum Street in Cincinnati. This Methodist Episcopal Church is a large building, which until a devastating fire in 1945, included timber trusses with gothic ornament, most of which was salvaged and reinstalled in construction. The Saint Joseph Roman Catholic Church at 12th and Greenup Streets was built when 12th Street was the edge of Covington. In the Roman manner of the Renaissance it recalls the grand scale of the Italian churches, particularly on the 12th Street facade. In later years the famous Frank Duveneck, who lived in a modest cottage not far away, painted murals, which, I am told are still in place in this important church. One of the most interesting and dramatic churches in Covington is the one dedicated to the Mother of God on Sixth Street. Constructed about 1864, it was designed in reminiscence of both Italian and French forms of the late Renaissance; of large dimension, with two towers and a high dome over the crossing. These are the two most interesting features in this building worthy of mention here. There is, in the home, a fine mural, painted by some remote artist who copied or employed the character of design of the

Renaissance painter known as Perugino. One does not often find a painting so clearly similar to the work of the artist of Perugia. Then, I would mention the very large columns which serve as nave piers. These columns are easily forty feet high and are cast iron; wonderful examples of this rapidly developing metallic construction which ushered in a new era; an era of technology which has been directly responsible for many of the modern construction and manufacturing methods.

" Of business structures I would note the original medieval buildings of the Bavarian and Riedemann Breweries. I urge that you look above the Watch Jewelry Store on Madison Avenue to see a red sandstone front replete with the motifs of the era. What was this building? I have a faint recollection of a wooden gothic railroad station; of a rumbling picturesque St. Elizabeth Hospital on 11th Street; and the French Post Office designed by a Mr. Potter still serves as a vocational school; these in Covington.

" And many of us remember too clearly, and with mixed, very confused emotion the old Covington High School which stood, until a few years ago, at Russell and 12th Streets. The increasing rumble of the railroad trains and the fly ash from the locomotives lent cracks to the masonry and a smudge 'Fatina' which reached to the galvanized iron cornices and the railings of the tower.

"Then we come now, to the phase of our architectural heritage which reveals more and more clearly the reasons for some of the contemporary philosophies of building design. I refer to the Post Civil War period which displayed the great rush of construction and industrial development, bringing with it the freedoms of new materials and the acceptance of great inventions. Of the inventors we hear and study, and we marvel at the telephone, the steam engines and turbines, the production of structural iron shapes and later the steel industry that gave the Schwab family great wealth, and the electric lamp, the Morris Chair, and the great advances in

transportation. With all of this came New York's '400'; Chicago's architectural 'barbarism' that created a steel frame for a tower building to help rebuild a great city after a devastating fire; Cincinnati's German singing societies and the eventual building of a great and still revered music hall, an art museum, 'fashionable' hotels, department stores, and dining places, opera houses; and somewhat suddenly three buildings destined to have effect upon all the economic and social integration which Covington, Newport and Cincinnati have become.

" The construction of the Suspension Bridge, although began in 1859, I believe, was partially completed when the War started, was finished after 1865. The rugged masonry of the piers is by no means to be ignored when reviewing our architecture. Of large scale and medieval character these monuments are thrilling structural masses. But the wire cables and engineering principle was new, dramatic. By the eighties there were other bridges, all of them indicative of the engineering skills in the analysis of metal frames. Amos Shinkle, again the builder, was a financial power in the creation of these three important structures.

" Henry Hobson Richardson, the architectural genius of Boston, spread his eclectic, medieval design to the Ohio Valley in the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce Building, and, through the office of Samuel Hannaford, in the Cincinnati City Hall on Plum Street. And the architects of Covington and Newport watched, with the men of Cincinnati, to experiment carried on in the laboratories of the University proving that iron and steel could be encased in concrete to give increased structural value to the 'ferro-concrete' material; designed to change the character of architecture and to hasten the writing of restraining building codes to assure the safety of the occupants of buildings. Cast iron store fronts and large glass panels with galvanized iron cornices and ornaments appeared everywhere.

Newport witnessed the growth of a large steel industry along the banks of the Licking, and the Andrews and the Nelsons grew in social and industrial importance. But we continued to grow as residential communities and our houses echoes the trend to 'gadgetry', of 'indoor' plumbing and furnaces of pressed brick. and, rather 'all at once' we journeyed to Chicago for technological 'know-how'.

In the parlor of our home, when I was very young, was a Brussels carpet, the rose like pattern of which supported a mechanical rocker, some red mahogany furniture, ample and clumsily curved, and later an early upright piano. The mantle was of mahogany with thin columns ~~of~~ and a beveled mirror, the coal hob-grate encased in brass and surrounded by elongated, pressed and glazed ceramic tiles. There was a large window which raised three or four inches only, and over it a stained glass transom displaying purple grapes and leaves. A too panel sliding door disappeared into the wall leaving an opening over which stretched a spool and knob grill of intricate craftsmanship. In my favorite corner was a table with a marble top and on the wall above it were two crayon portraits in black oval frames; on the shelf under the table top was a music box which mechanically plucked out an aria from Lucretia de Lamermoor; but on the marble top lay the large and treasured tome which contained the pictures of the wonderful, wonderful Chicago World's Fair.

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