

BUNKER HILL MONUMENT AND SCHOOLHOUSE, 1847 (AT LEFT),  
CHARLESTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS  
Courtesy of the Charlestown Branch Library.

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## Architectural Projects in the Greek Revival Style by Ammi Burnham Young

By LAWRENCE WODEHOUSE

THE architecture of Ammi Burnham Young can be divided into three rather indistinct phases, namely the Asher Benjamin craftsman-builder tradition, when Young "procured a few books" and was experimenting in the realm of architecture; the Boston phase under the guidance of Alexander Parris; and the Italianate period with influences from England, when Young was Supervising Architect to the Treasury Department from 1852 to 1862. During the first phase, Young designed Congregational meetinghouses, using Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* (1797) for inspiration; an Episcopal church in the Gothic tradition; college and bank buildings in a utilitarian classical mode; and in 1833, his first essay in the Greek Revival style, the State Capitol at Montpelier, Vermont. Only four years later Young won a competition for the Customhouse at Boston, Massachusetts. He moved to Boston, where he gained "some little instruction" from Alexander Parris.

Although Young's Greek Revival designs date from the 1830's and 1840's, he also continued in the eclectic tradition typical of architects in the era prior to formal school training in architecture. His Gothic designs for Mount Auburn Cemetery Chapel at Cambridge (Figs. 1 and 2) and his use of the Romanesque at the Lowell Courthouse (1850) and the Bromfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Boston (Fig. 3), illustrates this trend. While practicing architecture in Boston, he also designed bonded warehouses on Commercial Street; a solid block of buildings on State Street at the corner of Merchants' Row; at least one hundred houses in South End; a house on Washington Street and Franklin Square; his own house at 48 Bowdoin Street, at the corner of Ashburton Place; and a schoolhouse at Charlestown (Frontispiece), all of which have been demolished.<sup>1</sup>

We are thus left with three extant buildings of Greek Revival design by Young, the Montpelier Statehouse, and

Customhouses at Boston, Massachusetts, and Charleston, South Carolina. Other projects include four designs for the United States Capitol in Washington and the design for an unidentified municipal building. His design for the Courthouse at Worcester, Massachusetts, completed in 1845 and demolished in 1909 (Fig. 4), can be classified as Jeffersonian Roman Revival,<sup>2</sup> a style which Young continued to use as Supervising Architect to the Treasury Department, and typified in the Customhouse, Post Office and Courtroom at Cincinnati, Ohio of 1854. The Customhouse at Galveston, Texas, was another variant of the Classical Revival and has affinities to the Queen's House, Greenwich, by Inigo Jones.

Young used the Corinthian order on his design for the extension of the Capitol at Washington, to retain a unity with the Thorton-Latrobe facades (Fig. 5). He also used the Corinthian order on the exterior of the Worcester Courthouse and the Charleston Customhouse and on the interior of the Customhouse at Boston. The exteriors of the Boston and Montpelier buildings were based upon the Grecian Doric order of the Theseion at Athens, although the Montpelier Statehouse has the Ionic order on the interior; the Ionic order was also used on the unidentified municipal building (Fig. 6). The use of the orders in this arbitrary manner seems to be a matter of Young's taste and seems to have little to do with his masonic affiliations and the association of the three orders of architecture with the symbols of strength, wisdom and beauty.<sup>3</sup>

The Boston Customhouse (Cover) is a logical development from the Montpelier Statehouse both being cruciform in plan, constructed of granite, with a

similar massing, and both capped by a shallow dome; the original Montpelier dome was of wood, sheathed in copper and painted to simulate veined marble, but was an exterior feature with no internal space-use (Fig. 7). The total cost of the Statehouse was \$132,077.23 and the Boston Customhouse, \$1,076,000.00.

Under the influence of Alexander Parris, Young developed the idea of using single blocks of granite for the shafts of thirty-two Doric columns on the Boston Customhouse; twenty of these columns cost \$79,000. The Markethouse by Parris was "among the earliest examples of monolithic" columns in Boston. This innovation, used by Young on the Boston Customhouse, and continued at Charleston and on Robert Mills' Treasury Building in Washington, was to lead to Young's downfall in 1862. The expense of this preference was exorbitant and Congressional appropriations were never adequate. On the Boston Customhouse Young considered the "additional expense . . . properly employed."

The Boston Customhouse was authorized by the Twenty-Third Congress of the United States in 1835 and \$50,000 was appropriated for a building "to facilitate and secure the collection of revenue, and for the convenience of the commercial community."<sup>4</sup> The Secretary of the Treasury, Levi Woodbury, visited Boston on December 15 of that year and found no suitable site which could be purchased, and suggested an additional appropriation of \$100,000. Boston was after all the second city in the Union, and provided "one fifth of the national revenue and with promptness." Imports more than doubled in the five years from 1830 to 1835 from \$8,343,613 to \$18,643,800 and exports also increased.<sup>5</sup> The

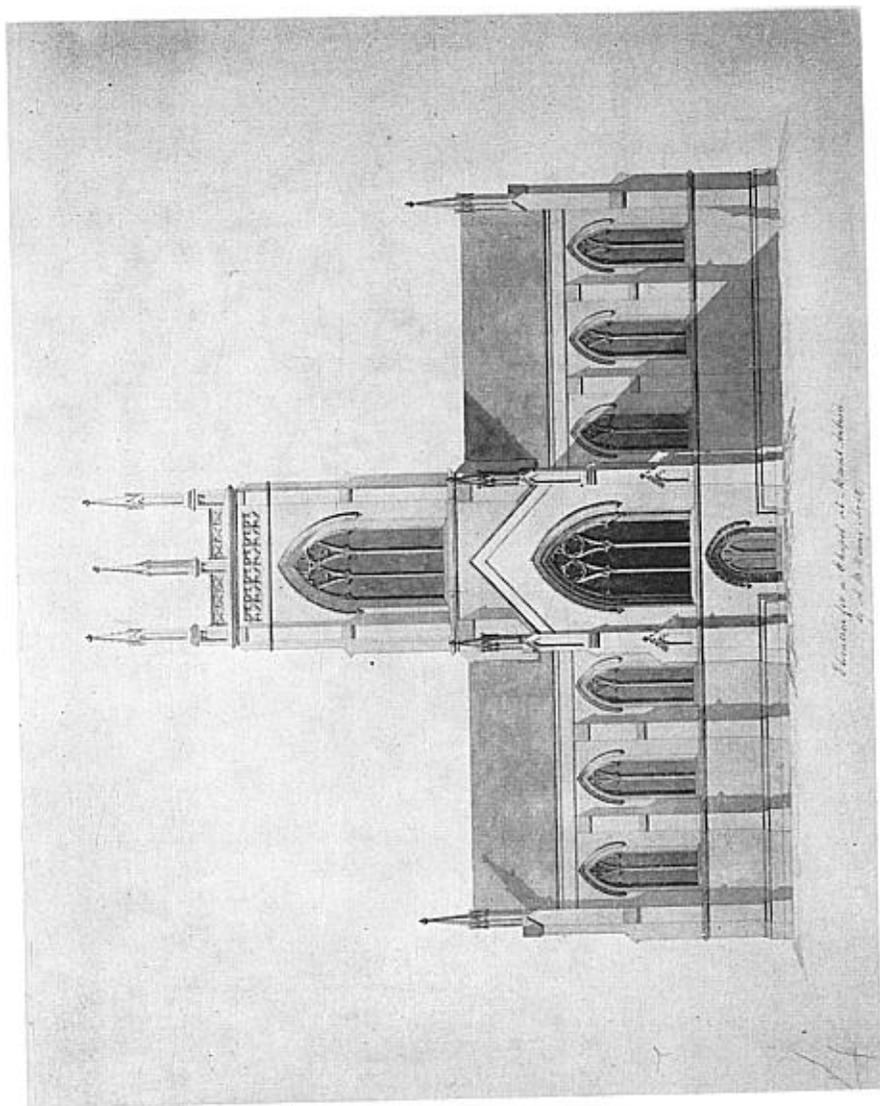


FIG. 1. COMPETITION DESIGN BY AMMI B. YOUNG FOR THE MOUNT AUBURN  
CEMETERY CHAPEL, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, CA. 1844  
Collections of the Society.

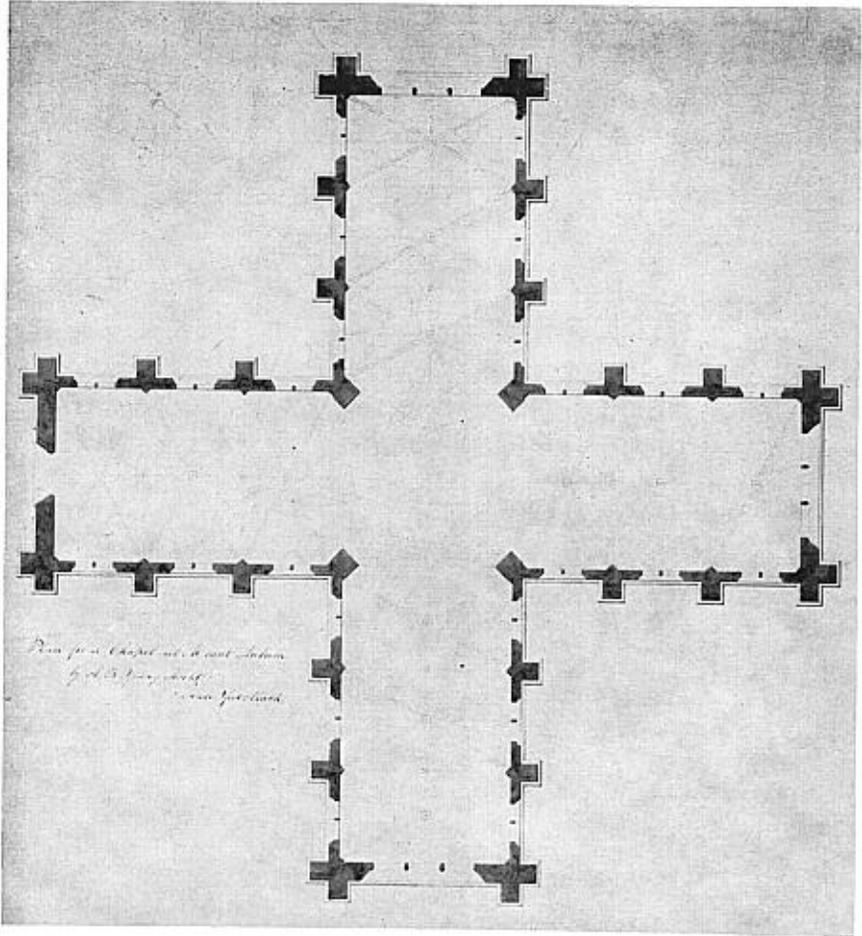


FIG. 2. PLAN WHICH ACCOMPANIED THE COMPETITION DESIGN BY  
AMMI B. YOUNG FOR THE MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY CHAPEL,  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, CA. 1844  
Collections of the Society.

merchants thus felt that Boston should have an imposing monumental pile of granite with no expense spared. Appropriations were made annually by Congress, and Young wrote one letter to Senator Samuel C. Crafts of Vermont to insure sufficient funds.<sup>6</sup>

Construction began in 1837 and it took three years to secure the foundations, driving 3,000 wooden piles into the mud, and to construct the cellar below street level for the storage of coal and for the steam-heating plant. The stylobate basement level, measuring 140 x 75 feet, was for the storage of goods. Above was the entrance story vestibule entered from the Doric porticoes projecting ten feet from the building on the north and south sides. External monolithic granite Doric columns are five feet four inches in diameter at the base and thirty-two feet high. The major space in the building was the central Great Room of the principal story measuring 63 x 59 feet with a circle of twelve Corinthian marble columns, 29 feet high and three feet in diameter, supporting the shallow dome with stained glass oculus 62 feet above floor level. Externally the 32 Doric columns, supporting a Doric entablature, are the height of the entrance and principal floor to cornice level. The building was finished except for minor details and opened on August 1, 1847.<sup>7</sup>

Three years prior to the opening, *The North American Review* ran an article entitled "Architecture in the United States." The anonymous author was a follower and supporter of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and his *True Principles of . . . Christian Architecture*, and rejected the introduction of Greek architecture in the United States as a "great mistake." Young's hypaethral temple was a specific example of misapplied govern-

ment patronage, "an incongruous and absurd pile, . . . a mass of jumbled features and dischordant characteristics, . . . a blankness and poverty of design, . . . a leaf cut out of Stuart's *Athens*, that inexhaustible quarry of bad taste, supplies our architect with his design and his detail."<sup>8</sup>

William W. Wheildon, a Boston writer and Charlestown publisher, wrote a stricture on the article "at the request of Ammi B. Young, and with the concurrence of the United States Commissioners," defending the building.<sup>9</sup> Wheildon pointed out that "the taste of one man can never be taken as that of a people or an age." He answers the criticisms of the writer in the *North American Review*, concerning the engaged columns, the steep and narrow staircases and the dome as a "crowning absurdity." Wheildon admits that a dome on a Greek temple would have been inadmissible, but that a Customhouse is not a temple. Instead Young has created a building for the United States, inspired by Greek architecture, unifying elements and harmonizing all into a simplicity of outline. Engaged columns were admissible as on the Erechtheum, Athens, and the staircases from the entrance vestibule to the principal floor were from seven to fifteen feet wide, had seven-inch risers and eleven- to sixteen-inch treads, being by no means narrow or steep.

These staircases and the twelve internal Corinthian columns were removed in 1915. Eight of the columns were moved to Franklin Park, when a 500-foot tower was constructed above the Customhouse by Robert Swain Peabody of the firm Peabody and Stearns in that year.

In the construction of the Peabody tower, caissons were driven through the soft clay below the Customhouse to a gravel-boulder level, one hundred feet

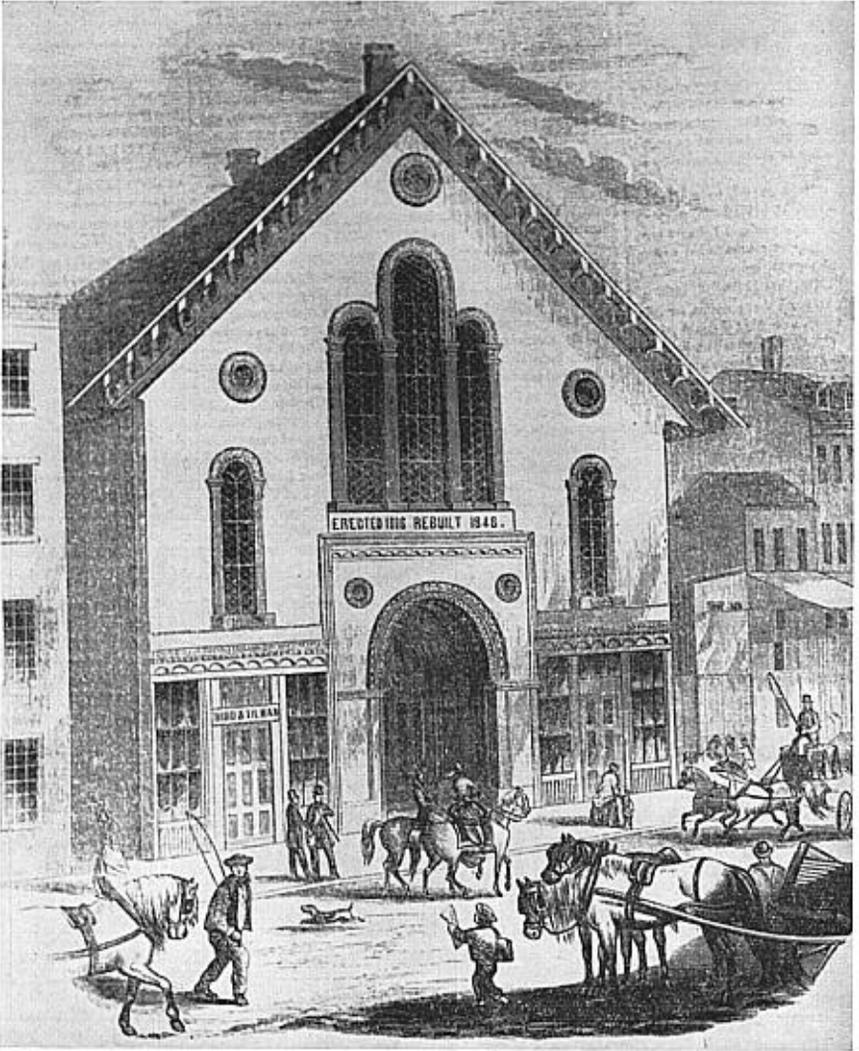


FIG. 3. BROMFIELD STREET METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BOSTON  
From an early wood engraving.

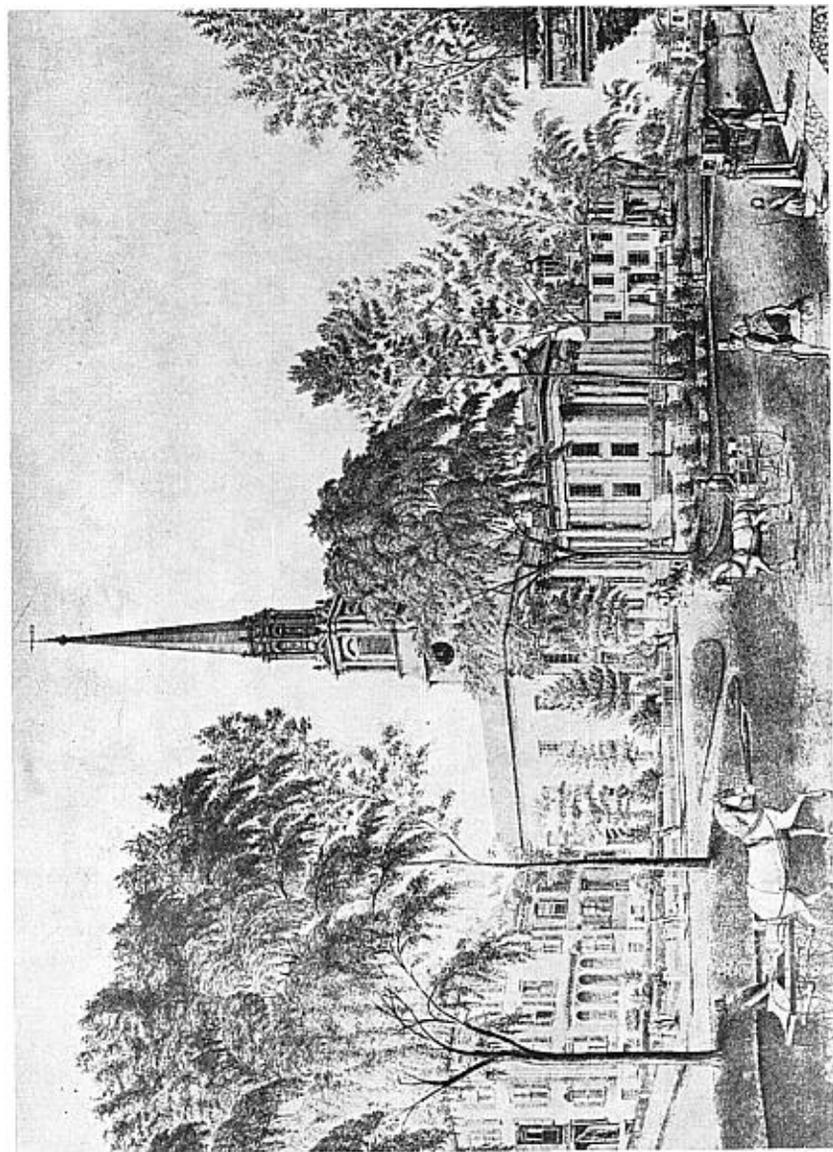


FIG. 4. COURTHOUSE, WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS, 1842-1845  
Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

deep. The new structure was to preserve the external appearance because of a sentiment which existed at the beginning of the twentieth century in Boston; "to think of tearing down the old building was out of the question."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless no natural lighting from the windows and oculus filter into the space of the Grand Room, nor is there a free-flowing space at the principal floor level. Instead the height of the building from basement to dome has been opened up, with balcony rails at each level, and is artificially lighted. The design, prior to alterations, had many features similar to those found in Samuel Thomson's Customhouse, New York, designed in 1833. The New York building has a dome, not expressed on the outside, but supported on a circle of columns within a major cruciform space.

After completing the Boston Customhouse in 1847, Young coordinated designs of the four winning schemes of the Charleston Customhouse into a single design which was built from 1850 to 1854.

Young, as a designer of government buildings, thus felt himself to be a major architect in the United States and a designer qualified to submit schemes for the extension of the United States Capitol.

Only twenty years after completion, the Senate and House wings of the United States Capitol were inadequate in size. On May 28, 1850, the Committee on Public Buildings recommended extensions be made to plans by Robert Mills. The Senate did not approve the Committee's suggestion and instead authorized a competition with a \$500 premium for a plan, to either extend the Capitol to the north and south by the construction of two wings, or to create a "separate and distinct building . . . to the east." Ultimately four sets of plans were selected from which Robert

Mills was to make a design, and the \$500 was divided between the four winners; a common practice it seems in competitions of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1902 when Glenn Brown wrote his *History of the United States Capitol*, he could only find two schemes by the competitors, one by Thomas U. Walter and another without a name appended. Four more schemes all by Ammi Young are now owned by the Library of the American Institute of Architects.<sup>11</sup>

An act of Congress of September 30, 1850, appropriated \$100,000 for the Capitol extension "under the direction of an architect appointed by the President." President Millard Fillmore used his prerogative and appointed Thomas U. Walter, instead of Robert Mills who was preferred by the Committee of Public Buildings.

It is interesting to compare the schemes of Walter with those of Young. Both architects proposed designs for north and south extensions, and for a single extension to the east of the Capitol.

Young created pedimented pavilions to emphasize the importance of Senate or House chambers behind. Walter on the other hand used pedimented pavilions arbitrarily and in one of his designs, clerk's offices and a courtyard are situated behind major porticoes of the north and south facades. The similarity in the plans and elevations of the drawings by Walter and Young respectively, and of the existing building by Thornton and Latrobe, illustrates the continuing and unifying tradition of Greek Revival architecture in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Few architects practiced the Greek Revival style after the Civil War, although one of Young's successors as Supervising Architect to the Treasury Department,

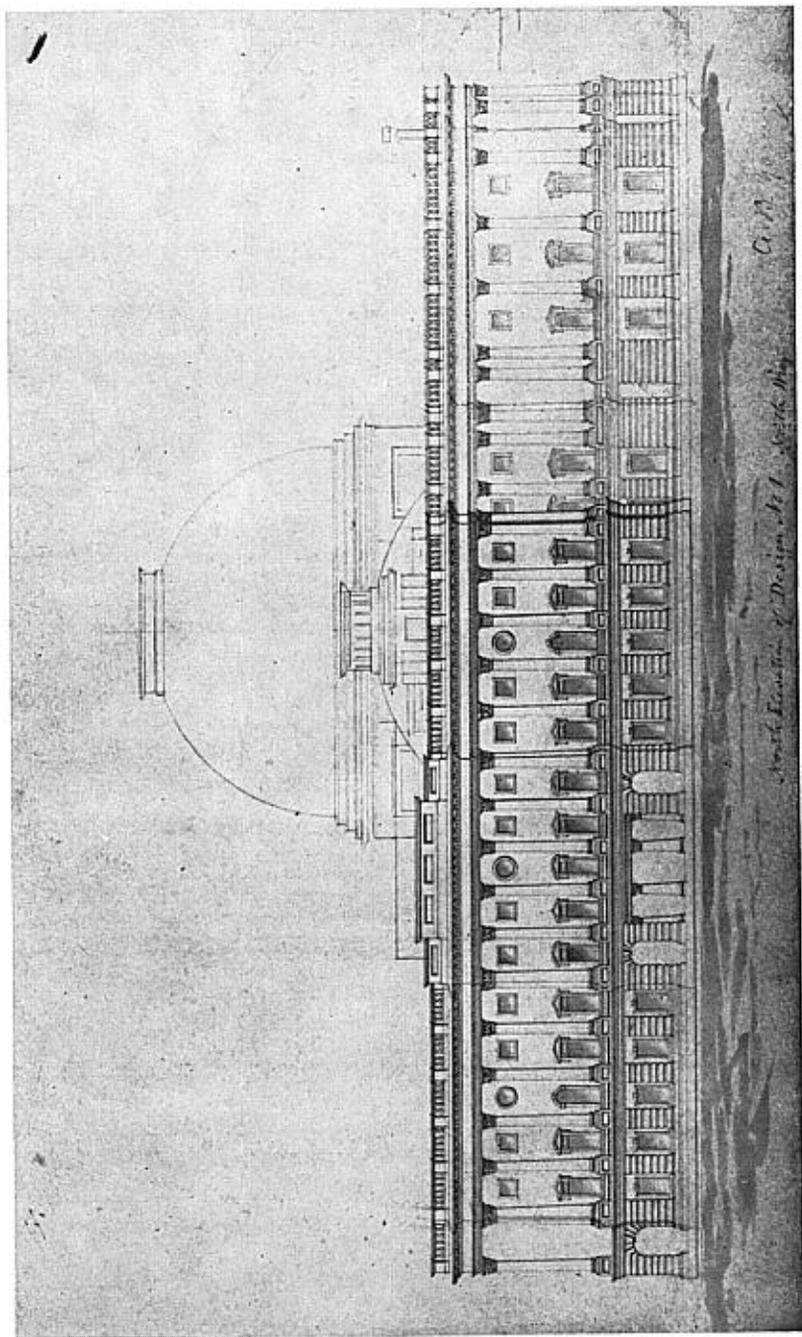


FIG. 5. EXTENSION OF THE NATIONAL CAPITOL, WASHINGTON, D. C., PROJECTED 1850 BY AMMI B. YOUNG  
Courtesy of the American Institute of Architects.

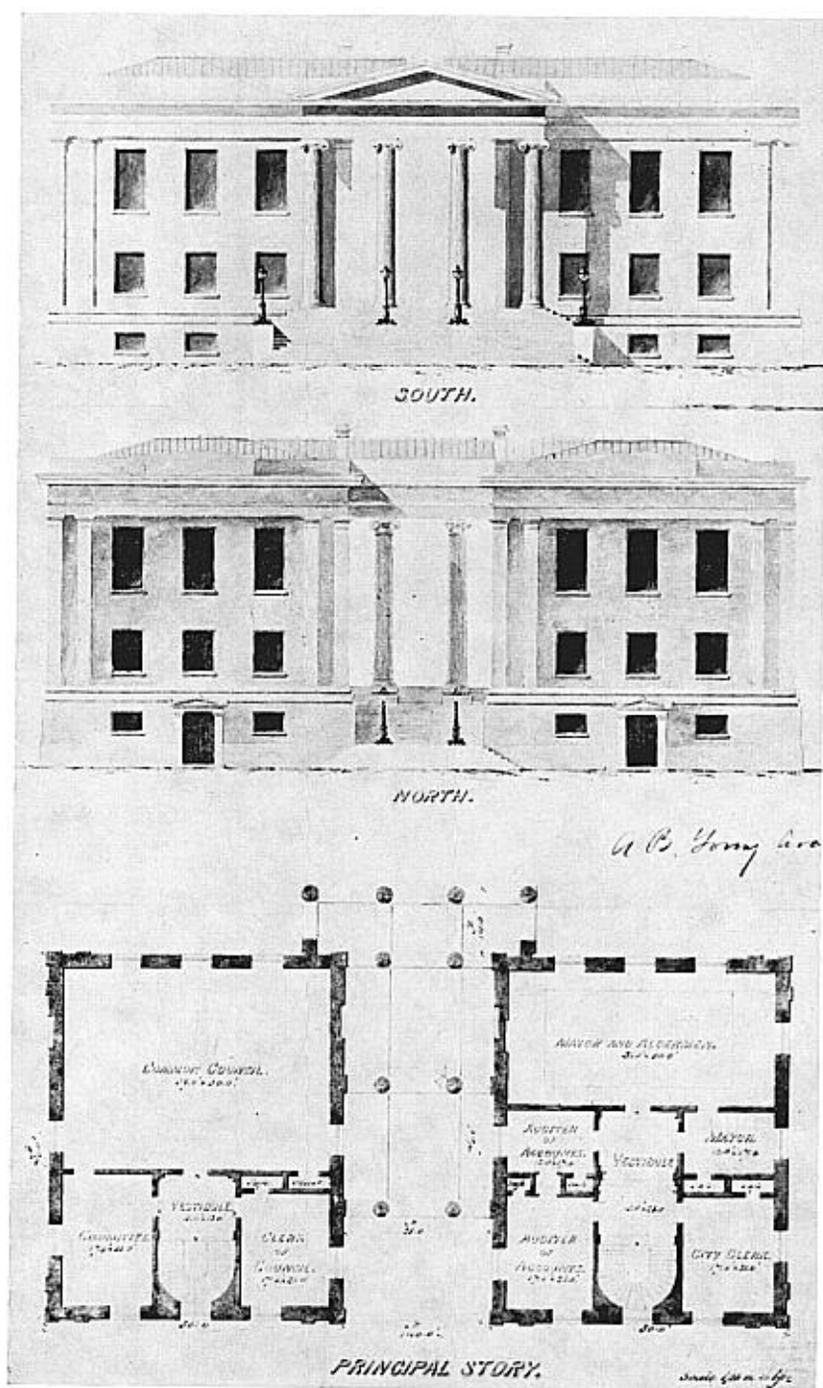


FIG. 6. UNIDENTIFIED MUNICIPAL BUILDING, DESIGNED BY  
AMMI B. YOUNG

Courtesy of the American Institute of Architects.

Alfred Bult Mullett, did design the San Francisco Branch Mint in that style in 1870.

Young was thus a competent follower of leading designers of many traditions and styles, and one of the last of the Greek Revivalists in the Latrobe tradition. Talbot Hamlin in his *Greek Revival*

*Architecture in America* says of the Boston Customhouse: "In one sense it is the most highly developed example of the Greek Revival style in Boston, . . . and most successful of . . . many attempts made by Greek Revival architects to combine a low Roman dome with a pedimented Greek Doric order."<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *American Architect and Building News*, vol. 38, Nov. 19, 1898, p. 124. Reprint of "A. B. Young, Architect of the Boston Custom House," by T. W. S. in the *Boston Transcript*. T. W. S. was a student in the Boston office of Young from 1849-1850. The Charlestown High School was built to the north of the Bunker Hill Monument during 1847 at a cost of \$15,000. See *Charlestown High School Historical Sketches* (Boston, 1881). The School was completely altered and extended in 1870 and was capped by a Mansard roof.

<sup>2</sup> The 1842 meeting of the Worcester County Commissioners appropriated \$65,000 for a County Courthouse. It was completed in 1845 at a cost of \$100,000. Each of the six Corinthian columns of the portico were monolithic, weighing nineteen tons and measuring 3' 0" in diameter and 25' 0" in height. Quincy granite was used in the construction. See Charles Nutt, *History of Worcester and Its People* (Worcester, 1919), pp. 387-389.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Gowans has suggested that Thomas Jefferson used the Ionic Order for the Virginia State Capitol instead of the Corinthian Order of the Maison Carree, Nimes, France, for reasons of Freemasonry. See Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living* (Philadelphia and New York, 1964), pp. 250-251. Ammi B. Young was a Junior Warden of the Franklin Lodge of Lebanon, N. H., from 1822, and was elected to the St. Andrews Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Lebanon, N. H., in 1823.

<sup>4</sup> A memorial by the Merchants of Boston dated December 18, 1835, was made to the Twenty-Fourth Congress, First Session.

<sup>5</sup> "Boston Customhouse," Report of Committees, Serial 294, Rep. No. 448, Twenty-Fourth Congress, First Session, Committee of Ways and Means, March 21, 1836.

<sup>6</sup> Letter dated December 22, 1842, from

Young to the Honorable Samuel C. Crafts (Samuel C. Crafts Papers, Wilbur Library, University of Vermont), discovered by Margaret Muller. The author is indebted to T. S. Seymour-Bassett for this information. Samuel C. Crafts was appointed United States Senator from Vermont from December 1842 to March 1843 by Governor Paine to complete the unexpired term of Judge Prentiss, who had resigned from the Senate to accept the office of United States District Court Judge. Crafts was also thirteenth Governor of Vermont, 1828-1831. Appropriations were made annually as general items of expenditure on "Building Customhouses." Specific amounts for the Boston Customhouse included in the annual reports of the Secretary of the Treasury include \$130,000 in 1837; \$150,000, 1838; \$121,000, 1839. The total sum including alterations amounted to \$1,101,110 in 1857.

<sup>7</sup> For statistics on the building see *The Boston Almanac*, 1850, pp. 51-53. August 1, 1847, was a Sunday. No details of the opening ceremonies appear in the *Boston Post* on the subsequent days.

<sup>8</sup> "Architecture in the United States," *North American Review* (April 1844), pp. 436-483.

<sup>9</sup> W. W. Wheildon, *The New Custom House, Strictures on an Article in the North American Review for April 1844 entitled, "Architecture in America"* (Boston, 1844), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> J. A. Schweinfurth, "Robert Swain Peabody—Tower Builder 1845-1917," *American Architect*, vol. 130 (September 5, 1926), pp. 181-191. N. A. Richards, "Rebuilding the Custom House at Boston, Massachusetts," *Architectural Forum*, vol. 30, no. 3 (March 1919), pp. 87-89.

<sup>11</sup> The AIA Library has twenty-three drawings by Young; fourteen of his four designs for extending the United States Capitol, one sketch

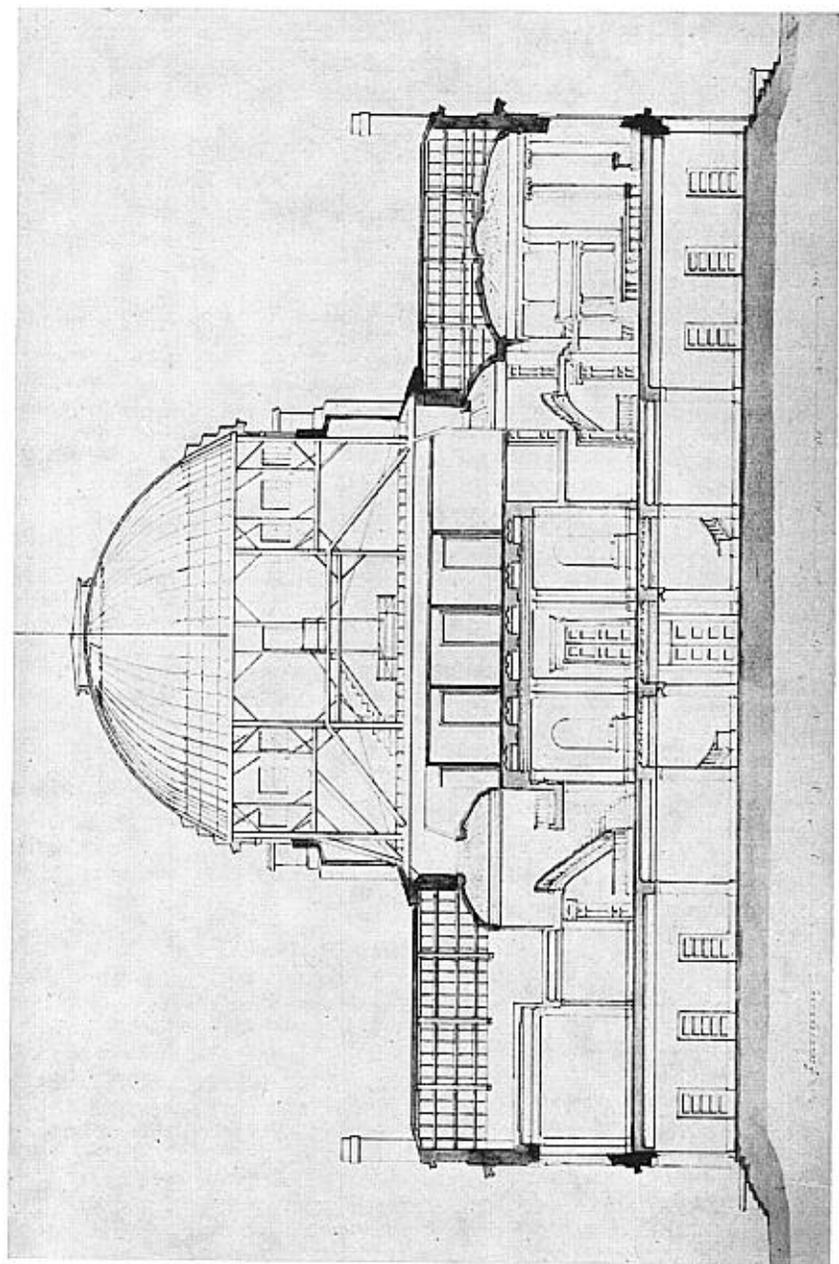


FIG. 7. LONGITUDINAL SECTION, VERMONT STATE CAPITOL, DESIGNED BY AMMI B. YOUNG, 1833  
Courtesy of the American Institute of Architects.

of the Boston Customhouse, one drawing of an unidentified municipal building, and nine of the Vermont State Capitol at Montpelier. All drawings have an embossed stamp which reads "Geo. W. Rapp, Architect and Supt. Cincinnati, Ohio." How George Rapp, partner in the firm of Rapp and Rapp of Chicago, who died

in 1926, came into possession of the drawings or how they came into the possession the AIA Library is unknown.

<sup>12</sup> Talbot, Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (New York, 1944), pp. 106-107.