

Ammi Burnham Young and the Gilmanton Theological Seminary

By BRYANT FRANKLIN TOLLES, JR.

THE career of the Gilmanton Theological Seminary, Gilmanton, New Hampshire (1835-1846) represents an interesting although abbreviated episode in the early history of New England higher education. Since its abrupt demise, its place in this region as a training institution for Congregational ministers has been readily taken by Bangor Theological Seminary, Andover-Newton Theological School, and university divinity schools. Its principal building, Seminary Hall, also disappeared long ago. This structure merits attention, nevertheless, because of its simple, direct and pleasant Greek Revival styling, its association with the well-known nineteenth-century American architect, Ammi Burnham Young (1798-1874),¹ and its striking resemblance to Young's Reed Hall (1839-1840) at Dartmouth College in Hanover. Recent research findings have made it possible to attribute without question the Gilmanton design to Mr. Young, and to provide further critical insight as to its original functions and appearance.

Contemplated in the original terms of the charter of Gilmanton Academy in 1794 as an instrument for theological instruction,² the Seminary was first established as a department of the Academy with a common trustee board, faculty, administration and facilities. The great religious revivals of 1832-1833 brought demands for great numbers of preachers, which the existing seminaries had been unable to supply. The creation of Gilmanton was a worthy response. Its his-

tory,³ though occasionally perilous, did feature certain successes, and several of its faculty and graduates gained distinction in the religious fields as teachers, scholars, missionaries and church pastors. Just as it was achieving some notice as a quality institution, however, it suffered the unfortunate fate of financial embarrassment and lack of students during the national economic depression of the late 1830's and early 1840's. Reluctantly, in September of 1846, the Board of Trustees of the Academy and Seminary voted to suspend the formal academic program, with the hope of reviving it at a more promising time in the future.⁴ That occasion was never to present itself, though the parent Academy continued its operations for nearly a century thereafter.

Ammi Burnham Young's connections with the fledgling Gilmanton Theological Seminary, which can now be concretely ascertained by Trustee Records and Daniel Lancaster's town history, began in 1838. By this time, the former pupil of Boston's Alexander Parris, working from his birthplace in Lebanon, New Hampshire, had established a reputation as an accomplished designer of local churches and educational structures. Most notable of his early architectural works are the Congregational Churches at Norwich, Vermont (1817) and Lebanon (1828), Wentworth and Thornton Halls (1828-1829) at Dartmouth College, and the first building at Kimball Union Academy, Meriden, New Hampshire (1815, rebuilt 1825).⁵ Simultaneous with his work at Gilmanton, he

carried out a commission for one of his finest buildings, the State House at Montpelier, Vermont (1836-1838). At the same time, a year or so before his moves to Montpelier and Boston, he won the competition for the Boston Customs House (1838), though this excellent building was not to be completed until 1849.⁶ During this first period of his career, his style advancement from the typed English Renaissance tradition, as disseminated in the United States through the publications of Asher Benjamin and others, to the initial rough-stage developments of the uniquely American Greek Revival was dramatically displayed in these few building examples.⁷

At the Gilmanton Trustees' meeting in December of 1836, plans were first laid for construction of the much-needed Seminary building. A building committee was formed, a \$15,000 subscription campaign undertaken, and a land purchase arranged.⁸ An elevated site once commanding a beautiful prospect of the surrounding countryside was secured on the Province Road to Laconia (New Hampshire, Route No. 107), just above the present-day town, across the road from the former Academy.⁹ On February 16, 1837, the Trustees voted:

... to proceed immediately to making contracts for materials to erect a Building for Rooms for Students of the Theological Seminary and to go on with such building as far as funds can be obtained for that purpose. And it is to be constructed nearly upon the plan of the 'Bartlett Hall' at Andover, Ms., excepting it is to have a square roof with such other alterations as the committee may deem to make.¹⁰

Following this vote, the committee charged with the task of supervising the building project was asked to contract for the services of a designer-builder. It was at this juncture, that Ammi Young entered into the affairs of the Seminary.

Although we can be reasonably certain of Mr. Young's association with the erection of Seminary Hall, thanks to the attribution by Lancaster,¹¹ the minutes of the Trustee meetings prove conclusively his authorship. At the annual meeting of 1838, it was resolved:

... that the Secretary correspond with Ammi B. Young, Esq., of Montpelier, Vt. and offer him five dollars a day besides his necessary expenses, if he will come to this place and view the site and make us a plan for a Theological Seminary Building with a view to future Buildings to be erected.¹²

Apparently, action on this vote was held up, and it was decided again at the December 13, 1838 Trustee gathering to urge enthusiastically that Young visit Gilmanton, so as to express his views on the project, and to present "a suitable model and drawings."¹³ A week later, he appeared before the Trustees:

At this meeting, Ammi B. Young, Esq. of Boston (late of Montpelier, Vt.) attended agreeably to an invitation extended to him by the Board, and exhibited sketches of a design for the first contemplated Building to be erected for the Theological Seminary which he had prepared and which were very favourably received by all members of the Board who were present...¹⁴

But, in true conservative fashion, the group postponed a final decision on Young's drawings,¹⁵ and reaffirmed their desire to copy the lines of Bartlett Hall (1820) at Andover Theological Seminary,¹⁶ a building which Seminary Hall barely resembled in its ultimate form. After a delay of nearly two months, it was voted at the February, 1839 meeting¹⁷ that Ammi Young's plans be adopted, that materials be collected, additional building funds be solicited, and that an agent be selected to superintend the construction. A contract was next drawn with Young, though it appears

now that the ardent Congregationalist performed the necessary design services gratis.¹⁸ Contrary to the Trustees' fondest hopes, only one of the projected buildings was ever to be constructed before the Seminary was forced to close its doors, but this one alone represented an in-

stitution, were deposited in a leaden box which was placed in a cavity in the stone. Many years later, these items were to make their way to the safety of the Widener Library collections at Harvard. By November of the same year, the walls of the structure had been raised, and a

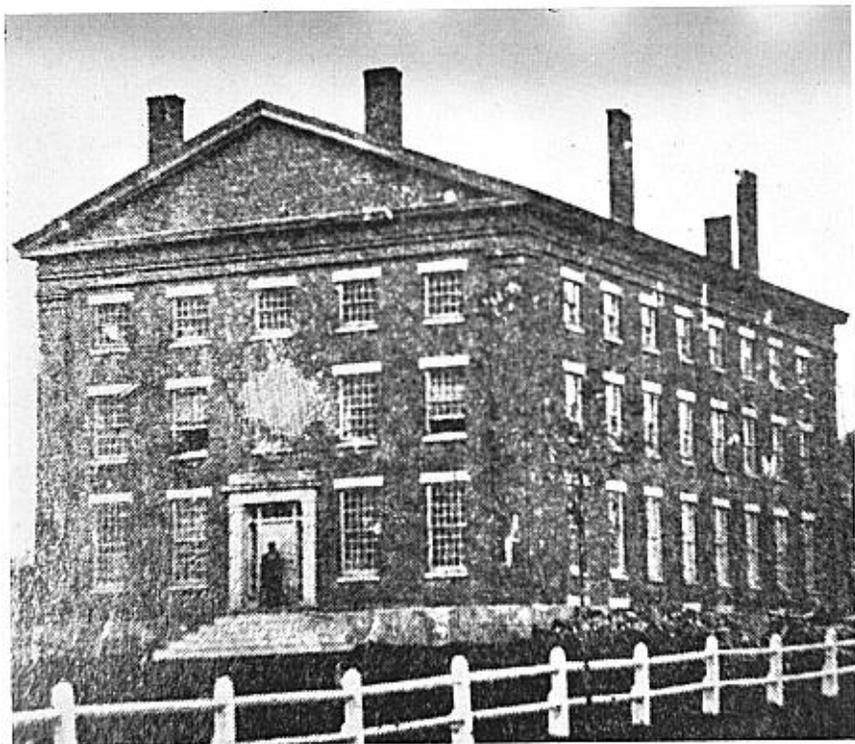


FIG. I. THE SEMINARY, GILMANTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

From *Granite Monthly* 41 (1909), page 207.

triguing contribution to our architectural heritage.

On July 16, 1839, the foundations having been prepared, the cornerstone for Seminary Hall was laid amidst much pomp and ceremony, accompanied by speeches, hymns and prayers. Various documents, along with a history of the in-

stitution, were deposited in a leaden box which was placed in a cavity in the stone. Many years later, these items were to make their way to the safety of the Widener Library collections at Harvard. By November of the same year, the walls of the structure had been raised, and a

roof covering provided. In 1840, the structure was glazed, and quarters for sixty-four students completed. Due to the benevolence of the Gilmanton Ladies Sewing Circle, a chapel was fitted out on the first floor, and a large, well-toned bell and furniture acquired. At appropriate public services on August 18,

1841, the Seminary building was dedicated.¹⁹ Subsequent to that occasion, the Ladies furnished at their own expense three lecture rooms, and a spacious library room which accommodated the theology collection of some 2,500 volumes.²⁰

Written descriptions of Seminary Hall are scanty, so much so that it is impossible to reconstruct interior floor plans, even in the most conjectural fashion. Fortunately, there still exists a photographic view of the exterior (Fig. 1), which, though in poor condition, serves as an invaluable historical document.²¹ We can be sure that the Hall was eighty-eight feet in length, fifty feet in width, and three stories in height above the basement.²² The outside building material was brick and mortar, with granite employed for foundation stones and steps, and for door moldings, windowsills, and window lintels. It is probable, from what the photograph and brick remnants indicate, that it retained its natural red-brick outside color for its entire existence. Presumably, like most public buildings of its day and others of Young's commissions, its interior framing consisted of heavy, square timbers placed and interlocked vertically and horizontally, according to the long-standing practice of New England carpenter-builders. The Hall's roof, punctured by eight tall brick chimneys, was most likely of slate, and rested comfortably on low-pitched triangular gable pediments at either end. It appears to have been elevated roughly three to four feet above the third story, thereby adding height to the building and allowing space for the plain frieze above the window row. By diminishing the heights of the many windows from bottom story to top, stability and interest was lent to the entire structure. As opposed to customary practice, the building's Greek Revival details

were in brick, rather than in stone or wood. Its corner brick pilasters, plain Doric-inspired capitals, and architrave overhang all added an original kind of classic flavor to the whole rectangular building block. The gable-end entrance, though perhaps too crude and heavy in detailing, was sufficiently Greek to harmonize well with the other elements. The total scaling and interrelationship of style features must have been of a high order. While it stood, one could not have helped but sense a feeling of the austere simplicity and strength conveyed by the Hall's mass, the true heart of its style. Though its exterior was modeled after and severely conditioned by the Greek temple ideal, it was aesthetically pleasing, and its interior arrangement, functionally successful. During its period of usage, it received accolades as a "convenient and elegant" structure.²³

Gilmanton's Seminary Hall is able to stand by itself as an interesting, practical, and unusual work of educational architecture. Yet, even greater curiosity surrounds it because of its remarkable similarity to Dartmouth College's Reed Hall (Cover),²⁴ designed by Ammi Young and completed at approximately the same time in 1839-1840.²⁵ Because of its comparable construction date, Seminary, as well as Reed should receive compliments for any meritorious structural or style characteristics that have been to date thought Reed's only. At first examination, the two buildings appear to have been near equivalents, though without the original plans of either, it is difficult to draw too many comparisons. It is quite evident, however, that Reed, though of the same width, is 100 feet in length,²⁶ or one window bay (twelve feet) longer than Seminary. The proportions appear virtually identical; hence, it is logical to

assume that Seminary was roughly the same height at the ridgepole as Reed (forty-eight feet), and possessed the same decreasing story heights of ten, nine and one-half and eight feet from foundation to roof eaves. Both buildings contained the same number of windows in their end

to tell whether the design for Seminary also reflected this practice.²⁷ Reed appears today to have possessed four fewer chimneys than Seminary; but, in actuality, they had the same number as four were removed from Reed in the 1929-1932 restoration.²⁸ While Seminary retained its



FIG. 2. SOUTH ENTRANCE, REED HALL (1839-1840),
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Photograph by the Author.

facades, but Reed features nine per story on each side facade, as opposed to Seminary's eight. The window lintels are trapezoidal in Reed, while they were rectangular in Seminary. The door moldings appear to have been much the same (Fig. 2). Dictated by interior demands, the exterior of Reed broke a fixed formula by means of irregular horizontal window spacing; however, it is impossible

natural brick coloring to the end of its career, Reed has been painted both yellow and white during its history.²⁹ The interior floor-plan arrangements, little that is known about them, varied, of course, according to the educational demands of each institution. It is clear that Reed contained fewer student rooms (ten apartments of the third floor) than Seminary, and that more of its interior space was de-

voted to library facilities and recitation rooms.³⁰ Both, nonetheless, served as multipurpose educational structures, and carried out their planners' belief in the desirability of integration under a single roof of academic and residential facilities. Situated on comparable raised sites, each building related effectively to its environment, and successfully combined aesthetic appeal with utilitarian practicality. Both illustrated unique facets of the inventive American version of the Greek Revival.

After formal suspension of instruction at Gilmanton Theological Seminary in 1846, Seminary Hall remained open for a time for individual study under the guidance of three former faculty members. Finally, in 1848, the Board of Trustees transferred the Hall to the Academy for debts incurred on the con-

dition that it might be repossessed by the theological faculty if the Seminary's situation should alter. Such was not to occur, however, and the building was occupied by the young ladies of the Academy briefly until it was sold to a commercial venturer for use as the Mountain View Hotel, a summer tourist resort.³¹ It was in this state that the Hall, renovated slightly by the addition of roofless wooden porches, a two-story annex (1889), and interior rearrangements, was destroyed by fire in 1893.³² Upon its burning, it passed on to the critical estimate of later architectural historians, while continuing in people's memories to express its characteristic mass, simplicity and self-sufficiency. Even in modern terms, Ammi Burnham Young's design stands up well as an artistic, yet functional building statement.³³

NOTES

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¹ Long unrecognized and undiscussed by architectural historians, Ammi Burnham Young, especially his New England period, has been exposed to considerable scholarly scrutiny over the last twenty-five years. Talbot F. Hamlin's *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 106-111, and Edwin Morris' short biographical sketch in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 1 (1944): 69-71, initiated published treatment of the man and his career. These efforts were followed by two articles by Osmund R. Overby: "Ammi Burnham Young in the Connecticut Valley," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 19 (1960): 119-121, and, "Ammi B. Young: An Architectural Sketch," *Antiques* 81 (1962): 530-533. The most recent and most knowledgeable scholar of Young and his works is Profes-

sor Lawrence Wodehouse of Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. Among his several essays concerning Young are, "Ammi Burnham Young, 1798-1874," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25 (1966): 268-280, and, "Ammi Young's Architecture in Northern New England," *Vermont History* 36 (1968): 54-58.

² In his famed *Gazetteer of New Hampshire* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1849), John Hayward stated that the Seminary was "founded upon the charter of Gilmanton Academy, as the Theological Seminary at Andover, Mass., is upon the charter of Phillips Academy in that place." (P. 20.) John N. McClintock commented in his *History of New Hampshire* (Boston: B. B. Russell, 1889) that the institution was formed, "to aid in providing an adequate supply of able, humble, zealous, and laborious ministers of the gospel for the churches of State and country, especially the feeble and destitute." (Pp. 257-258.)

³ A full history of the Gilmanton Theological Seminary by George H. Williams was published as a pamphlet reprint in 1960. It is entitled, *The Seminary in the Wilderness: A*

Representative Episode in the Cultural History of Northern New England, and appeared initially in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* 13 (1959): 369-400, and 14 (1960): 27-58. Brief, but useful historical sketches are contained in Daniel Lancaster's, *The History of Gilmanton* (Gilmanton, New Hampshire: Alfred Prescott, 1845), pp. 169-173, and in Diane H. Hurd, ed., *Merrimack and Belknap Counties, New Hampshire* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Company, 1885), pp. 798-800. References to the Seminary are made in two articles from *Granite Monthly* magazine: "Old Gilmanton Matters: Historical Memoranda and Biographical Notes," by Albion H. French (4, 1909: 249-265), and, "Glimpses of Old Gilmanton," by J. E. Fullerton (3, 1880: 304-310). Material relating to Seminary Hall in any of these writings is, however, quite sparse.

⁴ Williams, op. cit., *Harvard Library Bulletin* 13 (1960): p. 55.

⁵ Wodehouse, "Ammi Young's Architecture in Northern New England," *Vermont History* 36 (1968): pp. 55-56.

⁶ Wodehouse, "Ammi Burnham Young, 1798-1874," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25 (1966): p. 270.

⁷ Ammi Burnham Young (1798-1874) was always regarded as a scholarly and exemplary gentleman by his associates. Sadly, little is known about his personal life; building designs tell the story of man and career. Young gained greatest distinction in his later years as the first "Superintending Architect of the U. S. Treasury Department" (1852-1862), succeeding Robert Mills, whose title was "Federal Architect" to 1842. While in this position, the New Hampshire was responsible for the designs of approximately fifty public buildings all over the United States. These included the Courthouse and Post Office at Windsor, Vermont, the old Custom House at Charleston, South Carolina (Commenced, 1849), the Custom Houses at Galveston, Texas (see Lawrence Wodehouse, "The Custom House, Galveston, Texas, 1857, by Ammi Burnham Young," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25 (1966): 64-67), the Post Office and Customs House at Portsmouth, New Hampshire (see Geoffrey P. Moran, "The Post Office and Customs House at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Its Architect, Ammi Burnham Young," *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND* 57 (1967): 85-102), and civic structures in Rut-

land and Burlington, Vermont. Young remained at the head of the department for a ten-year period, and it is said that he instituted many changes, one of which resulted in the hiring of professional architects instead of laymen for the designing of government buildings. Upon his resignation because of failing health, he spent the final twelve years of his life at his Washington, D. C. home. He died in 1874. He had been married twice, the only child being a daughter by his first wife. Of his brothers, the best known were Dyer B. Young, a New Hampshire contractor, and Ira Young, Professor of Astronomy, Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at Dartmouth College, both of whom collaborated with Mr. Young to complete the architect's last Dartmouth building, the Shattuck Observatory in 1852-1854. (Details from previously cited articles, and, Henry F. and Elsie R. Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of Architects Deceased*, Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Company, 1956, pp. 676-677).

⁸ Records of the Board of Trustees of Gilmanton Academy and Theological Seminary (Meeting of December 13, 1836), Town of Gilmanton, New Hampshire, Archives (Town Hall, Gilmanton Iron Works). (Subsequently referred to as "Records.")

⁹ The Seminary building formerly stood atop a prominence called, "Meetinghouse Hill," opposite the brick Methodist Church, which was razed many years ago, its materials used in a construction project in nearby Laconia. Upon close inspection of the original Seminary grounds, one may have the pleasure of playing the role of architectural archaeologist. It is still possible to see part of the old foundations and rubble building materials, charred bricks from which yet today reveal the damaging effects of the 1893 fire.

¹⁰ Records, Meeting of February 16, 1837.

¹¹ Lancaster, op. cit., p. 172. Even without the conclusive evidence of the Trustee Records, Lancaster should prove a reasonable authority for ascertaining Ammi Young's ties with the Seminary. Not only was he contemporary historian of the town, but he was for twenty years Congregational pastor there, and a trustee of the Seminary for its entire existence. His name appears on the 1839 subscription lists for the new building, and his membership of the building committee of the Board of Trustees is officially noted in the minutes of the April 26, 1837 meeting.

¹² Records, Annual Meeting of August 21, 1838.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Meeting of December 13, 1838.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Meeting of December 20, 1838.

¹⁵ Floor plan, elevation and detail drawings for Seminary Hall have yet to be discovered, and, presumably, have been destroyed long ago.

¹⁶ Now the property of Phillips Academy, Andover.

¹⁷ Records, Meeting of February 15, 1839.

¹⁸ There is no mention of payment for services to Young in the Account Book for the Gilmanton Academy and Theological Seminary covering the years 1840-1845 (New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord), so that it is quite possible that compensation was simply not offered or accepted. The actual cost of the building cannot be specifically determined by the fragmentary records, but it must have been in the \$10,000 to \$12,000 range. The expense for Reed Hall (1839-1840) at Dartmouth College was over \$15,000. Seminary must have been less, however, as Reed was larger, and was slightly more elaborate on the interior.

¹⁹ Lancaster, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁰ Records, meetings of May 2, 1842, and October 9, 1844.

²¹ *Granite Monthly* 41 (1909): p. 207. According to Williams, a glass negative of this illustration exists in the Town of Gilmanton Archives, but the negative was not found there by the author. A later photo from the Gilmanton Academy Record (October, 1890) shows the building in altered form as a resort hotel, but this view is of even poorer quality than the one mentioned above.

²² *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Theological Seminary, Gilmanton, New Hampshire* (Gilmanton, New Hampshire: Alfred Prescott, 1840), p. 12; Horace Wood Family Papers (Notebook) (1810-1886), Town of Gilmanton, New Hampshire Archives (Town Hall, Gilmanton Iron Works).

²³ *Catalogue, op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁴ The literature relating to the construction, history and architectural criticism of Reed Hall is thorough, and of excellent quality. Roger P. Benezet's 1932 undergraduate thesis, "The History of Reed Hall" (Carpenter Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire), offers solidly documented factual

history and analysis of the structure. For information about the building title, Leon Burr Richardson's, "Brief Biographies of Buildings: II-Reed Hall" (*Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* 35 (1942): 21) is stimulating and useful. Substantial pieces of information relating to Reed appear in Dartmouth College histories compiled by John K. Lord (*A History of Dartmouth College, 1815-1909*. Concord, New Hampshire, The Rumford Press, 1913), Richardson (*History of Dartmouth College*. 2 vols. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Publications, 1932), and Ralph Nading Hill (*The College on the Hill: A Dartmouth College Chronicle*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth Publications, 1964).

Reed Hall's history may be quite concisely related. Constructed in 1839-1840 on the site of President Eleazer Wheelock's former mansion house, it was named after the Honorable William Reed of Marblehead, Massachusetts, then a member of the Board of Trustees. Mr. Reed was successful enough at his mercantile pursuits to be able to leave a handsome legacy to Dartmouth College upon his death, part of which was directed toward the Reed Hall building fund. Assisting Ammi Young in the realization of the building plan was his brother, Dyer H. Young, the contractor based in Lebanon. Costing approximately \$15,000, the Hall housed for many years on its first and second floors the main and two society libraries, a museum, an art collection, and scientific apparatus. Student rooms occupied the third story. The lack of original floor plans prevent further interior specifications. Along with Seminary Hall, it undoubtedly drew its inspiration from Young's earlier temple-like buildings at Dartmouth, Wentworth and Thornton Halls (1828-1829). After the 1890's, Reed was used solely for dormitory purposes, that is until the 1929-1933 reconstruction directed by Jens Frederick Larson when the interior was completely removed and rebuilt, so as to accommodate faculty offices, conference rooms, and classrooms. Today, the old edifice serves well as the headquarters for the Departments of History and Economics.

²⁵ The fact that Young prepared the designs for Reed Hall has been a long-accepted certainty among architectural historians, and may be verified by the President's Report and Trustee Records for 1838-1839 (Dartmouth

Notes continued on page 56.