

AIA 150 / Virginia Architecture Week 2007
Old Town Alexandria Walking Tour Points of Interest Featuring
GLENN BROWN, AIA:
AN ALEXANDRIA ARCHITECT'S MONUMENTAL VISION

April 22, 2007

GLENN BROWN: BACKGROUND

Glenn Brown (1854-1932), an Alexandria native, was one of the most influential American architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He designed scores of notable buildings and served as Executive Secretary of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Locally, Brown was a driving force behind the establishment of the McMillan Commission, which created the monumental core of Washington, DC; was instrumental in the founding of the Commission of Fine Arts; was an influential architectural historian; a champion of the “City Beautiful Movement” and urban planning; and a presidential advisor. This exhibition acknowledges these important contributions on the national stage but focuses on his architectural contributions to his hometown of Alexandria.

Brown served as Secretary of the AIA from 1899 to 1913, during a period when the fundamentals of American architectural practice were being established. His published works were extremely influential and some continue to be standard references. As a practicing architect he designed a number of houses and buildings, both in Washington and in his hometown of Alexandria, and was an early proponent of documenting and preserving our architectural heritage.

ALEXANDRIA BOYHOOD

Glenn Brown was born in Fauquier County, Virginia. His grandfather was Bedford Brown, a well-known antebellum United States Senator from North Carolina. Though a Unionist, Bedford Brown supported the Confederacy, and passed his southern sympathies on to his family, including his son (Bedford Jr.), Glenn’s father.

My father, after serving four years as surgeon in the Confederate Army, moved to Alexandria, Va., to be near his mother’s family who lived in Washington. Here he began the practice of medicine. His practice in the South had been utterly destroyed by the devastating reconstruction days which were so ruinous to the South. He never forgot his inheritance and acquired southern tastes and principles. I was slated for the medical profession in my youth as my father thought only medicine, law or ministry were callings fit for a gentleman.

--- Glenn Brown’s memoirs

While he originally began to study medicine like his father, Glenn soon determined that he was much more interested in building and turned to architecture. From 1873 to 1875, he worked as an apprentice in the office of N. G. Starkweather, a well-respected designer who is best known in Alexandria as the architect of a number of buildings at the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary.

EARLY ARCHITECTURAL WORK

Interested in more formal architectural training, Brown enrolled in architecture school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1875, the first school in the country to offer formal

architectural education. While there, he was profoundly influenced by the immensely popular works of Henry Hobson Richardson, who was creating a distinctly robust American style of architecture.

Following his architectural studies, Brown went to work for Norcross Brothers, the contracting firm that constructed many of Richardson's designs, and became "the Clerk of the Works" for the Richardson designed Cheney Building project in Hartford, CT, today considered a fine example of "Romanesque Revival."

The Clerk of the works on these buildings . . . was a general utility man. While enlarging the scale details to full size, making the shop drawings and patterns, I became very familiar with other drawings from Richardson's office – was much impressed with their artistic qualities and wondered at his abilities in ignoring practical considerations when attaining artistic effects.

--- Glenn Brown's Memoirs, 1860-1930

Brown returned to Alexandria in the late 1870s and lived with his father on South Fairfax Street, opening his own architectural practice in Washington in 1880. His early work was largely residential, and he designed houses and apartment buildings not only in Washington but in his native Alexandria as well. Over the years, Glenn Brown designed well over a hundred houses in Washington, D.C. alone, with scores more for clients in Virginia, the surrounding countryside, and in the Mid-Atlantic region. As his practice developed, he also received commissions for a number of different building types, including churches, bridges, zoological structures, office buildings, the Marine Corps base at Quantico (Va.) and a number of restoration projects.

TOUR BEGINS

The intersection of South Washington and Prince Streets, surrounding the Confederate Monument (M. Casper Buberi, dedicated 1889) is one of the most architecturally diverse in the city. All of these buildings are landmarks of different architectural styles, yet three of the buildings were built within a few years of each other and the 1932 dedication of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, which passes through Alexandria on Washington Street. The four buildings surrounding this intersection are:

1. 201 S. Washington - Lyceum Hall/City History museum

The building was constructed in 1839 by Benjamin Hallowell as head of the Lyceum Company. It is one of only two temple form Greek Revival style buildings remaining in the city. The building was restored by Carroll Curtice in 1974 as the first Bicentennial visitor's center in the United States. The plaster exterior walls were restored to display the joints of stone blocks and the base color but the faux stone finish has not been painted due to budget constraints. The lecture hall upstairs continues to be used for cultural events and the downstairs is the City's history museum.

2. 117 S. Washington - Virginia Public Service Company Building (Pier 1)

This Art Deco commercial structure was designed in 1930 by Chicago architect Frank D. Chase.

3. 200 S. Washington St. - former US Customs House, Court House and Post Office

Constructed 1930, James A. Wetmore, Supervising Architect, in the Georgian Revival style.

4. 130 S. Washington St. - George Mason Hotel (now offices)

This Federal Revival style hotel is typical of the grand downtown hotels built throughout the small towns of Virginia in the 1920s and was a center of the city's social life for over 50 years.

5. 212 S. Washington St. - Downtown Baptist Church

The young Providence, RI architect Thomas A. Tefft designed the Lombard-Romanesque style facade addition for the existing early 19th century church building in 1854. The facade was originally scored and painted to resemble brownstone.

6. 706 Prince St. - Swann-Daingerfield house

This house was constructed ca. 1803 as a Federal style structure, of which portions remain on the interior. A Greek Revival style wing was added ca. 1850 and in the 1870s the exterior and portions of the interior were enlarged and restyled in a particularly robust Second Empire style, characterized by the Mansard roof and heavily carved porch, cornice brackets and dormers. Note the Flemish bond bricks on the original facade, used on pre-1820 structures in Alexandria, which helps the observer read the evolution of the building.

7. 711 Prince St. - Pickens-Fowle house

The original ca. 1797, two bay wide flounder house on the east side was incorporated into an expansion when William Fowle purchased the property in 1811. The Federal Style facade bears a striking similarity to the first Harrison-Gray-Otis house in Boston designed by Charles Bulfinch, who happened to be in Washington in the early 19th century working on the US capitol, though no physical evidence exists of his hand in the design.

8. 806 Prince - United Daughters of the Confederacy

Built by the Reverend James T. Johnston on a lot he bought in 1850. The brown sandstone pediments over the windows, center hall plan and cast iron railing are unusually grand for a Greek Revival style facade in Alexandria.

9. 915 & 917 Prince Street (architect unknown)**

**Brown was the most knowledgeable practitioner of the Richardsonian Romanesque style in Alexandria at that time and, while specific documentation has not been found attributing the following stylistically similar houses to Brown, they are very likely either designed by or were strongly influenced by him.

The twin townhouses at 915 and 917 Prince Street constructed about 1890 show unmistakable Romanesque design elements. The houses have strong massing and solid, bold forms, use a variety of masonry materials to achieve a rich surface texture, have deeply recessed entries and make use of a semi-circular Romanesque style arch. Both houses are firmly tied to earth with large masonry blocks reflecting a remarkably assertive self confidence for a country barely over a century old.

Return to Alfred St .and turn south

10. 219 South Alfred Street (architect unknown)**

This freestanding masonry townhouse from about 1890 features a slate Mansard roof and metal clad bay window typical of the Romanesque style but, uncharacteristically, uses both semi-circular and the earlier style segmental arches over openings.

Return north on Alfred St.

11. 107 S. Alfred - Friendship Firehouse museum

The fire company was established in 1774 with George Washington as a member. The current building dates from 1855 with an Italianate style facade renovation in 1871. It is now a City museum.

12. Southeast corner of Cameron and North Alfred Streets - The Harlow House, 1893, Glenn Brown Architect. (demolished mid-20th century)

Glenn Brown designed this mansion for M.E Harlow, a local land developer. Stylistically the house displayed a familiarity with the prevailing architectural tastes of the day and included Italianate, Gothic Revival and Queen Anne influences, resulting in a richly detailed and ornamented residence. The Harlow house was replaced by a parking lot and later the:

Church Square townhomes/public parking garage, 1992. Stephen Bannigan, Architect.

This public/private joint venture was the result of a request for proposals for development of a city-owned surface parking lot on the north half of this block. The program required that the developer double the existing 100 commercial parking spaces, provide residential construction on Cameron and Columbus Streets and allowed commercial uses facing Alfred Street. The constructed proposal by local developer Lawrence Brandt in 1992 provides two levels of underground parking with fee simple, air rights townhomes above, surrounding an interior parking court. The facades are designed in a mix of eclectic designs intended to blend seamlessly with the surrounding neighborhood and not detract from the setting of Christ Church. The project proved so popular with surrounding residents and buyers that a similar project was also completed near the Torpedo Factory on N. Union and Queen Streets.

Turn east (right) on Cameron St.

13. N. Columbus/Cameron/N. Washington St. - Christ Church

The Church was constructed between 1767-73 from a design by James Wren. The original builder, James Parsons, was unable to complete the job and it was finished by John Carlyle. Carlyle is known to have had a copy of Batty Langley's *City and Country Builder's and Workman's Treasury of Designs*, published in London in 1756, from which he took the design for the Palladian window on the east facade. George Washington is believed to have copied this window for the north facade of Mt. Vernon in 1776. The Georgian style corner quoins and arch keystones are of Aquia sandstone. The tower and steeple date from 1785-99 with alterations again in 1818. The interior gallery was added sometime during this period. In the 1870s the interior was remodeled in the Gothic revival style which was restored to the colonial style by Glenn Brown in 1891. Milton Grigg further restored the church after WWII and designed the adjacent parish hall which was erected in 1950.

Restored Colonial Revival Style Interior by Glenn Brown, 1891

Brown restored the Christ Church interior to a colonial appearance from its mid-century makeover in the dark, Gothic Revival style. His restoration rediscovered and utilized the original sounding board and windows, as well as the central chandelier, reading desk and chairs; he also designed the "wine glass" pulpit and reinstalled original pews. Today, it is Glenn Brown's interior that defines Christ Church's architectural image.

Glenn Brown's other early restoration work included Pohick Church in 1901, where he restored woodwork which had been destroyed by Union troops during the Civil War. Labeled "a deft essay on Colonial Revival design," the woodwork was based, according to Brown himself, on "old Georgian

churches of the period like Christ Church in Alexandria, Kings Chapel Boston and the Newport Church.”

A RESTORATION ARCHITECT

In the first two decades of his professional practice, Brown became well-known for his restoration work. His interest in the early colonial architecture of the nation mirrored the patriotic fervor of the American public following the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, which celebrated the first century of nationhood.

During the last two decades of the 19th century, architects became increasingly enamored of colonial architecture of the early years of the Republic. Through studies and drawings of old buildings, they created the first body of scholarship on this heritage. Glenn Brown was in the forefront of this movement; in 1887, he published a series of measured drawings and sketches in the *American Architect and Building News* detailing the interiors of buildings in Alexandria. Included in his survey were Gadsby’s Tavern, the “Braddock House” (the Carlyle House today), the Bank of Alexandria, the Cathcart House (Hoxton House?) at Episcopal High School, and The Octagon in Washington.

“In an old warehouse which has recently been torn down in Alexandria, Va., four old books were found and presented to me filled with plates of doors, cornices, mantels, etc., one by Langely, 1739, another by Wm. Pain; of the others the titles were lost. These English works show clearly where the carpenters and builders of the day received their inspiration.”

-- *American Architect and Building News*

Glenn Brown’s acknowledgment of the importance of the design sources for the early architecture of the country foreshadowed much scholarly work in the 20th century. His measured drawings often resulted in commissions to “restore” colonial buildings and, by the late 1890’s, preservation and restoration projects had become an important part of his practice.

Gadsby’s Tavern Ballroom: Nearly two decades after his initial recording of the building’s woodwork, Glenn Brown remained intensely interested in the fate of Alexandria’s colonial architecture. By 1917, the venerable Gadsby’s Tavern, the setting of balls for George and Martha Washington, Thomas Jefferson’s first inaugural party, and many other significant events, had fallen into a deplorable condition. Brown learned that the Metropolitan Museum of Art was buying examples of American architecture for its forthcoming American Wing, and mounted an effort to save the ballroom woodwork by having the museum acquire it. In the 1930’s, renowned restoration architect Thomas Tileston Waterman traveled to New York to take measurements of the original woodwork in order to create the replica ballroom which visitors to Gadsby’s Tavern see today.

Turn north (left) on Columbus St.

14. 215, 217 & 219 N. Columbus Street, 1886. Glenn Brown, Architect.

In addition to his ease with Richardson Romanesque style buildings, Brown was perfectly capable of designing in variety of popular late 19th residential styles. His trio of row houses at 215, 217 and 219 North Columbus Street make use of the widely popular Queen Anne style, one closely allied to Romanesque. All of these houses displayed (before later alterations) asymmetrical massing and a juxtaposition of different surface treatments including “German lap” and “fish scale” siding, and covered porches.

15. 228 N. Columbus Street, 1893. Glenn Brown, Architect.

Known locally as “the Muir House,” this building includes many of the same Richardson Romanesque massing and design motifs that Brown was familiar with from the Cheney Building experience. In many respects Brown’s Richardson-inspired Alexandria townhouses displayed unmistakable modernity in Alexandria, and must have seemed refreshing and visually interesting to citizens of the period when contrasted to the severely symmetrical, monochromatic brick Federal and Georgian rowhouses for which Alexandria is more well known.

Turn east on Queen St. and south on N. Washington St.

16. 208 & 210 N. Washington Street (architect unknown)**

These buildings are stylistic similar to the Muir House at 228 N. Columbus Street but use a slate Mansard roof at the third floor.

Return north on N. Washington St.

17. 417 N. Washington Street (architect unknown)**

This version of a dwelling in the Romanesque style uses similar a copper bay window but is a freestanding dwelling, rather than a rowhouse, as the other examples used here.

Turn east (left) on Oronoco St.

18. Lee Fendall House. Originally built 1785, restyled in Greek Revival manner about 1850. Currently a house museum and undergoing renovation.

19. 607 and 609 Oronoco Street, Lee Boyhood Home. Twin houses built by William Wilson in 1795, both originally on a half block.

607 is known as the boyhood home of Robert E. Lee and was for many years a historic house museum, currently a private residence. Robert E. Lee lived here sporadically, among other family homes in Alexandria, until he left to go to West Point in 1825.

Turn south (right) on St. Asaph St.

20. 300 block South St. Asaph, west side

Most of these frame rowhouses date from the mid-19th century and were "restored" to their present condition to appear Colonial in the 1960s. Preservation philosophy has evolved in the intervening forty years and today emphasizes maintaining the original architectural appearance of a building rather than creating a program of imagined history.

21. 607 Cameron St.

This Federal style dwelling was constructed by William Yeaton, who bought this lot in 1799. From 1830 to 1846 it was the residence of Thomas, ninth Lord Fairfax, whose wife was a grand-daughter of John Carlyle.

22. 517 Prince St. - John Douglas Brown house

Built around 1775 by Patrick Murray on a 1/4 block lot, the typical original subdivision of Alexandria’s blocks. The dwelling and outbuildings were owned by the Brown family between 1816

and 2000 and have been altered remarkably little since the middle of the 19th century. The original wide board pine siding painted oxide red was preserved below the existing clapboards but the surviving early white cedar shingles show no traces of paint. Virtually all 18th century buildings in Alexandria, including the wood shingles, were painted red - if they were painted at all. The street elevation was also originally several feet higher and the front door was centered on the street facade. Uncut stone foundations would never have been exposed in the 18th century and wherever they are visible today indicates that the street was lowered in the late 18th century for storm drainage.

The 400 and 500 blocks of Prince contain numerous examples of Alexandria=s Greek Revival style townhomes from the 1850s, distinguished by the bold neo-classical architraves around the entrances, the tall first floor windows and moulded brick egg-and-dart cornices.

Turn west (right) on Prince toward the Lyceum

21. 601 Prince - re-modeled by Glenn Brown, 1889. (EDAW offices)

This building, originally constructed as the 2nd Presbyterian Church in 1840 in a temple form Greek Revival style, was remodeled by Alexandria architect Glenn Brown in 1889-95 in the Richardson Romanesque style. The Greek pilasters are still visible on the west facade. Brown's remodeling added a new front and a bell tower in what the Alexandria Gazette described as "modern in its style of architecture" making it "one of the handsomest structures in Alexandria." Like the Armory of a few years earlier, Brown used brickwork to suggest the stone massiveness typical in Richardson-designed structures. The building is no longer used as a church and is now an office building for a landscape architecture firm.

22. 605-607 Prince - Society of Military Engineers offices

The scored plaster facade with cast iron Italianate style window heads were added in 1869 by James Graham to a row of 18th century brick townhouses to unify and update them.

Tour notes, and all resulting errors, by Al Cox, FAIA. For additional information see *Historic Alexandria Virginia Street by Street: A Survey of Existing Early Buildings* by Ethelyn Cox, Historic Alexandria Foundation, 1976.