

It's All Greek to Me: Classical Influences on Georgian and Federal Architectural Styles in the American Colonies

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Abstract

When the British established colonies in North America, they brought with them their cultural practices and ideals, which can be seen in the architectural styles present in the New World. It is generally accepted that both the Early Colonial and Georgian styles were brought to North America through English influence over the colonies, however, architects are in disagreement as to whether the Federal style should be given its own designation. In order to understand the genesis of the stylistic influences behind both the Georgian and Federal styles in colonial and post-colonial North America, this paper will outline the characteristics of domestic structures that exemplify each style as well as the prominent architects associated with them. I will argue that the Federal style is a separate and distinct style from the Georgian style in post-colonial America due not only to variation of architectural and stylistic elements, but more importantly due to the social milieu of the period in which it arose.

Introduction

In the field of architecture, as in many other professional fields, it is customary for professionals to develop terms and classifications in order to sort and compare the objects that are under study. The most commonly used term of classification in architecture is *style*, which generally refers to a scheme that separates or groups structures together based on qualitative and quantitative attributes of a structure's physical characteristics

including ornamentation, material, general appearance and/or major design elements (Harris 1998). However, the term architectural style can also be applied to a period of time, religious tradition, country of origin or geographic region. While analyses of architectural structures and style often rely solely on the physical characteristics, this study will also examine the cultural factors that influence architectural styles.

The first formal, sophisticated architectural styles in North America arose in the seventeenth century when the British began to establish permanent colonies. By the dawn of the eighteenth century the Georgian style rose in popularity due to British influence on the American colonies and prevailed until the American Revolution. In the post-revolutionary landscape, however, the Federal style was specifically developed by Americans to represent their newly founded republic and it dominated the landscape into the early nineteenth century (Trachtenberg 2003). Although both Georgian and Federal styles are based on symmetry and classical orders, the former was built strictly on a central cubical mass with an emphasis on square rooms and square or rectangular windows, while the latter incorporated circular or elliptical rooms and fanlights into a similar style with a central cubical mass (Eberlein and Hubbard 1952; McAlester 1984; Morrison 1952; Roth 1979).

While Britain has been credited with introducing the Georgian architectural style into the North American colonies, the original influence of the Federal style is debated. Georgian architecture is common in England in the eighteenth century and only appears in the American colonies when British immigrants and architects began actively designing and building structures in the colonies (Donnelly 2003). However, authors within the architectural discipline frequently challenge whether the Federal style should be differentiated from the Georgian style due to extensive stylistic similarities. Many architectural historians believe that the Georgian and Federal styles are, in fact, one and the same type of colonial architecture, while some believe that the Federal style is an

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independent style representative of a new republic and others still classify both the Georgian and Federal styles as adapted forms of neo-classical architecture. I argue here that both the Georgian and Federal architectural styles are part of a classical revival genre; however, they are distinct from one another due to differences in their architectural and stylistic elements, as well as the sociopolitical climate in which they developed. In order to discuss these issues, I will describe the major physical characteristics that typify and exemplify both the Georgian and Federal styles and discuss where they are similar to one another, as well as where they depart from each other using examples from both the Old World and New World. Finally, I will examine the social and political factors that influenced the architecture styles in order to put them into context.

Colonial Architecture

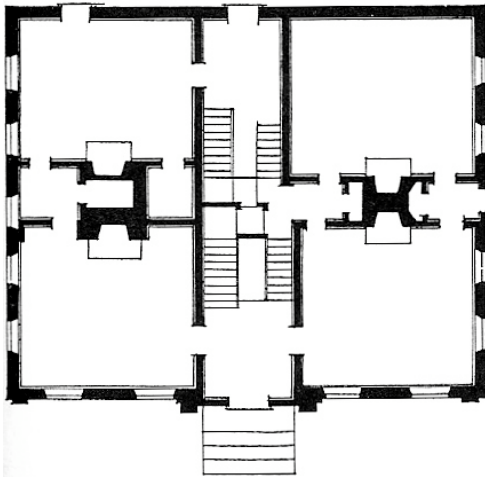
Although Europeans had been migrating to North America since the late fifteenth century, the first permanent colonial settlements were not built until the early seventeenth century (Donnelly 2003; Harris 1998; Williams and Williams 1962). The period spanning approximately two hundred years prior to the American Revolution is referred to as the Colonial Period, which is comprised of the Early Colonial Period and the Georgian Period. The Federal period followed, arising after the American Revolution and lasting into the early nineteenth century.

The Georgian Period (1700 - 1780)

While most people understand the term *Georgian* to be an architectural style designation, it is in fact, a sociopolitical term that refers to the art and architecture produced in England and America from 1714 to 1800, during the reigns of King George

I through King George III in England (Donnelly 2003). Coinciding with this time period was a movement toward a unified architectural style that was embraced in England, as well as the American colonies that emphasized classical elements. Notable architects associated with this style include Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren in the early eighteenth century and James Gibbs in the latter portion of the eighteenth century (McAlester 1984; Roth 1979).

The Georgian style emphasized bilateral symmetry based on a central axis in plan, as well as façade. Structures of this style contain precise proportional relationships among all of their elements, which are representative of their symmetrical interior plan (Roth 1979). The plan of domestic Georgian structures is cubical or rectangular, comprised of four rooms on each floor, with two on each side of the structure divided by a central hall that runs the length of the house. This bilateral symmetry is exemplified in the John Vassall House (Figures 1 and 2). The rooms of these structures are square or rectangular and are symmetrical to one another (Williams and Williams 1962). The functionality of early colonial architecture remains in the Georgian style, but it is covered by ornately finished surfaces and formally divided into a kitchen (hall), living room (parlor) and multiple bedrooms.



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Figure 1: Plan of the John Vassall (Longfellow) house, exhibiting cubical symmetrical plan (adapted from Kimball 1966:71).

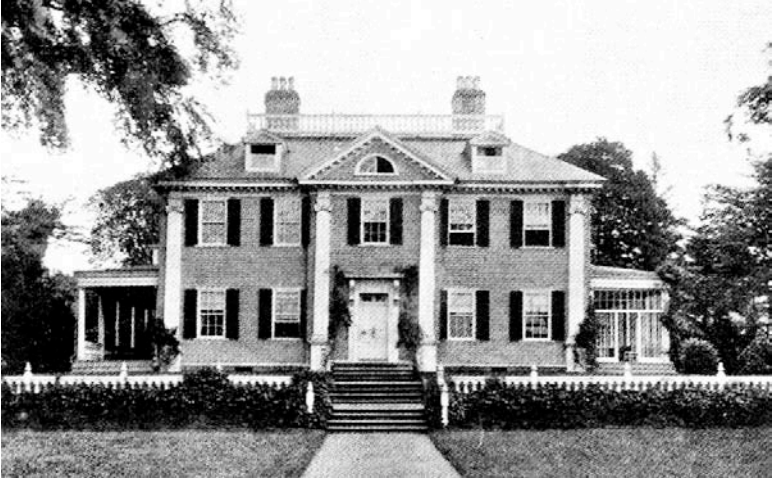


Figure 2: Front Elevation of the John Vassall (Longfellow) House, reflecting the cubical, symmetrical floorplan (adapted from Kimball 1966:96)

The most common building material in the colonies was brick, thus most external facades were brick, although stucco and wooden planks were used in the southern colonies (McAlester 1984). Georgian structures were commonly two stories tall, but contained features such as moldings, belt courses and water tables in order to emphasize the horizontal axis. External characteristics of Georgian structures contain classical elements that are bold and masculine in appearance, as seen in the John Vassall House (Figure 2). The masculinity of these structures is exemplified in their entrances, which were placed in the center of the façade and elevated above the

ground, which required the presence of stairs to enter and added a sense of grandeur to the structure (Morrison 1952). The doorways of Georgian houses were elaborately paneled, generous in width and framed by pilasters or engaged columns. The pilasters and columns flanking doorways were always of the classical order, were fluted or plain, and either the full height of the structure or elevated on pedestals. Georgian doorways also contained over door features, which were greatly varied (Eberlein and Hubbard 1952; Morrison 1952); the most common features include a flat section of classic entablature, an angular pediment, a curved or segmented pediment and finally a scroll or swan neck pediment (Harris 1998; Williams and Williams 1962) (Figure 3). Some of these porticos were so grandiose that they extended the full height of the structure, which required the pediment to interrupt the roofline. If the portico did not extend the full height of the structure or was absent all together, the roofs of Georgian structures were typically low-hipped and when gabled, contained a side-gabled or gambrel roof. Low-hipped roofs also frequently contained a flat portion at the center of the roof (called a captain's walk) that was enclosed by a balustrade (Harris 1998).

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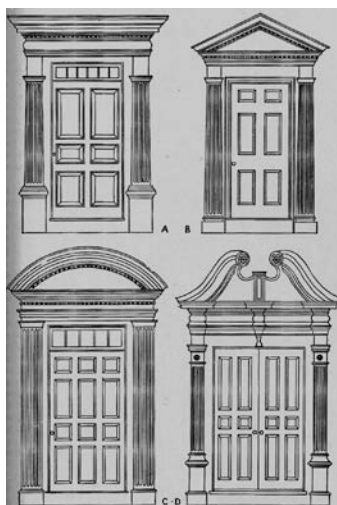


Figure 3: Typical Georgian doorways. A: A molded cornice, B: An angular pediment, C: A curved pediment, D: A scroll pediment (Morrison 1952:301-302).

The Federal Period (1780 - 1820)

The Federal style was in vogue in America following the revolution and continued throughout the latter portion of the eighteenth century into the early portion of the nineteenth century. Notable architects associated with the Federal style are Charles Bulfinch, James Hoban, Stephen Haller and Benjamin Latrobe. The Federal style receives its name from its association with the ruling mercantile aristocracy of the northeast, particularly centered around Boston, Massachusetts, however, is also sometimes referred to as the Adam style a neoclassical style that was developed by Robert Adam, an English architect (Roth 1979). It is characterized, as the Georgian style is, by strict symmetry in plan and façade, as well as the desire for classical qualities and classical correctness (Morrison 1952). While the Federal style is similar

to the Georgian style, it contains delicacy and lightness in its details, which was never achieved in the Georgian style (Harris 1998). The plan of the Federal style usually contains four rooms on each floor: two on each side divided by a central hall, which is reflected in the façade where there are large windows in each room. While some Federal style structures contain round or octagonal projecting bays and round, semi-circular or elliptically shaped rooms, they are more commonly seen only in more fanciful or high style Federal structures. A prime example of this is seen in the plan of the Barrel House (Figure 4) (Eberlein and Hubbard 1952; McAlester 1984; Morrison 1952; Williams and Williams 1962).

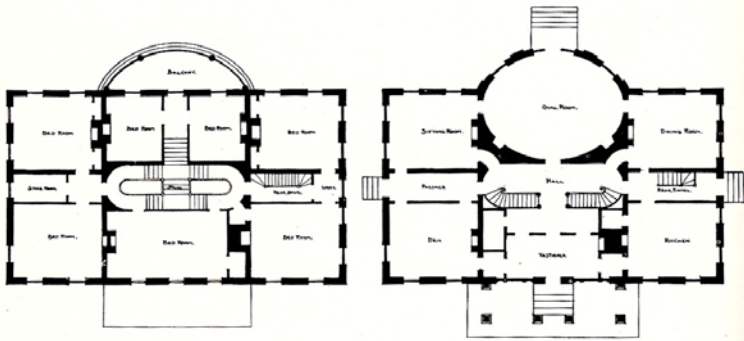


Figure 4: Floorplan of the Barrel House exhibiting cubical, symmetrical plan with an oval room (parlor) (adapted from Kimball 1966:160).

The most common building material used in Federal structures, as with the Georgian style, was brick, although material used in façade treatments depended largely on geographical location. Federal structures were usually two stories tall and frequently contained belt courses or cornice moldings above windows to separate the first floor from the second, emphasizing the horizontal nature of the structure (Harris 1998). There is also great emphasis placed on the front entrance in the Federal style, evidenced by large entrance doors flanked by pilasters, engaged columns and, in some cases was domed. The doors of Federal structures were elaborately

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paneled and enclosed in large porticos, projected away from the front of the structure and commonly extended the full height of the structure. The most common over door feature was an elliptical or semi-circular fanlight, usually accompanied by sidelights that flanked the door. The roofs on Federal period structures are most commonly low-hipped but were also side-gabled and contained a balustrade over the eaves of the structure (Morrison 1952). The Crafts House (Figure 5) is a prime example of this, in that it contains an elliptical fanlight above the door, as well as sidelights. Additionally, it contains elevated columns (that form the portico), as well as engaged columns (near the corners) that extend nearly the entire height of the structure.

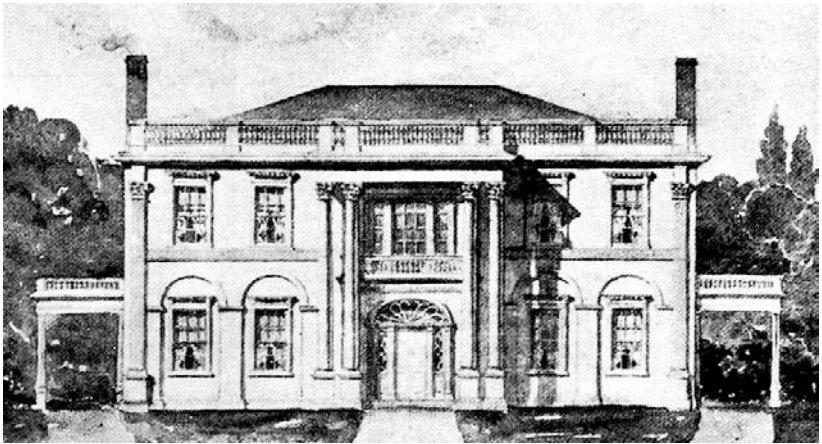


Figure 5: The Crafts House (adapted from Kimball 1966:198).

Discussion

As evidenced from the description of the architectural styles above, the Georgian and Federal styles contain many similarities to one another in their form, plan and façade. Both

architectural styles contain symmetry in plan and façade with a strict proportional relationship between the architectural elements. Both plans are also based on a cubical mass that contains four rooms on each floor that are symmetrical to each other (Harris 1998). Additionally, both styles place a large emphasis on the front entrance, which is the focal point in the façade and is framed dramatically with classically inspired pilasters or columns and crowned with a flat, angular or scrolling pediment. These classical elements add to the grandeur of the style, as they are a stark white and in drastic contrast to the red brick façade.

Although these similarities are noteworthy, it is where the two styles deviate from one another that are more important. While the Georgian style contains only square or rectangular rooms, the Federal style incorporates round, octagonal and elliptical rooms and projecting bays into its plan (Williams and Williams 1962). A significant difference in the exterior façade is the presence of a projecting portico at the main entrance that is frequently present in the Federal style and not common absent in the Georgian style. A minor deviation from the Georgian style is the presence of a semi-circular or elliptical fanlight above the entrance door in Federal structures. While the two styles are quite similar, the Federal style does contain sufficient deviations from the Georgian style, and should thus be differentiated from the Georgian style.

Cultural and Political Factors

The major political factors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the colonization of North America by the British, followed by the declaration of independence by America. However, there are other noteworthy factors that influenced the popularity of the Georgian and Federal architectural styles in England and North America including scientific archaeological excavations of classical sites and the publication of works by Palladio and Vitruvius (Kimball 1966; Roth 1979). In the eighteenth century archaeological excavations were conducted at Pompeii in 1755 and

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Herculaneum in 1735, which yielded information about the architecture and building techniques of the ancient Romans and provided vast amounts of information pertaining to their daily lives (Morrison 1952). These new discoveries painted a romantic vision of ancient Roman architecture, which were presented in the resulting publications.

Other publications that influenced architects around the world include *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715-1725) by Colen Campbell, Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* (1663) and *A Book of Architecture* (1728) by James Gibbs (Donnelly 2003). The publication of these volumes allowed knowledge of classical architecture to circulate widely. The movement in neoclassical architecture that followed is considered to be specific imitation of the original Greek and Roman buildings, which became widespread in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (Morrison 1952). Essentially, these publications served as a building guide for architects that looked to classical architecture for inspiration, and as a result, a neoclassical movement appears in Europe, followed closely by North America.

Conclusion

A thorough survey of the literature pertaining to the architectural features of the Georgian and Federal styles has revealed the similarities and differences between the two styles, which has been presented here. From this survey it is evident that the Federal style is a variation of the Georgian style that preceded it. Their similarity in the shape and layout of plan, as well as the balance and symmetry present in the façade is striking. However, the Federal style does vary from the Georgian style in that the Federal structures do contain semi-circular projecting bays, as well circular and semi-circular

rooms. These differences in plan are important to note, but more substantially, the Federal architecture style was consciously chosen by Americans for its neoclassical value above the Georgian style, which represents the founding of their new, independent republic. Many authors believe that the Federal style was developed in America independently after the revolution however the style is synonymous with the term Adam style, which was prominent in England, as it was developed by Robert Adam, an English architect. It was the British influence in America that brought the Georgian and the Federal architectural styles into North America. However, both the Georgian and Federal styles are influenced by ancient Rome and therefore, both styles should be considered part of a neoclassical movement that swept through Europe and soon thereafter, North America, rather than independent styles.

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