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Author(s): John Rothfork

Source: *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (FALL 1977), pp. 173-187

Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27796639>

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John Rothfork

To understand Barnard's [school] architecture we need to go back and savor early nineteenth-century conceptions of man; we need to learn how human character was thought to be formed and to discover why, given such a conception of character, rational, efficient school design was spiritually important.¹

This is exactly our intent: to sketch the intellectual and sociological climate that led Henry Barnard to advocate Greek Revival architecture for school buildings, to see why this style and its implicit values were popular in the era between 1820 and 1860, and to examine a few of the plans in Barnard's *School Architecture* (1838-48). Although explicating a philosophical statement from architecture can be risky, it is worth while, since, as Talbot Hamlin puts it, "architecture is the erection in concrete and tangible form of a people's dream."² The dream of American culture during this era was, of course, articulated by the Transcendentalists. Undoubtedly there was an association between Transcendentalist philosophy and the architecture of the period. But instead of seeking to discover a precise cause-and-effect relationship between a philosopher and an architect, unlikely to succeed, it is more fruitful to consider that all of the arts—philosophy, literature, sculpture, music, and architecture—flowered together in a profusion now called the American Renaissance; and that then, as in any period, the artists and thinkers influenced each other, so that retrospect suggests some homogeneity of concerns, values, and styles. Cultural values may thus be deduced from architectural style. In this sense, Henry Barnard can be identified as a Romantic reformist. Although he was not an original thinker, his pragmatic designs for school buildings demonstrate in line and shape the values better articulated in language by others of his time.

The Greek Revival school building can even be seen as the most typical of the Transcendentalist reforms, since its intention was to enliven the imagination and, by its association with Classical grandeur, to suggest that any farmboy could become another Socrates. In

JGE: THE JOURNAL OF GENERAL EDUCATION 29, 3 (Fall 1977).
Published by The Pennsylvania State University Press.
University Park and London.

its clean and stern lines it spoke to the unknown possibilities latent in each student, not by dictating a curriculum of useful knowledge, but by saying that the pupil must trust his imagination or higher instincts for direction and exercise his powers of will to realize his unique vision. Concerned that education should inspire the higher imagination, Emerson wrote:

The great object of education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; to teach self-trust: to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself . . . to inflame him with a piety towards the Grand Mind in which he lives.³

More prosaically stressing the value of willpower, Margaret Fuller wrote that “Architecture was the art in which Rome excelled, and this corresponds with the feeling these men of Rome excite. They did not grow—they built themselves up.”⁴ Thus the Greek Revival school building was a monument to the greatness of imagination exhibited by the arts of Greece and to the grandeur of will exhibited by the engineering and governmental structures of Rome.

Transcendentalism and the Classical heritage

The period of American cultural history between 1820 and 1860 has been called the American Renaissance for good reason. Its accomplishments in literature, religion, and philosophy are well known. Less well known are the social forces behind this cultural eruption, especially their expression as a concern with the Classical humanities. Hamlin wrote that “It was as though Greek culture and Roman culture had suddenly become symbols of all that was free, refined, thoughtful, and—especially—beautiful in human life” (p. 97). However, the Classical humanities were selectively used to endorse modern values rather than to provide an historically accurate background. It was the imaginative faculty, not the rational faculty, that was most admired. Diligent philological study of the Classics was in decline. In 1789 the Boston Latin School had abridged its course from seven to four years, and scholars such as Samuel Miller were lamenting that:

In America the decline of classical literature is especially remarkable and prevalent. Many of our colleges require in the student but a superficial acquaintance with the Latin language; and with respect to Greek, are contented with a smattering which scarcely deserves the name of knowledge.⁵

The Classics had, of course, been the cornerstone of the American Constitution. John Adams remarked that "Athens and Rome have done more honour to our species than all the rest of it."⁶ But fifty years after the founding of the Republic, revolutionary ardor had dissipated and with it the emphasis on ancient political precedents. The country was eager for experimentation in many areas. In higher education, Ticknor, Everett, Bancroft, and Cogswell sought to infuse Harvard with German scholasticism. George Ticknor announced that he cared "not three straws about any of the *theories* from Plato and Quintilian down to Rousseau," but that he was eager to experiment.⁷ Longfellow conferred immediate prestige on the curricular innovation of teaching modern languages at Harvard and on the concomitant erosion of the Classics. Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia promised to rival Harvard in producing the new generation of American leaders. In *The Boston Daily Advertiser* of 1821, Ticknor even lauded the new military academy at West Point as an institution where the intellectual rivalry was keener, and the students more orderly and industrious, than at other colleges. Ticknor thought that West Point produced the best scientists and engineers in the country.

The modernists were not unopposed. An eloquent defense of a curriculum based on the Classical humanities was made in the 1828 Yale "Report on a Course of Liberal Education," which appeared, ironically, in the 1829 *American Journal of Science*. However, in 1829 Andrew Jackson entered the White House. From the conservative view, he seemed a barbarian. Judge Story wrote of the inauguration:

I seem almost, while I write, to be in a dream, and to be called back to the last days of the Roman republic, when the people shouted for Caesar, and liberty itself expired with the dark but prophetic words of Cicero.⁸

Although the American Republic had been founded on democratic theories, in fact it had been guided by what Samuel Adams called the natural aristocracy of the gifted, talented, and wealthy. But by 1820 social changes, such as incipient industrialism, population growth, uncontrolled Western expansion, and the upsurge of a vociferous middle class, had begun to shift power away from the old aristocrats and towards the new industrialists. If leaders could now be expected to arise from the military, industrial, and technological schools, then the Classical curriculum, even if at Harvard, was outmoded. Jackson in the White House was as a living symbol of what every man could become.

The intellectuals were with Thoreau, denigrating the traditional education which had been dedicated to the acquisition of cognitive skills and the molding of man to fit Aristotle's concept of a rational animal. The Transcendentalists, who studied biology, were Naturalists enamoured with the Romantic metaphor of Organicism, growth that would inevitably occur unless impediments such as traditional schooling stunted it. Transcendentalism rested on Rousseau's concept of man, which denied original sin and posited instead the perfectability of man: the notion that the individual is part of the godhead, and that man's instinct is, as Plato said, to do that which is good. If society nurtures instinct instead of repressing or destroying it, man will progressively discover his true nature as a manifestation of the Over-Soul. Thus Emerson wrote: "I think, according to the good-hearted word of Plato, 'Unwillingly the soul is deprived of truth' " (p. 123), and "nothing shall warp me from the belief that every man is a lover of truth" (p. 128). The connection between this doctrine and education is clear in this passage:

Man is ever invited inward into shining realms of knowledge and power by the shows of the world, which interpret to him the infinitude of his own consciousness—it becomes the office of a just education to awaken him to the knowledge of this fact (Emerson, p. 253).

Although Thoreau and his brother dabbled for a time with a prep school and Emerson taught for a year, it was Bronson Alcott who accepted the challenge of reforming education to reflect the Transcendentalist premises. Like Wordsworth, Alcott reasoned that children more nearly retain natural divinity, since they have not yet been taught what to value. Therefore, the ideal teacher could remake society by teaching children to trust their own instincts. Education was defined as self-discovery. A teacher should not be burdened with plans and preconceptions. Like Socrates, he should inculcate education as a way of life that discovers our true nature.

Even while revolting against the current practice of the Classical curricula, the Transcendentalists were advocating a renaissance of what they saw as its intentions. Emerson asks:

What is the foundation of that interest all men feel in Greek history, letters, art and poetry . . .? What but this, that every man passes personally through a Grecian period. The Grecian state is the era of the bodily nature, the perfection of the senses—of the spiritual nature unfolded in strict unity with the body (p. 153).

The "Grecian period" is subsequently defined as a period when adults act "with the simplicity and grace of children." The Classics were valued because they attested to something eternal, something they did not so much create as suggest that each person find within himself. "Our admiration of the antique is not admiration of the old, but of the natural" (Emerson, p. 154). It was no accident that Thoreau, the best scholar of Greek in Concord, was at home at Walden Pond. One might conjecture that Thoreau's life-style was partially shaped by his study of the Classics, which, as Emerson said, suggest that "The way to knowledge and power has ever been an escape from too much engagement with affairs and possessions, into solitude and privation" (p. 259).

The Transcendentalists thus faced a paradox: if the divine individual is the repository of all value, then he should not be subjected to institutional education; yet even Emerson admitted that "humanly speaking, the school, the college, society, make the difference between men" (p. 249).

The synthesis, in so far as there could be one, between the free spirit of the individual and the facts of life in society can be identified in Mann's and Barnard's position that education should be universal, compulsory, and primarily concerned with what we now call the enabling or basic skills. In his *Connecticut Common School Journal* Barnard wrote: "The schools of this State were founded and supported chiefly for the purpose of perpetuating civil and religious knowledge and liberty, as the early laws of the colony explicitly declare." The intent seems clearly to safeguard individual rights. Emerson recognized that despite the organic metaphors of Romanticism, a human child does not grow like a vegetable. Instead, he wrote, "the child shall be taken up by the State, and taught, at the public cost, the rudiments of knowledge" (pp. 248-9). If one simply encounters Nature or Being without an awareness of its metaphysical depth, that is not enough. It is only when the mind becomes cognizant of its nature as the stage on which Being is realized that man discovers his essential divinity.

School Architecture

Barnard's special contribution to Transcendentalist education was his advocacy of Greek Revival architecture for school buildings. In his *School Architecture* (which first appeared as essays in the *Connecticut Common School Journal* from 1838 to 1840 and was published as a book in 1848), Barnard construed the school building as a symbol endorsing a constellation of Transcendental values. Bar-

nard's innovation was not in his choice of style, for Greek Revivalism was, in effect, the only style of the period. Hamlin writes that there was "hardly an architect of the first water in this nineteenth-century America who did not . . . strive to design buildings of a new type . . . American buildings . . . inspired by the classics" (p. 24). But while the style itself was inherited from political associations with the foundation of the Republic, its justification was no longer the same. Barnard wrote that:

Every schoolhouse should be a temple, consecrated in prayer to the physical, intellectual, and moral culture of every child in the community, and be associated in every heart with the earliest and strongest impressions of truth, patriotism, and religion.⁹

The school building was to act as a monument to the accomplishment of the ancient Greeks, specifically to an idealized and somewhat nebulous Socrates, who was neither an engineer, nor a politician, nor a priest, and who was martyred because his life was a testament to the primacy of the individual.

In his essay "Architecture and the Romantic Tradition: Coleridge to Wright," Richard Adams dismisses Greek Revivalism in the Transcendental era as imitative, sentimental, and devoid of any substance from which an American architecture might emerge.¹⁰ As Hamlin shows, this opinion is simply wrong. (It is perhaps due in part to Adams' interest in arguing for modern architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright; hence he evaluates all earlier schools according to their contributions to the evolution of Wright's work.) Perhaps a key to appreciating the Greek Revival style is to acknowledge that it was "no Procrustean bed into which all buildings had to forced, but rather a discipline to integrity of construction, simple and powerful composition, restrained and carefully studied detail" (Hamlin, p. 111). As with other elements of Classicism, the buildings were most highly regarded for their associations and inspirational qualities which, like those of Classical literature, should be absorbed, not simply copied.

Emerson no less than Whitman wanted to hear the spontaneous speech of the common man—the thing itself, not a description or copy. Thus the school building, like the curriculum, was to serve as the occasion for preparing students for their own "commencement" with life. Echoing Emerson, William Ellery Channing wrote, "As a general rule, the young are to be made, as far as possible, their own teachers, the discoverers of truth, the interpreters of nature, the framers of science. They are to be helped to help themselves."¹¹ The only strict admonition was that schooling should breathe "a spirit of

humanity." Such a spirit was associated with Classicism. It was no accident that towns founded during this period were called Athens, Troy, Ithaca, Ypsilanti, and Cincinnati.

A sense of the implicit values embodied in a Greek Revival school building is immediately apparent if one compares it to a modern school building, which is produced in what Lewis Mumford calls "barracks style architecture . . . to fit a single purpose—land speculation or profitmaking."¹² The modern building announces dehumanization: like modern art in general, it is the result of the attributes of its materials. Unlike a building in the Greek Revival style, it does not symbolically idealize a humanistic function, but simply creates a neutral space in which any activity, from data processing to dairy farming to schooling, might occur with equal efficiency.

Barnard's book was one of several building guides current in his day. *The American Builder's Companion* (1826), Edward Shaw's *Civil Architecture* (1831), and Chester Hill's *The Builder's Guide* (1836), all popular books written by carpenters and builders,¹³ served as sourcebooks of stock plans which could be easily followed. Before this time there had been few, if any, professional architects in the U.S. The architect James Gallier remarks in his *Autobiography* that:

On my arrival in New York on the 14th of April, 1832, I considered a large city as the most likely place to expect employment in my profession, but here I found that the majority of people could with difficulty be made to understand what was meant by a professional architect; the builders, that is, the carpenters and bricklayers, all called themselves architects (Hamlin, p. 140).

This distinction between builder and architect is important. The builder first conceives himself to be an engineer. The architect, as a member of a professional class, is an intellectual operating in a scholarly and humanistic discipline. Thus Robert Cary Long, Jr., a prominent Greek Revival architect of Baltimore, wrote in 1841 that "Architecture must manifest the changes that are taking place in society" (Hamlin, p. 61). Barnard's *School Architecture*, written in the vein of the builders' guides, had little to do with the theoretical concerns that distinguished the emerging profession of the architects. Barnard was not an artist; his designs for school buildings were simply offered to local boards of education as expedient building plans to rectify the scandal of public school building neglect. (A large part of the book reproduces stinging legislative reports on the condition of New England's school buildings.) Yet there is some evidence to suggest that Barnard had been an avid student of the Classics in

prep school and at Yale, although he was not known as a Classical scholar.¹⁴ After graduation at age nineteen, he read law, passed the bar, and began a distinguished political career in the service of education. A year before entering the state legislature, he toured Europe and met Wordsworth and Carlyle. So Barnard knew something of the Classics, had met some of the major Romantic figures of the day, and was in general a strong supporter of Romantically-inspired reforms. For example, he was a prominent advocate for Thomas Gallaudet's college for the deaf and had a lifelong interest in prison reform. Given his background, it is not surprising that his buildings reflect some of Transcendentalism's values.

All the buildings pictured in *School Architecture* were roughly contemporaneous, having been built between 1800 and 1838, and were offered as examples for emulation if not outright imitation. The apparent evolution of style is thus ontological, rather than chronological. It begins with New England Congregational Church style (Figure 1), which is wedded to Greek Revival temple architecture (Figures 2 and 3). The Congregational influence is then dropped and stern and monumental Greek Revival style emerges (Figures 4 and 5). This style, humanized, became the final form of the typical Greek Revival school building, variously repeated until at least the turn of the century (Figures 6 and 7).

In Figure 1 we see a Rhode Island school building that is fundamentally the same as a Congregational Church building. The diminutive

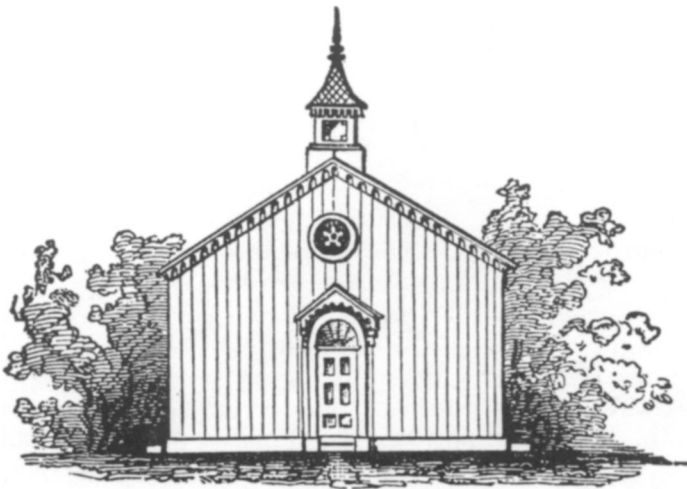


FIGURE 1 View of board and batten school house, Glocester, Rhode Island

rosette window subtly announces a religious function by its derivation from the grandiose European cathedrals, while simultaneously underscoring the Puritan ethic of plainness and humility. The lines formed by the boards are vertical and appropriately lead our vision upwards, again in a restrained and humble fashion in contrast to the ornate European cathedrals. The materials are used straightforwardly; they do not pretend to be something else. The elementary sculpted cornice stops our vision at the roof and is consistent with the mercantile concern to keep our vision on earth instead of ascending into the clouds. It seems to concur that we should serve God through stewardship instead of poverty. Translated into the realm of education, it might suggest the dictum "nothing in excess." After all, the school existed to enrich the existing life-style, not to radically alter it. The cupola and the arch over the door suggest a flirtation with elegance, as does the repetition of the apexes in the roof of the portico, the roof of the building, and the final spire of the cupola roof. However, the general effect is to suggest a seriousness and discipline stopping short of fanaticism or disregard for the world. Finally, one should note the sun-ray motif emanating from the top of the door. The implicit invitation seems clear: those who enter through this door will be illuminated with the vitalism of a knowledge that knows no confines of time or place.

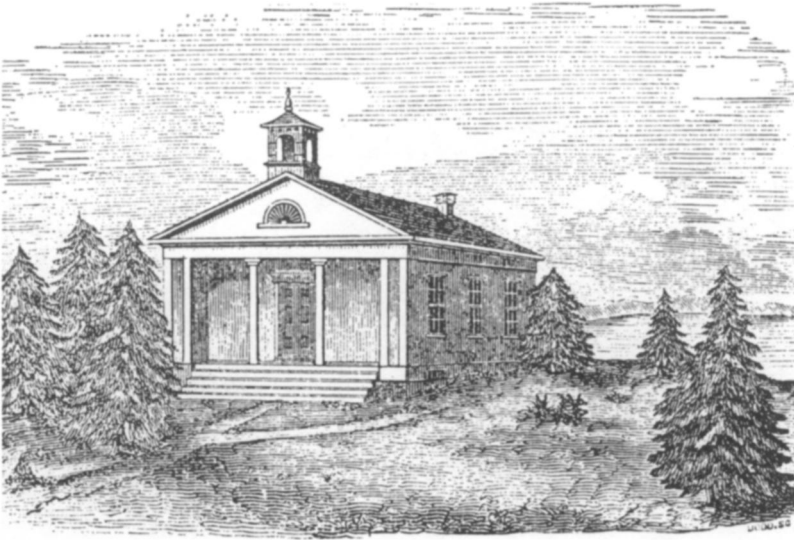


FIGURE 2 View of Greek Revival District School House, Barrington, Rhode Island
(*Thomas A. Teft, architect*)

In Figure 2 we notice that the two small columns which supported the portico roof, hidden by the vertical lines of the boards in the Congregational Church building, have now become obtrusive and dominate the building. The excessively broad steps elevate and isolate the building, while the smooth finish of the walls contributes to a sense of solidity and uniformity. The broad steps tacitly endorse an egalitarian notion of education. Clearly there is room for everyone to ascend these stairs and enter the temple of education. (In contrast, the Congregational building had a narrow entrance, appropriate to a religion which was confined to a community of saints.) Entering this Greek Revival building constituted a subliminal educational experience in itself. To ascend those stairs and pass through those columns is to experience a change in attitude, rising above the world and entering the temple of knowledge where a priest, standing on an elevated platform, conducts an arcane rite. (In contrast the Congregational building, entered on the ground level, is occupied by a minister whose authority rests in the consent of the Congregation, not in any specialized background that elevates him above the pupils.) In the temple-school the teacher is construed to be a superior being, an exemplar to emulate. While the image of the school teacher in *The Hoosier School-Master* (1871) or in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819-20) may have been more accurate, the architectural intent was to aggrandize the role of the teacher.

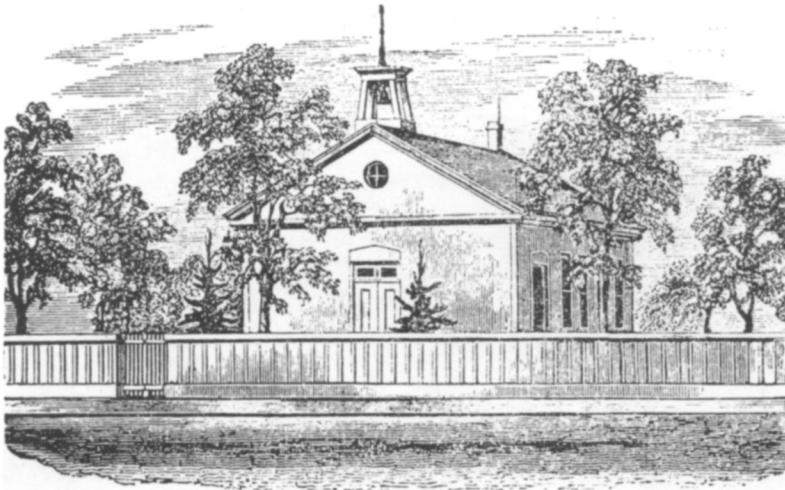


FIGURE 3 View of Greek Revival Primary School House, Providence, Rhode Island

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The cupola in Figure 2 has its own solid arches and a rather squat spire that further contributes to the sense of solidarity. This spire, while incongruous for a Greek temple, is in keeping with the residual Congregational style and serves as a symbol for the sacred mission of education. The rising sun motif becomes more prominent, being set in a large otherwise empty space of the pediment. Yet the pediment remains simple. The only sculptural addition is properly confined to the elementary and iconographic frieze of the dawn. The columns remain simple rectangles and do not have elegant capitals or bases, nor are they fluted. Indeed the pair on each end is almost vestigial and apologetic. Finally, one might remark on the fact that there is path worn around the building to, presumably, a back door. Possibly this fact comments on the relatively grave undertaking of ascending the stairs and making a formal entrance.

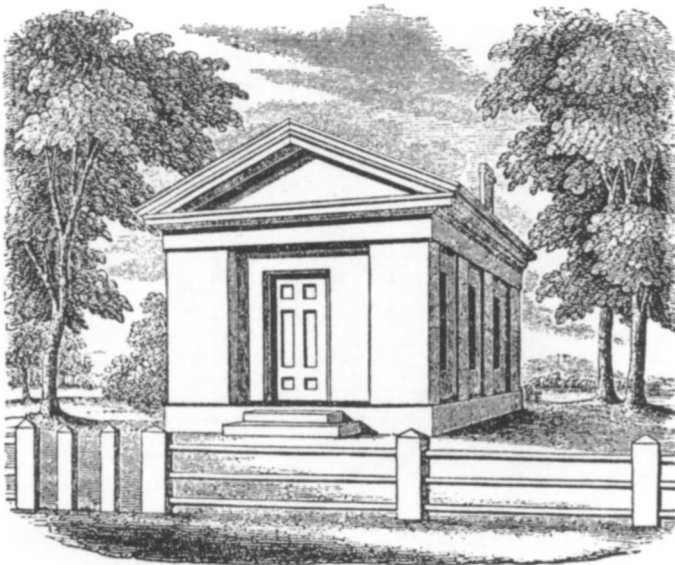


FIGURE 4 View of Greek Revival School House, District No. 6, Windsor, Connecticut (*Henry Barnard, architect*)

The building in Figure 3 is much more severe. The columns are engaged and only suggested. The lintel is pronounced and clearly announces that the building's search for fundamentals has carried it back to a time antedating the discovery of the arch. The arch is avoided also in the cupola, which in its clumsiness and absolute starkness reminds one of the megalithic temples of Malta or of even more basic structures such as the Lion Gate. Although there is a

rosette window of a sort, it is purely functional and even more stark than that in the Congregational building. The icon of the rising sun motif is conspicuously absent. The stark near-windowless front of the building is foreboding; it reminds one more of a mausoleum than of a school. Finally, the fence shuts out the world and demarcates the sanctified grounds of the temple-school.

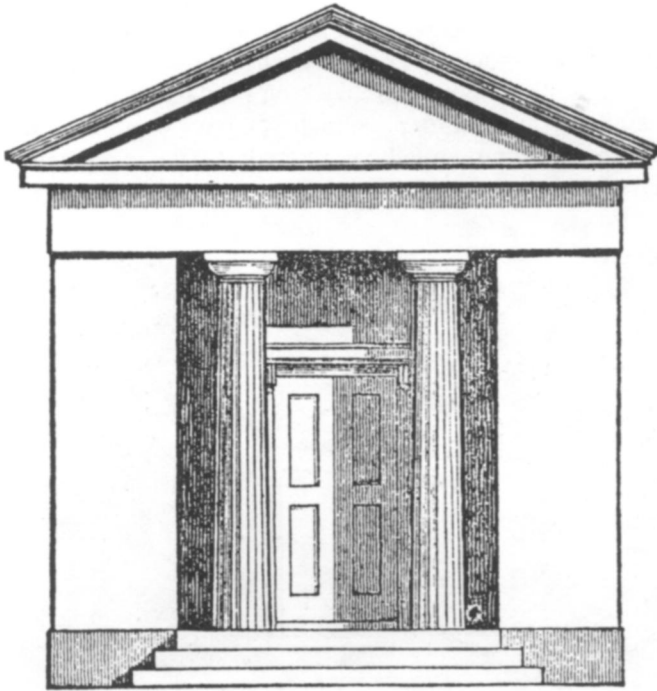


FIGURE 5 View of Greek Revival School House, Washington District, Hartford, Connecticut (*Henry Barnard, architect*)

If a marriage between the Congregational Church style and Greek Revival style is apparent in these buildings, one can see no compromise in the very formal Greek Revival schools in Figures 4 and 5. The monumental intent is overbearing, and both buildings look as though they belonged in a cemetery. Figure 4 is almost megalithic and neolithic instead of Classical. The only improvement in Figure 5 is the humanization apparent in the two fluted columns that attest that man has begun to tame the megaliths. Neither building welcomes one with a rosette window or the least frieze. There are no cupolas here, nor are there any other remaining influences from the Congregational

style. The pediments in both Figures 4 and 5 are pronounced and oppressive.

Figures 6 and 7 are closely related. The columns in Figure 6 are more elementary than those in Figure 7, which are fluted and have

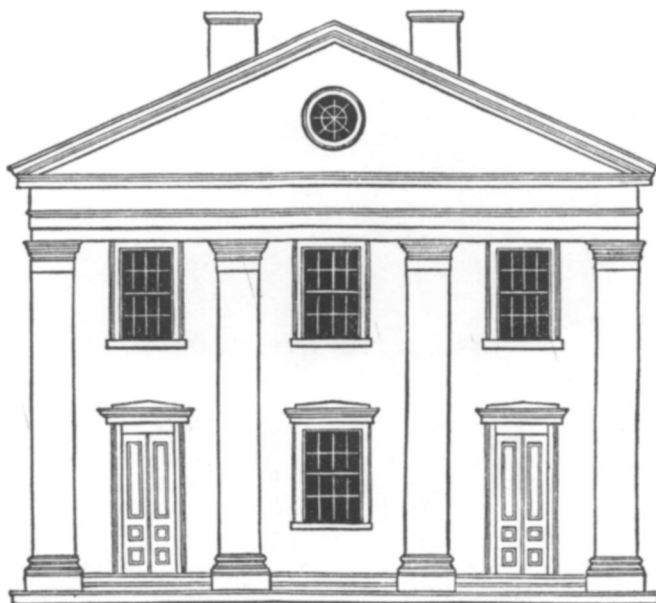


FIGURE 6 Front elevation, Greek Revival State Normal School House, Bridgewater, Massachusetts

ornate Ionic capitals. But in neither case are they apologetic or retiring; they are fully rounded and integral to the building. Figure 7 also possesses more ornate chimneys, but the similarity of the buildings suggests that the Greek Revival school building has found a stable form. The large windows, which for the first time greet the entrant, seem to suggest a balance between the denial of the outside world (as in Figure 4, for example) and the theoretical position of Transcendentalism that the woods and fields can be the classroom, all of life the curriculum. The windows also suggest that Mann and Barnard have largely won their struggle to identify education as central to our American experience: not only can the students see out, but also the world is invited to look in. Finally the rosette, returning, becomes fully iconographic and almost necessary. It symbolizes the rising sun and is constituted of fragmented parts that coalesce in forming the mind and character of the student. It was in buildings like these that Barnard hoped that

From many obscure and humble homes in the city and in the country, will be called forth . . . intellectual taste and God-like benevolence, which will . . . carry forward every moral and religious enterprise which aims to bless, purify, and elevate society (*School Architecture*, p. 103).

Horace Mann has long overshadowed Henry Barnard as the foremost proponent of the American public school system. Often



FIGURE 7 Front elevation, Greek Revival State Normal School House, Westfield, Massachusetts

Barnard has been either ignored or tacitly assumed to have been merely imitative. When he is recognized, it is usually for two accomplishments. Like Mann in Massachusetts, Barnard in both Connecticut and Rhode Island initiated political reforms pertaining to public education and helped to identify it as a fundamental American institution. In addition, Barnard's *American Journal of Education* (1855-1882) was one of the most significant vehicles in creating a professional group of teachers. The journal itself was nearly monumental, spanning thirty volumes of more than eight-hundred pages each, and comprising an encyclopedia of all phases of education.

Less apparent and infrequently noted is the philosophy that motivated Barnard and insured his public success. Barnard was a popu-

larizer, comparable to Benjamin Franklin, who popularized the Enlightenment's principles in *Poor Richard's Almanac*. While there is little evidence to suggest that the pragmatic Barnard knew the theoretical or philosophical foundations of his work, he was important in translating its tenets to the broadest audience possible. More important, if the association between Transcendentalism and the Greek Revival style for school buildings is valid, then we have uncovered a significant constituent of educational philosophy, one that has been previously ignored, but must have had, and indeed may still have, a profound effect. Consider again the buildings in Figures 6 and 7. It is a rare teacher who has never been in such a building, as either a student or teacher. What he conceives education to be may be influenced as much by the form of the building, and hence by Henry Barnard, as by what he is taught or teaches.

Notes

1. Robert and Jean McClintock, "Architecture and Pedagogy," foreword to *Henry Barnard's School Architecture* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1970), p. 9.
2. Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 44. Subsequent page references are to this volume.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, edited by Mark Van Doren (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 255. Subsequent page references are to this volume.
4. Quoted in Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture*, p. 315.
5. Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: T. & S. Swords Printers, 1803), Vol. 2, pp. 37-38.
6. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1852), Vol. 7, p. 593. Consider also this statement: "Classicks, in spite of our Friend Rush, I think indispensable."—John Adams, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p. 438.
7. Quoted by David Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 100.
8. Quoted in Tyack, p. 218.
9. Barnard, *School Architecture*, p. 55.
10. Richard Adams, "Architecture and the Romantic Tradition: Coleridge to Wright," *American Quarterly*, Spring 1957, p. 48.
11. "Remarks on Education," reprinted from the *Christian Examiner*, Nov. 1833, in *The Works of William E. Channing* (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1848), Vol. 1, p. 382.
12. Lewis Mumford, *Architecture* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1826), p. 23.
13. Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture*, pp. 163-67.
14. See *Henry Barnard: American Educator*, ed. Vincent P. Lannie (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1974), p. 4.