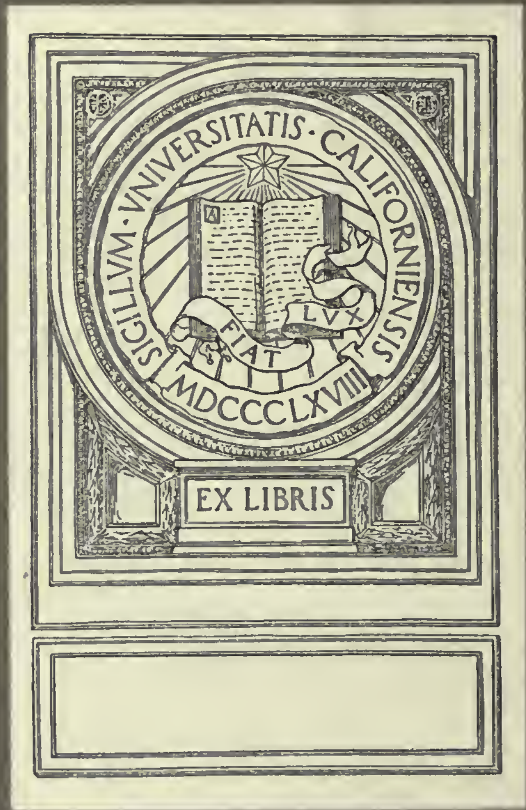
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The WHITE PINE

SERIES OF *Architectural Monographs*

Volume III *Number 5*

THE BRISTOL RENAISSANCE

With Introductory Text by
Joy Wheeler Dow

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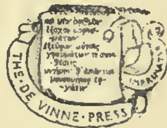

An Architectural MONOGRAPH on The BRISTOL Renaissance

With Text by

·JOY WHEELER DOW·

Prepared for Publication by
Russell F Whitehead formerly Editor
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THE DE WOLF-MYDDLETON HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND. Detail of East Front.
RUSSELL WARREN, ARCHITECT.

Built in 1808 by Hon. William De Wolf. Situated on the Papasquae Road to Bristol Neck. Now the home of the Misses Myddleton.

The WHITE PINE SERIES of ARCHITECTURAL MONOGRAPHS

A BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION SUGGESTING THE ARCHITECTURAL USES OF WHITE PINE AND ITS AVAILABILITY TODAY AS A STRUCTURAL WOOD

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THE BRISTOL RENAISSANCE

By JOY WHEELER DOW

Mr. Dow is a native of Greenwich Village, and a descendant of Thomas Dow—"Ye Wheelwright af Ipswich." As an architect, naturally, he was attracted by the Genre Architecture of America, to which he has devoted much study. He believes that a story should be woven, by the imagination, into every architectural creation. He believes that we have as excellent and distinctive a Renaissance development as has England, France, Spain or Italy, albeit a development largely of wood. Besides many magazine articles and the story "Miss Polly Fairfax," Mr. Dow is the author of "American Renaissance," also the Revised Golden Rule.—EDITOR'S NOTE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIAN A. BUCKLY AND THE AUTHOR

THE title for this number of the *White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs* respectfully refers to a short but brilliant art movement in Bristol, Rhode Island, during the interregnum following the grand epoch of Washington and his contemporaries, but before the banal, transitional times inaugurated with General Jackson to the Presidency in 1829. It is usual to call all architecture erected in this country during this interregnum, "Early Nineteenth Century Work"; but it has seemed to me that an architectural development at once so characteristic, so suffused with local color as to make it dissimilar to any other contemporaneous work, yet so excellent all the time, as was exploited by Russell Warren, architect, his apprentices and co-workers in Bristol, is quite worthy of a classification by itself. It was, indeed, a new school of Renaissance that flagrantly strayed from the rules of Vignola and the Italian authorities, yet preserved the dramatic note—the story-telling note—without which no architecture can succeed, and with which all is forgiven, like—

"St. Augustine in his fine confessions
Which make the reader envy his transgressions."

The Bristol Renaissance was brought about by a great influx of wealth to Bristol, the profits of two highly remunerative commercial enterprises (or *un*commercial, if you prefer) known respectively as privateering and slave-trading. It made L'Afcadio Hearn sad, when he visited Martinique, to note the abysses of decay and death out of which sprang the orchids and other exquisite flora of the island. And that was only vegetable dissolution of no very great consequence. How would it have affected him had he meditated upon those fetid cargoes of betrayed blacks stowed in ships which once plied their trade between Africa and this country. How does it affect us now, used as we are to the harrowing details of present-day war, to be told that out of this unholy traffic in flesh and blood grew many of the charming Bristol houses?

But let us not look upon an unavoidable circumstance too gloomily, nor yet uncharitably. Have you ever tried to grow vegetables in your garden? Does not your experience controvert the exaggerated idea of the Socialist about the fertility of the earth? Have you not come to believe that the man with the axe, standing before his rude cabin, vignetted on the five-dollar bills, has arrived at about as high a state of civilization and comfort as he can, unless, indeed, he goes in for a little genteel privateering and slave-trading—in gentler words, a little robbing of Peter to pay Paul? And how may we, who go into ecstasy over the irresistible magnetism of these Bristol houses,—who covet the carved details of their doorways, their parapet rails with eagles and other ornament, their entrancing garden walls and gates, their interior graces, the elliptic stairways, the refined cornices and wainscots,—ever hope to possess anything in the way of a home half as satisfying, unless we have resources besides an axe and two willing hands, unless the necessities of other people make this dream of life possible for us? If it has to be—why, then, all right; only we much prefer that circumstances beyond our control divert the efforts and earnings of others to our gain, rather than our own planning and cupidity.

Never mind; the Samuel McIntyre of Bristol

DOORWAY ON HOPE STREET, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
Typical of the Bristol Renaissance.

—Russell Warren—did his part, and, I imagine, got very little of the plunder. John McComb received scarcely a draughtsman's salary for designing New York's beautiful City Hall which everybody raves over. A painting by Troyon of two very ordinary milch cows recently fetched some fifty thousand dollars at an art sale. Well, the City Hall is like a cubical Troyon. It has three dimensions, and should have been worth to the city inestimably more than if it were a mere veneer of pigment upon canvas for the Metropolitan Museum. McComb's honorarium for this piece of work alone should have been—a competency. Why is it that so many great architects have fared so meanly? Why have their very names been obliterated from their work, while the work itself becomes more and more celebrated?

I do not know that Russell Warren was quite so much of a dilettante as was his contemporary, Samuel McIntyre, in Salem; that he was a musician as well as an architect: but he had the same impeccable taste, the same intuitive refinement, the same psychology which made it a cardinal principle of his atelier to express with clean and aromatic White Pine as much family devotion, sacrifice and *bienséance*—which alone make life worth living—as possible. He could not help it if some of his houses afterward became the scenes of tragedies (as Alice Morse Earle once wrote me they did), or that the owl *fiacres* of Paris and Vienna are no busier upon questionable errands than have been those of Bristol. Wealth brutalizes the same as does poverty; only, I should say, more swiftly and surely.

M. Gabriel, the architectural talent of Louis XV, who produced the Pompadour theatre at Versailles,—constructed of White Pine and other woods for acoustic effects,—may have been a very devout and exemplary person, although in the pay of a dissolute king. Russell Warren gave to Bristol chaste and honest architecture, thereby imparting to the town the indefinable charm of its home atmosphere, as well as most of its historic value—two material assets which have become evanescent in many of the older cities and villages of New England in the path of a ruthless commercialism. Let us be thankful that Bristol remains intact—a show town of the old régime.

Unlike other show towns, however, the life of

DOORWAY, CORNER OF UNION AND HIGH STREETS, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND

Bristol does not focus about its common, but ranges up and down Hope Street, an incomparable highway affording unexpected glimpses of the water of Narragansett Bay at every cross street, and ending in a marine prospect scarcely inferior to that of a drive out of Naples. If you go down to the wharves close at hand, you will spy across the water two very imposing estates—the De Wolf-Myddleton and De Wolf-Mudge, respectively. They are on the Papasquae road to Bristol Neck, another drive of no less enchantment. It is pretty, also, over at Mount Hope—only, don't stop there: for that would mean social extinction. As the vergers of the cathedrals of Europe are fond of pointing out to you the little inaccuracies of the mediæval builders, without prejudice to the wonderful structures themselves, only lending additional interest thereto, I will tell you that the two great columns of the water front of the De Wolf-Myddleton house have square capitals fitted upon round shafts, but which are up so high from the platform of the portico, that undoubtedly, it was hoped, nobody would notice them. They tell you that "Captain Jim De Wolf"—the most unscrupulous and successful of his contemporaries—planned to build a young Trianon on

DOORWAY, CAPTAIN SPRAGUE HOUSE ON HOPE STREET, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.

DOORWAY AND PORCH 676 HOPE STREET, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.

the west side of Bristol Common; and I have seen lengths of building stone half buried in the grass there, that tradition says were to face the foundations of the main pavilion. His semi-rural manse just off Church Street, erected in 1803, was, however, where he lived at the time he fitted out the privateer *Yankee,* that terror to the commerce of Great Britain, but a gold-mine in prize-money to many an American sailor. From here he used to journey all the way to Washington to attend Congress, in a family state coach. When I visited the "Captain Jim" house, now many years since, some sinister influence seemed to be silently at work. Perhaps, it is only fitting for its legend, that a dramatic conflagration should have occurred in the last act.

One hundred years ago, the amplification of the cupola motive was carried to excess in Rhode Island, all prototypes being finally eclipsed by the Norris house at Bristol. The cupola came within three feet of covering the entire roof; and yet the Norris house is particularly nice with its double parapet rail. The Villa Doria Pamphili at Rome has an amplified Rhode Island cupola; but will you contend that the proportions of this villa are as successful as those of

THE DE WOLF-MYDDLETON HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
Detail of West Front and Entrance.
RUSSELL WARREN, ARCHITECT.

the Norris house, even if it be considered the finest of Roman villas, and was erected by Pope Innocent X for his nephew, Prince Pamphili. We should refuse to be Rasputined in matters of art, though friends betray their apprehension in exclaiming, "My dear, my dear, you have—*courage!*" It does take courage to compare a wooden Colonial exemplar with any one of the Italian palaces of the Renaissance, and more courage to insist that the former has the better lines and proportion. Verbalizing the name of the Russian monk, or instancing the influence that Svengali exerted over Trilby, is sufficient, however, to visualize the only nemesis there is to dread.

Detail of West Front.
THE DE WOLF-MYDDLETON HOUSE, BRISTOL, R. I.

The splayed lintels of wood placed over the windows of so many of the Bristol houses, however, in imitation of constructive masonry, are a distinctly false note of design; but Russell Warren was not responsible for this, because it was done all over Rhode Island before his time. Even the stately mansions in the neighborhood of Benefit Street in Providence did not escape. The window heads of the De Wolf-Colt house are legitimate, although I never approve of such lofty windows dominating

(Continued on page 10)

THE DE WOLF-MYDDLETON HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND. Water Front.
Russell Warren gave to Bristol chaste and honest architecture, thereby imparting to the town its indefinable charm of home atmosphere.

THE STEPHEN CHURCH HOUSE, PAPASQUAE NECK, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.

THE DE WITT-COLT HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND. Built in 1810.
Detail of Inner Court.

an admirably proportioned doorway with Colonial transom and side-lights, as is shown by illustration below. I was told by Colonel Colt that the late James Renwick, architect, always commended this elevation, and thought that the shallowness of the portico—shallow for its great height—enhanced a certain successful effect that otherwise could not have been attained. The De Wolf-Colt house is far more successful on the exterior than it is in the interior. Surmounting the cornice is the characteristic Bristol parapet rail, broken by raised sections at regular intervals,—to dignify the panels, I suppose,—and unlike any other rails of the Colonial school.

THE DE WITT-COLT HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
Built in 1810. It has a remarkable attic portico.

The most beautiful parapet rail of the Bristol Renaissance is the one which crowns the cornice

Side Elevation and Garden.

THE MORICE-BABBIT HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
The house is flush with the sidewalk, its garden rail a continuation of the front wall. Built by Mr. Morice in the early nineteenth century.

THE NORRIS HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
Date about 1810. Celebrated for its exaggerated amplification of the Rhode Island cupola motif until it covers, practically, the entire roof of the building.

THE CABOT-CHURCHILL HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.
"House with the Eagles."

of the Cabot-Churchill house (House with the Eagles). The four eagles, one poised over each corner, were carved out of wood, according to tradition, by sailors of the intrepid *Yankee*, of which Captain Churchill was sometime master. A century's vicissitudes have not fazed them. The Morice house, standing just over the way, could have no rail, because of the introduction of a flattened gable and lunette window into its hip roof; and the front door opens not into an imposing hall, which one might naturally expect, but into a tiny entry from which a corkscrew staircase "goes up like lightning," as a carpenter would say, after the manner of the old witch-houses in Massachusetts—the Capen house at Topsfield and the Saltonstall house at Ipswich. But there is no house in Bristol which sounds the dramatic home note with a truer ring than does the Morice house, the domestic offices of which extend to the rear, seemingly, in endless sequence—laundry, dairy, coal-bins, woodshed, tool-house, smoke-house maybe—I am sure I have no idea what use could have been found for quite so many dependencies. These are the things, however, which bespeak each one helping to drag the "coach" up-hill, instead of adding his own weight to the toil and fatigue of the straining team. They bespeak rising betimes and helping with the fires, the wood-chopping—helping with the breakfast. Yes, the kitchen is the engine-room of the ship of life, and demands our keenest solicitude, so very little carelessness here may upset the plans of a lifetime. Unless an architect has this breakfast feeling, I doubt if he will ever succeed with the plan of a dwelling-house.

Detail, House on Hope Street.

Detail, Parker-Borden House.

CARVED WOOD CAPITALS. HOUSES IN BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.

I am not afraid to say it, at a time, too, of the strictest censorship, that a selfish, fallacious, don't-miss-anything-in-life philosophy is indirectly responsible for seventy-five per cent. of the ill-advised architecture that is erected, which is a pity the more when the draughtsmanship that is taught in our schools is so painstaking and good.

THE PARKER-BORDEN HOUSE, BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND.

THE CIVILIZATION OF COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND REFLECTED IN WHITE PINE

By LAMONT ROWLANDS

Vice-President, The C. A. Goodyear Lumber Company, Chicago, Illinois

THE cultural longings of a people express themselves in the fine arts; their achievements in literature, painting, sculpture and architecture record what manner of men they are, and reflect the true state of their civilization.

Art has been defined as "man's expression of his need for the beautiful." So fundamental is this need that there are traces of it from the very beginnings of man's struggle upward: true evidence that he is fashioned in the image of God, for nothing is more ennobling and more uplifting than the striving for the beautiful. And, in turn, nothing has so great a moral influence on a people as the truly beautiful in literature, art and architecture.

For this reason the architecture of Colonial New England—and the dominant part that White Pine played in it—is of more than passing interest. New England represented the highest cultural achievement among the Colonies. It was not the richest territory, the culture of the individuals may have been no higher than in other sections, but conditions were more favorable to the cultural development of the community. It was more homogeneous, being settled almost entirely by the English, whereas the middle Colonies embraced a mixture of races —English, Dutch, Swedes, Germans, French; it was more thickly settled than the southern Colonies, which were also almost entirely English.

The architecture of Colonial New England is not, however, a slavish following of English precedents. It was tempered by the sojourn of the Puritans in Holland and by the changed conditions of their environment in the new country. It is a curious fact that historians have only recently begun to trace the influence of other than English institutions on Colonial institutions, although other influences than English have always been apparent in the architecture of the period.

The part that White Pine played in the architecture of New England was not altogether accidental. The men who settled there came from parts of England where wood construction was almost universal. They were familiar with wood—they knew how to use it; and so naturally in their new surroundings they turned to wood, although stone and clay were to be had in every settlement.

What joy must have been theirs to find such a wood as White Pine!—abundant on every hand, readily yielding to their rough tools, quickly providing in their first log cabins both shelter from the weather and protection from the savages.

There is something about White Pine that inspires. It has always had a fascination for men who handle it. Of no other wood do lumbermen speak with such admiration—almost reverence. "Good old White Pine"—there's a lot of real sentiment bound up in that phrase.

Following the log cabin stage came the beginnings of American architecture, based on precedents brought from overseas, yet full of originality, full of expression of the strong Puritan character, and admirably adapted to their needs. The new country made its impress on Colonial architecture just as it did on Colonial literature. Necessity and utility were the dominant influences.

Nevertheless there is a rugged beauty in those early White Pine houses and churches that truly expresses the Puritan's love of home and reverence for God. Recall some of the old New England houses—the sturdiness, the fearlessness, yes, the faith and hopefulness they express. Severe, to be sure; crude, perhaps—yet pure in line, well balanced and well proportioned—above all, simple and dignified, and built by an honest craftsmanship to endure; despite their shortcomings, so fundamentally correct architecturally that they are to-day an inspiration to architects who are once again trying to develop a typical American architecture.

The second period of Colonial architecture began with the first quarter of the eighteenth century, when the economic development of the Colonies had brought affluence to many families in New England. Men now had time to think of the finer things of life, and possessed the means to acquire them. The new country had been subdued, it had been made safe, necessity and utility were no longer the governing considerations. In this period, which continued until the early part of the nineteenth century, when American architecture degenerated to the ignoble depths from which it is only now rising, were built those stately mansions and those noble churches which still stand in all parts of New England.

The Georgian style influenced the builders of

this period. Once again the architecture of Enghand is drawn on, but, as in the earlier days, adapted rather than reproduced. Instead of the severity of the earlier buildings we find a conscious effort to adorn the exterior. Ornamental details add a grace and charm hitherto almost entirely lacking. The Colonists have become more worldly, the sternness of the pioneers has softened—the indomitable spirit of the Fathers remains, but under happier conditions it expresses itself in a happier vein; and while the new architectural style is no longer simple, it still retains the dignity of the old.

The Georgian style in England was for the most part executed in stone, but the builders in New England held to the material with which they were thoroughly familiar. Their White Pine was especially adaptable to its intricate details. With infinite patience and love for their craft they wrought those beautiful doorways, delicate mouldings, splendid cornices, and graceful columns that still excite our admiration. Their interiors, too, they embellished with their admirable panelling, stairways and doorways, and their exquisite mantels and mouldings.

If we had no other record of Colonial New England than its architecture we could still trace its material and social progress. In an unbroken line, the succession of homes from the crude farm-house of the earliest period to the more pretentious mansions of the later period tell the story of the economic development, the struggle with the Indians and the daily life of the forefathers. The churches tell us of their divine aspirations, and represent their spiritual life. Together the houses and churches truly express the purity, the simplicity, the sternness, the strength of character, the unconquerable will, the love of home and love of God of the Pilgrim Fathers, "the greatest moral force the world has known"; step by step they unfold the mastery of the new country, the material progress, and the development of the social life, culminating in the era of prosperity, culture and refinement at the close of the Colonial period.

Fortunate, indeed, that this story was recorded in so durable a material as White Pine. What good fortune for us that the forefathers found such a wood awaiting them on "the stern and rock-bound coast." And what a lesson to us in the selection of woods for home-building!

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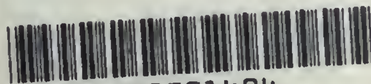

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