

Martin Euclid Thompson

1786 - 1877

Architect and Painter

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Martin Euclid Thompson started his career as a carpenter and builder before becoming a student of New York City architect Joseph R Brady.

One of Thompson's earliest documented commissions was the design of the New York City branch of the Bank of the United States, located at 15½ Wall Street. The building was completed in 1824, when Thompson was only 28 years old. After President Andrew Jackson abolished the Bank of the United States, the magnificent edifice would become the United States Assay Office for Manhattan. [When the Assay Office was slated for demolition in 1924, Robert W deForest undertook the preservation of the building's façade. It was moved, stone by stone, to Central Park and reassembled to become the south façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing – where it can still be enjoyed today.]

The corner stone of this chaste edifice was laid in the spring of 1822; but owing to the epidemic scourge with which the city was visited, and by which its lower section was totally depopulated in the autumn of that memorable year, its progress was so much retarded, that it was not completed until the spring of 1824. It was first opened for the transaction of business on the fourteenth of April in that year.

The building is of white marble, from the quarries of Westchester, and was designed and erected by Mr. Martin E. Thompson. It shows a front of sixty feet, in Wall-street, and is about seventy feet deep, occupying a lot that cost nearly as much as the edifice itself, viz. forty thousand dollars. The building is constructed in the most substantial manner, and is fire-proof throughout. Besides the banking-room, (which is thirty feet in height, and surrounded with a gallery) there are apartments for the accommodation of directors, stockholders, &c., with others occupied as a loan-office, the payment of United



The New York City Branch of the Bank of the United States

States pensioners, &c. The gallery, vestibule, and portico, add much to the beauty of the structure. (NY Mirror, 1829)

In 1826, Thompson was one of the founding members of the National Academy of Design, an honorary organization intended to “promote the fine arts in America through instruction and exhibition” composed of some of the most pre-eminent artists and designers in the nation.

His next major project was the design of the New York Merchant's Exchange, completed in 1827. One critic commented that “in beauty and richness the building had no peers in the city. It was dignified, simple and commodius.”

This truly noble and extensive building is situated in Wallstreet, below William-street, and extends southward one hundred and fifty feet to Exchange-street. It presents a front on William-street, of one

hundred and fifteen feet, and three stories in height, exclusive of the basement, which is considerably elevated. Its southwest front, in Exchange-street, is one hundred and fourteen feet long, and also three stories high, including the basement story, which is only one step above the pavement. The Wall-street front is the principal one, and is built entirely of white marble, from the quarries of Westchester. The first and second stories comprise but one order, which is the ionic, from the temple of Minerva Polios, at Priene, in Ionia. A recessed portico of about forty feet wide, in an elliptical form, has been introduced in front to great advantage, both as it regards convenience and appearance. A screen of four stupendous columns and two antic, extends across the front of the portico, nearly in a line with the front of the building. These columns are thirty feet high, and three feet four inches in diameter above the base. The shaft of each column is composed of a single block of marble. The columns support an entablature of about six feet in height, upon which rests the attic, or third story -, making a height of about sixty feet from the ground. Beneath, on each side of the portico, is a passage through the basement story to the post-office and Exchange-street.

The principal entrance to the exchange-room, is by a flight of nine or ten broad marble steps, finished with a pedestal at each end. On ascending to the portico, three doors open to the vestibule in front, while one on either hand open into insurance offices, &c. &c. The vestibule is of the ionic order, after the most chaste and finished style, from the little ionic temple of Illyssus—being the most ancient structure known of that order. The exchange-room is eighty-five feet in length, fifty-five feet wide, and forty-five feet high. Adjacent to this apartment, are the publication offices of three morning papers, viz. the Daily Advertiser, the Courier and Enquirer, and the Morning Herald; to the latter establishment is attached a very extensive reading-room, in which can be found most of the political and commercial journals of the United States. In the second story is a saloon for sales at auction of merchandize by the package; also a room for the board of brokers and the chamber of commerce. On the whole, without entering into a minute description, we pronounce this building an honour and ornament to the city, and one that was long wanted for the convenience of our merchants. It was commenced on the first day of



The Merchants' Exchange, New York City

April, 1825, and completed in July 1827. The plan was wholly that of M. E. Thompson, esq. the architect of the edifice.

Regretfully it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1835.

Thompson briefly partnered with Ithiel Town, who was also a rising star in New York City's architectural circles. Exposure to Town's extensive collection of architectural engravings and library moved Thompson to embrace the Greek Revival style, which would be the hallmark of his designs for the next two decades. Town and Thompson are believed to have collaborated on several designs, including the Church of the Ascension on Canal Street in 1828 and a brick tower and spire for St Mark's Church in the Bowery district. However, some contemporary writers only give Thompson credit for the two projects.

The New York Institute for the Blind was another of Thompson's important projects; the building was completed in 1841, and Thompson was also listed as "supervisor" of construction (for a fee of \$300), a position often given to architects to ensure that the contractors executed the approved design to speci-



The Elijah W King mansion, overlooking Long Island Sound in Pelham, The Bronx

fication. Another of his institutional designs was the Columbia Grammar School, which was built in 1829.

Not limiting himself to public structures, Thompson undertook a number of residential commissions in Manhattan. The mansion he designed for Robert Ray at 17 Broadway was considered to be among his finest works; it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1845. He designed the façades of a several residences on Murray St on land owned by Columbia University. Near the height of the Greek Revival craze he was engaged to design “Hawkswood,” a 50 by 62 foot mansion in Pelham in the Bronx for Elijah W King, a New York City attorney and assemblyman. Outside of New York City he designed “Evergreen,” the Morristown NJ mansion of James E Colles, completed in 1838.

Thompson was given the opportunity to design several buildings for the Federal government. These were the United States Naval Hospital at the Navy Yard in Brooklyn (constructed between 1831 and 1838). In January of 1831, Thompson had writ-



Thompson's New York City Post Office

ten to the Navy:

I will furnish all the materials, and construct a three-story brick hospital, with a blue stone basement, two feet thick, with twelve-inch outside brick walls, partition walls eight inches thick, slate roof and copper gutters, hard finished walls, and a small iron grate in each room, the building to be properly timbered with floors of white pine, planed and grooved, six-pannel doors with seven-inch rim locks, sashes hung with weights, and wood work painted with two coats of white lead. (Anon, 1860)

He placed the cost of the center building at \$19,000, with each wing estimated at \$16,000, for a total cost of \$51,000.

He was also responsible for “Admiral’s House” on Governor’s Island (constructed in 1843). The latter has been preserved as part of the Governor’s Island rehabilitation project.

In 1845, Thompson’s design for the New York City Post Office was finally completed and opened to the public.

One major departure from Thompson’s trade-mark Greek Revival style is The Arsenal in Central Park. Originally commis-



Thompson's New York City Post Office

sion by the State of New York as a storehouse for weapons for the State Militia, the building was constructed in 1847 to 1851. Thompson abandoned Greek Revival to create a imposing classical military structure with turrets intended to evoke historic European fortifications. Its use as an arsenal was short lived; the City of New York seized the land it was on for public park space, and in 1857 bought the building from the State of New York. It subsequently served as a police precinct house; as home to a public menagerie of animals that was the precursor to the Central Park zoo; as home to the newly formed American Museum of Natural History (with part of the building being used as display space and part being used as a laboiratory where dinosaur skeletons were assembled); an art gallery; and even as the home of the New York City Meteorology Bureau. Today the building serves as headquarters for the Parks Department.

One of Thompson’s last works was the Tradersmen’s Bank in New York City in 1861.

On the northwest corner of Broadway and Reade-street a building has been, erected for the Tradersmen's Bank, and was completed by the 1st of May, 1861. The size of the building is 93 feet 2 inches on Broadway, and 98 feet 9 inches on Reade-street There are a sub-cellar, basement and four stories, surmounted by an enriched Corinthian entablature, with frieze windows, forming an attic or fifth story. The Reade-street front has a pediment over the centre. Both the fronts are built of white marble, and in the Palladian Italian style of architecture. The first story, to be occupied by the bank, is built of fire-proof materials, with iron beams and brick arches. This floor is approached from the street by a wide flight of marble steps, with ballustrades and pedestals. The stairs to the second story are also of white marble. There is a back staircase of iron from the basement to the fifth story, to be used in connection with the hoistway, or in case of fire. All the stories above the bank

have been already leased by a large importing firm, to be occupied for mercantile purposes, & are built as fire-proof as can be made with timber beams, and well deafened. The basement floor is six steps below the sidewalk, and will be leased either as a store or as offices. The building throughout will be heated by steam, and will cost about \$80,000, or, including the lot of ground, about \$200,000. The architect for the above building is Mr. Martin E. Thompson. The new building was first occupied by the Tradesmen's Bank on Monday, June 24th. (Bankers Mag, 1861)

Thompson's daughter married George James Price, who had purchased "Dosoris", the sprawling estate of Rev. Benjamin Woolsey north of the village of Glen Cove, in 1850. Price died in 1861, leaving Susan in charge of the family's large farm. After Thompson's wife Mary died in 1864, he abandoned New York City to live with his daughter and help manage the farm. The urban architect adapted quickly enough to rural life that he was able to chair a roundtable discussion on commercial apple production in the same year at the American Institute's annual meeting.



The Arsenal in Central Park as it appeared circa 1900.

In addition to his career as architect, Thompson was also a painter in both oil and watercolor; the author has seen several surviving landscapes attributed to him. The intriguing possibility that Thompson may have painted local scenes during his retirement here is worthy for further exploration; certainly his body of work bears further study.



"Cold Spring and West Point" by Martin E Thompson

When Thompson died in 1877, Rev. John Cavarly Middleton of St Paul's Episcopal Church in Glen Cove offered the following eulogy:

On the 24th of July Mr. Martin E. Thompson passed away in hope of the resurrection. He was ninety years of age, and until a year or two before his death a remarkably vigorous old man. As is usual with persons of great age he lived very much in the past. Indeed the past seemed to him more real than the present because he had been so active in it. For he had been a marked

man in his younger days. As an architect, when architecture was in its infancy in America, he did noble work and left the impress of his art on many churches, banks, and public buildings whose fine proportions are silent witnesses today of the quality of his genius and the culture of his taste. He was repeatedly called to fill positions of honor, among which was one of which he might well be proud. For it was he who was appointed by the Grand Lodge of Free Masons to welcome LaFayette to our shores when at the

invitation of Congress he returned as the nation's guest in 1824 When the weight of years pressed heavily upon him and his active life was over he retired to the home of one of his daughters in our midst, where he remained till his death the recipient of the tenderest filial care and Christian love.

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