

Charles Follen McKim On The Point by Lisa Stuart

You are likely aware that the house at 79 Second Street was designed by famous architect Charles Follen McKim as barn for his father-in-law John Bigelow. But that is not the only McKim design on the Point. He also designed the building at 11 Chestnut Street and renovated several others. These were his first commissions after venturing out on his own and were instrumental in the development of his Colonial Revival/Shingle Style that can be seen throughout Newport.

McKim was introduced to Newport and the Point around 1872 by William Bigelow whose family owned Bayside a grand summer house at 94 Washington Street which was later razed in the 1930s. It was at Bayside that McKim met William's sister Annie Bigelow. They were married in 1874. The Reverend Doctor William Spencer Child, a relative of Annie's, and Pointer was the officiant.

Rev. Child was an Episcopal priest and Rector of the Zion Episcopal Church which was located in the building that is now the Jane Pickens Theater. He lived on the Point from 1864 through the 1880s. Although he was never a rector at St. John's, he was associated with it and ran the "Saint John's School for Boys" here on the Point. Through Rev. Child the young McKims lived in the Dennis House (the rectory for St. Johns).

Although grand Victorian homes had replaced many of the earlier homes on Washington Street, there were still many eighteenth-century Georgian Colonial homes here. McKim was intrigued by the Colonial homes and the Point's streets which were laid out in an orderly fashion by Quakers. Most of the houses were wooden versions of British buildings. He was further intrigued by father-and-son builders George Champlin Mason senior and junior and studied their work here in Newport.

He was not alone. Interest in Colonial America was growing. McKim became part of the Colonial Revival movement and was a member of the group which developed an architectural vocabulary for this new style of architecture.

"To our mind there is greater charm to be found about the front-door step of one of these houses, more homeliness and promise of comfort within, even more interest about its wrought scraper, than in the most of the

ambitious dwellings of the present day” (*New York Sketch Book of Architecture*, col 1, no 12 (December, 1974), pl.45)

In 1874 McKim hired a photographer to take a set of photographs of eighteenth-century buildings in Newport. The collection became the core of his Colonial architectural study and influenced his own architectural style. The photo collection is now at The Newport Historical Society and may be viewed on it's website. <https://collections.newporthistory.org/Gallery/96>

In 1875 the McKims' daughter Margaret was born. The McKims split their time between an apartment in New York City and summers in Newport. McKim participated in meetings of the Town and Country Club, a group of intellectuals, that was initially held at Bayside. Two years after Margaret's birth, Annie abruptly ended the marriage. There was much gossip over the reason. The official reason given by Annie was “malign influences.” She refused to let McKim see their daughter.

Despite the McKim's divorce, Annie's brother William continued to work with McKim. In 1877 they went on a “Colonial Tour of the New England Coast” together. The architectural studies from this trip formed the core of McKim's architectural style.

Upon their return home Annie started spreading rumors that McKim had committed “unnatural acts against the bounds of Christian behavior.” This lead the Bigelow family to force William to resign from McKim, Mead and Bigelow in 1879. William was replaced by the charismatic Stanford White. Later it was suggested that it was an affair between Annie and Rose Wagner, an interior designer, that broke up the McKim's marriage.

Annie's love life continue to cause controversy in Newport when she, a divorced woman, married Rev. John E. Daly, pastor of the Channing Memorial Church in 1886. Something not done in those days. When in her twenties Margaret sought out her father on her own and reunited with him.

McKim's Work On The Point

During his years on the Point, McKim started to build his architectural style as can be seen in the his early projects here: the design of Child's

Schoolhouse and the Bigelow-Fairchild Barn and the renovation of several Colonial houses owned by Benjamin Smith.

Rev. Child's Schoolhouse designed in 1875/76, 11 Chestnut Street

To thank Rev. William Spencer Child for officiating his marriage to Annie, McKim designed a school house based on one he designed and published in *The New York Sketchbook* of 1873. Rev. Child owned most of the block between Chestnut and Cherry from Washington Street to Second Street. The school house was built and still stands on the Northwest corner of Chestnut and Second Street.

The *Newport Journal* reported that "the assembly room of the Rev. Child's new school is 21 by 40 feet with open timber ceiling, half height of roof, yellow pine finish throughout, wainscot, etc. A common and recitation room 18 by 20 feet and 10 feet square yellow pine finish throughout, etc. reached from the porch and connected with the second floor by a open landing and yellow pine staircase. The entrance to the building instead of being from the street is from the enclosure which contains the residence." (*Newport Journal* 2, December 1875)

In a paper about the early work of McKim, Professor Richard Wilson notes that Child's schoolhouse had an exposed ceiling, yellow pine finish throughout, and was described as in the "style....of the Queen Anne period. The Queen Anne label was used because of the wall covering—shingles over a clapboard—since the building itself was a large rectangle topped by a huge gable." ("The Early Work of Charles F. McKim: Country House Commissions." *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1979, pp. 235–267. *JSTOR*)

In her Master of Arts dissertation at the University of Wisconsin, 1964, Eugenia Brandenburger Smith discusses the important elements of McKim's schoolhouse design: cut shingles forming exterior decorative surface patterns accentuating the horizontal lines of the building, a simple massing of volumes progressively moving toward a great simple triangle, and banks of windows grouped under a slightly projecting overhang. These elements are seen later in the design of the Newport Casino.

Rev. Child later built a larger school on the southwest corner of Cherry and Washington Street. It is now the Nina-Lynette House. The schoolhouse at 11 Chestnut Street was purchased and restored by current owner Chris May in 1990.



Bigelow-Fairchild Carriage House, designed in 1876, 79 Second Street

In 1876 the economy was weak and McKim had little work. His father-in-law, John Bigelow engaged him to design a barn and stable for Bayside. The barn was later converted to a house.

The *Newport Journal* April 29, 1876 stated “a stable 40 x 60 feet is to be built on Poplar Street for John W. Bigelow of New York cost \$3,000.” After consulting Sanborn maps with Bert Lippincott, NHS, we determined that although the initial intention may have been to build the barn on Poplar, it was built on Pine and Second where it still stands.”



The Bigelow stable designed by their new son-in-law McKim, ca. 1875. Although the house is gone, the stable remains.



Eugenia Brandenburger Smith noted that the Barn was similar to the Child's school but the wood shingles and diamond-paned windows created a greater surface continuity. According to Prof. Wilson, the Barn is an example of "clean, tightly massed volumes combined with a continuous wall of cut shingles."

McKim's Renovation of Colonial Houses on the Point

In 1860, at the death of two elderly cousins (both Robinson by birth), Benjamin R. Smith inherited 64 Washington Street. Smith then purchased the other three houses on the other corners of Poplar and Washington Street to prevent a great commercial pier from taking over those lots and razing the houses: Hunter House, Dennis House, The Robinson House and the Captain Phillips House which was later moved to 42 Elm Street. (Esther Fisher Benson, "The Restoration Movement in Newport, RI 1963 to 1976 Spring," *Newport History*, Vol. 57 (1984) Iss. 194, Art. 2) He hired the young McKim to renovate these Colonial Houses.

Hunter House, built around 1748 for Johnathan Nichols, Jr.

Hunter House has served as a private home, a boarding house, a convalescent home and convent over the years. It has had numerous architectural modifications to it.

The first modification took place in 1756 when a Central Hall was added. In 1805 it was purchased by Honorable William Hunter, Jr., His son Thomas leased it as a boarding house from 1834-1844. It was then rented to Old Colony which used it as a boarding house for passengers. Next it was rented to Dr. Milton Mayer and served as a convalescent house for two decades. During this period, there were several structural changes. Both entrances of the house were widened and a porch was added to the rear of the building forcing the removal of two windows. The street-side door was discarded and the water-side door was removed. (*Green Light*, Spring 2004)



In 1876 Smith engaged McKim to bring Hunter House back to a single-family house. Professor Wilson notes:

“A porch was added to the front, while the entrance was relocated to the rear, which, with the addition of a new kitchen and sleeping wings, changed the configuration of the house. On the interior, McKim converted the old keeping room into a living hall. A large window bay extended the interior space outward and related stairwell created vertical spatial movement.”

When the front doorway was widened the door was discarded. Benjamin Smith salvaged it and attached it to the north entry of the Dennis House. In 1924, under the direction of the architect Norman Isham, the pineapple and floral decorations were returned to the Hunter House, restored and installed on the street side. The remaining parts, pediments and pilasters, were duplicated and the pineapple and floral decorations copied for the Dennis House. So both houses share identical doorways.

Robinson House, built 1725-36, addition 1760, 64 Washington Street

The Robinson house stands directly on the street as was the way at the time it was built. The living rooms were on the street side which protected them from the wind and away from the business of commercial shipping that took place the water front off the Point. The back buildings, shop and woodshed stretched from the house down to the water—all connected to the house by a flagged walk.

Much of the furniture in the Robinson House was made by “neighbor Goddard” who lived just north of the Robinsons. The Goddard House was moved in 1868 and now stands at 81 Second Street. (Anna Wharton Wood, “The Robinson Family and their Correspondence with the de Noailles,” *Newport History*, Vol 72, 1922.)

In 1874 Benjamin R. Smith asked McKim to add a kitchen wing and connect the original keeping room overlooking the bay into a rear sitting room with an exterior porch. This would reposition the kitchen to the street and the living spaces to the waterside which by then was less commercial.

For the sitting room McKim reproduced moldings, paneling and shutters from the eighteenth-century portion of the house. The exterior porch continued the original lines of the house and make a by a window and tall west windows. The fireplace combined colonial features, such as the



purple and white Dutch tiles and the manual shelf, with McKim's nineteenth-century interpretations, a large hearth and whimsical finials (Wilson, page 250)

Dennis House, built 1760, 65 Poplar Street

In 1876 McKim enlarged the rear of this house. He repositioned a staircase with twisted balusters, added a Queen Anne-style bay window and coordinated the older Georgian fireplace with new wainscoted paneling and classical arch opening in to the stair hall” (James Yarnell Newport History Vol 74, 2005, isa 252, Art. 4)

Fr. Humphrey the immediate past rector of St. John's, now at St. Thomas's, Toronto shares:

“Dennis House is really two houses put together: the c. 1740 front and the 1876 back. You can see the dividing line between the two in the “Family Hall,” as he called the great room; there's a beam that runs across the center of the ceiling. On one side is the old colonial kitchen, and on the other side is the bay window that makes the room so welcoming. On the colonial side, he transformed the cook's fireplace by adding a formal neo-colonial mantle and paneling, and tied both halves together with a unique parquet floor. He also eliminated the center hall staircase and replaced it with a gracious neo-colonial one off the “Family Hall.”



The Captain Phillips House built before 1758, originally located at 55 Washington Street moved to 42 Elm Street 1880

Although several references state McKim oversaw renovations on the four houses Benjamin Smith, I was unable to determine exactly what renovations, if any, were made by McKim to The Captain Phillips House. I will be continuing my research on this house and will, hopefully, be able to share information with you in the future. In the meanwhile a little about this interesting house.

The Captain Phillips House originally stood on the southeast corner of Washington and Poplar Street. It is characterized by the segmental pediment over its doorway, one of the few remaining in Rhode Island and the only one on the Point. The house was bought by Samuel Phillips, mariner, in 1806, hence its name (*Green Light*, December 1986).

It was moved to 42 Elm Street where it still stands by Sarah Kendall in 1880 to clear land for her grand Victorian home on Washington Street. (*Green Light* January 1968). She subsequently built a Victorian House on

the lot at 55 Washington Street.

In 1947 The Captain Phillips House was rescued from demolition for a second time. After the City inspector condemned the house a group of individuals, whose names were not disclosed, purchased the house and received approval to renovate it by the City of Newport's Board of Review. They requested permission to remove from the building all exterior additions, to renovate it inside, and then, if possible, to seek a buyer who would use it as a permanent home.

Richard C. Adams, of the Preservation Society of Newport County, headed the group. John Perkins Brown Providence architect and owner of the house showed the board plans for it's restoration (having purchased and renovated the Simon House in the same manner). Leonard Panaggio represented the Newport Historical Society. (*Newport Mercury*, February 14, 1947) After the house was restored it was put on the Oldport Association Tour and offered for sale for \$9,800.



Note to Editor From Lisa

The next section are quotes and photos from the current owners of the houses in the article. They should each go in a box/sidebar.

Bill Doyle and Jed Pearson
Robinson House, 64 Washington Street

“We feel lucky to be living with such amazing architecture. One of the more striking aspects of the McKim room is his specification for the raised paneling and fireplace mantle to be painted dark charcoal grey, and that has never been changed by any of the subsequent owners, including us. In fact, over the years, we believe it has only been painted a few times, which has preserved the details of the woodwork magnificently.”



*N.J.A. Humphrey VIII Rector and Anne Stone and Family
Dennis House, 66 Poplar*

In 2020, when the exterior of the house was repainted, our daughter was inspired to make a dollhouse-sized cardboard model of the rectory, which this summer we painted to match the new look of the house. It opens in such a way that one can immediately see the colonial part in front and the shingle-style McKim addition in back.



*The model is copyright 2020 by Margaret Wells Humphrey (b. 2007).
Media: cardboard, hot glue gun, matching paint.*