

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Calvin Ryder (1810-1890)

Calvin Ryder, one of the foremost architects produced by the State of Maine, left a legacy of splendid mid-nineteenth century residences in the Penobscot River Valley. These structures, which include the James P. White House in Belfast (1842) and the William Blake House in Bangor (1858), are among the most important examples of Maine's architectural heritage.

Southeast of Bangor on the Penobscot River is the Village of Orrington, where Ryder was born in 1810.¹ Nothing is known about his youth or training. By 1831 he was residing in Bangor with his brother Perry. Both men are listed as mechanics, a general term denoting a skilled trade.² Bangor in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was a prosperous lumber port with at least two architects, Charles H. Pond and Charles G. Bryant, whose work would influence Ryder. Although brother Perry remained in Bangor working as a plane maker, Calvin moved to

Winterport (then known as Frankfort) in 1833 to establish a practice as an architect and builder.

Ryder's first known commission is the Union Meeting House of 1833 in Winterport. The congregation specified that the building be patterned after the Methodist Church in Orrington constructed a year earlier according to the plans of Charles Pond. These two Gothic Revival style churches are virtually identical in design. Therefore, Ryder must be considered the builder rather than the architect.³

It is likely that Ryder designed and constructed many of the Greek Revival style homes in Winterport.⁴ This riverport underwent its most important period of growth during the 1830s and 1840s. Only one residence, however, can be documented as his work. This was a double house built as rental property by the architect and Captain Winslow Curtis in 1837.

About 15 miles downstream from Winterport is the important seaport of Belfast. During the 1840s a prosperous shipbuilding industry brought rapid development.⁵ A total of four residences have been documented as Ryder-designed, although there were surely many more. Two houses erected in 1840 provide a contrast in the architect's work. The Sherburne Sleeper House is patterned after several Bangor homes designed by Charles G. Bryant.⁶ With its gable roof, five-bay facade, clapboard siding and simple moldings, there is little that can be discerned as characteristic of Ryder's own hand. Hiram Alden's house, however, exhibits important features as an early design of the Winterport architect.

The principal facade of the Alden house is three bays wide and delineated by four large Doric pilasters supporting a full entablature. Flush-board siding provides a masonry-like contrast to the clapboard sheathing used for the other elevations. Over the doorway is a small Doric portico with a cast iron roof balustrade. Although a traditional gable roof house with the entrance in the center of the long facade, the division of only three bays instead of five provides for more spacious fenestration. Moreover, the windows have heavy, pronounced caps and sills which stand in sharp relief to the flushboard siding.

With the Alden House, Ryder established his own characteristic treatment of the Green Revival style.

Two years later, in 1842, he designed his masterpiece, the house for James P. White (Figure 1). This magnificent structure, sited at the junction of Church and High Streets, is a remarkably innovative interpretation of classical revival architecture. Each element is carefully integrated into a coherent composition of the most careful proportions.⁷

The main body of the house is rectangular with a hipped roof. Classical pilasters and flush-board siding on the front and side walls emphasize a three dimensional aspect not present in the Alden House. The three bay facade is broken in the center by a two story pavilion capped with a classical pediment. This pavilion contains the main entrance and a second story porch recessed behind Ionic columns in antis. Stylized corner pilasters supporting an entablature enframe each doorway.

In the center of the roof is an octagonal cupola resting on a platform behind a balustrade with pedestals and urn-shaped balusters. Each angle of the cupola is ornamented with Ionic pilasters, and the roof has cresting with intricate floral designs. Carving patterned in these Greek floral motifs is also employed around the doors of the central pavilion. Similar decorations were popularized locally by Bangor architects Bryant and Pond, but ultimately derive from builder's guides by Asher Benjamin, Minard LaFever, and Chester Hills.

Attached to the north side of the house is a T-shaped wing with classical moldings executed in simpler profiles than the main section. Clapboard siding and gable roofs also distinguish this kitchen wing and carriage barn from the living quarters. The subsidiary wing is, nonetheless, elegantly fashioned with recessed porches supported by fluted Doric columns on the east and west sides.

The interior of the White House has a traditional central hall plan with two rooms on either side. These spacious rooms feature intricate plaster ceiling medallions, black marble mantelpieces and architrave trim with corner blocks containing carved anthemion motifs. The circular staircase, with its simple newell post and plain balusters, suggests a persistence of Federal style influence (Figure 2).

In 1844 Ryder began work on a second major Belfast mansion, the home of Joseph Williamson (Figure 3). This structure is more monumental in character with its massive two-story portico supported on four Ionic columns. Behind the portico the flush-board siding, corner pilasters, and molded second floor belt course resemble the White House. Originally there was also an octagonal cupola. The broad five bay facade was no doubt considered necessary to provide sufficient visual backing for the massive portico, but the parlors which flank the central staircase do not seem significantly larger than

those in the White House.⁸

The monumental aspect of the exterior created by the columned portico is reinforced by the siting. The Williamson House occupies a narrow lot on High Street. Its placement at the top of a small knoll overlooking the harbor, however, emphasizes the image of a classical temple. Siting is equally important for the White House, which has a commanding location at the intersection of High and Church Streets. The



Figure 1. James White House, Principal Facade.
Photo: Gregory Clancey



Figure 2. White House, Central Hall
Photo: Gregory Clancey

triangular-shaped lot extends well out in front of the building to gain maximum exposure as one approaches from the south.

Ryder's work for wealthy clients such as White and Williamson must have ensured a good income with ample prospects for future commissions. In 1846, however, there occurred an event which apparently had a major effect on the architect's career. Ryder and eight other men were ordered to prison for failure to pay damages on a debt incurred in 1833. In that year these men, along with five others, had borrowed \$15,000 from Daniel Wilkins.⁹ The reason for borrowing this rather large sum is not known. While it is unlikely that Ryder served any time in jail,¹⁰ the whole episode may have precipitated his relocation to Boston.

Unfortunately, no record has come to light indicating where Ryder spent the four years between 1848 and 1852. By the end of that period he was established in Boston as a junior partner in the architectural firm of Hovey and Ryder. William Hovey was the first of three partners. About 1857 Ryder formed a firm with Enoch Fuller, which lasted three years. A third partnership with Edward D. Harris continued from about 1864 to 1874. In the intervening years, and until the 1880s, Ryder practiced alone.

By all accounts Calvin Ryder was fairly successful as a Boston architect. Several buildings in the city and surrounding communities have been documented as the work of Ryder and his various partners. In the mid-1850s he developed what was apparently his own version of the Mansard style. While its early development has yet to be fully documented, Ryder was clearly in the forefront of those architects to practice in this fashionable idiom. Derived from contemporary French architecture and introduced in this country by Charles Lemoulnier in 1848, the Mansard style resulted in some of the most elegant examples of mid-nineteenth-century design in New England.¹¹

Through his Maine contacts Ryder continued to design important buildings in the state. For his brother-in-law William Blake, he prepared drawings for a residence on Court Street in Bangor, which was constructed in 1858 (Figure 4). This residence is the earliest known use of the Mansard roof in Maine. Moreover, this structure takes on paramount importance in that it provided the model for a great many houses built throughout the Penobscot River Valley.¹²

The most distinctive feature of the Blake House is the concave slope of the Mansard roof and its central dormer. The dormer caps a central pavilion in a plan which exhibits the same traditional classical symmetry that is characteristic of Ryder's earlier work. Differences that reflect changing mid-nineteenth century tastes include a spacious drawing room and an oval dining room¹³



Figure 3. Joseph Williamson House, C. 1900 View.

Ryder is known to have used this design repeatedly in Massachusetts. Variety was obtained through different window treatments, such as combinations of round arched, square headed, and segmental arched caps. With the architect's careful attention to detail and restrained use of ornament, the Blake House manifests a fine proportional combination of its various elements.

Ryder's last known major work in Maine, the Bangor residence of Charles G. Sterns, provided what was probably the most sophisticated interpretation of French-influenced architecture in the state (Figure 5). Constructed in 1866, it was not significantly larger than the Blake House. Yet a grander sense of scale is obtained through the use of imitation stone banding, small window balconies, and a massive segmental arched central dormer flanked by scroll-shaped brackets. In other respects, the Sterns House follows the basic formula established by the White House and continued in much of Ryder's work. The destruction of this house was tragic, for it was comparable, on a smaller scale, to the most fashionable mid-nineteenth century mansions of Boston.

After 1869, when he planned four identical commercial buildings in Bangor, no more Ryder designs have been documented in Maine. Indeed, the 59 year old architect was by then probably deriving most of his commission from the Boston area. In 1890 he died unexpectedly while visiting William Blake in Bangor. Ryder was buried in his native Winterport where his career had begun sixty years earlier.

*Roger G. Reed
February, 1984*

NOTES:

- ¹ The architect's last name was spelled Rider until he moved to Boston around 1850, when the change occurred.
- ² Bangor Poll Tax for 1831 and 1832. Ryder does not appear in the 1833 poll tax.
- ³ In 1837 Ryder built the Baptist Church in Belfast, again following the Pond design. It would be interesting to know if Ryder learned this trade from Pond in 1831-32. Pond's Penobscot County Courthouse (1831) was a sophisticated early example of the Greek Revival style.



Figure 4. William Blake House, Principal Elevation.

⁴ As early as 1836 Ryder referred to himself as an "architect". Waldo County Registry of Deeds, Book 37, Page 169.

⁵ *The History of the City of Belfast*. Joseph Williamson, Belfast, 1982, Vol. I, pp. 217-218.

⁶ The contract to construct the Sleeper House is dated January 8, 1840, so the design presumably dates from 1839.

⁷ Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., has pointed out that the basis for this design probably derived from Plate 43 of Minard Lafever's *The Young Builder's General Instructor*. Newark, New Jersey, 1829. This does not detract from the originality of Ryder's scheme, which follows Lafever only in a general way.

⁸ The flying staircase and interior moldings are also similar to the White House. The Williamson House was remodelled about 1920 under the direction of Bangor architect Wilfred E. Mansur. The changes included enlarging several rooms and extending the portico, all of which altered Ryder's careful proportions to accord more with early twentieth century concepts of a grand mansion. The cupola was also removed at that time.

⁹ Waldo County Registry of Deeds, Volume 43, Page 515. Also, *Wilkins vrs Fowles, et al.*, October Term, 1846, Number 58. Records of the Maine Supreme Court, Maine State Archives, Augusta.

¹⁰ As late as 1848 Ryder still owned property in Winterport. This probably would have been sold earlier if he had been sent to jail.

¹¹ Examples appeared in Cambridge as early as 1853 and were common by 1857. *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge Report Four: Old Cambridge*. Bainbridge Bunting and Robert Nylander, MIT, 1973, pp. 102-106. For a list of known Ryder designs outside Maine, see files of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

¹² Included is the house in Bangor for William T. Pearson, which is a close copy of the Blake House. Other variations can be found throughout Bangor and in towns such as Searsport, Frankfort and Monroe, as well as Auburn.



Figure 5. Charles Sterns House, C. 1875 View.

¹³ Much attention in the local newspaper was given to the central steam heating system installed in the house. Contemporary accounts also mention that the house was painted white rather than dark color combinations which were more typical of the period. *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, Oct. 5, 1858.

List of Known Commissions in Maine by Calvin Ryder:

- Union Meeting House, Winterport, 1833. Intact.
- Baptist Church, Belfast, 1837. Completely Remodelled.
- Double House for Calvin Ryder and Winslow Curtis, Main Street, Winterport, 1837. Destroyed.
- Hiram Alden House, 19 Church Street, Belfast, 1840. Remodeled in 1880's.
- Sherburne Sleeper House, 14 Congress Street, Belfast, 1840. Altered.
- James P. White House, 1 Church Street, Belfast, 1842. Intact.
- Joseph Williamson House, 18 High Street, Belfast, 1844-45. Remodeled c. 1920.
- William Blake House, 107 Court Street, Belfast, 1858. Intact.
- Charles Sterns House, Broadway, Bangor, 1866. Destroyed.
- Commercial Building for H. Brown, 14 Broad Street, Bangor, 1869. Altered.
- Commercial Building for Webster Treat, 18 Broad Street, Bangor, 1869. Altered.
- Commercial Building for Webster Treat and George Pickering, 32-36 Broad Street, Bangor, 1869. Intact.

Sources:

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Architectural Plans:

The only known Ryder drawings are those of the Blake House in Bangor, which consist of plans, elevations and details. These drawings are in possession of George D. Carlisle, the owner of the house.

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