

Stop: Ainsley Hall/Robert Mills House

Robert Mills--Background Information

RM was the first architect trained in America. He was an apprentice to New York and Boston architects trained in Europe during the first phase of building program in the new country of the US after 1789. He is revered for his ability to "adopt and reinterpret classical architecture".

Notable among his designs in Washington, DC (which occurred after his Columbia, SC work) are the Treasury Building, US Post Office Building, and Washington Monument. His influence continued in Washington through successive architects who retained Greek/Roman/Doric look for federal buildings.

RM was appointed as "federal architect" for 16 years by Andrew Jackson. Working under another architect (James Hoban) during his early years, he drew plans for the White House and U S Capitol Building and general plans for Thomas Jefferson's Monticello--Jefferson always added detail drawings for his own style. Mills was both a friend and protege of T. Jefferson. RM was involved in oversight of construction at Monticello. During this time, his friendship became so strong that RM accepted a match-making by Jefferson for his wife--Eliza Barnwell Smith of Virginia.

Mills had several tenets of his work:

- to serve the broad needs of the public
- to develop canals, water works, railroads, bridges, and reclaim swamps
- safety along with function and style

Mills was a strong supporter of canals for transportation and saw Charleston as his part-of-choice over New York because of its elevation. His projects include jails and courthouses and the dredging of Charleston harbor. His bridges were pierless spans to avoid the dredging problems. Later proposals included the rotary engine, a Washington to New Orleans monorail, and the draining of Southern swamps for agricultural purposes.

The tour focuses on two of Mills buildings:

1. Ainsley Hall

Built for a private individual when RM was unemployed, it is one of a very few private efforts. It has all the style and function of his public structures. Although built for Hall as a residence, Hall died before completion. (See attached reprint)

The house was guarded closely by Union soldiers upon take-over after the surrender of Columbia since RM was the renowned "federal architect" of the capital of the Union.

See Ghost Story on Robert Mills house

2. S. C. Lunatic Asylum (Robert Mills Building)

Set on 4 acres, the hospital was a project of RM when he was first hired to build public buildings in the new S C capital at Columbia. In the early 1800's, public works projects had the highest priority since many felt such construction would draw the young country together and help fight the sectionalism that threatened the new nation. Those public works projects were also the most prestigious and highly prized by architects of that day.

RM was employed by S C from 1820-23 after his successes in Mass. and Baltimore. His first project--the Lunatic Asylum--was originally appropriated for \$28,000 or \$31,000 but was too ambitious for the incoming tax revenue. Mills' work was extensive and the total final cost of \$91,000 did not include the landscaping or plumbing which the legislature vetoed in an attempt to hold down the costs. This cost overrun is directly attributed to his demise as state architect. He remained as a consultant until 1929 when he was employed by the President as federal architect.

The central part of the asylum had 2 oblique wings that allowed "no sight lines from ward to ward". The angle provided for separation of sexes visually to avoid problems within the asylum since the wards were separated by sex already. The hospital was designed to reflect current theory of treatment by the Quakers William and Samuel Tuke, who were instrumental in the creation of hospitals for the insane in England. Features of note are:

- large, wide halls for exercise in inclement weather
- private bedrooms with large windows opening to the southern exposure for "calming" and warmth of the sun
- roof garden for visitors
- accessible gardens within the angled wings below and also on the remaining acreage for varying classifications of patients

Mills added his architectural concerns to those treatment concerns:

- fireproof building
- concealed security
 - a) hinges and locks on windows and doors hidden from view so they appeared to be absent
 - b) window scrollwork to hide prisonlike atmosphere
- central heat system with pipes and flues with dampers for more even and comfortable heating
- convection cooling in summer accomplished with drains in the floor and airflow from the large, cooler basement
- use of fresh air to avoid contaminated atmosphere and spread of "humours"

When the building was completed, the original patient was a woman. Her mother came as her caretaker and became the first matron. When it was opened, it was the largest and most complex building in South Carolina.

The occupancy was quickly recorded as 51 lunatics and 29 deaf mutes. The words "lunatic" and "insane" were interchangeable with out present day term of "mental illness".

Present day Ghost Story: The building now houses offices. It once housed nurses as their residence as other buildings were added to the grounds. Security guards in 1992 often have to report to obscure room, unoccupied for hours since the close of the day, to turn off unexplained lights. One guard told of experiencing "cold spots" and an awareness that he was not alone on the upper floors when he turned off the lights.

Sources:

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ROBERT MILLS

Columbians can point with pride to the buildings still standing in the Capitol City that were designed by Robert Mills. Born in Charleston in 1781, Mills, the son of a well-to-do Scottish tailor and an aristocrat mother, was the first American-born, American-educated professional architect.

After graduating from the College of Charleston about 1800, he travelled with his father to Washington where he became a draftsman for James Hoban, who had designed Columbia's first State House in 1786 and was then preparing plans for the nation's Capitol and the White House.

Through Hoban, Mills met Thomas Jefferson, who became his mentor, introducing young Mills to the right people and extending to him the resources of his library at Monticello, containing the greatest collection of architectural books in the country. At age 21, Mills submitted designs for the first building planned for the South Carolina College which were incorporated in part in the final plans. Later he designed and officiated at the dedication of the Maxcy Monument on the campus.

In 1803, Mills returned to South Carolina as a member of the Board of Public Works, and as State Architect and Engineer. His responsibilities included building roads, canals, and new buildings authorized by the Legislature, and inspection of all state-owned buildings. One of his unusual assignments was the design of a hospital for the insane in Columbia, which was built in 1822. Another of his landmarks was the Ainsley Hall Mansion.

Although there is no proof, he is thought to have designed the DeBruhl-Marshall house at 1401 Laurel Street and the Caroliniana Library at U.S.C. Certainly his influence is obvious. Mills did design many public buildings throughout the state, including his famous "Fireproof Building" in Charleston.

Mills returned to Washington in 1836 and was appointed Federal Architect by President Jackson, a position he held under seven presidents. During this period, he designed the Washington Post Office, the Treasury Building, the Patent Office and the Washington Monument.

THE ROBERT MILLS HOUSE AND PARK 1616 BLANDING STREET

Located on a four-acre downtown block, bounded by Taylor, Pickens, Blanding and Henderson Streets, the Robert Mills House and Park is one of Columbia's outstanding historic and architectural showplaces.

A superb example of early 19th Century architecture, it is also one of the few residences known to have been designed by Mills, the first Federal Architect. Mills, a native of Charleston, planned this mansion in 1823 for Ainsley Hall, a prominent Columbia merchant. Unfortunately, Mr. Hall died before the mansion was completed, and his wife, the former Sara Goodwin, sold it to the Presbyterian Seminary.

During the fire of 1865, many Columbia buildings were destroyed, but the Mills House remained undamaged. It had become the central building of the Columbia Theological Seminary, which moved to Decatur, near Atlanta, in 1930. It then lay dormant for a period; was bought by Columbia Bible College in 1938, and acquired by the Historic Columbia Foundation in 1963.

Under authority of the Foundation, and with the cooperation of the Richland County Historic Preservation Commission, the City of Columbia and the County of Richland, the house and grounds were completely restored in 1968. The work was done by McCrory-Sumwalt Construction Company, under the direction and supervision of Albert Simons of Charleston and Walter Petty of Columbia, fellows of the American Institute of Architects, and is a tribute to their skill in restoration. Many organizations and public spirited individuals contributed towards the project.

The interior, as originally finished, was rather plain due to Hall's untimely death and the need to sell the property

to meet his debts. The present elaborate plaster work and other detailing was reconstructed during the restoration, based on Mills' designs.

1992

Paneled inside shutters, three-part Venetian windows, and curved walls indicate both the practicality and the urbanity of Mill's style. The elegance of the architecture is enhanced by Regency furnishings, marble mantelpieces, and sterling silver doorknobs and locksets. A four-acre garden surrounding the house and outbuildings reflects the beauty and diversity of Southern landscaping in the antebellum years.

Today, with its two flankers and carriage house, the Robert Mills House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also one of Columbia's five National Historic Landmarks. □

THE CARRIAGE HOUSE

The small brick building below was designed by architect Robert Mills in 1823 as a stable for the horses and carriages of merchant, Ainsley Hall.

The stable and the Hall Mansion became the property of the Columbia Theological Seminary in 1831 and the stable was converted into a chapel about 1870. Its clean-cut lines, triple-arched windows, exterior half-circle brick indentations, high ceiling and two front doors were ideal for the adaptation. An added rostrum and long wood pews completed the transformation, and the walls soon echoed with daily sermons. □

Sherman would have never considered burning home or property of Robt Mills as arch. of capital city of Union

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

1616 BLANDING STREET

Founded in 1828 by the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, the Seminary moved into these quarters in 1830. The central building on which construction began in 1823, had been designed by Robert Mills as a home for his client Ainsley Hall, a Columbia merchant, who died before the house was completed.

The house was soon flanked by two dormitories, Simons Hall and Law Hall. A brick carriage house on the east side was converted to a Chapel. Woodrow Wilson's father and uncle were on the faculty. In 1925, the Seminary vacated the premises and relocated in Decatur, Georgia, where it is still known as the Columbia Theological Seminary. □

In 1886, Winthrop Training School for women, organized by David Bancroft Johnson, was allowed to use the building when it was not in use by the Seminary. But in 1891, Winthrop moved to Rock Hill and the little chapel was left behind — but not for long. In 1936 Winthrop alumni, missing their old chapel in Columbia, negotiated a purchase of the old "pile of bricks" and removed them to Rock Hill where they were reassembled just as Mills had designed them. The building became a memorial to Winthrop's founder, who had died in 1928.

But the story did not end in Rock Hill. During the restoration of the Ainsley Hall Mansion in Columbia in 1968 the former stable was reconstructed on its original site with similar brick from another source. □



Theological Seminary, 1616 Blanding Street.
(1924 photo by Russell Maxey)

In 1873, one of the students, a 17-year old lad, known as Tommy Wilson attended the services and in this chapel made his first confession of faith. Years later this man, then President of the United States, was known as Woodrow Wilson. □