Peter Harrison Biography

Peter Harrison

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Biography

Peter Harrison (1716-1775), American colonial architect and merchant, provided a number of distinguished edifices for British and American patrons.

Peter Harrison was born of a Quaker family in Yorkshire, England. He became a seaman and on a voyage to America visited Newport, R.I., about 1738. In 1745 his vessel was captured by a French warship, and he was imprisoned in the fortress of Louisbourg, Nova Scotia. After his release he drew a map of Louisbourg and otherwise assisted a later colonial expedition against the fort.

Harrison settled in Newport in 1746, married Elizabeth Pelham that year and established himself as a dealer in rum, mahogany, molasses, and wines. Shirley Place, the house he built in Roxbury, Mass., in 1746 for Governor Shirley of Massachusetts, was apparently his first architectural design.

One of Harrison's best-known buildings is the Redwood Library in Newport (1748). He designed it by combining plates from various English architectural design books he owned. Later Harrison provided plans for Touro Synagogue (1759-1763) and the Brick Market (ca. 1760) in Newport, King's Chapel in Boston (1749-1754), and Christ Church in Cambridge, Mass. (1759-1761). Sometimes attributed to Harrison are St. Michael's Church in Charleston, S.C. (1759-1761), and a number of houses with facades distinguished by two-story central sections framed by pilasters, such as the Vassall-Longfellow House in Cambridge (1760), the Apthorpe Houses in Cambridge and New York (1760 and 1767), and the Lady Pepperell House in Kittery Point, Maine (1760).

What essentially distinguishes Harrison's work is not so much an artistic personality as a generally recognizable preference for certain architectural plans and forms. As a gentleman architect, Harrison, like other refined men of his day, chose the form a building would take and left the construction details to artisans.

Politically, Harrison was a Tory. Toward the end of his life he became customs collector for the port of New Haven, Conn. However, it was an inauspicious moment, for Revolutionary tempers were running high, and as an officer of the Crown Harrison was suspect. Fortunately for him, perhaps, he died in 1775; unfortunately for history, a mob of "patriots" broke into his office and burned his books and papers, including his architectural designs.