

William Graves Perry – Architect Championing Historic Preservation



Born in 1884 in Boston - only 20 years after the end of the Civil War - Perry was the son of Charles F. Perry and Georgianna West (Graves), a descendant of an old Newburyport seafaring family. He grew up in Newburyport in family wealth in a High Street mansion, graduating from Harvard, MIT and Paris' L'Ecole des Beaux Arts by 1913, just in time to serve in Europe from 1915 to 1916 during World War I.

By the time he returned to Newburyport to save its once-grand city center from annihilation, this 19th century gentleman had long acquired his well-earned celebrity in both the worlds of architecture and history. As a founder of his architectural firm in 1922, Perry earned a reputation for himself as a fine designer of college, private school and other commercial buildings. Locally, Perry designed Plum Island's American Yacht Club in 1908, and it was Perry who got the call to design St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Newburyport, after the chapel burned.

Rockefeller's pick In early 1926, Perry and a Harvard classmate Arthur Derby passed by Williamsburg to take in the Georgian architecture while returning from a duck hunting trip to South Carolina. When Derby fell ill, requiring surgery, the men left their car behind, returning to Boston by train. Returning for the car in spring, Perry again visited the brick home of George Wythe, a mansion on the green of the College of William and Mary. It was then he met the Rev. Dr. William Goodwin, a clergyman who at the time was William and Mary's director of development. Goodwin was in the process of restoring an 18th-century home, and Perry noticed he needed old door locks, which Perry just happened to collect. "Perry took measurements of the locks and screws and keyholes, and told Goodwin he'd see what he could find when he got back to Boston," Ringenbach said. "About a month later, Goodwin got a box of locks in the mail." At the time, Goodwin was also looking for a benefactor to fund his dream of preserving Williamsburg as a

historical tribute to its era. The man who would financially back Goodwin's vision would be John Rockefeller, Jr., although Rockefeller's name was kept secret. "When they reached a point where they needed an architect, the Rev. Goodwin said 'I know just the person,'" Ringenbach said. "Perry was retained, but wasn't told Rockefeller was involved. He was finally invited to

New York and told to go to a hotel and wait for a phone call. Perry used to say he lived on room service for two days because he never left the hotel for fear he'd miss the call." The relationship between Williamsburg and Perry lasted from 1927 until Williamsburg set up its own architectural department in 1953, Ringenbach said. Appropriately, a member of Perry's firm left to set up the department.

The professional affiliation with Williamsburg may have been over, but the belief in the value of historic preservation remained. "Preservation was always an important aspect of our practice," Ringenbach.



That importance led Newburyport preservationists to tap Perry for the cause. Perry, who was living in North Andover at the time, not only helped turn the tide away from demolition, but also sent in a sealed bid for the renovation of the Custom House in 1968, with his junior partner Conover Fitch, Ringenbach said. "The day they opened the bids for the restoration, both Perry and Conover drove to Newburyport in separate cars," Ringenbach said. "Conover said when they opened the bids, they were very pleased with the number, and they went on to help in restoration of this important landmark.

Perry went on to live another seven years, dying in 1975 at the age of 91.

References:

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'A person of extreme detail': Perry's contributions to Port seen today, By Angeljean Chiaramida , Staff writer *Daily News of Newburyport*, May 28th, 2007.