

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## Arthur H. Vinal 1854-1923

Five structures in Maine represent some of the most influential work by the prolific Boston architect Arthur Howard Vinal. The Methodist Church in Farmington (1877) is the earliest major commission known in Vinal's 50 year career. The Bangor Opera House (1881) prepared Vinal for later theatre commissions in Maine and Massachusetts. The substantial Mount Kineo House Hotel on Moosehead Lake (1883) served as the design precedent for a series of structures created for Boston sites between 1884 and 1888. Two other buildings, the Calais Public Library (1891-92) and the Burpee Residence in Bangor (1892) furthered Vinal's fluency in the latest architectural styles and contributed to the success of an architect who, with over 80 documented structures, was once well known across Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Born in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1854, Vinal demonstrated an "early talent for architecture" which by age twenty helped him secure a position with the Boston architectural firm of Peabody &

Stearns.<sup>1</sup> When he joined in 1874, this firm was but four years old and had received just 11 commissions.<sup>2</sup> By the end of 1875, when Vinal left, the firm had designed 13 additional major buildings.<sup>3</sup> Encouraged by the success of his parent company, Vinal left to start his own firm with Henry F. Starbuck. Starbuck & Vinal worked at 639 Washington Street, Boston from 1876 until 1878.<sup>4</sup>

The first major accomplishment of Starbuck & Vinal was their design for a "Church at Farmington, Maine" which was published in the February 17, 1877 issue of the *American Architect and Building News* (Figure 1). This design was especially remarkable for the diversity of ornament used on the building's exterior. On a form that was essentially Romanesque in massing, the architects placed Gothic spires, arches and quatrefoils, Stick Style members and detailing, and mansard roof elements on the main steeple as well as cut tracery and other decorative effects. As built, the Methodist Church presented a modified version of eclectic styling in which its asymmetrical massing suggests the influence of the Queen Anne style (Figure 2). An 1877 addition to Samuel S. Ridell's home at 60 Elm Street in Jamaica Plain,



Arthur H. Vinal, right, and family members.

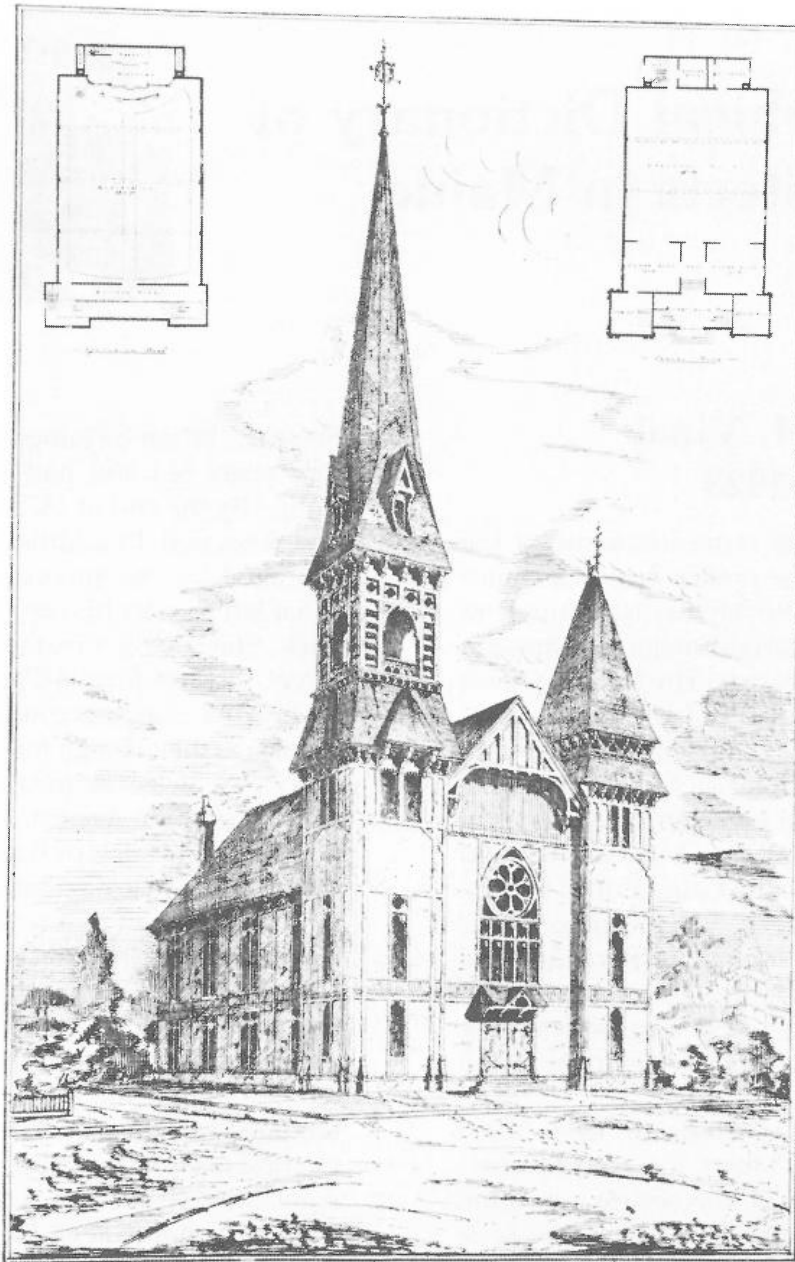


Figure 1. Methodist Church, Farmington, as published in the *American Architect and Building News*, February 17, 1877 (SPNEA, Boston).

Massachusetts, is the only other commission known to have been designed by Starbuck & Vinal. This residential design employed recessed dormers, colored tiles, and decorative brick corbelling and chimneys to animate a Second Empire form.<sup>5</sup> Stylistic diversity was a characteristic of Starbuck & Vinal which continued in Vinal's work after Starbuck removed to Saint John, New Brunswick in 1878.<sup>6</sup>

The Bangor Opera House of 1881 was unlike most other buildings designed by Vinal in that its exterior appearance was almost totally arranged within the two dimensional framework of the principal facade (Figure 3). Scaled and positioned to be continuous

with adjacent buildings on each side, the structure's major highlights were limited to the shape and location of rectangular, semi-circular, and segmental arched windows, which were grouped in the middle to suggest a Palladian motif harmonious with a tripartite order which governed the entire front. Against the brick background, light-colored stone impost blocks contributed a Ruskinian Gothic flavor, while the semi-circular frames, brick corbels and brownstone details were fancifully Romanesque. Above the slab bearing the name "Opera House" Vinal enthusiastically positioned a stone "on which is carved two dragons, with the date '1881' between," reflecting his love for figure-animated archi-



Figure 2. Methodist Church, Farmington, as built, c. 1910 view (MHPC).

ecture which later produced 35 Melville Avenue, Dorchester, Massachusetts (graced with brownstone lions) and 40 Allston Street, Dorchester (outfitted with a soaring eagle and the carving of a personified sun).<sup>7</sup> To enliven other portions of the Opera House facade, Vinal used brick diapering which became standard on nearly all his masonry buildings erected after his Franklin Buildings were completed in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1879.<sup>8</sup> Farwell Hall in Rockland (1891-2), the Augusta Opera House (1900) and the Globe Theatre in Boston (1903) were later commissions which probably resulted from Vinal's successful theatrical designs in Portsmouth and Bangor.<sup>9</sup>

Probably the most influential of all of Vinal's Maine buildings, the Mount Kineo House Hotel designed for A. O. Dennen in 1882-1883, proved to be the architect's eclectic masterpiece<sup>10</sup> (Figures 4 & 5). This mammoth wooden hotel on Moosehead Lake accommodated 400 guests in two wings measuring 50 by 130 and 50 by 110 feet and was joined to a kitchen ell which measured 50 by 70 feet. Above its three story mass, at the principal corner, a central tower 45 feet square rose an additional three stories before supporting a pyramidal hip roof. Along with this great square pyramidal tower, the Mount Kineo House featured pedimented gables, complex surface ornamentation, and a polychromatic paint scheme,

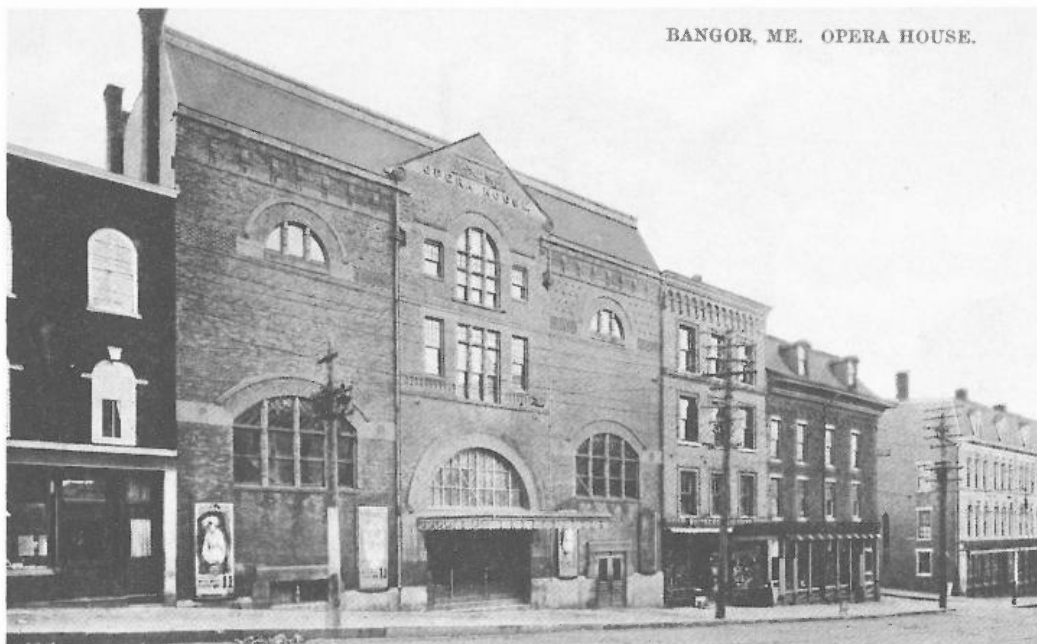


Figure 3. Bangor Opera House, c. 1910 view (MHPC).



Figure 4. Mount Kineo House Hotel, Moosehead Lake, c. 1885 view (MHPC).



Figure 5. Mount Kineo House Hotel, Moosehead Lake, c. 1885 view (MHPC).



all hallmarks of the Queen Anne style. On the principal facade, Vinal placed a 130 foot long veranda, an arcaded balcony, an open balcony, and a large projecting pedimented gable. Several decorative bands of vertical stickwork, horizontal shingle coursings, and a rhythm of brackets and porthole ornaments further served to highlight Mount Kineo's animated facades. Mount Kineo, conceived as "the finest summer resort in the New England states", was probably primarily responsible for Vinal's renown in 1884, which led to his being appointed City Architect of Boston, a position he held through 1888.<sup>11</sup>

Vinal, as City Architect, designed at least 11 schools, 3 fire stations, 1 police station and 2 police stables, a Home for Pauper Females, a Dormitory for Nurses, a pumping station and dwelling house for a reservoir project, as well as a gate house and bridge for the Parks Department — all in Boston. Five of his municipal structures are particularly interesting as they reinterpreted Mount Kineo's massing in smaller, well-proportioned structures of brick and brownstone. The Minot, Hyde, Martin, and Bowditch Schools (1885, 1885, 1886, 1892) all grouped low symmetrical wings around a central section that was substantially taller and capped with a pyramidal hipped roof.<sup>12</sup> More compact than Mount Kineo, these buildings were rectangular, not L-shaped, in plan. As first conceived before November, 1887, Vinal's proposed Boston Public Library also grouped low, essentially symmetrical wings around a taller, pyramidally hipped roof central section.<sup>13</sup> In its heavy use of rough-cut brownstone, Syrian columns and arcaded openings, this first design also paid respect to the great Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson, whose Trinity Church stood across from the library site. One critic called Vinal's initial library design "an example of what Richardson's own style could become at the

hands of a sincere but incompetent disciple -- it was a chaos of gables, oriels, arcades and towers all worked out in brownstone."<sup>14</sup> To design successfully in "Richardsonian Romanesque" was a challenge that guided most of Vinal's other municipal work and produced ultimately his best public library, in Maine in 1892.

The Calais Public Library, like the first scheme for the Boston Public Library, was a composition by Vinal which reinterpreted design elements popularized by H. H. Richardson (Figure 6). Rough-cut stonework, arcaded windows, and heavy-framed arched openings were popular elements of the Richardsonian Romanesque style. In its plan and principal elevation, the Calais Public Library seems to have been influenced most strongly by Richardson's Crane Memorial Library, which was opened in Vinal's hometown of Quincy in 1883. The major element borrowed from Richardson's library is a conical-roofed tower which is allowed to merge with the major pediment, pushing the arched entry off-center.<sup>15</sup> Vinal experimented with engaged towers and off-center openings in at least five Boston buildings between 1884 and 1890: Joshua Bates School (1884), Winchell School (1885), Hugh O'Brien School (1887), Second Boston Public Library scheme (1887), and the Chestnut Hill Reservoir High Service Station (1887).<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the Maine building, designed in 1891, benefitted from these earlier prototypes.<sup>17</sup> The Calais Public Library expresses the repose and dignity expected from a fine work of architecture, allowing Vinal's distinctive cupola, complex roof form, and end window with curvilinear tracery to all be perceived as positive highlights.

In 1892 Vinal prepared "plans for remodelling of the large residence of Mr. E. R. Burpee on High Street" in Bangor.<sup>18</sup> Originally Gothic Revival, this house had been built in 1847 for Oliver Frost from designs by the local architect Benjamin S. Deane.

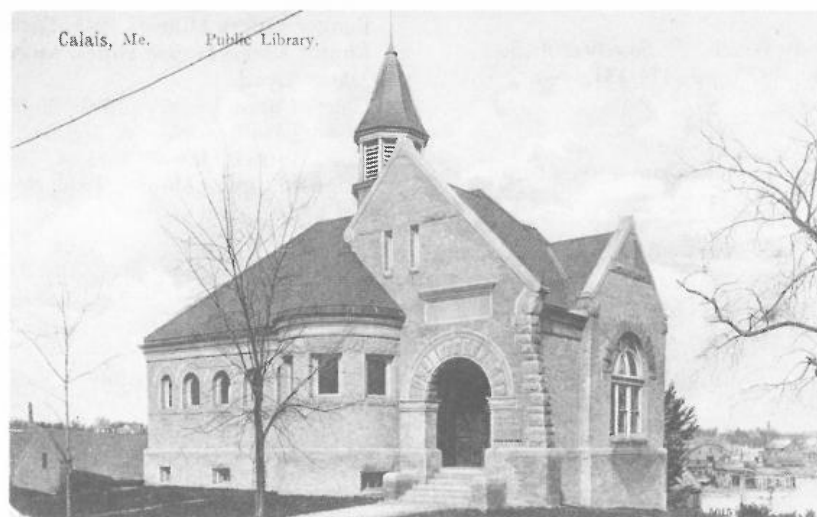


Figure 6. Calais Public Library, c. 1905 view (MHPC).

Vinal reinterpreted the Frost House in the Queen Anne style, applying fish-scale shingles, half-timbering, and stucco to the second story. Pavilions, wings, balconies, and dormers were added as the roof adapted to conical, octagonal and Gothic-inspired forms. Medieval style multipaned windows completed a sought-after appearance of Old World antiquity. Such bold reinterpretations of vernacular English forms were clearly a favorite of Vinal's in his maturity. In 1905 he won praise for Ye Olde English Room designed for the Hotel Thorndike in Boston, and his own retirement home at Marblehead Neck, like the Burpee House, was designed in that manner.<sup>19</sup> Architect George F. Tracy may have assisted Vinal with the working drawings on the Burpee Residence; 1892 was the first year Vinal and Tracy worked together, though Tracy's partnership survived no longer than Starbuck's had sixteen years before.<sup>20</sup>

For most of his life, Arthur Vinal worked alone. In addition to churches, hotels, theatres, libraries, and residences, Vinal designed a vast number of municipal structures and urban row houses as well as one of the first skyscrapers erected in Boston.<sup>21</sup> Vinal died while visiting his daughter and her family in South Harpswell, Maine in 1923.<sup>22</sup> His Maine buildings maintain an importance beyond their number, for they contain a high level of architectural sophistication and variety. With these qualities, it is understandable why this independent architect and sometime disciple of H. H. Richardson enjoyed such popularity all across northern New England during the late nineteenth century.

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February, 1985

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Vinal obituary, *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 25, 1923; Boston City Directories.
- <sup>2</sup> Wheaton Holden, "The Peabody Touch...", *Society of Architectural Historians Journal*, May, 1973, pp. 114-131.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Boston City Directories.
- <sup>5</sup> Boston Landmarks Commission, Jamaica Plain survey form 105.
- <sup>6</sup> Boston City Directories.

- <sup>7</sup> Bangor Opera House program, Season of 1882-83, No. 1, April 11-12, 1882; Douglas Shand Tucci, *Built in Boston*, Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978, p. 90.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Candee, National Register Nomination for Franklin Buildings, Portsmouth, N.H., October 10, 1983.
- <sup>9</sup> *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, January 15, 1892, p. 15 re Farwell Hall; *ibid.*, March 9, 1900, p. 8 re Augusta Opera House; Vinal obituary re Globe Theater.
- <sup>10</sup> *Industrial Journal*, November 24, 1882, p. 7, March 2, 1883, p. 6.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, March 2, 1883, p. 6; *Boston Globe*, August 25, 1901, p. 25; Boston City Directories, Vinal obituary.
- <sup>12</sup> For photographs of these four schools, see Boston School Committee Reports for 1901 and 1902.
- <sup>13</sup> *Boston Globe*, November 25, 1887. Vinal's several proposals for the Boston Public Library were rejected in favor of a design by the New York firm of McKim, Mead & White.
- <sup>14</sup> Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library, A Centennial History*, 1956, p. 139.
- <sup>15</sup> Henry Russell Hitchcock, *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times*, p. 210, plate 65.
- <sup>16</sup> For photographs of these five buildings, see respectively: Boston School Committee Reports for 1900, 1901, 1902; photograph of architect's drawing labelled "Front View of the City Architect's Elevation for the new Public Library Building, rejected by the Trustees of the Library" (Boston Public Library Print Room); Ellen J. Kipsey, *Draft for Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission on the Potential of the Chestnut Hill Reservoir and Pumping Station as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975* (December 11, 1979 report on file with the Boston Landmarks Commission).
- <sup>17</sup> *Industrial Journal*, October 23, 1891, p. 4.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, July 15, 1892, p. 8.
- <sup>19</sup> *Indoors and Out*, Boston, Vol. 1, No. 2, November, 1905, pp. 97-101; c. 1910 photograph in author's possession received from Vinal's grandson, Richard Meisenbach of South Harpswell, Maine.
- <sup>20</sup> Boston City Directories.
- <sup>21</sup> Melissa Debakis, *Arthur Vinal and his Bay State Road Structures*, April 26, 1978 paper for Boston University; Tucci, *Built in Boston*, p. 186.
- <sup>22</sup> Vinal obituary.

#### LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ARTHUR H. VINAL

Methodist Church, Farmington, by Starbuck & Vinal, 1877, Extant.  
Bangor Opera House, 1881, Destroyed.  
Mount Kineo House Hotel, Moosehead Lake, 1882-1883, Destroyed.  
Calais Public Library, 1891-92, Extant.  
Farwell Hall, Rockland, 1891-92, Remodelling, Destroyed.  
E. R. Burpee House, Bangor, 1892, Remodelling, Extant.  
Augusta Opera House, 1900, Remodelling, Destroyed.

Photograph of Arthur H. Vinal  
Courtesy of Richard Meisenbach

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