

Two Architects, One Island

By Sargent C. Gardiner

Since the late nineteenth century, architects and designers of national prominence have been designing houses, landscapes, and other structures on Mount Desert Island, attracted by the strikingly beautiful landscape, the character of which heavily influenced the work they produced. Two of the most notable of these architects were William Ralph Emerson (1833–1917) and Bruce Price (1845–1903), who designed a range of forward-looking residential projects that responded to the specific topography and natural context of Mount Desert Island. Although very different, both architects produced designs in what is now known as the “Shingle Style,” bringing a synthesis of nineteenth-century American domestic architectural styles to Mount Desert Island that, up to that point, had seen a predominantly local, vernacular building tradition in the form of Greek Revival structures. While Emerson was a regionally focused architect working primarily in New England, the houses he designed on Mount Desert Island represented the introduction of a contemporary style into the region. By contrast, Price was a nationally renowned architect with a more cosmopolitan career executing designs from his New York Studio in a range of locations, types, and styles. Price’s designs on Mount Desert bracket Emerson’s work, built before and after the 1880s, the decade when Emerson designed his most important houses in Bar Harbor. When viewed together, Emerson’s and Price’s designs on Mount Desert Island exemplify the development of a Shingle Style that incorporates earlier regional architectural forms and adapts to the specific geographic conditions of Mount Desert Island.

There is often not enough time in the day to practice architecture, raise a family, and explore the depths of architectural history on Mount Desert Island. First and foremost, I want to thank my wife, Aimee, and children, Luke, Anna, and Charlotte, for tolerating late nights, early mornings, and unexpected driving detours as we’ve studied the architectural history of whatever locale we were passing. I also would like to thank Peter Morris Dixon and Jay Lemire of Robert A.M. Stern Architects for their editing and critique of this specific text. And finally, Tim Garrity and the anonymous readers of the Chebacco editorial team for their input on this piece.

The Landscape of Mount Desert Island

Mount Desert Island's natural setting was conducive to the development of a new architecture. The largest island off the coast of Maine, Mount Desert Island is a compressed environment with a variety of geographic features concentrated within its coastline of 108 square miles. Formed 380 million years ago by tectonic collision, the granite landmass of the island was scraped to its current form by the Laurentide Ice Sheet as it extended and receded during the Pleistocene epoch. Smoothed by the north-south movement of glaciers, the resulting topography of mountains, ponds, and surrounding islands formed an extraordinary integrated composition. As will be shown, the undulating geography of the island provided Emerson and Price with a rich context from which to draw inspiration, and found unique expression in the Shingle Style as it developed in their residential designs.

Greek Revival: A Style of Local Origin

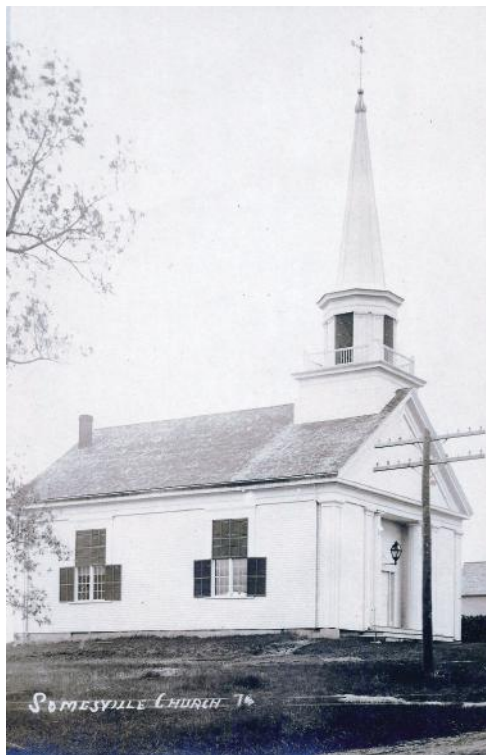
Mount Desert Island's European architectural history began with vernacular farmhouses and homesteads that sprang from local building traditions, built by carpenters or craftsmen often in the form of simple "Cape Cod" structures.¹ At the center of Mount Desert Island, Somes Sound, a natural fjard, was carved out during the glacial events. In 1761, at this sheltered location at the head of Somes Sound, a cooper named Abraham Somes built a modest log cabin in the place that would later become Somesville, Mount Desert Island's earliest European settlement.

Greek Revival was the first of the popular romantic styles that dominated the first half of the nineteenth century, mostly between 1830 and 1850. An appropriate style for the newly independent United States, it communicated the democratic ideals of Greece and adapted Greek forms and details to predominantly rural wood buildings.² Greek Revival was suited to the local builders, who could easily reference carpenters' guides and pattern books, and use traditional building methods learned over generations. Today, a loose grouping of Greek Revival houses and civic buildings still cluster along the road to Southwest Harbor. Among them, the Somesville meetinghouse, built in 1852 at the tail end of this period, illustrates the central concepts of Greek Revival. Its design is attributed to

architect Benjamin S. Deane of Bangor, who planned such churches in Eastern Maine.

The meetinghouse is a simple rectangular gabled volume, sheathed in white clapboard, the entry of which is positioned at the gable end that forms a classical pediment. This pediment is defined at the corners with pilasters and raised on a wide frieze typical of the style. The elevation is further punctuated by Doric columns that frame the recessed entry. The meetinghouse is well proportioned and probably served its function well, but could be as much at home in upstate New York as it is here. High examples of Greek Revival civic buildings can be found in Philadelphia or New York, where they were built in stone, a material much more suited to a style based on Greek stone temples. Somesville, being a rural settlement, built its meetinghouse of wood for practical reasons.

Vincent Scully, writing in his 1949 doctoral dissertation “The Cottage Style,” touched on the irony of using wood to build Greek Revival forms and the impulse to conceal the tectonic properties of wood beneath a painted skin, properties that would later be celebrated in Shingle Style architecture. “A skin deep architecture of wood, delicately and abstractly adjusted to its own properties the forms of stone, the Greek Revival concealed behind its elegant and enigmatic surface the realities of its inherited wooden frame, with its use of post and beam, mortice and tenon.”³



The Somesville meetinghouse, 1852. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

Early Resort Architecture: The Queen Anne and the Stick Styles

The nineteenth century was a time of dramatic evolution for American domestic architecture. On the national stage, American architect and author Andrew Jackson Downing was a critical force in that evolution. He advocated that architecture should more directly reflect the daily uses within, moving beyond the rigid symmetry of classicism to more flexible and romantic asymmetrical compositions. In his writings, Downing presented Gothic and Italianate historical styles as a way to express this new dynamic architecture.

A reaction against these romantic styles developed and was displayed to a wide audience at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The Queen Anne was an attempt to create an architecture that grew organically out of Medieval English prototypes, which were less style driven and more directly related to the practical needs of domestic life. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Queen Anne stylistic idiom became increasingly popular. As a flexible, economic, and rapid way for carpenters to customize house planning to an owner's needs, the Queen Anne stylistic idiom exploited new industrial materials of standardized lumber, wire cut nails, and factory-produced fixtures made available by the railroads.

Meanwhile, in Bar Harbor, by the 1870s, the region had become a summer destination for the nation's elite. New residents came from the industrial cities of the country, followed by their architects. As a result, the domestic architecture of Bar Harbor mirrored these national developments. Their designers developed a range of increasingly elaborate Queen Anne and Stick style cottages that would set the stage for Shingle Style designs by Emerson and Price.

Bar Harbor Becomes a Summer Resort

After the Civil War, America enjoyed a period of stable economic growth. Rapid industrialization and the national railroad system allowed for the efficient movement of material and people. At the same time, a newly affluent leisure class found themselves with money and time to spare. As a result, a number of summer resorts developed in the mid-nineteenth century, made up of summer cottages that could be occupied for an entire season. Railroads and steamship lines expanded into Maine, allowing visitors to come to Mount Desert Island by connecting through Rockland or Hancock

Point. Bar Harbor's development echoed that of Newport, America's first great summer resort. However, for all that they have in common, these two New England summer destinations have several important differences. As a prominent early Colonial settlement founded in 1639, Newport grew to be the most important seaport in Colonial Rhode Island. As a result, it had many significant Colonial houses and civic structures at a time when Bar Harbor was only a rural settlement. In the mid-1800s, Newport developed as the premier summer retreat of America's upper classes; wealthy families traveled great distances and spent the entire season there to escape the heat. Newport was easier to get to than Bar Harbor. Located in the center of New England, Newport was close to Providence, just seventy miles to the south of Boston and 175 miles northeast of New York. Newport's primary natural attribute is its ocean location, providing visitors with cooling summer breezes and active recreation of swimming and sailing. In contrast, Bar Harbor did not grow out of a strategically located trading center; it attracted summer visitors and residents because of Mount Desert Island's remarkable and varied glacial landscape.

Bruce Price in Bar Harbor, Queen Anne and Stick Style Designs

Bruce Price first came to Bar Harbor in 1879. Price completed commissions in the Stick and Queen Anne styles; designs that celebrated wood construction and reflected the characteristics of their environment, anticipating key qualities of his later Shingle Style work. Price, described by Scully as "that elegant gentleman and erratic genius,"⁴ was born in Cumberland, Maryland. He spent the early years of his practice in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore. He moved to New York in 1877 with his wife, Josephine Lee. Price was a cosmopolitan architect, and he led what would become a fifty-member architectural practice.⁵ Price's location in the rapidly evolving cultural capital of the United States gave him access to a wide-ranging client pool, as well as talented junior architects who helped execute his designs. Price's buildings were designed in several styles, and he completed commissions for clients all over the country, as well as internationally.

It was this cosmopolitan sensibility that Price brought to Bar Harbor with his Stick Style design for a commercial structure: The



West End Hotel, Bar Harbor, Bruce Price, 1878–79. *American Architect and Building News* 5, no. 161 (January 25, 1879): plate 161

West End Hotel Annex in 1878–79. The hotel highlighted simple wood construction with a varied skin of clapboard and shingle, simple timber brackets and railings, and an encompassing shingle roof of multiple heights, all concepts that would become central to the Shingle Style. Scully’s description of the West End Hotel in his book *The Shingle Style* identifies the importance of the wood skin and a unifying roof that would become central to the Shingle Style. “This large summer hotel was encircled by a deep veranda and capped by a high, shingled roof... The roof thereby becomes a mountain of shingles reaching out over the building below and in the shingles of the upper stories seeming to drip its rich texture down over the surface of the walls.”⁶

Price’s design for The Craigs, also of 1879, is a Queen Anne house that illustrated the designer’s ability to respond to the topography of the Mount Desert Island landscape. The Craigs was situated on a high bluff above town, a dynamic site with views to the ocean, downhill, and to the mountains above. Price responded by orienting the plan to the topography and views with a bent volume

with a large medieval turret acting as a hinge. The massing and resulting elevations were a collage of different details, decorated and articulated with a variety of surface treatments typical of the Queen Anne and at home on this dynamic site. Scully described it colorfully: “Unlike the West End hotel, a celebration of wood, this cottage contains many stylistic derivative elements. Half-timbered towers, Queen Anne plaster panels, sundials, bargeboard roofs with crude carvings, and violently turned posts. Although supposedly a cottage it seems a kind of fantastic feudal castle, a hodge-podge of picturesque bits and romantic skylines, an exacerbation of the industrialists’ dream of the picturesque.⁷”

Redwood Establishes the Shingle Style

The development of architecture is often not linear; as Price was executing *The Craigs*, which so successfully addressed its site, and the West End Hotel, which celebrated the use of wood and its properties, Emerson was taking a leap forward with his first Shingle Style design across town in the same year. Redwood was his first house in Bar Harbor, a commission for C.J. Morrill in 1879.



The Craigs, Bar Harbor, Bruce Price, 1878–79. *American Architect and Building News* 6, no. 209 (December 27, 1879): plate 298

Scully described Redwood as “The first fully developed monument of the new Shingle style.”⁸ Scully argued in *The Shingle Style* that other leading architectural practitioners like Price had been advancing domestic architecture, but few were able to bring together in one structure many of the new architectural concepts as Emerson did.⁹ Emerson advanced ideas of an open plan that allowed interior spaces to interact and extend from the house into the landscape beyond. The living hall, which unites spaces at different levels of this innovative open plan, is alluded to in *American Architect and Building News* in 1879. “A feature of the plan is that part of the hall facing the ocean is raised four steps above the entrance hall.”¹⁰



Redwood Cottage, Bar Harbor, William Ralph Emerson, 1879. *American Architect and Building News* 5, no. 169 (March 22, 1879): plate 169

Emerson, a New England architect based in Boston, was more regionally focused than Price. He specialized in the design of summer and country residences in New England. Emerson was born in Alton, Illinois, in 1833. Both his parents hailed from Maine, and his mother returned with him to Maine in 1837. As Emerson’s practice developed in the early 1870s, he refined his skills, designing seasonal houses in the prevailing stylistic modes of the High Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne, and the Stick styles. Emerson

gained national notoriety as designs were published in *American Architect* and *Scribner's Magazine*. As Emerson's focus moved beyond Boston, he built many designs in Maine; of his documented 161 projects, forty-eight are in the state.¹¹

Visitors to Bar Harbor in the 1860s and 1870s arrived primarily by steamer to docks located along West Street in the center of town. In the age before the automobile, proximity was a necessity. Early guesthouses and hotels like the West End Hotel were concentrated within close walking distance from the town transportation centers. As summer visitors began to build individual cottages, development spread from the center of town to the south and north along the shores, and up into the hills

to exploit sites with views of Frenchman Bay and the mountains inland. These out-of-town sites offered architects a chance to engage the Maine landscape. Redwood was built on the water's edge south of town along what today is known as the Shore Path. Redwood is approached through the Maine forest of moss-covered boulders and pines, and sits on an open bluff on the edge of a lawn, overlooking Frenchman Bay and the Porcupine Islands. Redwood's massing responds to the landscape, projecting its public rooms towards the open views of the Porcupine Islands on Frenchman Bay.

A single skin of wood shingles unifies all of the elements: a deep veranda at the entry acts as a transition from the exterior to the interior, while a projecting sun porch on the south side creates indoor and outdoor space. The elevations are brought into balance by a dynamic composition of windows, hooded sub-roofs, and articulated chimneys.



Redwood Cottage, Bar Harbor, William Ralph Emerson, 1879. *Courtesy of the author*



W.B. Howard House, Bar Harbor, William Ralph Emerson, 1882. *Arnold Lewis and George William Sheldon, American Country Houses of the Gilded Age* (Sheldon's "Artistic Country-Seats") (New York: Dover, 1982)

Emerson's Shingle Style Designs of the 1880s

While Redwood served as a formative moment in the development of the Shingle Style, Emerson's other Bar Harbor commissions during the 1880s created a body of work that demonstrates the flexibility of the Shingle to adapt to a range of sites. The W.B. Howard House of 1882, high in the hills above Bar Harbor, is one of Emerson's most impressionistic designs, engaging the surrounding foothills of Cadillac Mountain. Scully described the alpine nature of the project: "High on one of the wooded hills of that island, it echoed with its light shingled masses and pointed gables the forms of the mountains and pine trees around it. Eminently pictorial, it was a 19th century romantic landscape painters ideal of an upland dwelling, perched lightly above misty valleys, its rough textures and warm colors in harmony with the colors and textures of its terrain."¹²

Bournemouth was built in 1885 for W.B. Walley on Eden Street. Eden Street, the primary land approach to Bar Harbor, was lined with large summer cottages and epitomized Bar Harbor's arrival as a great resort town in the 1880s. Positioned on a site visible from the road, the house had a more formal and static symmetry than

Redwood. The first-floor elevations facing Eden Street are rough stone with a broad Richardsonian arch marking the entry. The second-story facade is half-timbered with bays flanking the center to give the house an almost symmetrical appearance. The massing and elevations are more conservative, lacking the site-specific and dynamic feel of Redwood.



Bournemouth, Bar Harbor, William Ralph Emerson, 1885. *Courtesy of Raymond Strout*

Bruce Price's Shingle Houses of Tuxedo Park

In the mid-1880s, while Emerson was at the peak of his Shingle Style productivity in Bar Harbor, Price was working further afield, advancing the Shingle Style with multiple houses in Tuxedo Park, New York. Commissioned for Pierre Lorillard, Price's designs for Tuxedo Park represented his most significant contributions to the Shingle Style.

Price's Tuxedo Park houses are a response to a demanding client, Lorillard, who had funded expeditions to South American ruins and pressured Price to integrate features of Aztec architecture; some of Price's best designs resulted. The houses are innovative and abstract, simple geometric masses, punctuated by voids that emphasize the interlocking of interior and exterior space, and anchored to their sites with massive stone plinths inspired by Aztec archeology.¹³

As Price honed his skills in the Shingle Style off the island, he was aware of Emerson's work on Mount Desert Island at the end of the



William Kent Residence, Bruce Price, Tuxedo Park, New York, 1886. *Arnold Lewis and George William Sheldon, American Country Houses of the Gilded Age (Sheldon's "Artistic Country-Seats") (New York: Dover, 1982)*

decade. Price published an article in *Scribner's* in July 1890, entitled "The Suburban House." There, he singled out Emerson as one of the best practitioners of the "shingle house," a distinctive adaptation of the Queen Anne. Price credited Emerson for the idea of unifying residential exteriors with a single skin of wood shingles, an idea he had initiated at the West End Hotel. Price wrote, "Mr. Emerson's was more distinctive still and went further than either Mr. McKim's or Mr. Jones, and others clothed their frame buildings with clapboards to the height of the first story and shingled them the rest of the way up. Mr. Emerson started his shingles over the entire house at the water table, and gained a step in repose that the other houses had not reached."¹⁴

Bruce Price's Canadian Work

Price's career launched into a new phase in the 1890s when he spent a considerable amount of his time in Canada designing projects for the Canadian National Railway.¹⁵ This work in Canada

would have a direct influence on Price when he later returned to Bar Harbor. The Banff Springs Hotel, 1888, dramatically illustrates Price's response to the mountainous landscape of the Canadian Rockies. The shingled Banff hotel sits on a massive plinth, a picturesque composition of towers that relates to its surrounding mountains.



Banff Springs Hotel, Bruce Price, Banff Springs, Alberta, Canada, 1888. Photograph by William J. Oliver. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

Price continued to address dynamic sites with his Château Frontenac of 1893 in Quebec City. This large masonry hotel has a complex series of connecting wings rising and dropping to different heights and allowing for a direct relationship between the structure and the site. In style, the Frontenac references the vocabulary of French chateaus while breaking down the scale of a monumental structure.

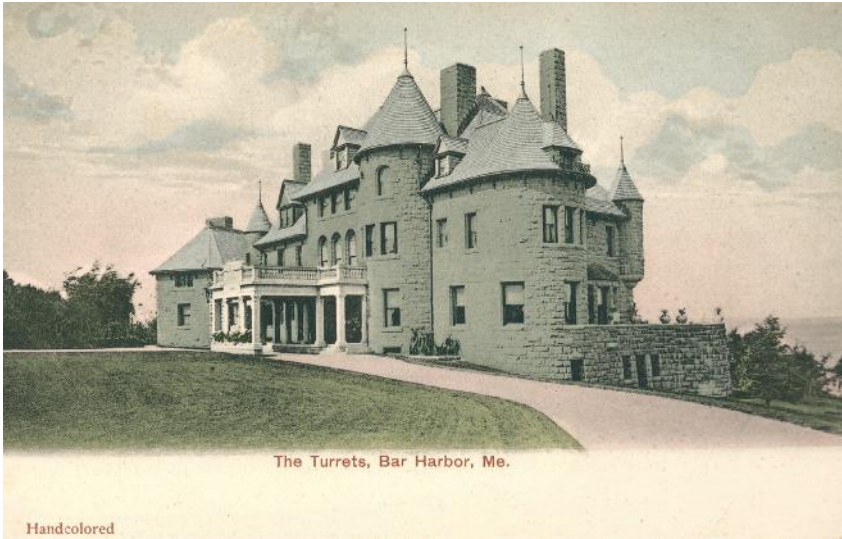


Château Frontenac, Bruce Price, Quebec City, Canada, 1893. Photograph by Bernard Gagnon. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

Return to Bar Harbor, Bruce Price and The Turrets

Price returned to Bar Harbor to design The Turrets for John Emery in 1893. The design for The Turrets represents the multiple influences of Price's previous work and an evolution from the Shingle Style. Built of sandy pink granite, The Turrets recalled the strong geometry of his Shingle Style Tuxedo Park work, but references the historical elements of his Canadian work. Its floor plans are open, including a living hall and open stair.¹⁶ The plans are expressed on the exterior with its asymmetrical massing, which also relates to its site.

The Turrets was located about a half mile north of Bar Harbor along Eden Street, not far from Emerson's Bournemouth, which was completed only eight years earlier. Like Redwood, The Turrets is less formal, and has a series of masses that act as a visual hinge allowing the landscape to flow around the structure to Frenchman Bay beyond. Like the shingle skin used at Redwood, the locally quarried granite unifies a dynamic composition. The windows were punched through the heavy stone, grouped in localized figures, balanced by the other architectural elements, and capped by a series of roofs at different heights. Classical details, which in shingled structures would usually be rendered in wood, here were executed in stone.



The Turrets, Bruce Price, Bar Harbor, 1893. *Postcard courtesy of Eliot Paine*

Conclusion

I have always been impressed by William Ralph Emerson's Shingle Style work in Bar Harbor. The sheer number of commissions is impressive by itself. However, it was with my discovery of Bruce Price, an architect I know well from his work in New York City, and Tuxedo Park that the story of the Shingle Style in Bar Harbor began to have more depth and context. Emerson honed his craft locally, refining compositional techniques and repeatedly adapting his designs to a variety of situations. Price's contribution was less consistent but farther ranging. Price's eclectic collection of designs both on the island and off add depth, range, and context to the Shingle Style story of Emerson and Price on Mount Desert Island.



The Turrets, Bruce Price, Bar Harbor, 1893. Photograph detail. *Courtesy of the author*

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¹ Gunnar Hansen and Peter B. Bell, *Mount Desert: An Informal History* (Mount Desert, ME: Town of Mount Desert, 1989), 154.

² Virginia Savage McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture* (New York: Random House, 2015), 247.

³ Vincent Scully, "The Cottage Style," in *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), xxvii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵ M. Christina Geis, *Georgian Court: An Estate of the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1991), 99–138.

⁶ Scully, *The Shingle Style*, 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰ *American Architect and Building News* 5, no. 169 (March 22, 1879): 93.

¹¹ Scully, *The Shingle Style*, 17–20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 110–111.

¹³ Geis, *Georgian Court*, 99–138.

¹⁴ Bruce Price, "The Suburban House," *Scribner's Magazine* 8, no. 1 (July 1890): 18.

¹⁵ Geis, *Georgian Court*, 99–138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*