

# The Grand Designs of Russell Warren; New Bedford Architecture

Though Rhode Island architect Russell Warren (1783-1860) lived in Tiverton, he didn't limit his designs to Rhode Island. He designed a fair amount of buildings throughout New Bedford. His majestic, and grand designs gave New Bedford a certain character that made her unique. Whether commercial buildings, grand church or stately Whaling Captain home, his buildings represented the economic strength of New Bedford due to the booming whaling industry. Enough of his homes still stand that architectural bus tours are given. For those buildings that remain no more, we still have images. I don't profess to be even an amateur architect, so this article will not be filled with "shop talk." I won't insult those who are professional architects or more knowledgeable. However, I don't need to be those things to admire and appreciate Warren's designs...and neither do you.

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Russell Warren was born in Tiverton, Rhode Island. in 1783. Historical records show two Russell Warrens that were born in 1783. One died in 1860 and the other in 1862. One was born in Fall River and the other in Tiverton. Fall River was called Tiverton until 1865. These may be two separate individuals or one and the same. One (or both) were born to parents Gamaliel Warren and Ruth Jenckes. If the last name looks familiar, it's because Richard Warren was a member of the Leiden contingent and passenger on the Mayflower. He also was also a signer of the Mayflower Compact. Gamaliel Warren was a descendant of this Richard Warren, so it may be possible for the architect to trace his lineage directly to Richard Warren of the Mayflower.

Russell got his start in life, not as an architect, but a carpenter. This practical field experience surely benefited his future career, lending him a perspective that perhaps many architects would not have. While known for an eclectic approach to design, he is best remembered for his Greek Revival style, which is in abundance here in New Bedford. However he was also fond of Egyptian Revival and Federal Style designs. At the start of his career, or first phase from 1800-1823 he honed his "chops" by building stately mansions in Bristol, Rhode Island. He did such a good job that his name spread and he began to branch out to Fall River, New Bedford and even the Carolinas where he lived part time. The whaling boom in New Bedford made many people wealthy and there was no shortage of money to be spent on churches and homes.

I came across eight buildings in particular that he designed and seven are still standing. Not to sound like a broken record, but boy do I hate one way dialogue. I certainly don't write these articles to talk *at* people and walk off into the sunset like a callous rube. Not only do I enjoy writing about these historical topics, but I enjoy discussion of them even more. Please, join the discussion and add corrections, share anecdotes and make additions. If you know of any other building that is still standing or have images of buildings that are gone, by all means share them! For ease, I will list his buildings in alphabetical order.

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*The "Double Bank" Building shared by Mechanic's Bank and Merchant's Bank (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

### **1. Double Bank Building c. 1831**

In 1831 when the building was erected, the population of New Bedford was 7,592 people and purchased this lot for \$2,000 or what would be today approximately \$55,000. The Double Bank Building has picked up a few monikers over the years. It is also called the J.J. Banc Building, Best Banc Building or the Merchants & Mechanics bank building. The reason it is called the double bank building is because two rival banking institutions hired two different builders to erect it, Robert Chase who built the northern half (for Mechanic's Bank) and Dudley Davenport, who built the southern half (for Merchant's Bank). Indeed, there is actually a difference in entasis between the four columns that Chase built and the four that Davenport built. In layman terms, it is to say the columns differ in where they curve. Intentional? Difficult to confirm, but anyone who is a craftsman, master carpenter or architect would be well aware of the minutest of details.

The interior of the building were similar to one another and

as far is known there are no major “unintentional” differences. However, I have come across documents that mention the rivalry between the two institutions continued after the building was erected. When one bank would beautify their half, the other half would attempt to outdo them, and so they dueled until the two banks eventually left this Greek “Ionic temple” in the early 1890’s. Heavens to Betsy.



*The First Unitarian Church, built in 1838 (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

## **2. First Unitarian Church, 1838**

The First Unitarian Church on 71 8th Street was a joint effort between architects Russell Warren and Alexander Jackson Davis and physically built by the brothers William and Seth Ingalls, for the low, low price of \$40,000. Russell’s official title in the project was as a building supervisor. Warren was the first to submit designs for the first year, but eventually Davis came aboard and it said his influence on the fortress like church is more in line with his work, for example the Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut and Lyndhurst, New York. It was built in the Norman Gothic style or Early Gothic Revival style depending on who you ask and required 7,000 tons of

granite. The church itself was established in 1708 in "Olde" Dartmouth, before making its way to the corner of Purchase and William Street in 1824 as the First Congregational Society of New Bedford. In 1868 a chapel was attached to the church which served as a meeting house and Sunday school. In 1874, she underwent some major renovations. In 1896, the Parish House was built in the rear. The Whaling Museum currently possesses original plans.

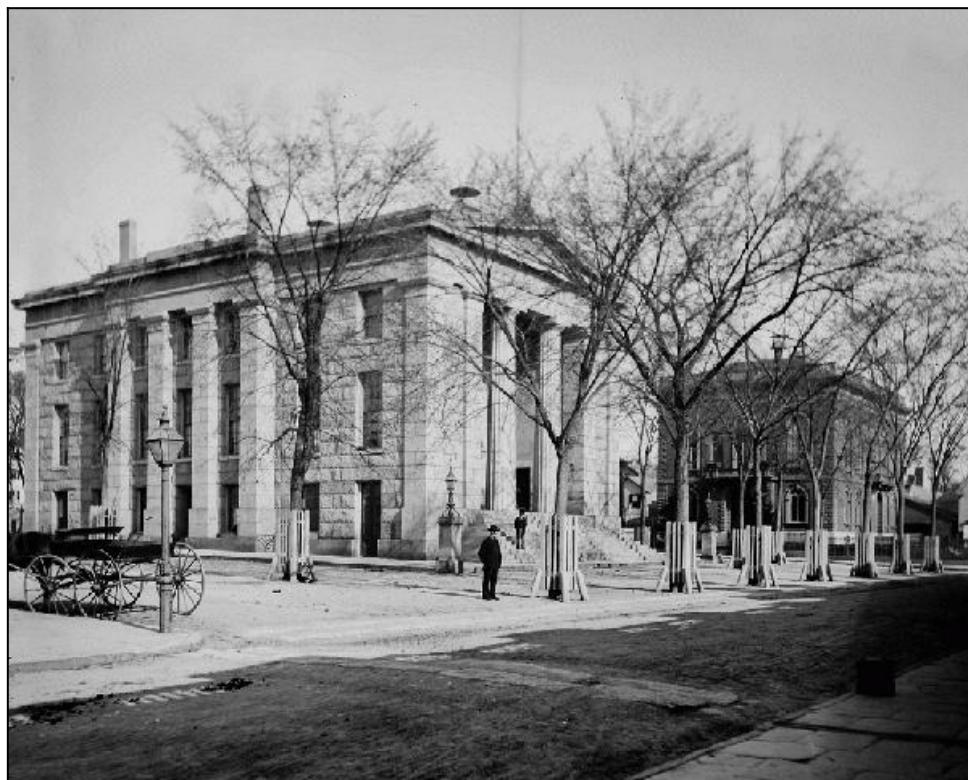


*The Joseph Grinnell Mansion at 379 County Street (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

### **3. Joseph Grinnell Mansion, 1830**

The Grinnell Mansion as it is colloquially known, was built for business man and Congressman Joseph Grinnell. The Greek Revival style building at at 379 County Street was built in 1830, and features the Doric columns that are seen on the Double Bank Building. These columns were destroyed in a fire, but eventually replaced. A third floor was added by an heir in 1893. Interestingly, the outer sheating was cut from the same quarry that Boston's Bunker Hill Monument was built from. Grinnell at one time used the mansion to host former President John Quincy Adams in September of 1843. While he began in the

seafood business, he was the pivotal to New Bedford building its first cotton cloth-manufacturing complex, the Wamsutta Mill. WHALE came on the scene in 1987 and renovated the deteriorating building, which had been completely abandoned for three decades. Today it is the Congregate Home for the Elderly.

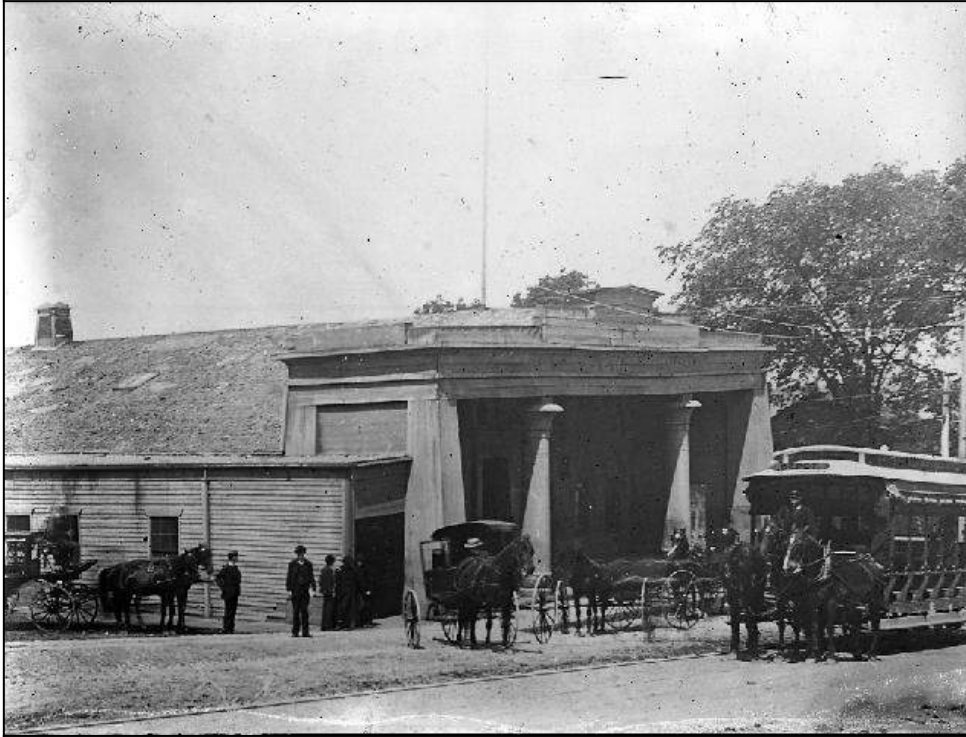


*City Hall and Library have switched original locations (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

#### **4. New Bedford Public Library, 1839**

The New Bedford Public Library was another building that Warren worked with the Ingalls brothers on. The federal government had a surplus revenue in 1837 (imagine that!) and distributed some of the funds to the city of New Bedford in 1838. The original idea was to build a new market, but in a follow up meeting decided to take the government's funding of \$40,000+ and add an additional \$12,000 for "...the erection of a Town Hall and Market House on William Street." The lowest floor was used as a market, the ground floor as a hall, and the top floor for city offices. The now (in)famous story,

known by any historian, amateur and professional alike, is that a fire in December of 1906, forced the City to take over the Library across the street to continue operations. After the damage to the building was repaired, the library decided to move in.



*Pearl Street Train Depot in Egyptian Revival Style (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

### **5. Pearl Street Depot, 1840**

The Pearl Street Depot has the glorious distinction of being the first train station built in New Bedford. It was located just east of Purchase Street. Built in the Egyptian Revival Style it was dubbed "The Tombs" because of its similarity in appearance to the entrances of Egyptian catacombs. As is a common theme with Warren, there were columns at the entrance, four in this case. Rather small, it only had two departures and arrivals a day initially, from New Bedford at 6:30 a.m. and 3:15 p.m. leaving Boston on the return with a stop in Taunton before arriving in New Bedford at 7:00 a.m. 4:15 p.m. As the railroad was extended throughout the region it gained in popularity and usage. So much so, that it was replaced with a much larger depot in 1886.



*The National Institution for Savings before it was owned by the NPS (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

## **6. Old Third District Courthouse, 1853**

The Old Third District Courthouse, located on the corner of Second and William streets was another Greek Revival style building, albeit without the columns that Warren seemed so fond of. While everyone knows this building as the New Bedford Whaling National Historic Park building or “the Visitor’s Building”, it was originally the New Bedford Institution for Savings or NBIS. When whaling busted, and textiles replaced it, the bank relocated further downtown in a larger facility. The Bristol County Courts then moved in and to this day the pediment states “THIRD DISTRICT COV[U]RT OF BRISTOL.” As the population grew, so didn’t the criminal element and the building was simply too small. The courts relocated in 1896, and the building then went through a variety of incarnations including an auto parts store and an antique dealership. In 1995 Fleet bank and WHALE came along and did their wonderful



thing in renovating the building before turning it over to the National Park Service.



*Rodman Mansion – One of America’s most expensive homes in the 1830s (New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

## **7. William R. Rodman Mansion**

Located at 388 County Street, the William R. Rodman Mansion or “Rodman House” was built in the Greek Revival style that Warren loved. Of course, it had the his favored Doric columns as well. It was designed for aristocrat, bank president, William Rotch Rodman and was considered “the most stately mansion in New Bedford” in its day. Indeed, it was considered one of the most expensive homes in America in the 1830s. When Rodman passed away in 1855, the mansion passed from one famous family after another, beginning with New Bedford’s first mayor Abraham Howland. For a number of years it passed from Howland, to Grinnell, to mill mogul Joseph Knowles who built an addition onto it in 1909, then to John Gael Hathaway. Self-made millionaire, and owner of Dartmouth Mills, Walter Hamer Langshaw purchased the house and spent years renovating and building additions, including an organ loft, mosaic floor, Georgian plaster-work, and a facade solarium. In the 1950s it

became the New Bedford Jewish Federation's community center. In 1972 it went to the Swain School of Design, and finally its last owner William Rodman Partnership in 1988.



*The John Avery Parker Mansion built in 1834  
(New Bedford Whaling Museum Photo).*

### **8. John Avery Parker Mansion, 1834**

Dubbed “the most imposing house ever built”, this Greek Revival mansion was similar in many ways to the Rodman Mansion and like the Rodman mansion, was also on County Street. It was bounded by County, Pearl, State and Willis Streets. Surprise, surprise, more doric columns! Mr. Parker paid \$100,000 in 1834 to have this mansion built. Mr. Parker passed away in 1853, when Wamsutta Mills superintendent Thomas Bennett purchased it. His daughter sold it in 1902 and it was promptly – and sadly – demolished, except the south wing on Willis Street.

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*As always, special thanks go to the [New Bedford Whaling Museum](#) for generously allowing us to use these great, vintage photos. If you enjoy these photos, there are plenty more in the museum and on their online database. You will find a number of photos*

*of these buildings in various stages.*

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