

# THE MIND BEHIND THE MONUMENT: ROBERT MILLS ARCHITECTURE

*A Former American Architect That Designed The Washington Monument  
Amongst Other Famous Works Found In South Carolina*



One of Robert Mills' greatest fears was that the Washington Monument would never be finished. Designed in 1836, starting to be built in 1848, then it came to a halt in 1854 – when donations to the construction seized at the hands of the “Know-Nothings” – an anti-Catholic, anti-Immigration party that claimed the monument was Catholic. “He passed in 1855,” says Dr. Faye Jensen, executive director of the South Carolina Historical Society, “so sadly he didn’t get to see it completed.” The Washington Monument started back up in 1879 and completed in 1885.

Though Mills is responsible for a lot of work near Washington, his portfolio is mostly seen in his native home of [South Carolina](#). In Charleston, a few of his most famous works remain within easy walking distance from one another. One is the [Fireproof Building](#) built between 1822-1826 – right in the heart of downtown Charleston on Meeting Street. The Fireproof building, declared a National Landmark in 1973, withstood hurricanes, the civil war, and, yes, fires. “Mills was very interested in fireproof construction as many cities were plagued by fires in those days,” Jensen says. Believed to be the oldest fire-resistant building in America, Mills incorporated many measures to make sure it withstood the elements.

It was built for the county, paid for by the state, and supervised by Mills, as he was

the commissioner for public works, eventually becoming the superintendent of public buildings. Due to the purpose of the building, to house county records, Mills wanted to make sure it was extremely protected. Mills made sure there was a “firebreak all around the building,” Jensen says, “He widened the streets and created Charleston’s first park behind the building.” The building itself was made of as “little wood as possible,” Jensen says, “he used wood to frame the walls and then would take it out.” It is built out of stucco and masonry. Most reports say the walls were about 12 inches thick, though recently they found walls much thicker. “We are renovating it right now and found many walls about 23 inches thick,” Jensen says, “some are even 40 inches thick!”



The original roof was copper and the bricks are said to “be tested to be fireproof on the plantation where they were made,” Jensen says. It has 8 entrances that lead to a cantilever staircase. All in all, Jensen says, “It is a gorgeous building. It doesn’t have a lot of ornamentation, however it is very dignified.” So has it stood true to its fire-resistance? “The records have always been safe,” Jensen says. A fire came a block away from the building in 1861 during the Civil War, however didn’t touch the building because of the firebreak.

One of the most interesting things about architecture is how buildings and places are reflections of the architect’s personal philosophy. As Frank Lloyd Wright is known for “organic architecture,” Mills has a taste that is reflected in his work. First, he was an engineer, also, and designed bridges and canals along with buildings. Because of that, his concern for fires and practical measures to combat them makes sense. Also, “Robert Mills was surprisingly democratic, in a city that was very aristocratic,” Jensen states. In the Fireproof Building, the 8 entrances illustrate this ideal. The entrances all lead to the staircase that gives easy access to all the offices in the public building. Mills believed that “all should have access to government.”

His architectural style, termed neoclassical, was influenced both by the times and by his mentor, James Hoban. Hoban was an Irish born architect that went on to design one of the most recognizable buildings in history – the White House. Under neoclassical, he made magnificent buildings with grand porticos, in what has become

known as characteristic of public buildings, banks, and churches.

A couple of other buildings in Charleston designed by Mills are worthy of note – the circular church of the early 1800s, the First Baptist Church, and the Old Marine Hospital.



A half a block north of the Fireproof building, the circular church was the first domed structure in the United States. Though the church doesn't stand anymore as it was destroyed in a fire in 1861, the Parish House, built in 1806, is still standing and the church is still going strong.

Two blocks south of the Fireproof building, the First Baptist Church is one of the oldest Church buildings in the south – built in 1820 – is a beautiful building built in the Greek Revival style. Still looking very much like it did in 1820, it is on the National Historic Register. Robert Mills himself said it is, “the best specimen of correct taste in architecture of all the modern buildings in this city. It is... simply grand in its proportions, and beautiful in its detail.”

The Old Marine Hospital has an interesting history. A bit more of a walk, about a half a mile west, it was built for the care of “sick and disabled merchants of American and foreign ships,” according to Joyce Weir, owner and operator of Charleston History Tours, “after the civil war, it was used as a free school for black children and then became an orphanage.”

Robert Mills, the first native-born Architect in America, has a permanent historical signature in the United States, and perhaps the world, with the Washington Monument. If one is interested in seeing the Washington Monument without going to DC, check a replica out at Washington Square right next to the Fireproof Building.

When going a bit deeper into his life and work in South Carolina – with the Fireproof building and others in Charleston to the canals, bridges, jails and courthouses all through South Carolina, his profound influence is also found in American civil architecture throughout the whole country. A man whose democratic ideals and strong architectural style is as American as, well, America itself.



### Andrew Malo

A graduate of Northeastern Illinois University in Education, Andrew has taught for the past decade in Chicago, New Mexico, and Japan. He enjoys tinkering with trucks and motorcycles, woodworking, reading and computer programming.



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