

Peter Banner, His Building Speculations in New Haven

By ELMER DAVENPORT KEITH AND WILLIAM LAMSON WARREN

PART IV

IN three previous articles,¹ we have dealt entirely with Peter Banner as a builder for Yale College, designing and erecting the President's house, 1799, Berkeley Hall, 1800 and the Lyceum, 1804. In all, he worked for Yale College as architect, contractor and builder for five years. He was in New Haven longer than this and was very busy with other projects around the Green, most of which are not as well documented as his work for the College and can only be discussed to a very limited degree.

Peter Banner had evidently moved from New York sometime during the summer of 1798, for in the *Connecticut Journal*, 5 September 1798, he inserted this advertisement:

PETER BANNER

Architect and builder from London designs and executes buildings of any description; by contract or otherwise, and also repairs and improvements of all kinds on reasonable terms.

New Haven, Sept. 3, 1798²

As far as is known, Banner's first work in this country was the President's house, which would seem to have ushered

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth in a series of articles on the work of Peter Banner by William L. Warren, Assistant Director of the Connecticut Historical Society, and Elmer D. Keith, well-known Connecticut architectural historian.

in a new architectural day in New Haven. It was the first step out of line from the orderly, conservative eighteenth-century colonial Georgian, a herald of European influence direct. The next year, 1800, saw the building of the William Bristol house (Fig. 1), on the north side of the Green, a house still in line with the orderly architectural progression but with an early edition of a graceful open portico that was to become so characteristic of many houses in Connecticut. It showed not only a masterly delicacy of detail throughout, but, in its separate balancing wings, a formal symmetry that was of the old country. This house has been attributed to David Hoadley (1774-1830), mainly because at the time the attribution was made, he was the first recognized Connecticut master joiner known to have the qualifications to do such a house.³ Hoadley was 26 in 1800, only a few years free from his apprenticeship. In 1795-1796, he had been working on two conventional churches in Waterbury and may have been one of the crew that built the Scovill mansion, 1795-1800, also in Waterbury, which was a replica of a William Sprats house in Litchfield.⁴ There is no proof that he worked in New Haven until 1806-1807, when he was credited with the plain, three-story brick Dexter house. With the knowledge that Peter Banner, an English trained architect, was established in New Haven, we should like to suggest that perhaps it was Banner rather than

Hoadley who was responsible for this more sophisticated but still traditional New Haven mansion. It should also be noted that there is evidence that Banner had an unknown competitor while bidding for the contract of Berkeley Hall in 1804,⁵ perhaps another joiner who might have been responsible for the Bristol house. The delicacy of the details and formalism of the plan *may* have been Banner, since they do not seem indigenous for this turn-of-the-century period. Though the President's house has no portico, the introduction of the side windows and a fanlight over the door with an arch of carved woodwork above have a sameness of design and proportion in both houses, supporting the attribution to Banner. It must be remembered that Banner, though an innovator, was constantly having to make changes. For instance, the President's house was designed to be of brick but Banner had instructions to change to wood. In fact, he had to make many changes and from the accounts, he was hard pressed to make money on the commission. The accounts reflect the changes. In the Bristol house, the same kind of cautionary procedure and hesitancy for anything too radically different may have been the reason that the Bristol house has so many elements of local tradition about it.

The Bristol house could also have been a contract job. That Banner was willing to work in the traditional style and to conform to the client's conservatism, has been remarked when discussing Berkeley College an old style meetinghouse which the College erected for a library, recitation building and science laboratory. In fact, Banner's willingness to do anything is expressed in his own advertisement. The only chance Banner would have to express himself in the more mod-

ern manner, the Adam style, would be in such details as attenuated moldings, large window panes, fanlights and porticos. While the President's house may have caused pride and satisfaction to both College and town, it would not be likely to make others, whose homes were less official, willing to emulate the distinction right away, especially when the Federalist taste was still Georgian.

On the east side of the Green (where the south end of the post office now stands) a leading citizen, William Joseph Whiting, had begun building a home of his own around 1790, which is several years before Banner had arrived in the young Republic. Mr. Whiting died in 1794, leaving an unfinished house. Peter Banner bought from the widow Martha Whiting the unfinished dwelling house in 1800.⁶ He and one Job Atterbury took it on an eight-and-a-half-year lease "together with the whole of the Barn and the Garden." The condition was that they were to pay £54 lawful money (the old currency being still in use, along with the new at this time) in quarterly payments each year. Banner was to "have liberty to expand and lay out the sum of £14 each year during the whole 8½ years on said House in Finishing and repairs necessary to be done" deducting this amount, or less, from the rent. If more than £14 was spent per period, Martha Whiting was to pay Banner back at the end of the contract. Mrs. Whiting then retired to the outskirts of the town and Job Atterbury disappeared from the record. As Peter Banner assumed full responsibility for the house and kept it until he moved from New Haven, it seems a fair inference that he occupied it. Of its appearance on this original site, we have only one notice, by Mrs. Noah Porter, who spoke of it, as it stood beside the Og-

den Coffee House to the north, as being "another and better white house."

On 13 February 1804, Peter Banner quitclaimed all rights under his lease to Isaac M. Wales, who returned the property next year to Mrs. Whiting.⁷ In December 1804 and March 1805, "Squire" or Sheriff Nathaniel Rossiter

Peter Banner again taking another long-term lease on a city lot, this time on the west side of College Street, just a block north of the new President's house about where, a century later, stood the home of the second President Dwight, on the corner of Wall Street. It was a half-acre lot, leased from Isaac Munson, eight

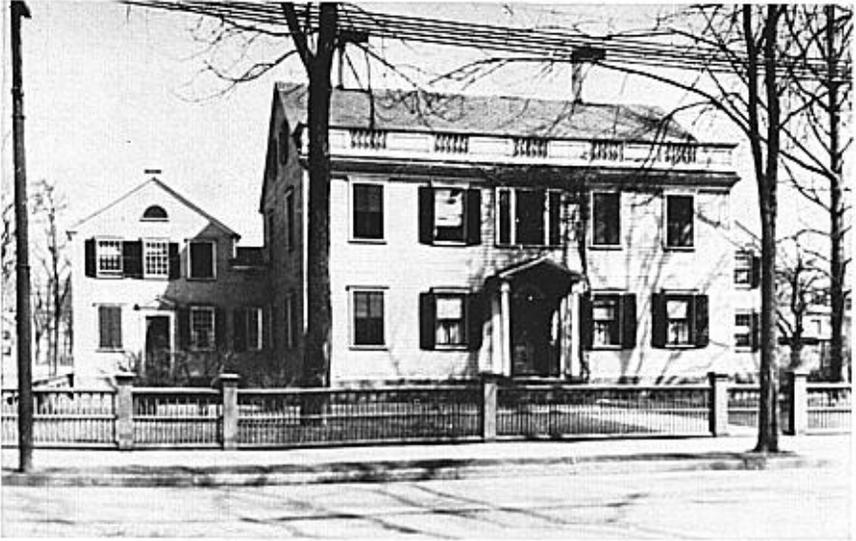


FIG. I. BRISTOL HOUSE, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

Courtesy of the New Haven Colony Historical Society (Dana Collection).

gathered together all rights to the property and became its owner for years.⁸ Then, in 1824, preparatory to the building of the Tontine Hotel on the site, the house was moved to the east side of College Street, near Grove, shorn of its out-buildings.⁹ A reproduction of a photograph, showing the house just before it was demolished in 1860, is preserved by the New Haven Colony Historical Society. Nothing can be seen to shed light on what Banner may have done to this house when he finished it.

On New Year's Day, 1802,¹⁰ we find

feet wide but extending back twenty-one rods. For this, he was to pay £22 a year over a seven-year period. At the end of that time, the land was to be reappraised to include the added value of any buildings he might erect, and adjustment made between the parties. Banner did build on this lot, for on 6 December 1803, he sold the lease and the house to Thaddeus Beecher for \$900.¹¹ The price indicates that the house was a simple one, not large and may have been one of the end-gable dwellings that were beginning to be popular in New Haven,

with simplified portico at one corner of the street side. There were several such along this block until 1870, when they were swept away for the erection of the Divinity Halls of the time.

signalized both Christmas and New Year by signing business transactions (the Sabbath then being the only day on which such transactions were illegal). With his two other deals already in the works,

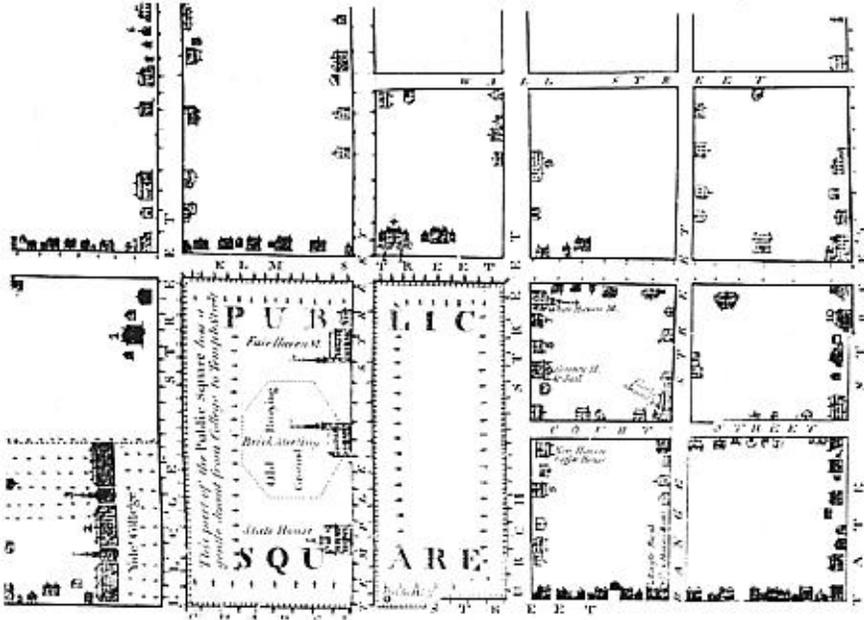


FIG. 2. ENGRAVED PLAN OF NEW HAVEN, OCTOBER 28, 1812,
SURVEYED AND PUBLISHED BY AMOS DOOLITTLE

Section showing buildings around New Haven Green erected by Peter Banner.
1. President Dwight's House, College St., 1799. 2. Berkeley Hall, College St., 1800. 3. The Lyceum, College St., 1804. 4. Bristol House, Elm St., 1801 (attributed). 5. Whiting House, Church St., 1800. 6. Small house, College St., 1802. 7. Timothy Dwight, Jr., House, Church St., 1803. 8. Brick building, Church St., 1805, presumably finished by David Hoadley. 9. Simeon Baldwin House, Church St., enlarged 1807, plans by Banner. 10. Abraham Bradley House, State St., 1807 (attributed).

Courtesy of Yale University Library.

In 1802, Banner undertook a third building venture, one that returned him to "Quality Row" on the east side of the Green, on Church Street, between Elm and Court Streets. He took a much longer lease, 999 years, on 25 December 1802, at \$61 a year.¹² In that year, he

it is no wonder that the grantor, Ebenezer Townsend, Jr., seems to have considered Banner's operation rather dangerously extended, for he stipulated that the payments were to be semiannual, on 25 June and 25 December, and that if any payment was in arrears for thirty

days, the contract was to be forfeited. Banner made the first payment and sold the College Street house just in time to help in the second installment.

Everything points to there being a special reason why Banner was attracted to this particular venture. There is no indication that he had any customer in mind. Perhaps, for this long-term venture, he was striking out for once to build the house of his dreams—something that would be more in tune with the one building which, so far, had brought him distinction—the President's house. There can be little doubt, from the history of the lot, that he was free to design as he chose and to be more than an ordinary contractor.

The house he designed (Fig. 3), was reminiscent in some respects of the President's house with its recessed arches over the lower front windows and door, the gable-end façade, with entrance to one side, and the semicircular window in the pediment. However, Banner went much further than this. He added two shallow wings at the sides, unfortunately not in view in the foreshortened picture of the house in the illustration. The house and wings were set high on a cut stone foundation—so high, in fact, that there were steps up to the entrances from the street. The most ambitious detail in this house, perhaps used for the first time on a New Haven house, was a colonnade of doric columns supporting a pediment. An unusual feature was pairing the two end columns and having single columns dividing the arched windows. The projecting front ell, deep enough to contain a parlor and entranceway, was not the main house at all, which was behind and included the wings. The supporting columns were of ornamental value only as the porch was too narrow to be of any

practical use. By raising the house and supporting the columns on stone bases a good three feet from the ground, Banner was able to make an imposing structure out of a rather simple form of temple. Even more than the President's house, this colonnade was an innovation which was soon to be, if not copied, at least used as the basis for even more elaborate houses in New Haven, i.e., the Abraham Bradley House on State Street, 1807, the design of which has been attributed to Banner;¹³ the Nathan Smith House, 1816; and the DeForest House, 1819, both by David Hoadley. Banner's house, in spite of its false front impression due to the columns having been arranged in such close proximity to the front wall, was a balanced and dignified composition. The photograph, though it only partially reveals the house after other buildings had been crowded against it, dwarfing it and making it seem more like an empty Hollywood scenery storage set, shows it pretty much as it must have looked in its day—a house of simple, quiet dignity.

The subsequent history of this house is interesting, for apparently Banner never really finished it. On 5 January 1804, he deeded this house on the Townsend lot, with the lease, to his ever-ready friend Thaddeus Beecher, for \$2,500.¹⁴ The original lease had not been properly recorded in 1802, so that the oversight had to be remedied by a second deed which passed to Beecher. In both deeds the house is described as a "new, unfinished dwelling house." Beecher, on 5 June 1804, assigned the house, still unfinished, to Charity, wife of John Morris, Jr., "with all building materials being used in said house and in the street." The loss to Beecher was \$750.¹⁵ Six months later the Morrises sold it to

Isaac Mills and Seth Staples for \$4,000. The house must have been fairly near completion before these two bought it, for the deed speaks of "Dwelling house and Barn and outhouses . . . with all

November of the same year, Timothy Dwight, Jr., son of the President of Yale, who had been the first occupant of Banner's house on the campus, bought it for \$4,500.¹⁹ Young Dwight was a



FIG. 3. HOUSE BEGUN BY PETER BANNER, CHURCH STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

Courtesy of the New Haven Colony Historical Society (Dana Collection).

building materials and all contracts made relative to said building."¹⁶ On 22 April 1805, Mills and Staples sold it for \$5,150 to Hezekiah Frith of the Island of Bermuda "now of the City and County of New Haven . . . with a new dwelling house and all the outbuildings thereon standing."¹⁷ Next, Captain Frith sold the "new Dwelling house and lot" to Thomas Darling of New York on 3 October 1807, for the same figure.¹⁸ In

hardware merchant in New York, later in New Haven, and he occupied it until his death in 1844. Twenty years later, Major Fitch tore it down in order to build one more in the style of his day.

There was still a fourth Banner speculation in New Haven, which was to be his last. It was even more ambitious than any of the others. He secured from Joseph Darling, on 6 May 1803, another 999-year lease, on the lot next south of

the Townsend lot, which was a third of an acre, sixty feet square, at a yearly rent of \$75.²⁰ This time he undertook to build by 1 May 1805, "a good, three story fire-proof brick dwelling house." He does not say for whom, so we conjecture it was for speculation. Before the second year of payments were due, Banner had probably left Connecticut, for he neglected the second payment and summarily relinquished this fourth transaction for "one cent and other considerations" to Joseph Darling, Esq., the previous owner of the land. This was on 8 June 1804.²¹ It is interesting to note, however, that the ambitious scheme was not completed. The house may have been so far along that it had to be finished. David Hoadley, who was to succeed Banner as architectural leader in New Haven, is credited with erecting on this lot, around 1805-1807, just such a three-story brick dwelling, which was probably the first such brick house in New Haven.²² This is also the earliest reference to Hoadley working in New Haven. The house, known as the Norman Dexter house, had little distinction. The land passed through the hands of several owners until 1871, when it became the "Law Chambers." The house was torn down in 1915.

Before we leave New Haven and follow Peter Banner elsewhere in New England, we have one more glimpse of him. In his first advertisement which we quoted, he speaks of "repairing and im-

provements of all kinds." Simeon Baldwin owned a house and lot which fronted on Church Street, between Elm and Wall. In 1804, Simeon Baldwin had plans drawn for an addition to his homestead. Mrs. Baldwin wrote him, "I think to go the length of Banner's plan, would rather be a source of regret, than pleasure. As to building wholly a new house it undoubtedly would be handsomer and might be made more commodious. Still I would not wish to become embarrassed by doing it or straighten ourselves so that we could not accomplish the more important purposes of living comfortably and educating our children well."²³

From this we surmise that he must have had Banner draw plans for a new house which Mrs. Baldwin rejected. Instead, the old house was enlarged. "The dinning-room was lengthened and a wing added, containing an office and library, with two large and well lighted closets for papers and several bedrooms above. The main house had been built close to the street line. The front of the addition was several feet east of it, the intervening space being occupied by an unroofed piazza. A southern window in the dining room opened on the piazza, and comanded a prospect of the Green."²⁴ This enlarging of the house may have been done by Peter Banner, though it is said to have been completed in 1806. By this time Banner was in Brookline, Massachusetts.

NOTES

¹ Elmer Davenport Keith and William Lamson Warren, OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND (hereafter cited O.T.N.E.) "Peter Banner" Part I, XLV, 93; Part II, XLVII, 49; Part III, XLIX, 104.

² This advertisement was repeated on 12 and 19 September 1798. There were other advertisements of Banner in *The Connecticut Journal*:

24 July 1799

CONTRACTS

Any person or persons willing to contract for delivery at New Haven, on or before the first day of April next, the following Building Materials—About 90 thousand good hard well burnt bricks the mould to be 9 inches in length 4½ inches wide, 2½ thick—about 80 tons of good white or rock oak timber, part sawed and part hewed—200 tons of good square building stone—200 tons of good

square red stone, for facing. All the above materials to be the very best of their kinds; to be paid for on delivery at New Haven, for particulars enquire of P. Banner
New Haven, July 24, 1799

This advertisement was repeated 31 July, 25 September, and 12 December 1799.
19 December 1799

CONTRACTS

Masons and Stone Cutters are wanted to prepare about seven thousand feet of East Haven Stone for building during the winter and spring. Likewise Wanted about fifty strait poles, 30 feet long, about six inches thick, at the bottom, about one hundred pieces of oak, birch or walnut wood, about four inches thick. Two thousand bushels of shell lime, or an equal quantity of Stone Lime. For particulars, enquire of

P. BANNER, New Haven.

Also repeated 26 December 1799, 4, 9 and 16 January 1800.
29 March 1800.

STONE CUTTERS

Ten or 12 Stone Cutters are wanted immediately, good wages will be given. Apply to PETER BANNER
New Haven, March 27, 1800.

³ George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven*, P.P. (New Haven, 1942), p. 710; and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *Bulletin*, 1927.

⁴ W. L. Warren, O.T.N.E., XLIV, 110, discussion of Hoadley et al.

⁵ Keith & Warren, O.T.N.E., XLIX, 105 and note 5.

⁶ *New Haven Land Records* (hereafter cited *N.H.L.R.*), Vol. 50, p. 135, 13 August 1800.

⁷ *N.H.L.R.*, Vol. 52, p. 499, 13 February 1804.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 50, p. 135.

⁹ Arnold Guyot Dana, Scrap Books of New Haven, New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven, Connecticut.

¹⁰ *N.H.L.R.*, Vol. 52, p. 1, 1 January 1802.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 53, p. 124, 6 December 1803.

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. 52, p. 220, 25 December 1802, not recorded until 21 January 1804.

¹³ George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven*, p. 775 & illustration, and Arnold Guyot Dana, Scrap Books of New Haven.

¹⁴ *N.H.L.R.*, Vol. 53, p. 143; Vol. 52, p. 220, 221, 5 January 1804; 21 January 1804; 31 January 1804.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 52, p. 277; and Vol. 53, p. 277, both 15 June 1804.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 52, p. 277; and Vol. 54, p. 60, both 3 November 1804.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 54, p. 151, 22 April 1805 and 23 April 1805; and Vol. 54, p. 150, 22 April 1805.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 56, p. 123, 3 October 1807.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 58, p. 406, 13 November 1807.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 52, p. 173, 6 May 1803.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 53, p. 445, 8 June 1804.

²² Arnold Guyot Dana, Scrap Books of New Haven.

²³ Simeon E. Baldwin, *Life and Letters of Simeon Baldwin* (New Haven, n.d.), p. 480.

²⁴ *Ibid.*