

Selected Modernist Architects in Virginia: Biographical Sketches

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William Leigh Carneal

Buildings

Library of Virginia and Supreme Court Building (Patrick Henry Building)

Carneal, Johnston, and Wright, architects
Basketville and Son, associated architects
Alfred M. Githens and Francis Keally, consulting architects
1111 E. Broad St.
Richmond, Virginia
National Register, 2005

Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) Building

1937-1939
Carneal, William Leigh
Johnston, James Markham Ambler
For Carneal & Johnston
1401 E. Broad St.
Richmond, Virginia
National Register, 2004

F.W. Woolworth Co.

1954
Carneal and Johnston
509 E. Broad St.
Richmond, Virginia

Ethyl Corporation Corporate Office Building

1954-1956
1985, addition one
1989, pavilion addition
Carneal and Johnston
Vincent Kling and Associates, pavilion addition
330 S. 4th St.
Richmond, Virginia

Richmond Dairy Company Building

1913
Carneal, William Leigh
Johnston, James Markham Ambler
For Carneal & Johnston
401 West Marshall Street
Richmond, Virginia

Biography

William Carneal was born, lived and passed away in the city where his professional career blossomed—Richmond, Virginia. Son of a hardware store owner, Carneal was born in 1881. He graduated from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in 1903, whereupon he worked in his father's store for three years. Carneal's building career would then span for half of the twentieth century uninterrupted except for his service in World War I. He served in the United States Army as a captain, where he was assigned to the Ordnance Department in Washington D.C. Carneal returned to Richmond after the war and practiced architecture from this point up until his passing in 1958.

Carneal left his father's employment in 1906 to join an architecture firm, but after about a year he left to form his own. Again, just one year later, Carneal formed an architectural partnership with James Markham Ambler Johnston, an alliance that would become Carneal and Johnston Architects and Engineers and shape the aesthetic of the Richmond area for over eighty years. Carneal and Johnston quickly became one of Richmond's most influential architectural firms. In addition to the works listed above, the most prominent of the firm's Richmond work included the State Office Building (The Washington Building) in Capitol Square (1922-23), the State Highway Commission Building (1937), and several buildings on the University of Richmond campus. Under Carneal's leadership the company often also ventured outside of Richmond far across the state, especially to the campuses of Virginia Tech and Carneal's alma mater VMI. The firm designed over twenty buildings for Virginia Tech and contributed significantly to the campus's overall design. In addition, the company designed over a dozen buildings for VMI. Regarding service and societies, Carneal served as the first president of the Virginia Society of Architects, elected in 1939, and was also a member of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce at various times. Carneal also had a strong connection with societies committed to assisting orphaned children. In 1923 he designed the main building for the Richmond Male Orphan Society (now the Virginia Home for

Boys and Girls). Upon the building's completion, Carneal served on the organization's board from 1924 to 1949.

Since Carneal co-founded his firm with Johnston, it is difficult to tell exactly who to give credit for design aspects of projects completed by the firm. All of the buildings listed above were attributed to Carneal and Johnston equally. It is difficult to hone in on a single Carneal work of paramount importance as each of the five works listed here received approximately equal attention in the literature.

With this selection of buildings, Carneal and Johnston's Moderne classicist style becomes quite evident. Scholars specifically cited the Library of Virginia and Supreme Court Building (former) as "one of Virginia's best examples of Moderne classicism." Specifically, authors refer to the austerity of the building's lower floors and the allusions made to the National Archives structure with the upper massing. Carneal and Johnston were not afraid to express their style and take risks either. Regarding the F.W. Woolworth Company building, Carneal and Johnston broke sharply from Woolworth's typical Art Deco façade, instead opting for their personal choice of 1950s modernism. However, Carneal and Johnston were not one-trick-ponies, so to speak. One would expect The Ethyl Corporation Corporate Office Building to be another modernist design, given Carneal and Johnston's preference for modernism and that the Ethyl Corporation specialized in high technology and chemicals. Carneal and Johnston instead fielded a specific request by the company's founder to use the Williamsburg Inn in Colonial Williamsburg as the primary reference point for their design, a more classical design starting point than typical for the firm.

The most unusual of Carneal and Johnston's works was probably the Richmond Dairy Company Building. The building's most striking feature is the presence of towers at the building's corners designed to look like giant milk bottles. Architectural critics cite this structure as a rare example of a building that is itself a sign for a commercial purpose with no additional signage necessary; the observer knows they

are looking at a milk company. Further, Carneal and Johnston again broke from their modernist trends regarding the building itself, which has a somewhat Medieval style. With these five structures—two of which are listed on the National Register—Carneal and his partners displayed their great stylistic diversity.

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Samuel J. Collins

Buildings

Virginia War Memorial

1955-56

Collins, Richard E., associate

Leo Friedlander, sculptor

621 S. Belvidere St.

Richmond, Virginia

Biography

Samuel J. Collins, one of many important Collins family architects, practiced his trade in the Staunton, Virginia, area from 1906 to 1953. Born in Washington D.C. in 1881, Samuel moved to Staunton about ten years later when his father—Thomas Jasper Collins—relocated to form an architectural practice in the area. This practice, T.J. Collins & Son, accepted over two hundred commissions in the immediate Staunton area alone. During this time T.J. Collins “single-handedly reshaped Staunton’s architectural appearance” through new designs or the remodeling of existent buildings. The most significant works of T.J. Collins’s were Tucker Hall at Washington & Lee University, the main barracks for the Fort Defiance Augusta Military Academy, the C&O Rail Depot in Staunton, and a private residence (Kalorama Castle) that was added to the National Register in 1982. Thomas Collins retired from his practice in 1911, leaving the managerial duties to his sons William and Samuel.¹

The Collins brothers proved more than capable as both produced significant works in the area both before and after their father’s retirement. William proved to be a more than capable draftsman, while Samuel took on a similar role of his father as the firm’s top architect. Samuel remained a partner in the firm from 1906 until 1927, at which point he took on more individualized projects. Most of Samuel’s designs were churches throughout the Mid-Atlantic, although he also designed several high

¹ Sarah B. Bearss, editor, *Dictionary of Virginia biography: Volume 3, Caperton through Daniels* (Richmond, Virginia: Library of Virginia, 2006).

schools in Virginia. Samuel Collins passed away in 1953. His funeral Mass was held at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Parish, one of many Catholic churches that he designed in the area.

By far, the most significant of Samuel's work was his design of the Virginia War Memorial in Richmond. The General Assembly of Virginia first authorized the Memorial in 1950 with the Governor making the initial fund appropriation. Samuel Collins's submission ultimately won, which seems to have been a bit of a surprise since Collins represented a "small regional practice...in the Shenandoah Valley."² The structure was built throughout 1955 and officially dedicated on February 29, 1956. Sadly, Collins never saw his completed work as this was three years after his death.

The Virginia War Memorial honors Virginians who served and died during the following conflicts: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. Collins's original design only included World War II (of course), but left space for any future honors (which would include Korean War veterans in a few short years). The heart of the monument is the sweeping glass wall upon which the names of the fallen are etched, 10,342 upon dedication, with many more added since. This specific aspect of the design resembles the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which was not designed until over thirty years after Collins's death. The pavilion design is open-air and even temple-like according to some descriptions. Within the temple-like pavilion stands a carved statue by Leo Friedlander—entitled "Memory". A female figure stands over a torch at her feet, a torch that was to burn eternally as a representation of "liberty."

The original Memorial consisted of The Hall of Honor Auditorium, a Visitors' Center, and the Shrine of Memory. There was no staff or public programming, as the commission believed that nobody needed an explanation of sacrifice or patriotism with two major wars in recent memory. By the early 1990s the Memorial fell into a state of disrepair, leading both the Governor and General Assembly to

² Richard Guy Wilson, editor, *Buildings of Virginia: Tidewater and Piedmont* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209.

give the Memorial's Board of Trustees authority to develop educational programming, hire staff, and repair the Monument.

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Wilson, Richard Guy, editor. *Buildings of Virginia: Tidewater and Piedmont*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Leonard J. Currie

Buildings

Currie House, aka "Pagoda House"

1961

Pascoe, Charles, builder

106 Highland Avenue (1105 Highland Circle)?

Blacksburg, Virginia

150-0019

National Register, 1994

Biography

Leonard J. Currie is best known as the former head of architecture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) from 1956 to 1962, during which time he designed the Currie House as a home for himself and his family. This structure, also known as the Pagoda House, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 and proved to be Currie's primary architectural legacy. Before he came to Virginia Tech, Currie already achieved a distinguished career as an architect, scholar, inventor, teacher, and administrator. During his lifetime, he founded four colleges, received prestigious fellowships, and lectured across the world. After his tenure at Virginia Tech, Currie moved to Illinois to become founding dean of the new College of Architecture and Art established at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus. In 1981, he retired and returned to Blacksburg, where he established an architectural practice and renewed ties with the college and the university.

Born in Canada in 1913, Currie studied architecture under Walter Gropius at Harvard, where he received his Master's and was heavily influenced by the styles of the Bauhaus architectural school of Germany. Currie also claimed inspiration during this time from the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. He then apprenticed with Gropius and Marcel Breuer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sharing teaching duties of the master's-level classes at The Architects Collaborative. Currie worked with them for nearly three years, until he received Harvard's Wheelwright Traveling Fellowship, with which he worked on the

reconstruction of the Mayan Ruinas de Copan as assistant to the archaeologist in charge. Subsequently, he supervised the construction of two national airports in Central America, before joining the Allied forces in Europe during World War II. In 1951, Currie and his family moved to Bogota, Colombia, where he initiated and directed the Inter-American Housing and Planning Center, a research and training institution of the Organization of American States dedicated to improving the quality of shelter and community services of the poorest sector of Latin American countries. After his tenures in Blacksburg and Chicago, Currie achieved status as a fellow of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and in 1993, received the Virginia AIA Chapter's highest award, the William C. Noland Medal. Currie was also presented a special lifetime achievement award by Virginia Tech in 1996. For his achievements and outstanding service to the college, he was named Professor Emeritus of Architecture at Virginia Tech. Currie passed away on April 23, 1996.

Returning to Currie's most notable architectural work in Virginia, the Currie House is a clear statement of contemporary design, an outstanding example in a state often praised for its historic styles. Currie and the home received the First Honor Award in the custom-designed-house classification in the American Institute of Architects' Homes for Better Living Awards Program in 1963. Currie himself actually sold the home in 1966 to a fellow Virginia Tech professor and even after Currie returned to Blacksburg in the 1980s, he did not attempt to reacquire the home. The home itself is set within a mid-twentieth-century subdivision of typical suburban dwellings on hilly, winding streets in Blacksburg, Virginia. There are few award-winning, high-style modern houses of the Currie House's era in the state, and in the southwest region it is recognized as the finest. Currie's clear, formal statement of contemporary design received exception to the fifty-year rule for the National Register of Historic Places because of the rarity of similar architectural resources in the Virginian southwest. The home's deck offers a spectacular view from the Allegheny ridge above Blacksburg looking northeast to the Roanoke Valley and south to Christiansburg.

The Currie House, a carefully crafted residence of wood, glass, and brick, rests on a steeply sloping, sparsely wooded site in the mid-twentieth century Highland subdivision. Set among standard brick split-level and ranch houses of the era, the Currie House has become a landmark since its construction. It is known locally as the "Pagoda House" for the prominent, sweeping hipped roof that shelters the one-and-a-half story square house. The roof's extensive overhang is underscored by a deck that encircles the building, so that the two embrace the glass and wood walls of the house. The overhang, circulation within the house, and sensitive landscaping take advantage of passive solar heating. The interior detailing and the furnishings are consistent with the design of the exterior. Even the radiant heating system contributes to the openness of the interior by eliminating radiators and unnecessary vents.

For much of the mid-twentieth century, modern forms of architecture were few and far between in Virginia. The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg heavily influenced Virginia's mid-century residential architecture. In the early twentieth century, several revival styles were popular choices for homes, but Georgian derivatives dominated once Colonial Williamsburg opened to the public. After World War II, a more modern aesthetic emerged as a housing shortage led to many housing developments across the state. However, the developments—often designed by builders and not by architects—were rarely planned with any architectural aspirations. In the early 1960s, Thomas K. Fitzpatrick, Dean of the Architecture program at the University of Virginia, bemoaned "Modern architecture in Virginia of significant importance is almost non-existent." Builders were generally blamed as most feared alienating the public's preference for Williamsburg style.

The Currie House represents a significant break from traditional Virginia architectural styles. In contrast to these trends, Currie utilized his training in the Modern Style, or the International Movement as it is often referred. The distinguishing principles of the International Style are: "emphasis upon

volume; space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and, lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions (as opposed to applied ornament).”³ With the Currie House, the use of floor-to-ceiling glass, particularly at the corners of the house, reveal that it is the skeletal wood frame, not the walls, bearing the weight of the roof. This increases the impression of a volume of space perched at the edge of a hill, merely wrapped in an enclosure of glass and wood with a large roof hovering over it.

The expansive, sheltering roof—the only feature of the house that seems counter to the ideas of the International Style—returns to earlier ideas of Currie's. The architect recalled that one of his first architectural influences was Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright, who disliked the machine-like buildings of many International Style architects, thought a house should communicate clearly its function as a haven and refuge for a family. He often tucked doorways into darkened, secluded passages, difficult for newcomers to find. Though the entrance to the Currie House is not obscure, it is indirect. Many of Wright's residential interiors were compared to caves—basic, encompassing shelter from the world for a family unit. Although the main level of the Currie House is anything but cave-like, at the lower level, the area set aside for the children, a deliberate attempt was made to invoke a protective, cave-like ambience. Further, Currie remarked that the nickname of the house (Pagoda House) and the implication that the design is based on Asian structures are misleading. Though Wright was influenced by Asian architecture, and Currie was fascinated by Wright, Currie did not deliberately set out to design a "pagoda"; he set out to design an International Style home with a few significant nods to Wright.

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James Ambler Johnston

Buildings

Virginia State Capitol (Restoration of old Senate chamber)

1785-1798 (Originally constructed)
1962-1964 (Old Senate chamber restoration)
Johnston, James Markham Ambler
1111 E. Broad St.
Richmond, Virginia

National Register, 1966

National Historic Landmark, 1960

Virginia Landmark Register, 1968

St. Peter's Church

1701-1703 (Originally constructed by William Hughes and Cornelius Hall)
1952-1964 (Restoration)
Johnston, James Ambler
Pratt, Harden deVoe
Rawlings, James Scott
8400 Saint Peter's Lane
Talleysville/Tunstall, Virginia

National Register, 2004

National Historic Landmark, 2012

Biography

James Ambler Johnston was born in Rockbridge County, Virginia, in 1885. His father was a Civil War veteran, a fact that would heavily influence Johnston's life as an architect, public historian, and preservationist. Johnston worked as an architect in Richmond, Virginia, for over fifty years up until his death in 1974. His primary contributions to Virginia architecture largely came from his time as half of the prominent Richmond architecture firm Carneal and Johnston.

Before his long career as a Richmond-based architect, Johnston studied engineering at Virginia Tech (graduating in 1904 and 1905) and Cornell University. In 1906 he moved to Richmond, worked one year with the Richmond Cedar Works, founded his own practice, and then formed his partnership with William L. Carneal in 1908. This partnership had a long and prolific lifespan and was responsible for many buildings on the campuses of the University of Richmond (which later awarded Johnston an honorary D.Sc.), Virginia Tech, and Virginia Military Institute. Johnston's time as a student at Virginia Tech was especially memorable for him. He committed significant donations to the university, served as president of the Alumni Association, and led Carneal & Johnston projects that designed many of the Collegiate Gothic buildings on campus. In return for his significant contributions, Virginia Tech named Ambler Johnston Hall after him in 1968.

Johnston was also a prominent Civil War authority, preservationist, and public historian. He contributed funds to purchase battlefields around Richmond and initiated the first points of interest

cast-iron markers for these battlefields. These actions earned him numerous awards, most prominently for preserving historic sites in Virginia; much of the land he acquired became part of Richmond National Battlefield Park. Further, Johnston was a charter member of the Richmond Rotary Club, helped found a Civil War Round Table at the State Penitentiary in Richmond, and held offices in several groups headquartered in Richmond, including the Sons of the Revolution, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the Virginia Historical Society.

While the Virginia State Capitol is a more well-known structure, Johnston's restoration of St. Peter's Church deserves significant attention. The church was initially constructed in 1701-03 with a tower expansion finished in 1740-1741. The builders used a technique that required exceptionally large bricks, borrowing its inspiration from both the "artisan mannerism" of the seventeenth century and the "neat and plain" neoclassical style characteristic of the eighteenth century.⁴ The New York Times asserted in 1999 that the "approach to the church and churchyard are the most magnificent in Virginia."⁵ The secluded and pastoral nature of the country parish church is preserved today along with the actual building itself. The church had fallen into disrepair by the mid-nineteenth century, but restoration efforts proved fruitful with Robert E. Lee providing significant financial assistance in 1869. There is also a widely held sentiment—both then and now—that George Washington married in this church although the location of his wedding is still debated and unknown.

There were two separate restoration efforts conducted in the mid-twentieth century. The first began its planning stage during the 1930s with Carneal and Johnston providing all restoration plans. Work slowly began in 1945, but it was not until 1952 that physical restoration began in earnest; this was the beginning of the second, more productive phase. According to the National Register nomination, the lead restoration architects Harden Pratt and James Rawlings conducted much of the physical work, while the Carneal and Johnston firm provided significant research and support. This second restoration process lasted over a decade—until 1964—largely because of financial constraints and the declining health of Rawlings. Regarding Johnston's involvement, he provided plans for the project throughout, and he served as a general overseer for the project alongside the two restoration architects. Johnston's restoration aimed to replace all renovations with materials that would have been present in the church's original construction. For example, the project replaced "modern" (i.e., 1872) elements such as the hardwood floor with flagstone brick, a material that may have been used in 1701. Also, Johnston and company gave special attention to the landscape around the church as well, attempting to recapture the property's full atmosphere in addition to restoring its walls, floors, and pews.

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⁵ Richard Ruda, "In Praise of Country Churches," The New York Times, September 26, 1999, from National Historic Landmark Nomination, <http://www.nps.gov/nhl/Spring11Noms/StPetersNoticeVersion.pdf>.

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