Granite Buildings

While in Europe Bulfinch saw many buildings constructed in granite, limestone and marble, a rarity in Boston at that time. The only examples of granite construction in Boston were the Hancock House and King's Chapel, both built with Braintree free stone, which was in limited supply. Granite construction also necessitated skilled craftsmen, a large number of oxen for transportation and a specific knowledge of engineering. The unavailability of materials meant that Bulfinch was unable to truly replicate the grand and monolithic European architecture which he prized, often leading him to paint his early wood and brick buildings grey.

With the construction of the Middlesex Canal (c.1803), however, granite became available, driving down transportation costs. At the time of its construction the Canal was thirty feet wide and three feet deep running from the Merrimack River in Middlesex County into Boston Harbor. A year after the construction of the canal, Bulfinch started work on the Charlestown State Prison, his first granite building, with the help of stone construction expert Stuart J. Park (1773-1859). Soon after the opening of the prison, granite was shipped there, cut and dressed by the prisoners, opening the way for more granite buildings to come.

Bulfinch quickly took advantage of the materials, building eleven projects in granite between 1809 and 1818. His granite buildings were mostly civic and located close to the mouth of the Middlesex Canal on the Charles River. All of his granite buildings were made from Chelmsford granite, a particularly white variety, which predated the Quincy and Rockport Quarries by 25-years. The most famous of his granite architecture included Bulfinch Pavilion at Massachusetts General Hospital and the Suffolk County Court House (1811-1812). One of the most current examples of construction in Chelmsford granite in Boston today is Secretarial Park across from the Nashua Street jail.

Bulfinch Building at Massachusetts General Hospital and University Hall at Harvard are the only Bulfinch granite buildings still in existence. These two buildings are grand examples of the height of Bulfinch's architectural design, balanced, with simplicity and function. University Hall was the farthest granite project from the mouth of the Canal that Bulfinch designed. Its construction required the barges to continue up the Charles River to College Wharf at Dunster Street. The cornerstone of University Hall was laid on July 1, 1813 and was occupied two years later in 1815. Although a Harvard College administrative building, its original purpose was varied, containing a chapel, common space and lecture rooms, as well as multiple dining halls.

The Massachusetts General Hospital building was Bulfinch's last architectural design in Boston before his appointment as Architect of the Capitol in Washington D.C., culminating Bulfinch's civic and architectural career in the place of his birth. At the behest of the Hospital's Board of Directors, Bulfinch traveled to hospitals in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore to study as a reference. Bulfinch submitted his review of these hospitals to the Hospital Board in 1816, who then commissioned him to design the building.

Construction wouldn't begin until after Bulfinch left for his appointment in Washington D.C. Using Bulfinch's design, Alexander Parris would oversee the project, finishing the building by 1821. Parris would soon become one of Boston's leading architects and a proponent of the Boston Granite Style, characterized by monolithic and austere stonework which often overshadows Bulfinch's foundational granite construction.

Courtesy Boston Public Library

Tufts Map of Charles River (c.1810)
Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library

Middlesex Canal's Shawsheen Aqueduct
Courtesy West End Museum

Nashua Street Park
Courtesy Fitchburg Granite

17-Yoke Ox Team
Courtesy Boston Public Library

Suffolk County Court House (c.1912)
Courtesy West End Museum

State Prison in Charlestown
Courtesy Gleason's Pictorial: West End Museum

Bliss-Tuckerman Houses (c.1800)
Courtesy Boston Public Library

Massachusetts General Hospital (c.1850)
Courtesy MGH Archives

University Hall, Harvard
Courtesy West End Museum

Tufts Map of Charles River (c.1810)
Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library