THE GRAND TOUR

At the impressionable age of 22, Bulfinch traveled to Europe coming home almost two years later with the influence and validation of his experience. Before this trip, the young Bulfinch would only have seen classical art and architecture in books, surrounded as he was by plain colonial structures. Arriving in Portsmouth, England, in the summer of 1785 Bulfinch quickly traveled to London where we can only imagine the awe with which he witnessed the full impact of the City.

The Grand Tour, a rite of passage for young aristocrats, finds its origins in the early 17th centuries when a trend in classical education sparked a new way of traveling, later influencing the neo-classical style in Europe and the federal style in America. Travel for the sake of curiosity, not necessity, presented wealthy young men with the opportunity to learn about the foundations of western civilization, art and architecture. It also popularized classical antiquities, sparking a neo-classical style, which in its various mediums entails a return to or revival of classical Greek and Roman artistic practices.

In London Bulfinch saw the architecture of neo-classicists like the Adam Brothers, James Wyatt and Christopher Wren, who rebuilt 52 churches in London after the Great Fire of 1666. Traveling to the continent in the winter of 1785, he saw the architecture of Charles-Louis Clérisseau, Pierre-Louis Moreau-Desproux, and Jacques-Francois Blondel in France. To learn more about the foundations of the style, Bulfinch next traveled to Italy, where he toured Rome, seeing the Capitoline Hill, the Pantheon, Coliseum, and Forum.

Bulfinch followed a variation of the fixed and accepted itinerary of the Grand Tour, which often began in London extending south through French, German and Italian cities. For young aristocrats, the Tour bestowed a form of social cache, demonstrating wealth, experience and exclusive knowledge. Many young men would travel in luxurious circumstances for months or years, taking their own personal tutors or knowledgeable guides. Likewise, Bulfinch traveled around the continent for approximately seven or eight months.