

# *Pulling Back the Curtain on Actor's Theater: Origins of a Landmark Design*

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## **Pulling Back the Curtain on Actor's Theatre: Origins of a Landmark Design**

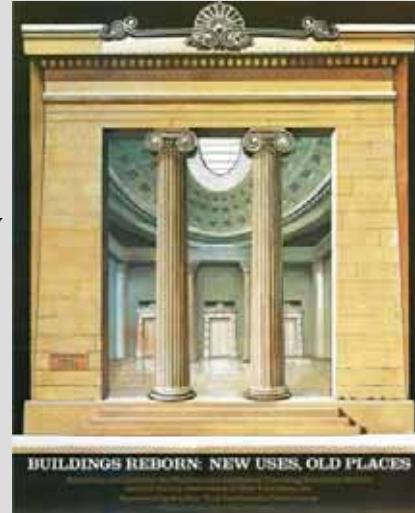
By Steve Wiser, AIA



Actor's Theatre (320 West Main Street) is considered one of Louisville's best designed buildings. Its classical exterior of ionic columns, tapered sides, and elaborate pediment, along with its beautiful domed, sky lit interior, is an aesthetic jewel.

Michael Graves, the acclaimed architect and creator of the Humana Building, named Actors his favorite local building. And, while city leaders were demolishing most of the historic structures around it forty years ago, Actors was saved, renovated and expanded. It was even featured nationally on a popular poster by the Smithsonian Institution. (*right*)

Until about 37 years ago, the design was commonly attributed to Kentucky architect Gideon Shryock. Shryock was known for his Greek Revival projects: Jefferson County Courthouse, the second Kentucky State Capitol in Frankfort, and Morrison Hall in Lexington. (left to right below)



There is even an official Kentucky state historic marker attached to the front of Actor's Theatre that names Gideon as the designer. (*left*) Shryock was involved with Actors development, overseeing its construction, but James Dakin has since been rightfully credited for the design. Dakin was from New York. He lived briefly in Louisville before settling in New Orleans, where his brother already lived.

Steve Wiser, AIA

WiserAIA@Hotmail.com

[www.WiserDesigns.com](http://www.WiserDesigns.com)

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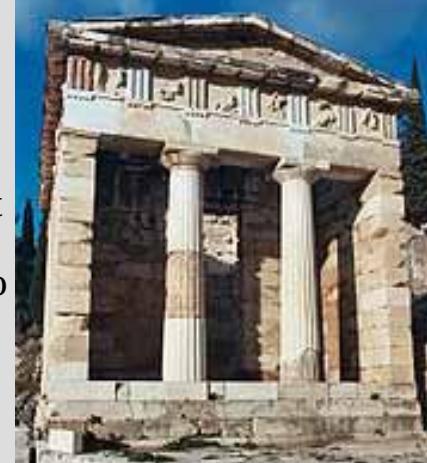
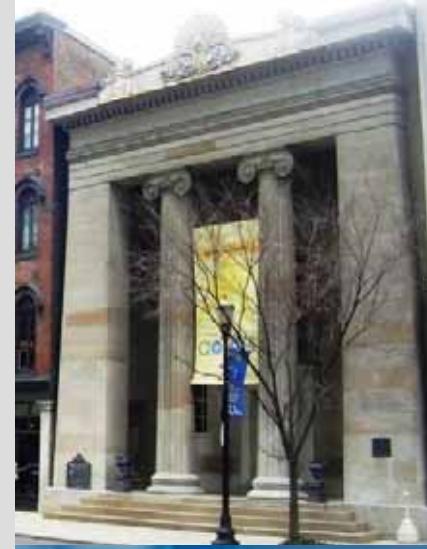
James Dakin worked in New York City as an architect with Ithiel Town and Alexander Davis. Town and Davis were well-respected, and built numerous landmarks.

Still standing today is their notable Custom House (1842), which is a prominent edifice on Wall Street in lower Manhattan. (*left*)

Sam Thomas, the noted Louisville historian, discovered another interesting Town and Davis project: the Bank of America (*right*), at the corner of William and Wall Streets. Long since demolished, a photo of this bank appears in the book "Lost New York". One does not need to be an architectural expert to observe that this bank closely resembles our Actor's Theatre. Especially since Actor's Theatre was originally a bank as well. It was built as the "Bank of Louisville".

Instead of ionic columns, the Bank of America has two Corinthian columns. And, the pediment, while containing the same ornamental symbols, is smaller than the more prominent one atop Actors. Both buildings were built in a similar time frame, Actors between 1835 – 1837, and Bank of America in 1835. Thus, Dakin would have had to depart New York City for Louisville soon after the design completion. He evidently came to the city at the request of the Bank of Louisville's founders in order to duplicate the Bank of America structure. Fortunately for Louisville, Dakin made important design changes that sets it apart from its predecessor, and makes it more significant.

Dakin's two bank designs, though, were inspired by an even more historic bank: the Athenian Treasury (500 B.C.) in Greece. Its two columns with pediment are universally recognized design themes that continue to be widely admired and emulated. Dakin also used this façade arrangement for his Church of the Nativity (1832) in New York City.



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Another famous structure that may have been influenced by this Greek aesthetic is the Temple of Dendur, (*Right*) which was built in the Nubian region of Egypt in 15 B.C. This design features the distinctive two columns with pediment and tapered sides. It has since been relocated to the interior of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. And, it was also replicated in the form of the Egypt Building of the Medical College of Virginia (1845) in Richmond. (*Right*)

Dakin did not remain in Louisville long, and there are no other buildings by him here. Upon arrival in New Orleans, he was able to acquire many important commissions, such as for the city hall, numerous churches, many elegant mansions, and even the state capitol, (*right*) After a prolonged illness, he died early at the age of 46 in 1852.

While Actor's Theatre may not be the original artistic achievement most Louisvillians have always believed, it most certainly is the best of the designs that have descended from its ancestor in ancient Greece. Dakin deserves a standing ovation for providing us this cherished landmark.

*(Steve Wiser, AIA, is a Louisville architect who has written several Louisville architecture and history books, including "Louisville Sites to See by Design", "Louisville Tapestry: People and Places who helped create America's Most Livable City", and "Modern Houses of Louisville". His email address is WiserAIA@Hotmail.com and his website is www.WiserDesigns.com)*

### Sources:

"Louisville Architecture", 2009, Sam Thomas

"James Dakin Architect", 1973, Arthur Scully, Jr.

"Lost New York", 1993, Nathan Silver

"Louisville Guide", 2004, David Mohney, et al.

"Historic American Buildings Survey" (HABS)

"AIA Guide to New York City", 1978



***Refer to following pages for additional information***

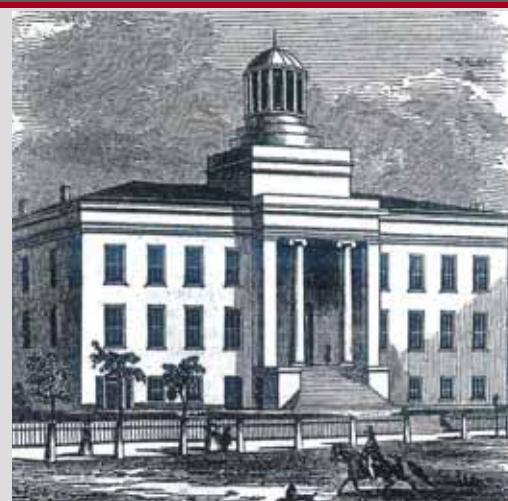
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*Above:*  
Gideon Shryock,  
1802—1880

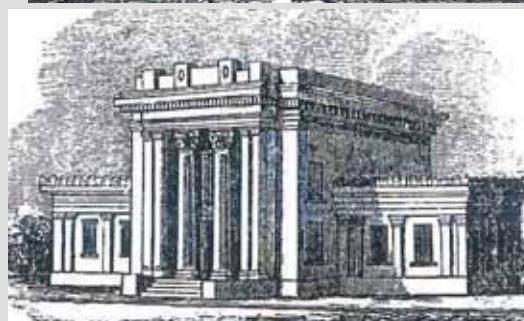
*Right:*  
Louisville Medical Institute,  
Eighth and Chestnut, 1838

Note the two ionic columns  
and similar entry feature as  
Actor's Theatre  
(Bank of Louisville)



*Below Right:*  
Medical College of Louisiana  
in New Orleans, 1843, by  
James Dakin.

The entry is strikingly similar  
to Louisville's Medical Insti-  
tute (above) But Shryock 's  
design was 5 years before  
Dakin's.

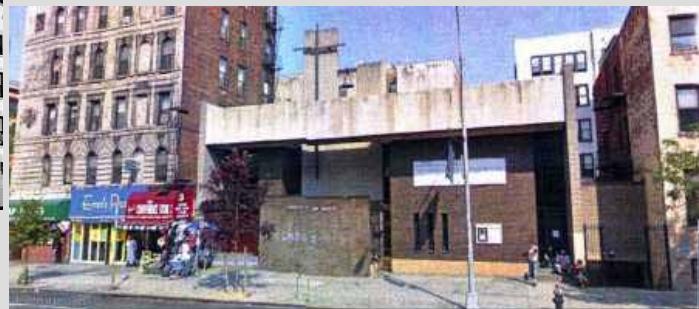


*Left:* Kentucky Military Museum in Frankfort, Ky.  
It was built as the Kentucky Arsenal in 1850.  
It looks very similar to Dakin's Louisiana State  
Capitol. There is a direct Dakin connection.  
This building was designed by Nathaniel C. Cook,  
who worked for Dakin in New Orleans and  
Memphis. He came to Frankfort circa 1845.,  
probably after Dakin fell ill.



*Left:* Church of the Nativity, 1832, New York City,  
by James Dakin which features the two ionic col-  
umn entry

*Below:* the Church of the Nativity replaced its Da-  
kin-designed building with the structure below at  
42nd Second Avenue.

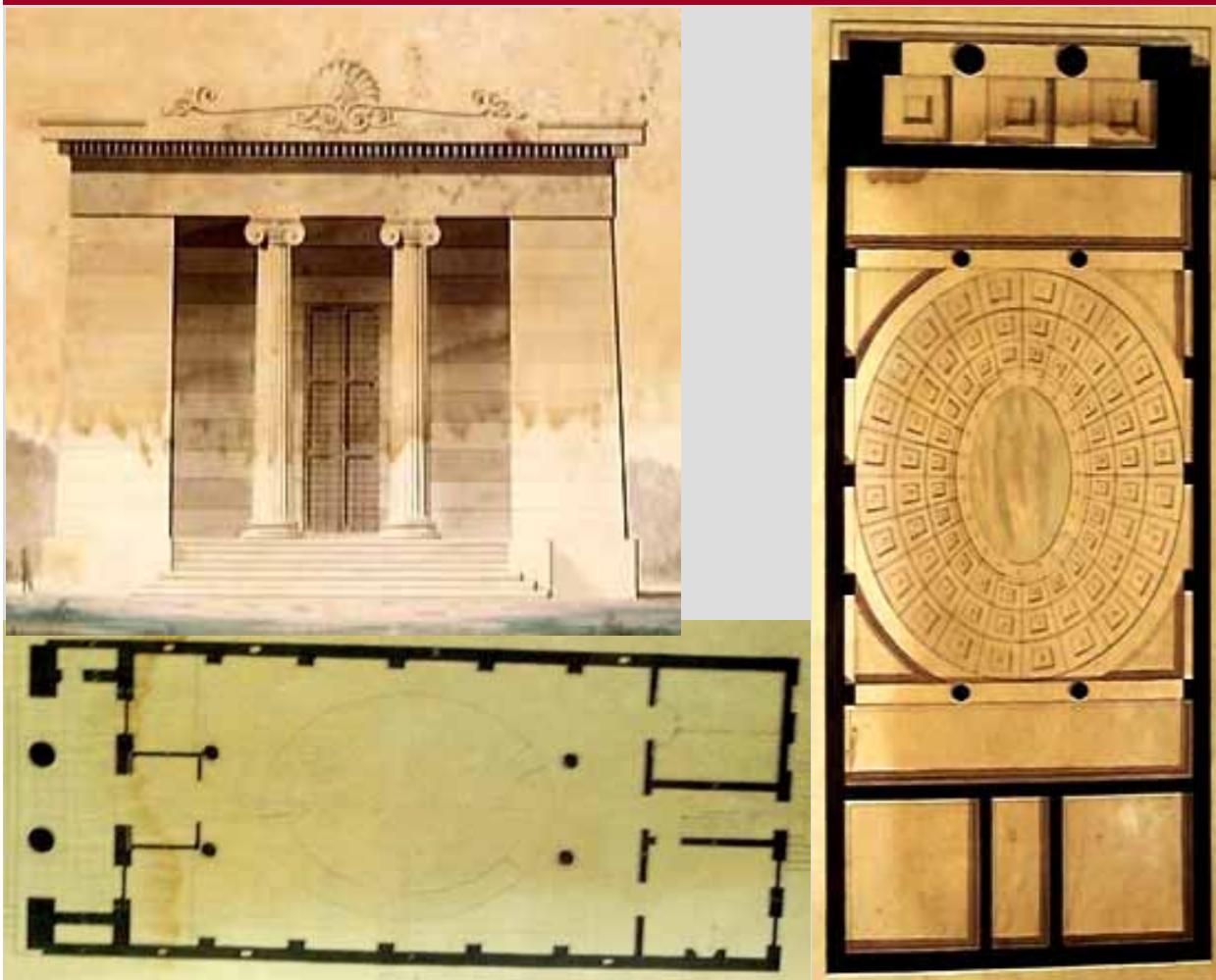


Steve Wiser, AIA

WiserAIA@Hotmail.com

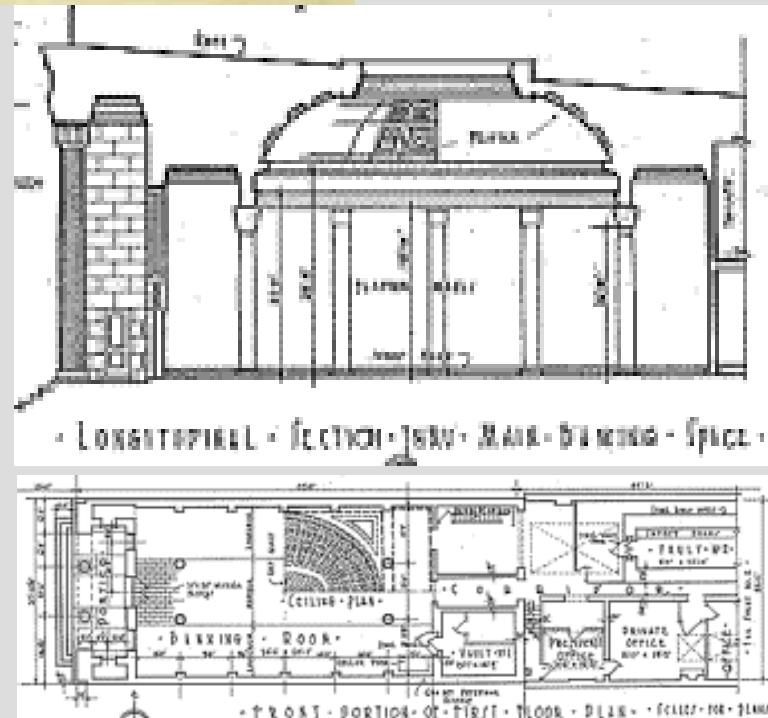
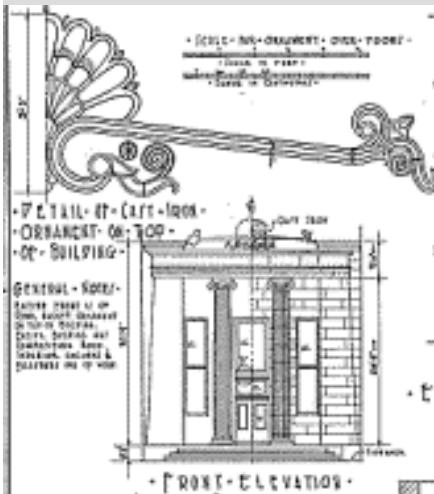
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*Above:* Original James Dakin drawings of "Bank of Louisville"

*Below and Right:*  
Historic American Building  
Survey Drawings of  
"Actors Theatre"

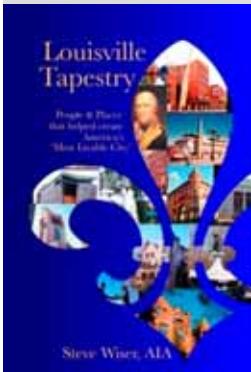


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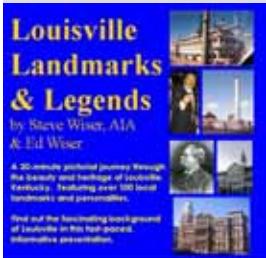
Interested in learning more about Louisville architecture and history?  
Then purchase one or all 3 of the following items prepared by Steve Wiser:



**"Louisville Tapestry: People & Places who helped create America's Most Livable City"**, 144 pages, over 100 b & w images, 2009.

**Cost: \$15 (includes shipping and handling)**

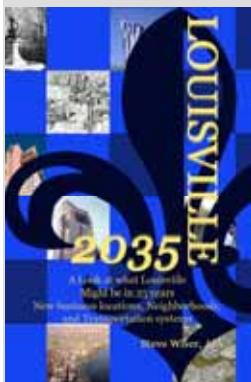
From the Olmsted Parks and landmark architecture, to fascinating tales on notable businesses and personalities, this book explains how the city evolved to its current state. Great for both native Louisvillians as well as new residents!



**"Louisville Landmarks & Legends"**, 25 minute DVD video, over 200 color images, 2008

**Cost \$10 (includes shipping and handling)**

This DVD features Louisville's legendary business leaders and landmark businesses such as Col. Sanders, John Schnatter, J. Graham Brown, Al Schneider, and Tom Simons, along with landmark businesses like Humana, UPS, Hillerich & Bradsby, and Churchill Downs, among many others. In 25 minutes you learn many important aspects of Louisville!



**"Louisville 2035"**, 144 pages, over 100 b & w images, 2008

**Cost: \$8 (includes shipping and handling)**

What will look like in 25 years? This is Steve Wiser's conjecture of how the city will evolve. It also contains many historical backgrounds on the city's past developments and civic leaders. Several of these proposals have already started to happen! Find out more in this intriguing futuristic vision.

To order, mail a check payable to "Steve Wiser"  
at P O Box 7034, Louisville Kentucky 40257.

For more information or to contact Steve,  
email him at [WiserAIA@Hotmail.com](mailto:WiserAIA@Hotmail.com)

To receive future commentary from Steve, make him a 'Friend' on Facebook

Steve Wiser is a Louisville architect and historian.

For more info on Steve, click on his website  
[www.WiserDesigns.com](http://www.WiserDesigns.com)

Steve Wiser, AIA

[WiserAIA@Hotmail.com](mailto:WiserAIA@Hotmail.com)

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