

The Mississippi River Commission Building

The Mississippi River Commission (MRC) Building, which originally served as a post office and customs house, is located at the corner of Walnut and Crawford Streets in downtown Vicksburg, Miss. It was completed in 1894 and expanded to its present size in 1914. The Commission has occupied the building since 1944. Since that time it has been the focal point of Corps navigation, flood control, and related programs throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley. The structure is the finest example in Mississippi of the Romanesque style of architecture first popularized in the United States by world-famed architect, H.H. Richardson, of Louisiana. Raised on a basement of quarry-faced stonework, the three-story building is constructed of wood beams and wood joists with a spread footing foundation. The structure exhibits lavish attention to detail and an outstanding precision of workmanship.

Many features of Norman architecture (a Romanesque style first appearing in Normandy about A.D. 950) are found in the round-arched medieval style of the building. This is especially true of the tower located at the northeast corner. It is finished with an elaborately molded parapet and a pyramidal roof topped with a finial. The pediments over the main entrance of the MRC Building feature high-relief, terra-cotta panels, a raking cornice, and an eye window with radiating voussoirs.

The north facade of the MRC Building has many interesting elements. The lower section is quarry-faced stonework. The midsection, made of masonry, includes the former main entrance to the building. The entry was divided into three bays and capped by a molding consisting of human faces entwined in a vine that spirals throughout the element. The third section of facade is separated by a belt course. Much elaborate brickwork can be found within the 11 bays that comprise this section. Flanking the doors are wrought iron light fixtures with ball globes. The newels of the stairs are decorated at the corners by an acanthus leaf detail cut into the stone. Other distinctive features include elaborate molded brick found in corbelled eave brackets in the belt courses and in the radiating voussoirs of the arched windows. The radiating voussoirs around some of the windows exhibit molding in a rinceau pattern.

Glossary of Terms

Acanthus----- architectural ornament suggesting the leaves of a family of prickly herbs that grow in the Mediterranean.

Belt Course----- horizontal band forming part of a building exterior.

Corbel ----- architectural member that projects outward from a vertical surface.

Cornice ----- molded and projecting member that crowns an architectural composition.

Finial ----- usually foliated ornament forming an upper extremity in Gothic architecture.

Newel ----- post at the foot of a stairway.

Parapet ----- low wall or railing near the edge of a roof.

Pediment ----- triangular space forming the gable of a roof in a classically derived architecture.

Romanesque ----- medieval architectural style that combined Roman and Gothic styles.

Rinceau ----- elaborate ornamental motif consisting of leaves and other natural forms.

Voussoirs ----- wedge-shaped pieces that form an arch or vault.