



MARCH 2010

## A Refrigerator in Neoclassical Guise

Benjamin Henry Latrobe | *Spring House*



**VISIT THE BMA**  
and see the *Spring House* on the West Lawn near the Contemporary Wing.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe (American, born England, 1764-1820). Detail. *Spring House*. c. 1812. White pine, field stone, stone, brick, stucco, plaster, glass. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of W.J. O'Brien, BMA 1932.25.1

Many years ago, before electric plug-in refrigerators had been invented, people who lived in the countryside had to figure out how to keep their milk cool on hot summer days so that it wouldn't spoil. Their solution was to build a spring house that would stay considerably chillier than the temperature outside.

Most spring houses were plain looking structures, some only 4 feet tall.\* By comparison, the BMA's Spring House is elegant indeed. Built to resemble a perfectly proportioned Greek temple, it has four slender Ionic columns that support a triangular pediment edged with a molding of dentils (which look like rows of teeth). Flat pilasters are attached to the right and left corners of the front wall as decoration.

Whether plain or sophisticated in design, all spring houses functioned the same way. Crocks of milk, jars of butter, and wire baskets of fresh eggs were placed on the floor in a trough twelve to eighteen inches deep. Cold water from a nearby spring flowed continuously through the trough—in one side of the spring house and out the other. Masonry walls about 1½ feet thick kept the interior temperature at about 55 degrees so that potatoes, onions, fruit, and vegetables stored on shelves would stay fresh during the hot summer months.

The BMA's Spring House was built about 1812 near a stream on a gentleman's estate in the area of Baltimore now known as Roland Park. It came to the BMA in 1932 after falling into disrepair on its original site. Since then, the BMA has lovingly restored the building as a fine example of Greek Revival architecture.

\*A typical spring house, can be seen in the painting *The Spring House* by N.C. Wyeth at the Delaware Art Museum, [http://www.delart.org/images/collection\\_pix/wyeth/1946-1.jpg](http://www.delart.org/images/collection_pix/wyeth/1946-1.jpg)

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

During the early 1800s, enthusiasm for the Greek Revival style swept across the United States. Courthouses, churches, banks, store fronts, and countless private houses were built with triangular pediments, classical columns, and pilasters in the Greek Revival style. Discover and sketch buildings in your own town that have elements of ancient Greek temples.

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**



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