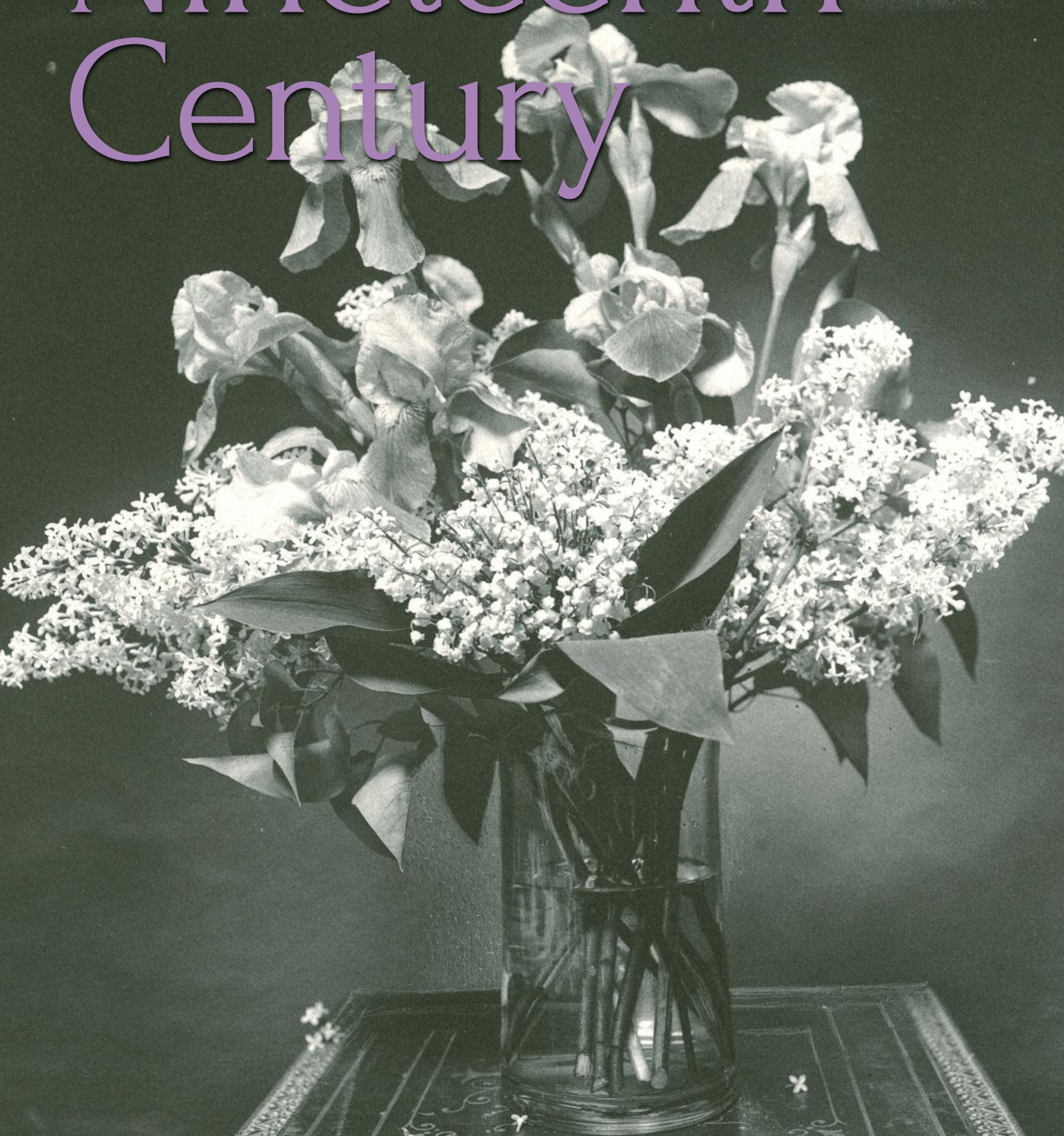


# Nineteenth Century



# Editorial

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## *This Land is Your Land*

Chances are that over the last year you have discovered a public place you have never been to before: a city park, a nature preserve, a river walk, a conservancy easement or maybe a rail trail. Outdoor places in the public domain have helped us all keep some sanity and perspective during this strange time.

The setting aside of public lands is a measure of civilized society. It is clear, in a time such as this, that they are not a luxury, but a necessity.

These spaces bespeak the best of human nature because they are the antithesis of our baser drive to “develop” open land, to strip it down and erect stores, apartments, houses, towers and roads. No one makes money off them. Anyone can take pleasure in them. All public parks that we set foot in are the result of laws and legislation made by the people, of the people and for the people. By whatever fiat such protected places are arrived at, we collectively benefit from every square foot of them and no more so than in the last year.

Some of the places we discovered this year are wild domains and some are quiet city parks. Instead of going to family and friend’s houses or restaurants for dinner, we took each other to our favorite outdoor havens. No sooner did one friend lead us to a new beautiful waterfall we hadn’t known about, then we couldn’t wait to lead other friends to the same spirit-lifting place.

Most of us also spent large swaths of these laconic days back in our thoroughly familiar sanctuaries. Just last week, wandering through my Central Park, noticing the many flowering bulbs planted by volunteers, I was delighted to visit the pavilions of Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould’s Belvedere Castle which have recently been fully repainted in their dazzling panoply of colors, just as they might have looked when they were completed in 1871. These two wood pavilions require regular upkeep as evidenced by the fact that their first versions were gone by 1900, victims of deterioration and neglect. They were not rebuilt until 1983 and have been carefully maintained since.

The setting aside of public lands is a measure of civilized society. It is clear, in a time *such as this, that they are not a luxury but a necessity*. And the dedication to the maintenance of these places is testament to thousands of men and women – citizens, volunteers, dedicated employees, conservancies and agencies – who know how vital such treasures are to every one of us.

Warren Ashworth

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Cover: Untitled floral still life, (detail) c. 1877. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection.



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## THANK YOU TO OUR PEER REVIEWERS

*Nineteenth Century* would like to acknowledge our peer reviewers. We at the editorial board are, as always, deeply grateful to this group of anonymous scholars who review all our author submissions for accuracy of content and application of up-to-date methods of research and scholarship.



Thomas Day (1801-1861), rocking chair, c. 1850. Courtesy North Carolina Museum of History.

# Thomas Day:

## FREE AFRICAN AMERICAN, WOODWORKER, AND DESIGN REVOLUTIONARY

*Madison Sommers*

“A first-rate workman, a remarkably sober, steady and industrious man, a high-minded and valuable citizen,” described Thomas Day from the perspective of Milton, North Carolina, citizens.<sup>1</sup> This extraordinary man lived in a time where it was almost impossible, as a free African American, to prove oneself in society and be taken seriously by wealthy white individuals, as slavery governed the preconceived notion of the identity of African Americans. Day was able to overcome stereotypes and discrimination through his remarkable pieces of furniture and woodwork, which came to be sought out by many upper-class individuals throughout North Carolina. He melded himself into the society in Milton through ownership and efficient operation of his woodworking business and by following in the footsteps of wealthy white individuals through the ownership of his own slaves. These anomalies allotted him a successful career, but unfortunately due to the persistent discrimination provided little long-term recognition of his work. Fortunately, due to his talented craftsmanship much of his work remains intact today and is generating renewed interest.

Thomas Day’s (1801-1861) woodwork came to be known for its unique interpretation of nineteenth-century designs, abiding by symmetrical arrangements, with the addition of curvilinear elements that evoke a strong sense of balance between positive and negative space. Because he operated his own shop he did not have to follow all the rules of popular design and was at liberty to experiment.<sup>2</sup> Through this experimentation, he was able to create a signature interpretation of classical motifs that were unique for each of his clients.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Day took over his father’s trade as a cabinet and fine furniture maker. His father, who was born free, learned the trade and passed his knowledge on to Thomas.<sup>4</sup> Day set up shop in Hillsborough, North Carolina in 1821.<sup>5</sup> Two years later Thomas Day followed his brother, John, northwest to Milton, North Carolina, located on the Virginia border and adjacent to the Dan River. This river gave Milton access to the larger Roanoke River system and the Atlantic trade.<sup>6</sup> Since more homes were being built within this region they would need to be furnished and this was the opportunity that the Day brothers were hoping to take advantage of.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Day had furniture businesses in both Hillsborough and Milton. In 1827, for his own security, he bought land in Milton and permanently established his business there. This was on account of an 1826 North Carolina law decreeing that free blacks could not move freely between states unless they were land-owners, Milton

became his permanent, singular workshop and residence. Further, he set up his shop on Milton’s Main Street, having purchased the building from a white resident, effectively declaring his was an important enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

Day’s most prominent opportunity came in 1847. The president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, David Lowry Swain, had implemented a program to update the campus. He took bids from cabinetmakers for the interiors of two libraries. New buildings for the university had been recently completed according to the designs of Alexander Jackson Davis but Swain was advised by the governor of North Carolina to engage local crafts people to complete the interiors.

**THOMAS DAY.**  
**CABINET-MAKER,**  
**R**ETURNS his thanks to his friends and the public for the patronage he has received, and wishes to inform them that he intends continuing his business at his old stand, and is well prepared to manufacture all kinds of  
**Mahogany, Walnut, and Stained Furniture.**  
He has on hand a small stock of Mahogany Furniture, made of the best St. Domingo mahogany, in the newest fashion, and executed in the most faithful manner;—and also some Walnut and Stained Furniture, and high and low post Bedsteads, turned according to the latest patterns; all which he will sell at reduced prices and on the most accommodating terms.  
Feb. 22, 62-5w

Advertisement for Thomas Day, Cabinetmaker. *Hillsborough Recorder*, April 6, 1825. Courtesy DigitalNC.

Swain’s strong support of Day swayed the officers of the Philanthropic and Dialectic Society to engage him to outfit their debating halls as well. Thomas Day’s bids for the libraries and debating halls won.<sup>9</sup> Word got around of Day’s success and by the 1850’s Day’s shop was the third largest furniture manufacturer in North Carolina.<sup>10</sup>

Between the 1830s and 1840s, designs of classical furniture and Greek Revival architecture were all the fashion.<sup>11</sup> This new style was labeled as “Grecian” by cabinet makers. A mixture of



Thomas Day's residence and workshop were located in the Union Tavern on Main Street in Milton, North Carolina. Courtesy Library of Congress.

English, French, and German versions melded into a new American vocabulary which Thomas Day adopted.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his career he was inspired by popular pattern books, particularly, architect John Hall's (1804-1855) *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant*, published in 1840.<sup>13</sup>

In 1855, Day commissioned three bureaus for the Governor of North Carolina, David Settle Reid. The commonalities between Day's pedestal bureau for Reid and the piece illustrated in John Hall's *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant*, indicate he was inspired by Hall's wardrobe.<sup>14</sup> Day modified its proportions, recessing and reducing the size of the two pedestals, creating a better sense of balance within the piece. He also added a marble slab across the front, which was very typical of the time and provided equilibrium with the strong, dark body of the bureau. Modifying the mirror introduced gracious negative spaces adjacent to the pedestals.

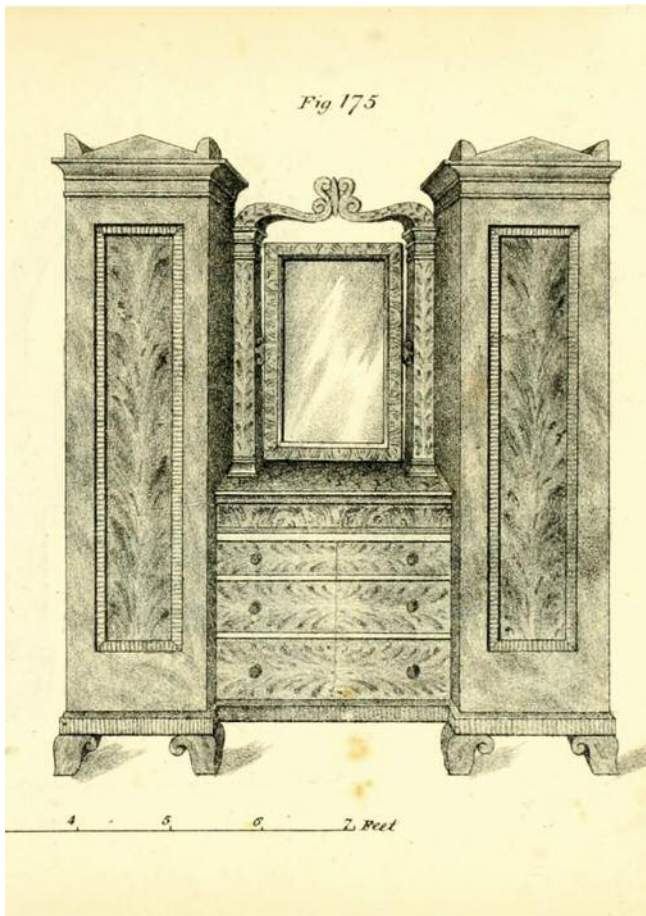
In John Hall's literature he had advised the cabinetmaker to never use the compasses to produce an oval form, or any part of it... Endeavor to acquire freedom of hand, by drawing those elliptical lines to be pleasing to the eye.<sup>15</sup>

It appears as though Day had followed this advice in this design as his motifs seem to echo the sweep of the hand. Day hewed closely to the ideals of symmetry while harnessing the motion of his motifs.

The design of this bureau also bespeaks to the character of his wealthy, white clients. They wanted their furniture to resemble the popular styles of the time, but to have an



Thomas Day, whatnot, c. 1858. Courtesy North Carolina History Museum.



L to R: John Hall, architect, *Pedestal Wardrobe*, as published in *The Cabinet Maker's Assistant*, 1840. Courtesy Library of Congress. Thomas Day, pedestal bureau, 1855. Designed and built for North Carolina Governor David S. Reid. Courtesy North Carolina Museum of History.

individuality to them, so that customers could be sure these pieces were hand designed for them. This allowed Day to experiment with Greek Revival styles and make them his own. This bureau brings up another aspect of his craft. Even though he wanted to create more vernacular interpretations of these Anglo designs, he built them in solid mahogany and mahogany veneer, staying true to the raw material that urban clients demanded. This illustrates the importance of material for these well-off rural clients. It also demonstrates Day's success as he could afford to stock this expensive, imported wood.

The Day lounge is the piece of furniture perhaps most associated with its maker. It was classically inspired and probably influenced by designs by Thomas Sheraton (1751-1806) and George Smith (1786-1826). Their books on furniture were very popular in the early nineteenth century and urban cabinetmakers faithfully followed these designs to please their clients. Day, an outsider in so many ways, took more liberty with his interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

This lounge was commissioned for the Richmond-Wilson-Cunningham family, who were a very wealthy family in North Carolina at the time. The piece was adapted in a way that incorporated this maker's unique sense of motion, seen in the play between the negative and positive space.<sup>17</sup> This piece is again symmetrical and is a more simplified interpretation of



Thomas Day, day lounge, c. 1855. Designed and built for the Richmond-Wilson-Cunningham family.

the lounges of Sheraton and Smith evident in the lack of applied ornament. Day's motifs here are incorporated through carving out negative space within the piece. The curvilinear elements are very prominent as Day has cut out the sides of the form underneath the arms and back to add a sense of lightness, motion, and balance. There is a strong balance here between these curves and straight lines, as the front rail of this piece is rectilinear but is balanced on either side with scroll-motif arms. The curving back juxtaposes the straight front rail balancing the rhythm within the piece; simple in ornament,



L to R: Exterior of the Garland-Buford House, Leasburg, North Carolina. Thomas Day, architect, 1860. Thomas Day, passage from Parlor to Sitting Room, 1860. Garland-Buford House, Leasburg, North Carolina. Photos by Tim Buchman.

extravagant in form.

In 1858, Thomas Day designed a whatnot for Governor David Settle Reid, which, like all of the Reid furniture, reflects a sense of grace and quietness.<sup>18</sup> Its curves created a bold design allowing the negative spaces to have a life of their own. Horizontal waves are balanced with vertical scrolls moving up the side of the piece. Even the shelves have a sense of movement with their slight curving fronts. Marshall and Leimenstoll, the authors of *Master Craftsman and Free Man of Color*, believe Day's "fascinating use of line and space within the whatnot form is a precursor to the sensual designs of the Art Nouveau style almost forty years later."<sup>19</sup> Indeed these curving forms seem ahead of their time in their intricacy and liveliness.

Starting in 1834 Day began getting commissions for architectural elements along with furniture. His lithe curving lines became an important aspect of this architectural design, expressed in different ways throughout the rest of his career. He created personalized S-shaped newel posts for center hall staircases that were paired with curving brackets on stair treads.<sup>20</sup> He reinterpreted classic Greek Revival designs for parlors with serpentine mantel friezes. He designed fluted casings for doors, windows, and niche openings. As with his

furniture, his architectural elements play with the tension between positive and negative space while remaining within the classical framework of symmetry. One of the homes his architectural work can be seen is the Garland-Buford House, which was built in 1860 in Leasburg, Caswell County, North Carolina. Dr. John T. Garland, who owned the plantation at the time, must have had a close relationship with Day as he was listed on Day's 1858 insolvency papers as one of his creditors.<sup>21</sup> Today, this home is privately owned. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 24, 1974.<sup>22</sup>

This trim work on its exterior is composed of scallops and brackets. This same motif is prominent throughout.<sup>23</sup> Day used these scalloped brackets to outline the roof and created a spectacular unprecedented balustrade for the top porch that is balanced with a mirroring a drop panel below and above. He even incorporated scalloped motifs into the horizontal window mullions.<sup>24</sup> This exterior is distinct from other Greek Revival buildings of the time, with more whimsy and lace. The columns at the front of the building are not typical either, they are very rectangular in shape, modest in scale, and lack ornamentation. Greek Revival columns were typically designed after one of the three classical column orders; Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian and often had some form of ornamentation. The



facade celebrates Day's vocabulary, and the interior of the house is a reflection of that exterior.<sup>25</sup>

For the interior entrance door casing, Day incorporated serpentine elements.<sup>26</sup> The entablature above the doors complements the pilasters by mimicking this serpentine motif in a larger scale, creating a balance between the horizontal and the vertical. The mantelpieces are similarly detailed. Day's use of these remarkable motifs pushed beyond what was commonplace for design during this period and is considered by many historians as quite radical.<sup>27</sup>

Thomas Day is a man who overcame his background and transcended an almost impossibly restrictive social system. He became integral to the local white society through his gift in furniture crafting and architectural woodwork. In fact, in an editorial in the *Raleigh Register* in 1857 citizens in Milton stated,

We doubt very much whether there is a superior artist to Mr. Day in the southern country – certainly not in this state.<sup>28</sup>

While we have no record of whatever physical attacks he might have endured or of the verbal attacks he most certainly endured, Day was valued in his time. His creative genius took urban styles and adapted them to suit rural clients through a unique and distinctive formula. His pieces remain in private collections and are also displayed as part of the collection of the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh.

Thomas Day, though an anomaly in many ways, fits into a category of many brilliant creatives from the nineteenth century who faced underrepresentation through the shadow of systemic racism and discrimination that has blinded American society for far too long. These brilliant individuals deserve to be celebrated, studied, and given credit where it is so rightfully due. The study of Thomas Day's work brings hope for a more just, inclusive future in design and architecture. One that brings forth ideas and influences from all people, so that the design industry can learn from past historical displacement and grow.



**Madison Sommers** graduated from the University of Southern California in May of 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and is currently continuing her studies in interior design at The New York School of Interior Design where she will receive her Associate in Applied Science in Interior Design in May of 2021. She is very passionate about sustainability and equality within the design industry and aspires to work for a small commercial firm with a focus in sustainability that helps companies create a brand through their interiors.



Thomas Day, interior view of front entrance, 1860. Garland-Buford House, North Carolina. Photo by Tim Buchman.

## Notes

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3. Prown, "The Furniture of Thomas Day: A Reevaluation," 216.
5. Marshall, 14.
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7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 14,16.
9. *Ibid.*, 35-38.
10. Prown, 215.
11. Marshall, 79.
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13. *Ibid.*, 80.
14. *Ibid.*, 87-89.
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23. Marshall, 179.
24. *Ibid.*, 179-180.
25. *Ibid.*, 180.
26. *Ibid.*, 180.
27. *Ibid.*, 180.
28. Prown, 216.



John Lewis Krimmel (1786-1821), *Dance in a Country Tavern (Barroom Dancing)*, c. 1820. Watercolor. Courtesy Library of Congress.

# A Night's Rest?

## TAVERN LIFE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Gerald Baum

How oft doth man, by care oppres'd

Find in an Inn a place of rest!

William Combe

Travel — manifestation of the American spirit and character. Intrepidly we seek the unusual, the awesome as well as the familiar. Whatever motivates us to discover what's over the next hill, after an exhausting day of travel we all crave a good night's rest. Likewise, Americans and foreigners, crisscrossed New York State 200 years ago for a myriad of reasons: making the Grand Tour to Niagara, checking prospects for emigration, spreading the word of God, migrating west to settle, collecting botanical specimens, assessing America's new experiment with democracy, and so on. All shared the same basic need — a resting place for man and beast, met in varying degrees by the essential upstate inn.

Important as the bedroom was to the wayfarer (so important that colonial era statutes mandated towns erect taverns for travelers), the upstate tavern regardless of size and presence or absence of amenities was the nucleus of burgeoning settlements. The early tavern not only provided entertainment in the form of food and rest for the weary traveler but was the essential social institution for local habitués often serving as a catalyst for the development of embryonic upstate villages. No other institution better serves as a microcosm reflecting the social life of early New Yorkers. It is not too much of a stretch to posit that whatever took place in early upstate communities took place in or about its tavern. Few were any aspects of upstate life that were not at one time or another as much a part of tavern fare as the food and drink regularly served.



In new settlements, at crossroads and ferry crossings, as emigres to western New York cleared land and erected houses, the inn was there by necessity. The tavern served as town hall

and the place local citizens received their mail and news. Here electioneering and voting occurred, courts convened, preachers preached, and business was transacted. It was the venue for dances and where sleighing parties warmed themselves by the tavern fire with a mug of flip; the site for militia musters, horse racing, shooting matches, weddings, and traveling exhibitions. Perhaps most importantly, the inn served its fermented and distilled beverages in a venue of fellowship and camaraderie, the social gathering place, *the* prime forum for social intercourse.

As invaluable as the humble inn was in meeting the needs of locals, this article concentrates on that singular role of the tavern of value only to the exhausted wayfarer — a good night's rest. To discover how and how well the upstate inn met this need, let us accompany foreign and American travelers, those who occupied the tavern bedroom, by perusing their books and journals to savor and experience a night in an upstate inn. Who else but the guests of the upstate innkeeper, "Mine Host," can inform us of the success or failure to achieve a night's rest? Only through recourse to first-hand accounts can we find

ourselves in an early tavern bedroom in Avon or Little Falls, New York.

**MILTON HOTEL.**

 **BY CHARLES CRAIG,** 

MAIN STREET, MILTON, PENN'A.

**T**HE subscriber begs leave to inform his friends and the travelling public in general, that he has taken the well known Tavern stand in Main street, in the borough of Milton, formerly kept by Daniel Eckert, and he pledges himself that no pains or expense shall be spared to make his house in every respect the travellers home.

His **TABLE** shall at all times be furnished with the best the country can produce.

His **BAR** shall contain none but the most pure and unadulterated liquors.

His **FURNITURE, BEDDING, &c.** is such that the most fastidious shall have no cause to complain.

His **STABLE** shall at all at all times abound with the best provinder, with careful and attentive ostlers ever ready at a moments call.

To those who may favor him with their custom he promises that every department of his establishment shall at all times receive his strict personal attention, and nothing on his part shall be wanting to merit a share of the public patronage.

**CHARLES CRAIG.**  
Milton, June 10, 1845. 25tf

Advertisement for the Milton Hotel, Milton Pennsylvania, June 10, 1845.

While examining bedchambers, sleeping arrangements and obstacles to sleep, let us be alert to how the tavern demonstrated in a real and personal way the democratic principles of our fledgling nation. The tavern practiced what was debated theoretically in new state legislatures and the halls of Congress: liberty “yes,” equality “perhaps.” In the tavern what was available to one was available to all. Longed for by some aristocratic visitors, how could hierarchy and segregation possibly exist in a tavern’s shared washing facilities, a common table including Revolutionary War veterans, itinerant preachers, local artisans, circuit riding magistrates, the stage driver and the landlord’s family, not to mention shared bedrooms with some beds carrying double? With recently

servant but rather as an equal performing a favor. Being treated with indifference or worse perhaps partially attributes English writers’ harsh criticism of their wayward child’s experiment with democracy. His upstate inn experiences left the foreigner with an impression of American democracy certainly more explicit than a comfortable contemplation of the delights of liberty. And perhaps a bit rankling, for while European titles counted for little in an inn of logs, the innkeeper coveted his militia status of Captain, Major or Colonel. In some sympathy to our mistreated English wayfarers, many upper class English found themselves forced to mingle with a class with which they were not accustomed to associate at home. Like it or not, there was little likelihood for



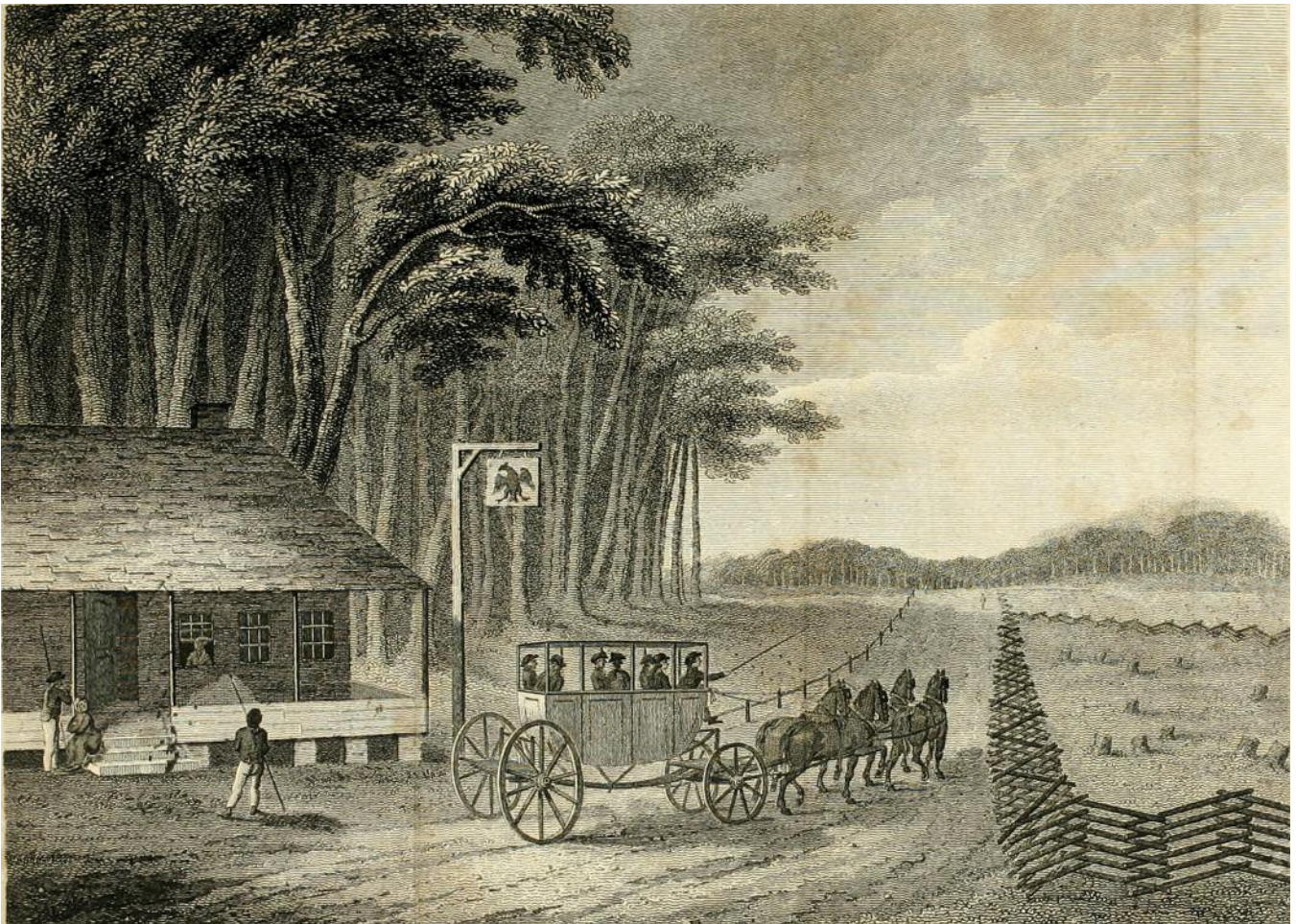
L to R: *Sign of the Black Horse*, c. 1771. Paint on pine board. Courtesy The Connecticut Historical Society; *R. Chadwick Inn*, c. 1775-1825. Paint on wood board. Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York. Gift of Stephen C. Clark. Photograph by Richard Walker.

gained independence would Americans tolerate social stratification in this heterogeneous institution?

Many foreign travelers (notably Englishmen of some rank) packed their prejudices in their portmanteaus, regularly commenting on the absence of deference of the innkeeper with his irritating air of independence. Civil without a hint of obsequiousness, he demanded respect and served, not as a

special treatment based on position or money. Here a request for privacy was equated with snobbishness. To protest sleeping arrangements would incur ill will and prejudice. Many travelers advised those following to accept what was offered and to request not demand. The inn sign proclaimed entertainment for all in this democratic establishment.

In the bedroom, if one were the last to arrive and found beds



Isaac Weld (1774-1856), *American Stage Wagon*, 1799. Engraving. James Storer, engraver. As published in *Travels through the States of North America...During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797, 1799.*

overflowing, the newcomer took liberty to move in, invited or not. Do we ascribe the “right” to occupy an already burdened bed to individualism, equality or just a desperate need for sleep? If one objected, the floor was a leveler for all. Some suggested that all who paid the same price were accorded the same treatment. Money was immaterial if the publican could offer no additional amenities. Later, with specialization in tavern types and the larger hotel with its diversified rooms there would be some adjustment to the enforced egalitarianism that characterized the early tavern.

In pre-railroad days upstate New York experienced massive migration. As the tavern sprung from private hospitality to bona fide licensed hostelry, so did its bedroom mature from the primitive, multi-purpose bedroom-living quarters with inadequate provisions for sleeping to the upstate hotel with its maze of corridors and countless, in the words of Charles Dickens, “little white-washed cells...like rooms in a prison.”<sup>1</sup> The “typical” early bedroom ranged from the one room inn which was bedroom, dining room, kitchen and family living space to the reasonably well-appointed private room with fireplace, wash bowl and chamber pot. Some taverns boasted a single communal bedroom, which while affording little privacy

did segregate late night tipplers and revelers from those seeking solace in the arms of Morpheus. It was the rare upstate inn that apportioned one person per room.

While privacy was rare, there were attempts at some modicum of decorum. Washington Irving’s party in 1803 northwest of Utica stopped at a one room log hut with a hole in the roof serving as a substitute chimney. Even here

...our hostess stretched a long blanket across the room and divided it into two on one side we spread our mattress for the ladies and great coats blankets &c for ourselves. The other side was left for the drivers &c.<sup>2</sup>

Morris Birkbeck noted

...even night in an American inn affords no privacy. Whatever may be the number of guests, they must receive their entertainment en masse, and they must sleep en masse.<sup>3</sup>

In this professedly classless era most makeshift attempts at achieving privacy were intended to segregate the sexes. Clarissa Stoddart records dividing a sleeping apartment by hanging sheets and blankets. Even taverns boasting more than



Unidentified artist, *Tavern Scene*, 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Oil on wood panel. Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York. Gift of Miss Jeanette Hoyt. Photograph by Richard Walker.

one bedroom required adaptation. At Olean

Our bed room was upstairs and very inconvenient, as we had to pass through a very large one where a number of men slept, obliging us to retire earlier than pleasant.<sup>4</sup>

“There was no room for them in the inn,” may have been the case with that legendary Bethlehem inn. Upstate innkeepers seemingly always had room for one more as noted by the French royalist exile, the Duke de La Rochefoucault Liancourt. Whether it be a noisy Bath, New York inn “no bigger than a sparrows nest” where

One night twenty-five of us slept in two rooms, in six beds, which rooms were, in fact, nothing but despicable corn-lofts or garrets, pervious to the wind and rain.<sup>5</sup>

Even at Buffalo’s commodious Eagle, Philip Hone recorded beds placed in the halls and ladies “compelled to sleep five and six in a room.”<sup>6</sup> No matter how cramped or communal, most would-be sleepers agreed these bedrooms were far more palatable than being denied hospitality even if the innkeeper failed to deliver “Entertainment for Man and Beast” proclaimed boldly on tavern signs.

Many arrived at taverns to find the floor the only bed available, either because mine host ignored licensing regulations requiring beds or because even the most resourceful taverner could stow no more into already overflowing beds. For wagoners with their own bedding, a shakedown on the floor was expected; but foreigners had

varied reactions, some finding the floor beneath their dignity. Others took into consideration the large number of emigrating families, stage passengers, tourists, drovers and waggoners all competing for limited beds. Some travelers like the anonymous “British Subject” expressed a very matter-of-fact attitude toward their situations and well they might have, for in reality there was little recourse:

In a small chamber 7 of us were stowed, some in beds, some on the floor, in this manner we spent the night, certainly better than sleeping out in the woods.<sup>7</sup>

Even taverns with bona fide bedrooms, that is, rooms intended for sleeping, usually contained little in the way of furnishings in even the best: and a bed only, when one was lucky to get it, in the worst. Few early taverns provided washing facilities in bedrooms; a basin and well-seasoned towel in the barroom or outside sufficed, at least in the opinion of most publicans. More than one foreign traveler remarked at the comb and hairbrush suspended on a string *pro bono publico*, and then questioned whether a toothbrush might be similarly provided. James Silk Buckingham, Member of Parliament, noted warming pans and curtains were seldom encountered though often longed for.<sup>8</sup> Several remark on the absence of carpets, more necessity than nicety on upstate winter mornings. Satirizing the prolific number of travelers’ books with their attacks on tavern conditions, an American writer employing the pseudonym XYZ, surmised his bedchamber at Ridgeway doubled as courtroom and Methodist meeting room



Nellis Tavern and outbuildings, c. 1880. St. Johnsville, New York. Courtesy Palatine Settlement Society.

from the evidence of pulpit, chandelier, law book and empty glasses.

Examined pulpit, and discovered a bible, book of Methodist hymns and an empty bottle, which smelt 'most villainously' of whiskey.<sup>9</sup>

Even lighting devices were not always available as noted by Scot James Stuart at Utica's Canal Coffee House. He experienced difficulty dressing for an early stage departure as "...the female servant...neglected to bring us a light in sufficient time."<sup>10</sup> A fire would have been welcomed on winter morns, but few travelers record such luxury. One night it was so cold in Clarissa Stoddart's bedroom that the poultice on her chilblains froze. On other occasions she mentions a fire in her own or adjoining bedroom, affording relief as she was traveling by sleigh.<sup>11</sup>

In those taverns boasting beds and bedrooms, few were of such scale to allow private rooms. Irishman Isaac Weld, touring America for possible emigration, explains the general procedure:

At the American taverns...all sorts of people, just as they happen to arrive, are crammed together into one room, where they must reconcile themselves to each other the best way they can.<sup>12</sup>

Sharing a room was as much a part of tavern life as communal dining and washing facilities. Common as it was, foreigners grudgingly reconciled themselves to this American custom but warned their readers what to expect, as did Captain Marryat, RN,

...to sleep in a room in which there are three or four other beds (I have slept in one with nearly twenty), most of them carrying double, even if you do not have a companion in your own.<sup>13</sup>

Who slept with whom in what room seemed to matter little to Americans as Englishman Isaac Candler doing the Grand Tour observed in Rochester. Fortuitously he secured a room to himself, but luck was fleeting:

When lo! On retiring one night, I found my bed preoccupied. I had learnt enough of American inns to know the trouble I should fall into by making such complaint; accordingly, on an apology being made, I took another in a triple-bedded room without enquiry as to the occupants of the other two beds. Seldom is a bed room door fitted up with either lock or bolt.<sup>14</sup>

Some of our European cousins objected to this forced camaraderie. John Fowler preferred his cloak and the parlor floor to "...occupying a room with strangers, according to custom here, careless who or what."<sup>15</sup>



Bedrooms at Nellis Tavern, St. Johnsville, New York. Courtesy Palatine Settlement Society.

With insufficient bedrooms it was inevitable that mixed company would perforce share a room. There are some oblique references to the art of undressing in such circumstances. The Duke de La Rochefoucault Liancourt enlightens us on this aspect of tavern life. He first thought his party had chosen the poorer of the two Canandaigua taverns. The Duke by his own admission was not a little susceptible to female charms, finding them "...more delectable to our senses than the fine rural scenery." One particular night's events are best told in the Duke's own words:

Our dissatisfaction was greatly encreased, when we were shewn into the corn-loft to sleep, being four of us, in company with ten or twelve other men. But sleep, the great balm of human uneasiness, soon calmed our minds. My rest, however, was ere long interrupted by...the arrival of two new guests, who soon entered our loft; an old man, and a handsome young woman, who, I believe, was his daughter. Three rows of beds were placed in this large apartment, which half filled it; and there were two empty beds in the same row with mine.

In one of these the good old man lay down without undressing himself, and the young woman, thinking every one about her fast asleep, fell to stripping, which she did as completely as if she had been in a room by herself. No movement on my part interrupted the business of her toilette, although I could not fall asleep again until the candle was put out.

This little anecdote, at which European coyness will no doubt either scoff or laugh, shews, in an advantageous light, the laudable simplicity and innocence of American manners.<sup>16</sup>

If sharing a room stretched the American spirit of egalitarianism to the extreme, then being compelled to halve a bed with a total stranger was the epitome of vulgarity, or so the practice was viewed by large numbers of foreign commentators. But the luxury of a bed to oneself was hard to come by. The traveler fearing the worst was seldom disappointed. While foreigners suffered from this aspect of tavern life, many natives enthusiastically engaged in this custom. The posted rules of the Buckthorn Inn dictated: "No boots to be worn in bed. No more than five to sleep in one bed."<sup>17</sup>

Our intrepid travelers vividly depict the ritual of bed sharing. In 1832, Lieutenant George Carr and companion stopped at a "dirty little horrid Public house" at French Creek and were shown to an equally filthy apartment with two beds:

Of course we concluded there was one for each, and were just going to draw lots when we found by a very loud snore, that one was already occupied, so we accordingly turned into the other—and had not been there very long, when we heard another customer arrive, who was to sleep with our unknown companion in the other bed—We were sadly afraid they would send a third to our bed, but luckily the night passed off, without any further annoyance.<sup>18</sup>





Tavern Room at Nellis Tavern, St. Johnsville, New York. Courtesy Palatine Settlement Society.

Scot James Flint approached this subject rather matter-of-factly:

A full house is always the apology for causing two strangers to sleep in the same bed; the propriety of the custom will always be admitted by the person who arrives latest. It has been my lot to sleep with a diversity of personages; I do believe, from the driver of the stage coach, to men of considerable name.<sup>19</sup>

New Yorker Thurlow Weed recalled doubling up as commonplace:

In country inns, a traveler who objected to a stranger as a bedfellow was regarded as unreasonably fastidious. Nothing was more common, after a passenger had retired, than to be awakened by the landlord, who appeared with a tallow candle, showing a stranger into your bed.<sup>20</sup>

Nowhere near so accepting was the traveling companion of the Marquis and Marquise de La Tour du Pin who, after experiencing harrowing escapes during the French Revolution in 1794, were residing in exile near Albany. Traveling with M. de Chambeau at Lebanon, New York, the Marquise found it noteworthy to record:

In the middle of the night, we suddenly heard a stream of French oaths, which could come only from him. In the morning we learned that towards midnight he had been awakened by a gentleman who was sliding, without so much as a 'by your leave' into the empty half of his double bed. Furious at this invasion, he promptly leaped out the other side and spent the night in a chair listening to his companion's snores, for he had been in no way disturbed by M. de Chambeau's anger.<sup>21</sup>

This American intruder in the spirit of democratic republicanism certainly exhibited no deference to French nobility when he exercised his right to halve a bed. M. de Chambeau among his expletives was not heard to shout "Liberte' E'galite Fraternite'."

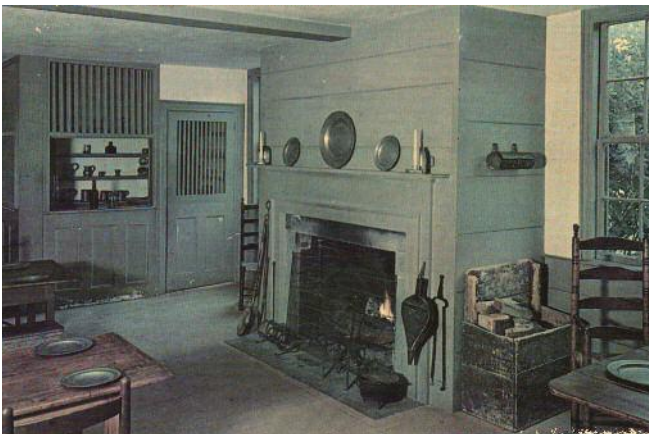
Achille Murat, Sicilian prince and nephew of Napoleon, in asylum here discussed sleeping arrangements.

All is here in the true (though rather uncomfortable) spirit of republicanism. Each...has the privilege and right to eat and sleep where he pleases...It is understood that one bed is to contain two individuals, and nobody is so ridiculous or fastidious as to trouble himself as to who is his neighbor, more than in the pit of a theater.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps bed sharing would have been less traumatic for some had they had a say as to their sleeping companion as suggested



Bump Tavern, c. 1790. Cooperstown, New York. Courtesy the Farmer's Museum.



Top to bottom: Sign for the Bump Tavern, E. Bump, proprietor. Interior of the Bump Tavern's barroom.

in conversation overheard at a ball in Halifax, Nova Scotia by Thomas Haliburton:

A double-bedded room does not mean, in the States, a room with two beds, but a bed with two persons in it. During the great embargo, I happened to be at Charlestown, South Carolina, when the landlord proposed to me to sleep with a dirty-looking foreign officer. If I cannot have a separate bed, I said, I prefer sitting before the fire all night to sleeping with that d---d Russian! Is he a Russian, sir? Said a tall, thin, inquisitive Yankee, that stood listening to the conversation — is he a Russian? I'll take him, then, if it convenes you, stranger. I should rather like it, for I never slept with a Russian.<sup>23</sup>

Logistics required the sharing of bedrooms by both sexes but not different gender bed partners. Edward Talbot was awakened pleasantly by the chatter of “five buxom girls.” As there were but four beds and each carried one, he anxiously anticipated one and possibly two partners. However, the five arranged a bed on the floor, and Talbot was disturbed only by their snoring.<sup>24</sup> Some of our travelers had a sense of humor regarding opposite sex bed partners. American William Tudor tells a story of a quick witted Yankee caught in a dilemma in a crowded inn. Though of considerable talents and respectable connections, this man was known for his dissipated life. Let us eavesdrop on this tavern conversation:

Among them [patrons] was a very respectable matron, who, in the course of conversation, began to reproach this rake with the life he led. She lamented that a man with his abilities, of such a respectable family, should



Bedrooms at the Bump Tavern, Cooperstown, New York. Photos by author.

pursue such a course. Her zeal made her very eloquent, and the object of it began to wish to get rid of the discussion. He observed to her, that she was very severe, that people were very much the same; that there was less difference than she supposed. O! no, she said, there was nobody so bad as he. In a deprecating tone and manner, he replied, that most people would act alike, when put in the same situation; that his conduct and her's would be the same, if placed in similar circumstances. She retorted that was impossible; that they could never act alike in any case: he thought he could name one; — she defied him: — suppose then, madam, that in travelling, you came to an inn, where all the beds were full except two, and in one of these was a man, and in the other a woman, which would you take? —Why, the woman's to be sure — Well, madam, said he, so would I. — Even the lady was obliged to join in the laugh, by which the profligate wit made his escape from a troublesome argument.<sup>25</sup>

Whether one halved a bed depended on the ratio of sleepers to beds. Some travelers lost sleep by having to share a bed and others remained awake in apprehension of an intruder who might never materialize. Desperate would-be sleepers employed various ruses to avoid bed sharing, such as claiming to be ill or informing the innkeeper that a traveling companion would be along later, pay for two, enjoy a bed to oneself confident of a good night's rest knowing that the mythical companion would disturb no one. Archibald Maxwell in 1840 Auburn upon announcing he and his companion were British officers to the landlord “a fine old chap,” were provided separate rooms thus negating their having to bundle.<sup>26</sup> More dramatic and certainly effective, English Lieutenant John Harriott displayed a brace of pistols on his pillow.<sup>27</sup> Our correspondent XYZ, asked to sleep three in a Canandaigua bed bluffed his way to a single: “Told Landlord, ‘Twouldn't do, and would go to some other inn,’ this settled the business at once.”<sup>28</sup>

Many travelers unsuccessful in their subterfuge preferred the floor to bed sharing, probably to the amusement of the

taverner and the comfort of the earlier occupant.

The beds themselves were oft discussed by their occupiers. Most were quite plain, seldom with posts and curtains. Beds consisted of buffalo robes, bear skins, ticks of corn husks or oat straw, feathers, ropes, or whatever else the enterprising publican contrived. Even First Lady Abigail Adams suffered with a bed on the floor “not larger than one of my Bolsters.”<sup>29</sup> The Vicomte de Chateaubriand, a severe critic of New York inns, chronicled a most peculiar bed several days walk west of Albany, the veracity of which requires some caution:

One night, as I entered one of those singular hostleries, I was stupefied at the sight of an immense circular bed built around a post: each traveler came to take his place in this bed, his feet at the center post, his head on the circumference of the circle, so that the sleepers were arranged symmetrically like the spokes of a wheel...After a little hesitation, however, I placed myself in this contraption because I saw no one in it. I was beginning to fall asleep when I felt a man's leg slide along mine: it was the leg of my guide, that great devil of a Dutchman, who was stretching out next to me. I never felt greater horror in my life. I leapt from this hospitable basket, cordially cursing the manners of our good ancestors. I went out to sleep in my coat in the light of the moon...<sup>30</sup>

Clean sheets were a treat not necessarily included in the price of a bed. XYZ issued this diatribe at Avon:

Short bed, dirty bed clothes, no blankets, but some non-descript substitute pillow, about the size of an old fashioned pin cushion, and from the number of holes in it, judged that it had probably served in that capacity in the “days of auld lang syne.”

Bed composed of porcupine's quills, or something that bore a pretty strict analogy to them, very uncomfortable. Travellers should on no account, omit carrying with them clean sheets and pillow casings.<sup>31</sup>

To daily launder bed clothes would have been a most unreasonable demand on the over-burdened taverner's wife. But Elijah Hudson attracted trade to his Kinderhook inn by advertising that he would provide lodging and clean sheets for one shilling in response to the advertisement of a Tarrytown innkeeper, "lodging and clean sheets, 3 sh; dirty sheets, 1 sh."<sup>32</sup> James Stuart's party was favorably impressed with the management of a German inn at Kingston until they were "...asked by the chambermaid, whether the sheets on the bed, as they had only been slept in by very genteel people would do for us."<sup>33</sup>

Perspective as to cleanliness differed between publican and lodger. Duke de La Rochefoucault Liancourt discovered sheets "totally unfit for use" despite the landlady's assertion to be very clean as they had been used only three or four times. His party of four near Elmira stopping with Squire MacCornick was obliged to sleep in the family's two beds. "The sheets had already served them some time, and it appears were to serve them still longer."<sup>34</sup> Esther Bogert, after encountering a dish of strawberries at the American Hotel in Albany "finely sprinkled with Sand, in lieu of Sugar," discovered the sheets "not only Damp, but absolutely wet...A Shamrock Lassie, of recent importation," replied when shown the sheets: "Ha, and shure it was a grate mistake..."<sup>35</sup>

French Army Capt. Ferdinand Bayard commented on associated health problems.

...because linen is scarce, and since gentlemen are all alike, people do not see why they could not sleep in the same sheets. When some of them have the itch, a very common disease in the North, it happens that others catch it by sleeping in the bed where a person with the itch has slept: in this way the disease is spread; this fact is well-known, but that does not cause an additional pair of sheets to be bought.<sup>36</sup>

Methodist minister William O'Bryan, with the luck of the Irish, appears to have miraculously avoided these dreadful conditions and thus expressed quite different opinions:

Accommodations for travellers are generally good. One essential accommodation is a good bed, in travelling; and in this the Americans excel all I ever met with in England, Norman Isles, Wales, or Ireland. In public and private houses the beds are excellent. Great care is taken in drying them well, and keeping them clean. I travelled in the country nearly three years, and do not recollect seeing a flea, or mark of one, during the time I was there. Their praise for good beds deserves to go through the earth for an example to other countries.<sup>37</sup>

Generally complaints exceeded compliments regarding inn conditions. However, perceptive travelers acknowledged that in this developing period and isolated locations, one could not expect better accommodations. Human nature what it is, what was found unfamiliar and offensive was oft recorded.

## Obstacles to Sleep

Sleep's the most strengthening  
Cordial Life receives:  
He that takes my Purse, steals Trash;  
But He that breaks my Sleep, takes from me  
That which gives no Strength to him,  
And makes me Weak indeed!<sup>38</sup>

For those hapless upstate travelers who actually procured a bed, by no means was it axiomatic that sleep necessarily followed. Nineteenth century travelers chronicle a litany of insomnia inducers: crowded beds, dirty linen, interconnecting bedrooms without locks, temperature extremes, hordes of mosquitoes, flying bats, rats and rambunctious cats, concerts of frogs, a cacophony of snoring and snorting, unruly children, lively dances, omnipresent bedbugs and fleas, and the energetic conversation of local tavern habitués and fellow travelers under the influence of strong drink in a neighboring if not the same room and possibly same bed.

De Witt Clinton, attempting to avoid attacks of kittens by sleeping on a wooden chest, did not escape the mosquitoes or the serenading of cow bells and the screaming of "drunken clowns."<sup>39</sup> Samuel Sherwood who had bribed the landlord with a dollar for the privilege of occupying one side of a straw bed in a room which contained five more was literally on guard all night as his room adjoined one occupied by fifteen or twenty gamblers.<sup>40</sup> It was "fiddling and faddling" and the "torturers of catgut" that kept Archibald Maxwell from the arms of Morpheus.<sup>41</sup> Patrick Campbell's rest at an Oneida Indian tavern when stretched before the fire on the bare floor was disturbed by an inebriated cavorting Indian who

made a hideous noise, leaping and capering about, which made me fear he would fall down or trample on my head.<sup>42</sup>

XYZ informs us of four legged sleep-disturbing creatures:

Imagined a parcel of carpenters were in the next room in full operation with saws, hammers and chisels, and dreamt of nothing in our dosing moments...but pulling down old houses and building new ones. Were called up by our fat landlord at two o'clock, half frozen...our bed clothes laying on the floor where they had been pulled, of course by...the rats and mice. Troubled in finding one of our stockings, finally discovered it sticking out of a rat hole, and one of our boots drawn in the same direction.<sup>43</sup>

American Asa Greene writing under the pseudonym "George Fibleton, the ex-barber to the King of England" satirizing English travel accounts with exaggerated humor also addressed this obstacle to sound sleep.

...they did not sleep o' nights, as I had occasion more than once to experience, when they ran galloping in troops over my bed; or kept me awake by gnawing through a neighboring partition, or making an attack upon my ears, fingers and toes. In fact, so ravenous were they, and such

was the strength of their teeth, that nothing came amiss. They would make their way with incredible speed through the thickest and toughest plank, and even, if I was rightly informed, have often been known to gnaw through solid iron.<sup>44</sup>

It was not the accommodations at Buffalo's Eagle which kept poet and newspaperman Willis Clark from resting nor the excitement of viewing Niagara on the morrow but

...influences enough about me to prevent somnolency, even in a sloth...I slept opposite a speculator in Michigan lands; and, as if determined never to be caught napping, he slept with his eyes open. The effect was really frightful. By the light of the moon, streaming through the window, I saw his cunning optics — full of bargain and sale — glaring upon me. Sometimes it seemed as if all the mortal light had departed from them; yet still they glared into mine. I aver, with sincerity, that those eyes never closed the live-long night. They seemed alive — yet dead...I awoke early; and performing certain orisons with a razor belonging to the establishment, (God knows how many chins it has reaped in its time!) before a glass which screwed my countenance into a horrific caricature, I made ready to accompany 'self and party' to the Falls.<sup>45</sup>

Bitterly cold upstate winters necessitated a fire in one's bedroom, a need often unfulfilled.

Writing to his father in England from Utica, George Parish transitioned from wagon to sleigh and describes the ritual after whatever sleep he managed in a room where the thermometer recorded "49 below the freezing point":

The first and last operation on entering and quitting a Bed...are too well known to require particular mention. Well, I was a little surprised to see the effects of this operation had been so affected by the cold, as to be converted into a *Solid Body of Ice*. My next attempt was at the Wash-hand Stand where (according to custom) I thrust my nose against an equal consistency, to the utter confusion of my cerebral organs. I then seized a Tooth Brush but on applying it, the Bristles seemed to have changed into Adamantine solidity and the violence with which they came in contact with my Teeth, rendered it doubtful, whether I should not have to apply to your friend Doctor Monsieur Duchmon for an artificial set. In fact, every thing I touched was frozen.<sup>46</sup>

Frozen or not, having the chamber pot next to one's bed, while convenient, often meant visits by other lodgers who approached one's bedside at all hours.

To bed —to sleep—  
To sleep! —perchance to be bitten!  
Ay —there's the scratch:  
And in that sleep of ours  
what bugs may come,  
Must give us pause.

—Fanny Kemble<sup>47</sup>

By far the greatest obstacle to sleep and one which did not discriminate between native and foreigner was the presence of vermin. Travelers disagreed as to the propriety of room and bed sharing, prices charged and what fixtures were necessary for comfort, but there was a near unanimous chorus that New York hostelrys had a surfeit of bugs. Before Charles Dickens pronounced American inns as not provided with enough of anything, he recalled the most bountiful supply of bugs.<sup>48</sup> Charles Murray who traveled upstate fared no better in 1835 Pennsylvania. He procured a sleeping apartment with two beds and hired them both under the pretext of a friend's later arrival. After having "nestled myself in the least dirty-looking of the beds" his "delicious prospect of solitude and quiet" was rudely interrupted "when forth rushed from tester, pillow, and post a horde of "blastet winners' whose name I abhor to write," but who bestowed "hundreds of random blows upon every part of my assaulted person, I rose and beat the whole blanketed field of battle with a large towel." After striking hundreds of random blows, with the aid of a candle he slew five of the ring leaders, but the "rebel rout" returned to the charge and gained an easy victory.<sup>49</sup> The "Citizen of Edinburgh" found 1834 canal boats and inns much infested with bugs, but

Fortunately I am one of those happy persons whom they do not bite; but still when I found them dropping from the roof of the bed on my cheek, I felt rather annoyed.<sup>50</sup>

More than annoyed was John Fowler who waged relentless war against bedbugs and continually attacked inns in his *Journal of a Tour*. Through experience he seldom trusted upstate beds, preferring sofas or even his cloak on the floor with his carpet bag as a pillow. After yet another aggravating night, Fowler concluded

...if this be a fair specimen of American entertainment of travellers,...I, for one, must be content to say, 'England, with all thy faults, I love thee still.'

Bedbugs were his constant companions and they alone would have been sufficient to deter Fowler from emigrating to the "land of freedom."<sup>51</sup> So strong were these diatribes that we ought consider to what degree foreign opinion of America perchance was shaped by the presence or absence of bedbugs.

Of amateur rank compared to bedbugs and fleas, mosquitoes were nevertheless a real annoyance. Isaac Weld awoke with hands and face covered with large pustules.

This happened too, notwithstanding that the people of the house, before we went to bed, had taken all the pains possible to clear the room of them, by fumigating it with the smoke of green wood, and afterwards securing the windows with gauze blinds...<sup>52</sup>

Some fought valiantly against impossible odds; others declined combat, abandoning their beds and retreating to neutral ground like barroom chairs, floor or hayloft. Emanuel Howitt discovered that if he could not sleep the first night, he always could the second, for the previous night's exercise of fighting those troopers prepared him for a second night's sleep that nothing could disturb.<sup>53</sup> Reverend Seth Williston near

Chenango wrote “There I lodged, but I could not sleep. Little insects, if commissioned by God, can take away all our comfort.” At Owego the Reverend put up at Maj. Pixly’s.

Slept none, or next to that being disturbed by creatures much smaller than myself. They take away my sleep & my ability to think.

Subsequently “This night slept upon the floor to avoid those creatures with whom I got acquainted last night.”<sup>54</sup> The English actress Fanny Kemble in what could be a soliloquy in one of her performances sums up the common sentiment regarding these lively impediments to sleep:

Oh bugs, fleas, flies, ants and mosquitoes, great is the misery you inflict upon me! I sit slapping my own face all day, and lie thumping my pillow all night: ’t is a perfect nuisance to be devoured of creatures before one’s in the ground; it is n’t fair.<sup>55</sup>

What did one pay for such comfort? Travelers recounted both low and high charges. Irish poet Thomas Moore wrote of the cheapness of upstate inns, but “I must own the accommodations are still lower than their price; nothing was ever so dirty or miserable...”<sup>56</sup> Lieut. Francis Hall between Rochester and Lewistown “at a log-hut dignified with the name of an inn,” disagreed:

Our accommodations were of the lowest, but our charges, of the highest rate; for, as our host sagaciously observed, ‘were he not to charge high, how was he ever to build a better house?’ By this rule we were compelled to contribute to posterity.<sup>57</sup>

### Good Night

Before bidding “Good Night” to these intrepid travelers let us hear from De Witt Clinton of Erie Canal fame and future governor as he describes a classic nocturnal experience in 1810 at Three River Point at an inn on which he and his companions bestowed the epithet “Bug Bay” where they found patrons, the landlord and family alike quite inebriated. They had a choice of two rooms, one filled with “several dirty, villainous-looking fellows in their bunks,” and the other a sort of kitchen pantry and bedroom which they had been assured contained beds free from vermin.

Satisfied with this assurance, we prepared ourselves for a comfortable sleep, after a fatiguing day. But no sooner were we lodged, than our noses were assailed by a thousand villainous smells, meeting our olfactory nerves in all directions, the most potent exhalation arising from boiled pork, which was left close to our heads. Our ears were invaded by a commingled noise of drunken people in an adjacent room, of crickets in the hearth, of rats in the walls, of dogs under the beds, by the whizzing of mosquitoes about our heads, and the flying of bats about the room. The women in the house were continually pushing open the door, and pacing the room for plates, and knives, and spoons; and the dogs would avail

themselves of such opportunities to come in under our beds. Under these circumstances sleep was impracticable ...We were...soon driven up by the annoyance of vermin. On lighting a candle and examining the beds, we found that we had been assailed by an army of bed-bugs, aided by a body of light infantry in the shape of fleas, and a regiment of musquito cavalry. I retreated from the disgusting scene and immediately dressed myself, and took refuge in a segar.<sup>58</sup>

How oft doth man, by care oppres’d  
Find in an inn a place of rest!

Referring to the opening declaration by William Combe, but now altering it to a question, many a traveler 200 years ago might justifiably respond “Not very often.”



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George W. Hewitt's private observatory, Burlington, New Jersey, c. 1894. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection. After the death of his wife and daughter, Hewitt turned to astronomy, building himself a private observatory behind his house.



# George W. Hewitt:

## THE ARCHITECT AS POLYMATH

Michael J. Lewis

Little satellites that orbit great planets are invisible to the naked eye – and to the historian of art. And rightly so, for we are concerned for the great artists, not their helpers. But it is different with architects, who practice the most collaborative of arts. The greatest of them often worked in partnership, and yet while we honor such giants as Louis Sullivan and H. H. Richardson, we know next to nothing about their firms, Adler & Sullivan and Gambrill & Richardson. Likewise with Frank Furness, Philadelphia's great rogue architect, who for more than a century has eclipsed George W. Hewitt, his early business partner.

Out of a forty-year career, Hewitt spent only eight working with Furness. But it was those years that gave us his most memorable building, the extravagantly restless Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1871-1876). Hewitt's later buildings, designed independently of Furness, were never so distinctive or imaginative. His Philadelphia Bourse and his Bellevue-Stratford Hotel were conventional buildings, perfectly polite and respectable, but free of the *Sturm und Drang* of Furness & Hewitt's work. One could almost suspect that Hewitt was the colorless factotum who puttered around the office while Furness knocked off the masterpieces.

As usual, the actual story is more complicated. Hewitt was a capable architect in his own right, with a highly personal style, if not as singular as Furness's. He was also an innovative photographer, whose chemical experiments helped introduce the revolutionary "dry plate" to American photography. And he was an accomplished amateur astronomer, who built an array of technically sophisticated telescopes and a private observatory in which to use them. In short, he was a polymath, his various achievements straddling the tidy fences that scholars build to mark their turf. Our age of specialization finds it hard to measure, or even comprehend, someone with such scattered interests. All this explains why the article you are reading is the first, leaving aside obituaries, entirely devoted to Hewitt.

George Wattson Hewitt (whose middle name is regularly misspelt) was born in Philadelphia in 1841 but for all practical purposes he was a native of Burlington, New Jersey, that stately colonial town on the Delaware. He moved there as a child and, apart from a brief interlude where he lived in Philadelphia, spent the rest of his life there. He enjoyed its picturesque riverfront, where he could fish or step onto a steamboat for a pleasant commute to Philadelphia. He photographed it frequently but not as often as St. Mary's, the Episcopal church that was the decisive building of his life.



George W. Hewitt (1841-1916), *Self Portrait*, c. 1890. Private collection. Hewitt was a "slender, mustached person, pale and reserved, who seldom relaxed from pose." Louis Sullivan's sassy description fits this Hewitt self-portrait.

A neogothic jewel by Richard Upjohn, St. Mary's was under construction from 1846 to 1854, Hewitt's formative years. It seems to have pushed him towards architecture, and Gothic architecture in particular. A lifelong member of the parish, he would later add to the church and, alas, its graveyard, with tombstones for his wife and several children. He attended Burlington College (a short-lived preparatory school and college) and then entered the office of Joseph C. Hoxie, an energetic but shifty Philadelphia architect. He remained there from 1857 to 1859, working on "several design projects for churches," an equivocal phrase that hints at unhappy competition entries.<sup>1</sup> By 1860 he was gone, leaving Hoxie to



Hewitt could commute from Burlington to Philadelphia on the iron-hulled steamboat Columbia. He photographed it on the Delaware, steaming upriver, against the distant shore of Pennsylvania. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection.

advertise for “A lad, to learn Architectural Drawing.”<sup>2</sup>

Hewitt found a much more rewarding position in the office of John Notman, Philadelphia’s brilliant medievalist. Notman had just completed Holy Trinity Church on Rittenhouse Square, one of those rare buildings that seems to capture exactly the spirit of the age. That spirit was Muscular Christianity, a byword for ardent young Anglicans and Episcopalians who believed equally in missionary work and manly athleticism, calling for a suitably muscular architecture. Notman’s church was certainly muscular: mighty round arches with deep jambs, vigorously molded arcades and corbels, and broad passages of massive, blank masonry. Hewitt was transfixed, and echoes of Holy Trinity would recur in his work for decades. By the time he finished his tutelage, his work was literally indistinguishable from his mentor’s, as you can easily confirm by looking at Holy Trinity and trying to distinguish Notman’s building of 1859 from Hewitt’s corner tower of 1867.

For Hewitt, the Gothic cause was something to be embraced joyfully, in a spirit of happy fellowship. He treated his fellow architects as colleagues, not competitors, and they reciprocated. He could lend Henry A. Sims, against whom he regularly competed, his copy of Brandon’s *Open Timber Roofs of the Middle Ages* or show him his designs for criticism and commentary. Or he could assist Emlen T. Littell, another friendly rival, by supervising construction of St. James the Greater at Twenty-second and Walnut.

Hewitt’s apprenticeship ended abruptly when Notman died in March 1865. Hewitt grieved, and would later name his firstborn son George Notman Hewitt. He soon threw his lot in with John Fraser, a capable Scots émigré with a lucrative practice (he had just built the Union League’s grand clubhouse on Broad Street). A postwar building boom beckoned and Fraser was eager to take in junior partners to share the work. He took in Frank Furness, the Civil War cavalry hero who had



L to R: *Synagogue for the Congregation Rodef Sholam*, c. 1870. Library Company of Philadelphia. George W. Hewitt, architect. Rodef Shalom Synagogue (1869-1870) was the first of Hewitt's essays in architectural color, a study in yellow Cleveland sandstone, ruddy Trenton brownstone, and red granite columns, carved and polished in Aberdeen Scotland; *The Evangelical Church of the Holy Communion* Private collection. Furness / Hewitt, architects. "A mighty fortress is our God," Martin Luther proclaimed, words that Hewitt carved into his Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion, which was itself a mighty fortress. It once stood at Broad and Arch streets in Philadelphia.

once paid him \$12 a month for architectural training, and Hewitt, who would presumably bring Notman's clientele with him. So was born the firm of Fraser, Furness & Hewitt.

For the next eight years Furness and Hewitt worked agreeably together (even more agreeably after they cast off the stodgy Fraser in 1871). Their Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts shows them working happily in tandem, for its intricate compound of Gothic, Greek, and French Renaissance lent itself to an additive design process (Hewitt seems to have been the chief designer for the grand and radiant stair hall, Furness for the eclectic facade). But in most cases they divided their commissions between themselves and tackled them independently. The buildings that we know for a fact that Furness designed – because of surviving drawings or other contemporary documents – are typically civic and institutional, such as the Mercantile Library, the Jewish Hospital, and the House of Correction, all long since bulldozed. Hewitt, naturally

enough, did most of the church work. He was responsible for St. Andrews chapel, Thirty-sixth and Baring streets; Holy Apostles, Twenty-third and Christian; and the Holy Comforter, Nineteenth and Titan. All were Episcopalian and Gothic, at least in spirit (even his occasional romanesque performances were essentially Gothic). Any of them might have been designed by Notman, had he lived.

Young architects, like all of us, begin by taking baby steps. At first blush, Hewitt's Rodef Shalom synagogue of 1869 with its exotic colors and cusped arches is as far from Notman's stately Holy Trinity as can be, and yet take away the Moorish trappings and it is the same building: the same auditorium plan with galleries, the same trilobed ceiling, the same eruption of tower at the corner. It is a transitional building, a flashy new set of clothes draped over a conventional body. But within a few years Hewitt's steps grew bolder. In 1871 came a defiantly original building, the Lutheran Church of the Holy



St. Mary's Episcopal Church, c 1877. Richard Upjohn, architect. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection. St. Mary's, Burlington, was the central building of Hewitt's life, spiritually and personally, and he photographed it again and again. It propelled him to study architecture and he would live to bury his wife and children under the shadow of its tower.

Communion, which once stood at Broad and Arch streets. It was a great leap forward from Rodeph Shalom, where he had sprinkled his ideas across the facade and compressed them into a single turbulent plane. At Holy Communion, he composed freely and thoughtfully in three dimensions. The corner tower seems impossibly top-heavy and ponderous until one realizes it is necessary to hold the sprawling composition together. It is like a spike driven into the ground, desperately keeping the willful tumble of gable, transept, narthex, and chancel from flying apart. But most startling was the palette. Hewitt had been dabbling with architectural color but now it burst forth in chromatic fury. He took a rainbow's worth of geology – black Belgian marble for the column bases, yellow Ohio stone for the voussoirs, ivory Caen stone for the capitals, brown Trenton sandstone for the base – and splashed it across a field of intensely green serpentine stone. Littell's St. James (1870) had

already familiarized him with those building stones but in Holy Communion they achieved a stridency so intense as to be almost alarming.

Hewitt called Holy Communion a "mighty fortress," quoting Martin Luther, but his building materials were insufficiently mighty. His green serpentine reacted badly in the acid air of industrial Philadelphia and the crumbling church was pulled down thirty years later. But it stood long enough to establish Hewitt's reputation as Philadelphia's greatest architectural colorist. In early 1873, while the church was still rising, an anonymous friend wrote a poetic tribute to Hewitt in the form of a mock obituary. It deserves quoting in full, with its original spelling, for it captures the high-spirited glee with which Hewitt and his peers were challenging Philadelphia's incorrigible dreariness.

## *In Memory of George W. Hewitt, architect*

George Hewitt was an architect of credit and renown  
He revolutionized the style in Philadelphia town  
The plain brick fronts with marble slabs and  
shutters painted green  
The Quaker taste is well nigh dead, forgotten like a dream  
His hobby was to reconstruct the people to the style  
Of Hewitt's curvilinear fronts, with snatches from the Nile  
Away with dingy neutral tints, this eager artist cried  
Give me instead the rainbows here, with thundercloud beside  
A blinding flash of lightning here, a crimson peacock there  
Pile on the color, make it bright, and let the people stare  
Grand and imposing was the work of this precocious man  
He did what others feared to do, and gained his cherished plan  
He lived to see the endless squares of prosy Chestnut Street  
Burst into blossom like the rose, his restless eyes to greet  
Venice with all her storied fame, and architectural maze  
Is nothing to this mighty town that sings with Hewitt's praise  
Byzantine fronts and Grecian backs, with fire proofs built inside  
And Doric columns carved with skill the spiral stairway hide  
Egypt gave up her treasures too, from pyramids and shrine.

To aid this wonder loving man, this architect divine  
Huge temples rose with magic charm, obedient to his brain  
All fretted over with burnished gold, from cellar floor to nave  
In truth he made our city what it never was before  
Replete with pinnacles and domes, but not a brown stone store.

Poor George is gone, and in his place, no other can I find.  
To be to me a trusty friend, so gentle and true and kind  
His spirit like a bird has flown, far upward in the sky  
Leaving this world of pain and care, to many a weeping eye  
So fare thee well my comrade dear, forgive a sinning mortal  
That dares to write an ode to thee, in Heaven's sacred portal  
Let us our parts as ably act, and those who can out do it.  
Each has a chance, but who'll surpass, our own immortal Hewitt.<sup>3</sup>

Whoever wrote these verses knew something of architecture, and could speak (if not spell) accurately about Hewitt's "curvilinear fronts," or his spiral stairs cleverly concealed within Doric columns. He also knew the sites where Hewitt found his architectural colors – Venice, North Africa, and Byzantium. But we would love to know what specific buildings inspired the doggerel. Rodeph Shalom could be said to be "replete with pinnacles and domes," but what buildings flaunted "Byzantine fronts and Grecian backs"?<sup>4</sup> And what narrow storefront on commercial Chestnut Street "burst into blossom like the rose"? The record is silent.

So vividly does Hewitt sparkle here that it is shocking that another observer found him to be a bloodless and unimaginative drudge, and just six months later! This was Louis H. Sullivan, who joined Furness & Hewitt as a draftsman around May 1873, remaining six months. Sullivan, of course, is one of the giants of American architecture, the inventor of the modern skyscraper and the mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright. With just a single phrase, "Form Follows Function," he

virtually discredited architectural eclecticism, the practice of using and mixing historical styles. Half a century after his stint with Furness & Hewitt, he wrote his celebrated *Autobiography of an Idea*, which has much to say about the workings of that firm. Because of his prestige and his unique vantage point, he is regarded as the authoritative source – unfortunately for Hewitt, who is treated so curtly and dismissively as to have been practically written out of architectural history.

For Sullivan it was Furness who was, as the firm's dominant creative personality, the man who "made buildings out of his head." Hewitt, by contrast, was the one who

...did the Victorian Gothic in its pantalettes, when a church building or something of that sort was on the boards. With precision, as though he held his elements by pincers, he worked out these decorous sublimities of inanity, as per the English current magazines and other English sources. He was a clean draftsman, and believed implicitly that all that was good was English. Louis regarded him with admiration as a draftsman, and with mild contempt as a man who kept his nose in books.<sup>5</sup>

That is a lot of abuse for one paragraph. The dig at "Victorian Gothic in its pantalettes" is especially amusing, pantalettes referring to the "long underpants with a frill at the bottom of each leg, worn by women and girls in the nineteenth century." So much for Hewitt's exquisitely detailed Gothic friezes and foliated column capitals – so much frilly underwear! For Sullivan, the chief offense was those English magazines in which Hewitt's nose was perpetually planted.

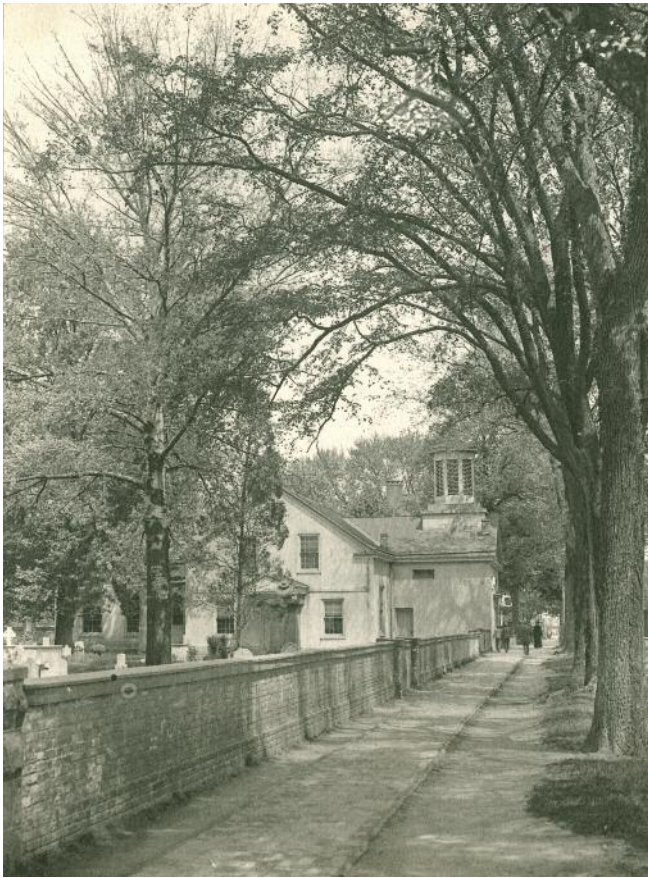
From a strictly literary point of view, Sullivan's portrait of the dissimilar partners, utterly antithetical in every way, is highly entertaining. But in order to write it, he had to omit certain inconvenient facts. One was that he admired the "decorous sublimities" of Hewitt's ornament, and strove to reproduce it. Another was that Hewitt humiliated him on one occasion, and to such an extent that it still stung decades later, enough for Sullivan to recall the story to his own draftsmen. The incident is related in Willard Connely's 1960 biography of Sullivan:

One night George Hewitt – for whom Louis coddled an aversion as a "bookworm" and "unoriginal" – on his way home from a theater saw lights in the office. Imagining that someone had forgotten to turn the lights off, Hewitt went in. He discovered Louis bent double over his board, and tracing intricate Moorish ornaments from a Masonic Temple which Hewitt had designed years earlier. The rather unsociable and intolerant junior partner remonstrated; he told the young assistant that he should have "asked permission," not only to stay in the office until such a late hour, but to rummage into the property of the firm. To this reproof Louis did not take kindly. Master and man went their separate ways in a mood less than amiable.<sup>6</sup>

This curious anecdote has been ignored by scholars, who have treated Connely's book as mere popular literature, compiled from other sources and without new information. But it can be corroborated from internal evidence, since no one but Sullivan

would have known about Furness & Hewitt's unsuccessful 1867 project for Philadelphia's Masonic Temple.<sup>7</sup> Connely would have heard the story from Sullivan's former draftsmen, William Purcell and George Elmslie, whom he knew well.

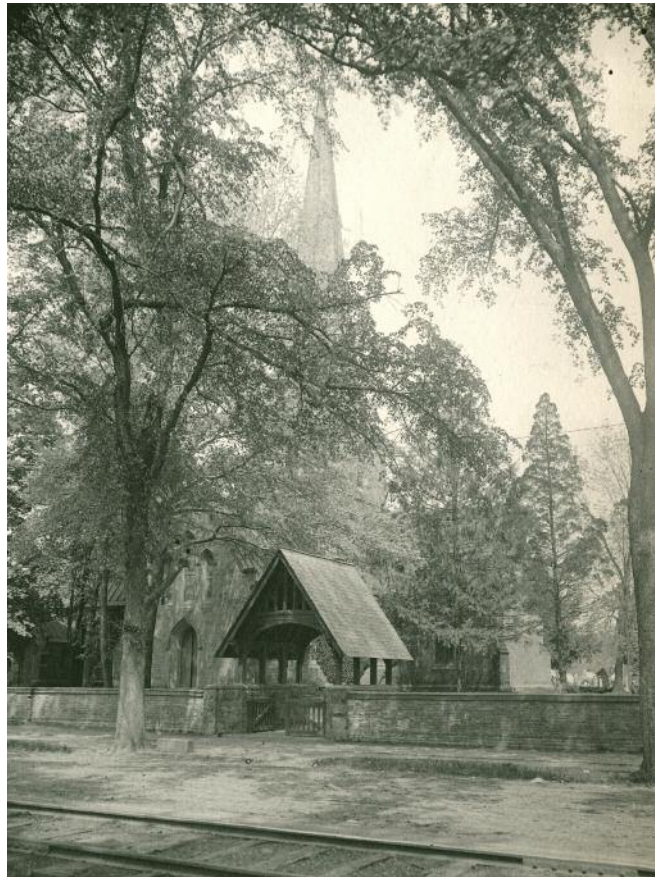
One can easily understand why Sullivan omitted the incident in his autobiography for it revealed something he found shameful, that he began his career as a brilliant designer of architectural ornament began by copying the work of another man. Seen in this light, his abuse for Hewitt's intricate ornament – *decorous inane pantalettes!* – speaks of deep guilt and chagrin, and a determined effort to conceal something, if only from himself.



firm's head draftsman, spoke delicately about what happened next:

About one year before the Centennial, Mr. Furness withdrew. Mr. Geo Hewitt was at that time just recovering from an extended spell of sickness. When Furness withdrew he took most of the work with him.<sup>9</sup>

Left unsaid was the exact nature of that extended spell of sickness. It was certainly prolonged and debilitating. Simple projects in Burlington that Hewitt might have handled with pleasure – the conversion of the original colonial St. Mary's into a Sunday School, or the decoration of the town hall for the Centennial – were handled by his brother. For the next few



St. Mary's Episcopal Church, c. 1890. Richard Upjohn, architect. Photographs by George W. Hewitt. Private collection. Hewitt's photographs record a half century of architectural stewardship at St. Mary's by the Hewitt brothers. George added the Lych Gate in memory of their brother Stephen, who died in 1882, and William converted the original eighteenth-century church into a Sunday School.

Hewitt was in his glory in 1873. His favorite client, Henry C. Gibson, an exorbitantly wealthy distiller, had just commissioned a sumptuous bank and office building at 310 Chestnut Street. No sooner had Hewitt turned in his dazzling Venetian design than he sailed to Europe, a pleasant study trip that would give him the chance to see firsthand the progress of the Gothic Revival.<sup>8</sup> But not long after his return the Furness-Hewitt partnership fell apart. First came the Panic of 1873, which dried up the firm's work and led to Sullivan's discharge. Business did not fully recover for a year or so, by which time Hewitt was unwell. His younger brother William D. Hewitt, the

years, Hewitt ran a much contracted practice, and with diminished energy. When business resumed more seriously around 1877, he seems to have leaned heavily on William. These were the years when his efforts shifted to photography.

Since about 1872 Hewitt had been dabbling at amateur photography. At that time, "wet plate" photography was still the rule. A light-sensitive chemical emulsion was spread thinly across a plate of glass, which had to be exposed quickly before the emulsion dried. The wet plate process was cumbersome; obviously a dry plate would be superior. The challenge was to find a transparent substance that would bind the emulsion to

the plate. The answer was gelatin, as proposed by Richard Leach Maddox, an English physician, in a brief notice in the *British Journal of Photography* in 1871.<sup>10</sup>

Maddox's article prompted Hewitt to begin his own experiments to find the "philosopher's stone" of dry plate photography. For the next five years he tested every possible binding agent, a quest he would describe with characteristic self-deprecation in the *Photographic News*:

I have had recourse for my preservatives to the henroost, the kitchen, the brewery, and the apothecary. I began with albumen, from that to tea and coffee, thence to beer and porter, and finally squills and nux vomica. I gave



Untitled floral still life, c. 1877. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection. "There was one peculiarity about his plates that I have never seen in any purchased plates, and that was the appearance of the image was more beautiful than I have ever seen in a commercial plate." So John Coates Brown, Philadelphia's experimental photographer, described Hewitt's handmade dry plates.

these all a trial, as well as raspberries and serum of milk...Gelatine, the most seductive of all, did well for a time, but eventually brought me into red fog and blisters [i.e., on his prints].<sup>11</sup>

(Nux vomica is a strychnine compound, making one wonder if Hewitt's "spell of sickness" was caused by poisonous chemicals in his darkroom.)

By 1877 Hewitt could report on his first successes.

According to John Carbutt, the photographic pioneer who created the 35 millimeter format, Hewitt was "the first to make a gelatine dry plate in this country."<sup>12</sup> Having found a process that worked, he applied it to his favorite subjects, picturesque views of his beloved St. Mary's and attractive still lifes usually of floral subjects. "Mr. Hewitt's plates were very good," noted his friends in the Philadelphia Photographic Society, where he regularly presented his work.<sup>13</sup> Characteristically, he did not seek to thrust himself forward or cultivate an idiosyncratic style. Much as he treated the Gothic Revival as a cooperative venture, so he regarded his fellow photographers as a kind of brotherhood. In 1881, when his practice was again bursting at the seams, he took time to make a design to "enable photographers who are entire novices in this direction to construct a glass studio."<sup>14</sup>

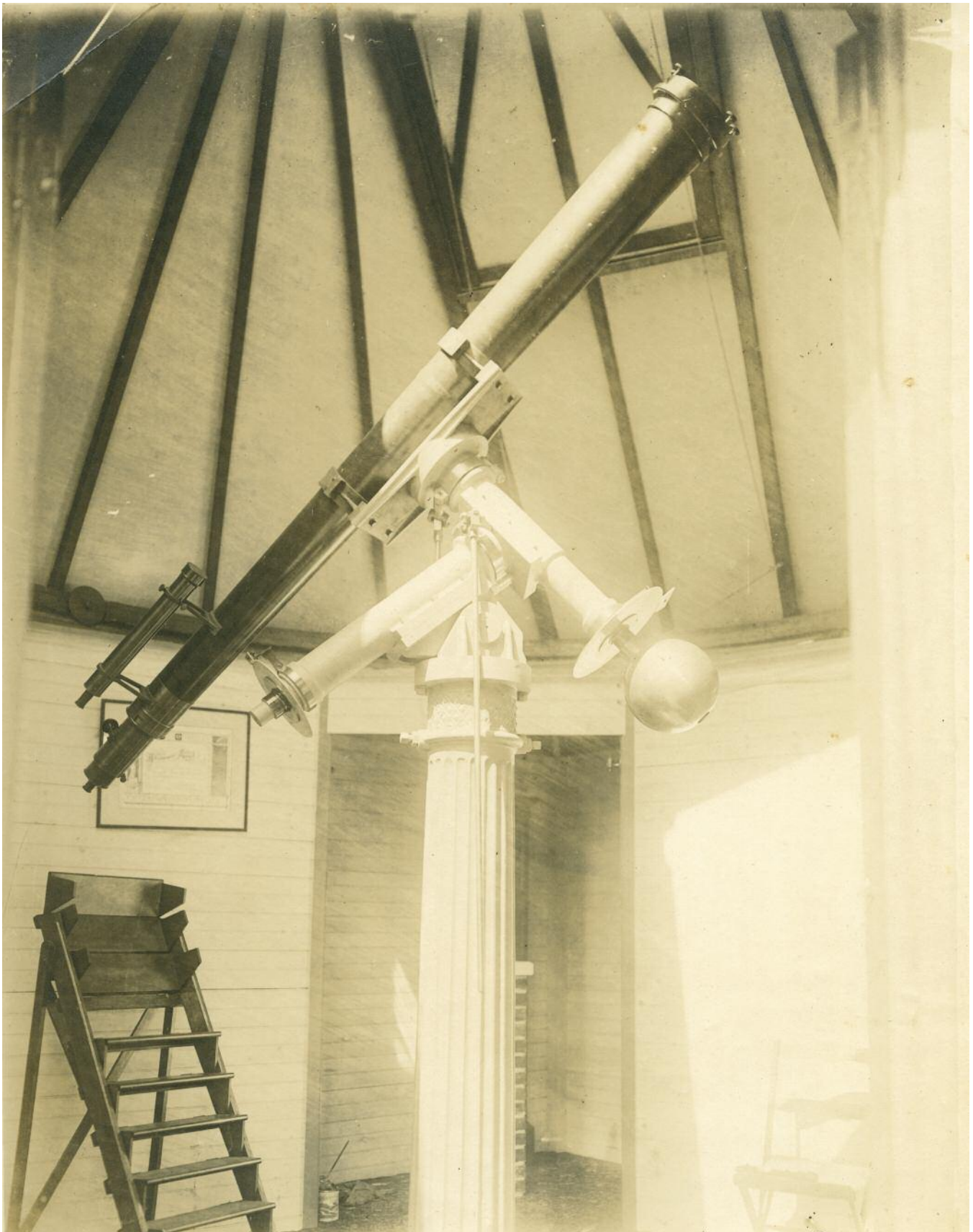
The artistic taste of Hewitt's photographs stood in stark distinction to that of his buildings. While his Gothic architecture showed sharp chiseled forms, vivid contrasts of texture and color, and an overall sense of restless energy, his photographs were distinguished by smooth transitions and a delicacy of tone. If anything, "microscopic sharpness" was something to be avoided. To look at his lyrical photograph of St. Mary's is to realize how closely he had studied the *Manual of Photography* by M. Carey Lea, another pioneering Philadelphia photographer. Lea wanted a clear delineation between foreground, middle ground, and background, a somewhat hazy background contributing to what he called "the general character and expression":

As soon as a satisfactory definition is obtained, farther reduction of the stop should be avoided with the utmost care. A small stop produces a flat picture without gradation of distance or atmosphere. A large one gives a bold clear view, with the objects in the respective planes of distance well made out. Objects that with a small stop seem pressed together, with a large one stand well out and show what they are. The photographer cannot be too strongly enjoined not, in order to obtain a microscopic sharpness, to sacrifice the general character and expression of his view.<sup>15</sup>

In Hewitt's view of St. Mary's, only the foliage in the foreground is in sharp focus, and the looming church in the background melts into a gentle softness.

Such were Hewitt's photographs during the 1880s and 1890s, which seem to have been created more for his private enjoyment than to establish himself as a photographic artist. But he was aware of photographic talent. As one of the judges at the 1893 exhibition of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, he gave a prize to young Alfred Stieglitz, then at the outset of his career.<sup>16</sup> It is pleasant to learn that Hewitt was among the first to recognize the promise of one of the most significant photographers of the twentieth century.

In later years, architecture interested Hewitt less and less, especially after the disaster of 1887. On March 28 of that year, his wife Elizabeth died "suddenly," of unspecified causes; on May 24, just two months later, his fifteen-year-old daughter Anne died. Both are buried under a single stone cross in St.



Interior of George W. Hewitt's observatory, Burlington. Photograph by George W. Hewitt. Private collection. Hewitt equipped his observatory professionally, with an astronomical clock and a transit instrument (for viewing objects as they cross the meridian), objects that contrast amusingly with the cast iron classical column on which he mounted his telescope, presumably a leftover from one of his architectural projects.





Afflicted by personal tragedy, Hewitt relinquished the practice to his younger brother William. Here he supervises his draftsmen as they finish the drawings for George Boldt's two great buildings, the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel and his private house in the Thousand Islands. On the floor is a discarded book of "Colonial Architecture," perhaps a sly jab at the new architectural fashion? Private collection.

Mary's cemetery. His brother's laconic account hints at inexpressible grief:

Mr. Hewitt was seriously affected by the death of his wife and daughter and the work devolved upon me, Geo. having stated he would withdraw.<sup>17</sup>

Withdraw he did, not only from business but from the world itself. Hewitt was only 46, and had three more decades to live, but he adopted the habits of a recluse. It was during this decade that he turned to one of the most solitary of pursuits, astronomy. The careful building of telescopes and long nights of quietly searching the sky appealed to his loner's disposition. The interest would have grown naturally out of his photography and work with lenses, and it developed quickly. He soon joined New Jersey's Camden Astronomical Society (1890), the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (1891), and the British Astronomical Association (1892).

By 1894 he had built himself a "very complete observatory at Burlington" from which, on October 13, he "watched carefully

for a chance to get a peep at Mars through the rifts of the clouds."<sup>18</sup> This was the height of the Martian canals craze, when lines observed on the planet seemed to show the engineering works of an ancient civilization. (Improved telescopes soon proved the canals to be an optical illusion, but not before H. G. Wells published his celebrated *War of the Worlds* in 1898).

Hewitt presumably took photographs of the moon and other celestial bodies with his telescope, but he does not seem to have used them for systematic research; he never published any findings. His reward lay in the craftsmanship itself. He was too self-aware not to see the strong current of obsessiveness in this. In a 1904 letter to a friend he sheepishly confessed that he had made many more telescopes than he needed, or could even use:

I have been getting the *three* six inch objectives in working shape. These are all rough ground to curves and I am now edging them up in the mill to finished diameter preparatory to truing up for thickness and smoothing. I have concluded to make them all of one correction, ...Of course you wonder what I am going to do with them.

With my present battery of *thirty five* from 9 inch down, these “Three Kings of Orient” seem to be superfluous. I am just making them for the pleasure it will give me to work out the interesting problem to a satisfactory result.<sup>19</sup>

Thirty-five telescopes! But if this was Hewitt’s preferred manner of what psychiatrists call “self-soothing,” then he needed a good deal of soothing, for his family tragedies had not ended in 1887. In 1898 his son George Notman Hewitt died, just 29 years old.

By this point, the work of George W. and William D. Hewitt was firmly in the hands of William, and it was very different in character from the picturesque neogothic of the 1870s. William had trained as an engineer at the Pennsylvania Polytechnical College, where he learned the rational method of the German polytechnical system. Planning and composition were a modular affair, governed by the grid of the structural frame. In the buildings William designed, such as the Wistar Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, one cannot but help be aware of the underlying grid. He was a heartier, jollier personality than his introspective brother. We have a delightful caricature of him at work, flogging his draftsmen to complete the drawings for the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel. By now, George was since long out of the picture, architecturally speaking. He remarried in 1908 at the age of sixty-seven; his wife, Isabel Rinehart Pugh, was fifty. He died in 1916 and, like the rest of his family, is buried in the shadow of the spire of St. Mary’s, Burlington.

What do we make of George W. Hewitt, the dignified introvert who refused to elbow himself forward the public eye, who wafted from architecture to photography to astronomy, as gently as a sleepwalker? As an architect, he never cultivated what is known as a signature style. As a photographer, he was content to perform long and thankless experiments, and to share his discoveries with his peers, taking photographs for his own satisfaction or for his small circle of peers. Likewise, as an amateur astronomer he worked in solitude, quietly enjoying the technical feat of building a working telescope and observatory, and the long hours peering through his nine-inch lens. Across the decades we have the sense of a singularly selfless man, an odd blend of reclusiveness and gregarious, with a refreshing lack of personal ego. We see these qualities in all three of his pursuits, practiced with absolute dedication and love, quiet perfectionism offering its own reward.

#### Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my new friends in the world of historic telescopes, particularly Trudy E. Bell, John W. Briggs, Matt Considine, Bart Fried, and the Antique Telescope Society. Thanks also to Bruce Laverty and Michael Seneca of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations belong to a private collection and are used here by permission.



**Michael J. Lewis** has taught since 1993 at Williams College, where he is Faison-Pierson-Stoddard Professor of Art. After receiving his B.A. from Haverford College, and two years at the University of Hannover Germany, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1989. His books include *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (2001), *American Art and Architecture* (2006), the prize-winning *August Reichensperger: The Politics of the German Gothic Revival* (1993), and he is the author of the newly published *Philadelphia Builds*. He has been a Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton and in 2008 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is the architecture critic for the *Wall Street Journal*.

#### Notes

1. *Philadelphia & Popular Philadelphians* (Philadelphia: The North American, 1891), pp. 223-224. A biographical sketch of Hewitt is in the Historical and Interpretive Collections of Philadelphia’s Franklin Institute, which also owns a set of his lantern slides and glass plates.
2. “Wants,” *Public Ledger* (April 30, 1860), p. 3.
3. Private collection. The poem is inscribed on a hand-illustrated card and dated January 4, 1873.
4. Perhaps the Henry C. Gibson House at 1612 Walnut Street is meant, a building that Hewitt is believed to have designed.
5. Louis H. Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1924), p. 195.
6. Willard Connely, *Louis Sullivan As He Lived: The Shaping of American Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), pp. 45-46.
7. It was not published until 1991. See George E. Thomas, Jeffrey A. Cohen, and Michael J. Lewis, *Frank Furness: The Complete Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), p. 147. The Masonic Temple project was not Moorish, however; Purcell and Elmslie apparently conflated it with the emphatically Moorish Rodeph Shalom.
8. “Local Brevities,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (June 14, 1873), p. 2.
9. William D. Hewitt, “An Attempt to recall Some of my Experiences,” ca. 1922. Manuscript, private collection.
10. Richard Leach Maddox, “An Experiment with Gelatino-Bromide,” *British Journal of Photography*, vol. 18 (Sept. 8, 1871), pp. 422-423.
11. George W. Hewitt, “Collodio-Albumen and other Dry Processes,” *The Photographic News: a Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography*, vol. 21 (June 1, 1877), pp. 261-262; (June 15), pp. 280-281.
12. John Carbutt, “Photographing the Invisible,” *Wilson’s Photographic Magazine* (1897), p. 222.
13. Robert S. Redfield, “The Photographic Society of Philadelphia,” vol. 9, no. 3, *American Journal of Photography* (March 1890), p. 79.
14. Edward Livingston Wilson, “The Glass Studio,” *Wilson’s Photographics* (Philadelphia, privately printed, 1881) p. 163.
15. M. Carey Lea, *A Manual of Photography: intended as a Text Book for Beginners* (Philadelphia: Benerman and Wilson, 1868), pp. 163-168.
16. “Photographic Prize-Winners,” *Philadelphia Times* (April 20, 1893), p. 6.
17. George Hewitt’s wife Elizabeth and his daughter Anne, who was born in 1872, died in 1887.
18. “Mars Shoots Past the Earth,” *Philadelphia Times* (October 14, 1894), p. 12.
19. This was Elihu Thomson, the famous electrical engineer. Letter, Hewitt to Elihu Thomson, Feb 2, 1904. Some 731 letters from Hewitt to Thomson, dating from 1891 to 1916, survive in the Thomson papers at the American Philosophical Society.

# Preservation Diary

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## Richmond, Virginia’s “Miracle on Grove Avenue”

*Dennis A. Andersen*



Tabernacle Baptist Church, 1925 Grove Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. Albert F. Hunt, architect, 1911. Built in the Classical Revival style, the church at one time housed the largest Sunday School classes in Virginia. Photo by author.

Members of the Victorian Society in America who participated in the May 2017 study tour to Richmond, Virginia, may remember their bus drive along Richmond’s Monument Avenue to the John Russell Pope-designed John Kerr Branch house. Described in the accompanying lecture was also the surrounding neighborhood, known since the 1950s as “The Fan,” or the “Fan District.” It was named for the streets radiating westward from what is now Monroe Park, reaching the Museum District. This nearly 500 acre, 85 block neighborhood was surveyed in the early 1980s for the National Register of Historic Places and is currently served by a neighborhood board that oversees their understanding of the “Fan Overlay District Guidelines.” “The Fan” is not a strictly designated historic district as such and its ongoing integrity relies on the generally strong preservation ethic of property

owners and a very vigilant neighborhood organization. The Fan District’s annual home tour, a major community event in late November/early December, attracts hundreds of visitors from the region and is a major funding source for community preservation and enrichment projects.

The district encompasses almost 3,000 contributing buildings, mostly attached or detached row houses built between the 1880s and late 1910s. While Monument Avenue boasts some splendid mansions of Richmond’s Gilded Age elite, “The Fan” was a community of white collar professionals and middle class families. It is a neighborhood remarkable for its unity in scale and its treasury of diverse architectural modes, ranging from Italianate, Romanesque revival, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Mediterranean Revival. A period of population decline in the 1950s on resulted in a few



Grove Avenue, Richmond, Virginia, c. 1920. Courtesy Virginia Commonwealth University / VCU Libraries Digital Collections.

demolitions, but most often the partitioning of larger houses in flats for students of the adjacent Virginia Commonwealth University. The last decade has seen a steady growth of professionals returning to the city, as well as young families and a more diverse population than nineteenth century Richmond could have envisioned.

Several historic churches pepper the district, among them the classical revival Tabernacle Baptist Church on Grove Avenue, designed in 1911 by Richmond architect Albert F. Hunt. Once one of the largest congregations in the city, it had fallen on hard times because of urban flight. The congregation had been offered suburban property to relocate some years back, but a residue of the congregation committed to stay. Excellent leadership in these times has been needed to rebuild membership, establish clear community outreach and service, and find the resources to maintain a rather monumental building.

Two houses adjacent to the church, both built by contractor J. Minor Delaney in 1914, have been owned by the church for decades. A concrete cinder block classroom addition was built behind the houses to accommodate what has become a popular pre-school of the vibrant congregation. The two houses became offices, then storage facilities, and were vacant and not maintained for some time. Water intrusion took its toll; exterior elements began to chip away or fail. The church was in an economically tough position and applied for a demolition permit almost three decades ago. They proposed to save the

front facades and move them back against the classroom building to create an extended sidewalk and grassy area – a solution not universally appreciated by neighborhood preservationists. It would be to some, as quoted in the local weekly magazine, “as if a giant fist punched out two front teeth in a perfect, century-old smile.”<sup>1</sup>

Demolition was set for early October 2017, and an invitation was sent out to those who might be interested in salvage of interior and exterior pieces. A local contractor happened to visit for that purpose, sized up the residual integrity of the two houses and quickly proposed to the congregation a practical means of preserving, renovating and restoring the houses to new use as residential apartments. Within a short time – days, in fact – what had been a proposed demolition was transformed into a very different project.

It involved legal provisions to reorganize the Tabernacle Child Care Center, establish the two houses and their apartments as a separate limited liability corporation, and secure historic preservation tax credits for rehabilitation of the houses. A considerable loan for the now-mature project was established from the Baptist Extension Board. The local contractor provided practical and material advice to help the congregation move successfully through the construction phases and into a new life for the buildings and for the congregation. Strong pastoral leadership and creative thinking on the part of the congregation’s governing board have yielded a project which breathes new life into the entire streetscape.



L to R: Houses at 1913 and 1915 Grove Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. J. Minor Delaney, builder, 1914. Built as speculative single family residences, these two houses are fine examples of the middle class housing in “The Fan” built during the period 1890 to 1920. Porch interior at 1915 Grove Avenue. Detailed woodwork of the window surrounds, porch ceiling and the terra cotta capitals of the pillars were carefully restored. Photos by author.

Weeks of construction involved structural and masonry repair, environmental cleanup, hazardous materials removal (lead paint, asbestos, etc.) – and all of this accomplished while the Tabernacle Child Care Center was in full operation. Thoughtful restoration of exterior terra cotta elements, slate roofing, and window details brought back to life what had been pitted, made shabby or decayed. When the scaffolding and plastic covers were finally removed, the street elevations of the houses looked much as they did in 1914. Residual mosaic tile ornaments the flooring of the front stoops. Corinthian capitals on the fluted columns were restored, and exterior colonial revival woodwork and window sashes had been sanded and painted in an appropriate color palette. Income from the apartments will support the programs of the congregation and contribute to the ongoing maintenance of the historic church building.

A neighborhood writer called this the “Miracle on Grove.”<sup>2</sup> Miracles, as it turns out, do not just happen. In this case the miracle involved an offer of different resources, an openness to avert what had seemed for years to be a foregone conclusion, and the alliance of new partners. The Fan neighborhood can be relieved that both the visual integrity of a significant block was maintained, but also that the presence and service of a major

religious and cultural institution like Tabernacle Baptist was preserved and enhanced. In a part of the city lauded for its architectural richness, but not officially and legally protected, this episode reminds us to be watchful and creative.



**Dennis A. Andersen** is a Lutheran clergyman who relocated upon retirement from the Pacific Northwest to Richmond, Virginia. He chaired the Seattle Landmarks Board for a number of years and was active in historic preservation organizations in Seattle and Portland, Oregon. He co-authored with Jeffrey Karl Ochsner *Distant Corner, Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H. H. Richardson* (University of Washington Press, 2003) and was a contributing author to successive editions of *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects* (University of Washington Press, 1994, 2014).

#### Notes

1. *Style Weekly*, August 20, 2013. Accessible at <https://www.styleweekly.com/richmond/next-life/Content?oid=1939344>
2. *Fanfare*, November 2019, p. 8.

# Preservation Diary

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## Threats to H. H. Richardson-Related Structures

*Maureen Meister*



Percy Browne House, Marion, Massachusetts, c. 1902. H. H. Richardson, architect. Courtesy Sippican Historical Society.

Three structures relating to the life and work of American architect Henry Hobson Richardson are threatened and are being monitored by scholars and organizations, including the Victorian Society in America.

Admirers of Richardson's work were startled to learn that demolition was contemplated for the Percy Browne House, 1881-82, located in Marion, Massachusetts, south of Boston, in the fall of 2019. Then this past December, a developer sought a demolition permit for the Perkins-Richardson House, c. 1803, in the Boston suburb of Brookline, where the architect lived and ran his practice after moving there from New York City in 1874. Concerns also have been raised over threats to the views of the Ames Monument, 1880-82, near Laramie, Wyoming. As of March 2021, the threats to the three structures have not been resolved.

The Percy Browne house, built for a Boston clergyman, is considered an important early example of the Shingle style. Although the smallest house designed by Richardson, it has long been admired. Mariana Van Rensselaer illustrated the gambrel-roofed dwelling in her 1888 biography of the architect. In 2008 the house was acquired by Tabor Academy and added to the preparatory school campus. After the school's plans to raze the house became known and public meetings were held, Tabor's representatives expressed some willingness



Perkins-Richardson House, c. 1880, Brookline, Massachusetts. Courtesy Public Library of Brookline, Brookline Photograph Collection.

to consider adapting the house for reuse. More recently the headmaster left, and now the Marion Historical Commission is waiting for the appointment of his replacement in order to continue the discussion and advocate for preservation.

The federal-era house that Richardson called home was built by Samuel Goddard Perkins, a Boston merchant involved in the China trade. Even though Richardson was a renter, he



Interior of H. H. Richardson's office, Brookline, Massachusetts, c. 1880. Courtesy Historic New England.

began adding to the house in 1878, erecting the “coops” where his staff worked. They have been demolished. In late December, the Brookline Preservation Commission held a remote hearing and voted to stay the request for a demolition permit for eighteen months, the maximum allowed under Brookline’s local bylaw. In February the Commission formed a study committee to consider creating a local historic district that would protect the house. A historic district may also include the home of landscape architect John Charles Olmsted, stepson of Frederick Law Olmsted, and Fairsted, the home and office of the senior Olmsted, run by the National Park Service. Establishing such a district will require a vote by two-thirds of the members of Brookline Town Meeting.

For Richardson, the commission to design the Ames Monument meant taking on a project that would honor Oakes and Oliver Ames—the source for two of his most important projects. Wealthy businessmen from North Easton, Massachusetts, Oakes had funded a community hall while Oliver left a bequest to fund a library. The Wyoming monument was erected to recognize the brothers’ role in managing and financing the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Originally located so that it could be seen by passengers traveling on the Union Pacific Railroad, the course of the tracks was shifted in the early twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the massive granite pyramid, sixty feet tall, can be viewed today by drivers and is a Wyoming tourist attraction. Low-relief portraits of the Ames brothers are embedded in its east and west faces, sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

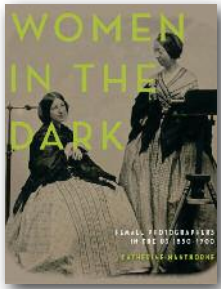
A Houston-based company, ConnectGen, proposes to erect a wind farm with turbine towers that could negatively impact the monument. The Western Area Power Administration is finishing a draft Environmental Impact Statement and will schedule virtual public hearings, likely to take place in late April. Because the Ames Monument is a National Historic Landmark, the Park Service will participate in the process, which will result in a Historic Properties Treatment Plan.



**Maureen Meister**, Ph.D., was volume editor for *H. H. Richardson: The Architect, His Peers, and Their Era* (1999), and since then, Richardson has played a part in many of her publications. She discussed him and his influence in *Arts and Crafts Architecture: History and Heritage in New England* (2014). In the fall 2017 issue of *Nineteenth Century*, she wrote about him in an article about Charles Rutan, one of Richardson’s employees and a successor in the partnership of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge.

# The Bibliophile

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## *Women in the Dark: Female Photographers in the US, 1850-1900*

Katherine Manthorne.  
Schiffer Publishing, 2020.

It was not unusual for photography studios to sign their work by printing their name on the back of the image. Finding a carte-de-visite produced by a studio headed by a “Mrs” prompted Katherine Manthorne to begin researching a relatively obscure subset of commercial photographers of the Victorian Era – women. She found that although women photographers existed during the era, they were rarely mentioned or had their collections preserved. The author states that the book is “meant to challenge our expectations, to force us to rethink who could be a photographer in the nineteenth century and how women were able to make images of interest and power.” *Women in the Dark* does a good job of just that.

Manthorne begins with the studio photography of the Civil War and the decades afterwards. Because photography equipment was so extensive and unwieldy, women that did ply the trade tended to specialize in studio work. Before soldiers went off to the Civil War, their loved ones often had them sit for a carte-de-visite. These small photographs, about the size of an index card, allowed one to keep a likeness close to the heart. As time went on, many patrons came as walk-in business, some reluctantly, equating having their photograph taken to a visit to the dentist (a feeling that lingers even today). As the art form grew, successful women reigned in clients through advertising, a phenomenon explored thoroughly in the book. Advertising was often in poetry form, making for delightful reading. In the late 1890s, Beatrice Tonnesen of Chicago inaugurated the use of live models in staged settings to compose images used for advertising, and yet her name and a long list of her clients is almost all we know of her. Tonnesen is but one of many women studio photographers whose reputation and career Manthorne recovers.

By the 1880s and the advent of less cumbersome dry-plate photography, women photographers moved outdoors. Mary Jane Wyatt obtained her own railcar and along with her husband, traveled the rails documenting the frontier life of Nebraska. Eliza Withington moved to California and documented the men who had gone west in search of gold. At the same time, Sarah Short Addis was documenting the everyday life of people along this new state’s southern border. Manthorne also covers a few talented women who never

became professionals. Among them was Marian Hopper Adams, known as Clover, who photographed her circle of distinguished friends and family in Washington, D.C. in the mid-1880s. In a deep depression, she committed suicide by drinking the potassium cyanide she used to process her images. Her husband, the writer Henry Adams, commissioned Augustus Saint-Gaudens to make a memorial to her; the deeply enigmatic figure stands today in Rock Creek Park.

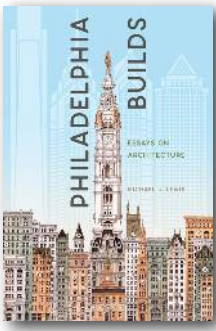
Towards the end of the Victorian Era, Kodak produced a light and portable camera that changed the photography world forever. Manthorne’s story ends as amateur photography flourishes and the market for commercial photography declines.

The book is filled with delightfully esoteric trivia that helps the reader understand how the author researched the many old, worn photographs that illustrate the book. Even though some points are redundant, they do not weigh down the narrative. In fact, all the data helps guide the reader through an art form that is no longer understood in this era when every phone has a camera. She weaves the stories of male photographers into the narrative to help one understand the context in which women worked. The book is a fast read with an abundance of intriguing images. All in all, Katherine Manthorne does a good job helping the reader understand the role of women in photography. This book is an excellent record of an almost-forgotten set of entrepreneurial, creative women.

*Reviewed by Cindy Casey*

**Cindy Casey** is a member of the board of the VSA and a retired historic restoration contractor. She writes prolifically and reads even more. In the last few years photography has become more than a hobby for her.





## *Philadelphia Builds: Essays on Architecture*

Michael J. Lewis.

Philadelphia, Paul Dry Books, 2021.

In the same way that archaeology reveals more the deeper the dig, so does Michael J. Lewis's book bring essential history back to the surface. This new book is a collection of essays that Lewis has previously published, starting with one on William Penn's plan for a "green Country Towne" and ending with a paean to the 1949 Modernist Mayfair Elementary School building (which Lewis attended) where he "first realized that a building could be an interesting object." In focusing on the microcosm of Philadelphia, Lewis creates a macrocosm of architectural history and criticism.

As when an archaeologist first brushes the dirt of eons from a rich, hidden hoard, Lewis's essays glow with intricate details. His article about Girard College is one example. Here he proposes that the 1832 competition for its design is America's most important architectural competition and the first to be fulfilled by professional builders and architects. In one of Lewis's nine other books, *American Art and Architecture*, he outlines the genesis of this awkward Greek Revival school building by Thomas Ustick Walter. In this discussion of a rich man's legacy to poor, white, orphaned boys he unearths the twenty-one archived competition entries, and examines them in depth, revealing a cross-section of American design in the early nineteenth century. The failed entries are illustrated and discussed, from that of the well-known William Strickland, to that of the nearly-forgotten upstate New York architect duo Higham & Wetherill who "seem to have regarded it as their principal duty to terrify orphans." Girard College, whose centerpiece remains the Greek Revival "Founders Hall," still thrives today, providing full-scholarship, K-12, to boys and girls of all races from single parent, low-income families.

Another essay addresses the work of the much more successful firm of Edwin Forrest Durang. Lewis dusts off Durang's transmogrification from panoramic scene painter to the Philadelphia Archdiocese's exclusive architect; "... a denominational monopoly that no other American architect has known, or ever will. This is not to say that he was a great architect, or even a good one. But he made the most of his limitations, and what we now see as his faults were to his loyal patrons his greatest assets." For this reviewer that last sentence is a triumph of craft and art equal to that of another great chronicler, Herman Melville. Excellent writing is part of the pleasure of reading *Philadelphia Builds*; even if one is not an architectural enthusiast, Lewis's delight in human foibles keep each page entertaining, as with this rich coda to the Durang essay: He spent the morning of

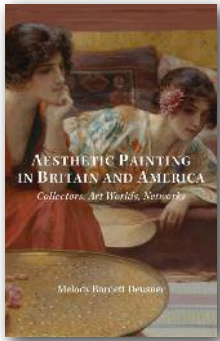
June 12, 1911 measuring the site for a new convent, then headed to the church where his daughter was to be married. After walking one block he collapsed and died "from heart disease, aggravated by heat exhaustion;" Durang was eight-three years old. The wedding proceeded without him.

Actual archaeology is the centerpiece of one astonishing article entitled "Trashing the President's House." It is an important and critical review of a 2011 installation by the National Park Service, under the aegis of revisionist historian Gary Nash. The most important archaeological discovery in the United States in the last generation, according to Lewis, is that of George Washington's temporary Philadelphia home and our temporary seat of executive government which was thought lost and unlocatable. It was found – by a singer who had a hunch – on the grounds of Independence National Park in Philadelphia. The author describes Nash's partial, reimagined house above ground which addresses the many inequities endured by the first president's enslaved people. The installation ignores the intact and distinct stone footprint of this structure, including the traces of the bow window that Washington installed (a precedent for the south façade of the White House) and barely mentions the many momentous events that occurred within its walls. Mr. Lewis ties this "item of agitprop masquerading as a memorial," to 2020's explosion of anger "among those whose sentiments [the President's House] was meant to flatter." The installation does a grave disservice by blithely overlooking architectural and cultural history instead choosing to focus on the irony of slaveholding in the shadow of the Liberty Bell.

This timely gathering of essays uncovers, preserves and puts in modern context much that might otherwise have been lost. These are illuminating essays, written with the intimacy of a native, the knowledge of a scholar and the passion of a great writer. The reader is introduced to the banal alongside the brilliant and that very human contrast enriches the telling.

*Reviewed by Warren Ashworth*

**Warren Ashworth** is an architect and professor of design and design history at the New York School of Interior Design. He is a writer, house restorer, and the Editor of *Nineteenth Century*.



## *Aesthetic Painting in Britain and America: Collectors, Art Worlds, Networks*

Melody Bartnett Deusner.

London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2020.

The last word in the title of this book – networks – could be a summary of the whole volume. Deusner offers a new take on how Aesthetic Movement oil painting functioned in Britain and America by focusing on the networks connecting artists, art dealers, patrons, their homes, their businesses, their politics – the webs that bound this cadre together. Deusner excels at pulling one strand and seeing what moves elsewhere in the web. The Aesthetic Movement is usually understood as a solipsistic world; perhaps the situation is more complex.

Deusner begins by recounting an afternoon spent looking at the Peacock Room, and seeing its interconnected patterning of ceiling moldings, gold wave- and fan-motifs on the walls, its latticework of shelving with its rhythm of blue and white porcelain, and the painting over the mantel, *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*. This deep looking prompted recollection of the story behind the room: On his own initiative Whistler overpainted expensive leather hangings, dubbed the room *Harmony in Blue and Gold*, then publicly bickered with the patron, Frederic Leyland, who refused to pay the artist in full, yet retained the decorations, using the room as a stage for prestigious dinner parties. In so doing, each constructed networks of supporters. Many years later, Charles Lang Freer bought the room, set it up in his own Detroit home to showcase his own collection of Oriental china, then donated the room to his namesake museum in Washington D.C., thereby establishing an ever-growing legacy of connoisseurs of his taste. This introduction sets the pattern for the chapters ahead: close analysis of the visual strategies of Aesthetic artwork, moving to an examination of the dense networks of personal and professional interactions linking paintings to their settings and to the people who lived among them.

Case studies examine other networks. For his music room in London, Arthur James Balfour commissioned a series of paintings and multi-media decorative panels from Edward Burne-Jones and other Aesthetic artists on the theme of the quest of Perseus. Such chivalric and spiritual themes were much favored by The Souls, a tight-knit group of aristocratic friends who delighted in the “pure connectivity” fostered by private concerts, elaborate parlor games of word play, and weekends in each other’s artistic country estates, where the group would include leading intellectuals and aesthetes.

In these settings, Balfour mingled with The Souls and other allies, forming the ties that led to his rise to Prime Minister, consolidation of the Conservative party and preservation of the British empire. As might be expected, a chapter on the Grosvenor Gallery describes its role in exhibiting Aesthetic painting, but, less expected, also

explores the Gallery’s business venture of establishing an electric light company in central London. The prominent businessmen who became customers of the service were often also art patrons, thus a literal and metaphorical circuit was formed, traced out by the wiring in the street. Another final chapter concerns Freer’s interconnections in the worlds of art patronage, domestic and public exhibition design, and sophisticated industrial production. Dwight Tryon painted a series of landscapes depicting the seasons and times of day for the front hall of Freer’s Detroit home, all with the same horizon line and in the same filigreed Stanford White-designed frames. Freer’s enthusiasms were adopted by next-door neighbor and business partner, Frank J. Hecker, whose French Renaissance mansion housed another set of landscapes by Tryon depicting the seasons.

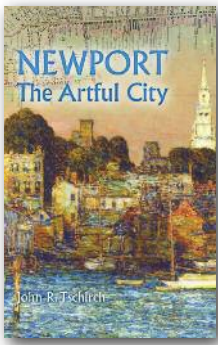
Deusner posits that these display strategies were parallel to the strategies of price-fixing and horizontal monopoly that the two achieved in the railroad car building syndicate they formed. Similarly, with Abbott Handerson Thayer, Freer negotiated not only the subjects of painting but their financing, with a complex system of loans and payment schedules, setting up “pseudo-corporate” patronage arrangements. When Freer gave his artworks to the nation, he also donated a building with precise directives on how the artwork would be displayed in a series of interconnected rooms. By prohibiting loans and further acquisitions of paintings, he fixed his networked collection in amber.

Deusner writes of Tryon’s interrelated landscapes that they were “not static but generative, proliferating without limit in a kind of infinite expansion.” This convincing argument, the thesis of the book, does not negate the popular conception of Aesthetic art as rarified and inward looking, but it does move beyond it. One might argue that the author’s focus on the influence that paintings had means that she can speak only about a relatively small world. She barely describes the work done by vast networks of porcelain and pottery, silver, wallpaper, and architecture in the Aesthetic Movement style, as well advice books and magazines advocating art for art’s sake as a lifestyle.

These objects and ideas circulated among a vast and growing middle class on both sides of the Atlantic. To trace all these networks, however, would require another book, or many books. Perhaps we have further volumes to expect from this author – a welcome prospect.

*Reviewed by Karen Zukowski*

**Karen Zukowski** is an independent writer and historian of nineteenth-century visual culture. She is the book review editor of *Nineteenth Century*.



## *Newport: The Artful City*

John R. Tschirch.

Newport Historical Society in association with D. Giles Limited, 2020.

To most Victorian scholars and enthusiasts Newport stands out at the go-to destination for the grand summer “cottages” such as the Breakers and Marble House by Richard Morris Hunt, along with innovative Shingle Style buildings such as the Isaac Bell Jr. house by McKim, Mead & White. But the picture is much bigger. Many say (yours truly included) that Newport has more great architecture per square foot than any other American city. This includes some fine Colonial buildings such as the Hunter House (c. 1720), as well as three structures by Peter Harrison: Redwood Library (1748), Touro Synagogue (1759), and the Brick Market (1772). These three may be the earliest architect-designed buildings in America. Less well known is the fact that in 1780, some 20% of the city’s population of Newport was Black, an outcome of the booming “triangle trade” of slaves, sugar and rum between Africa, England and her north American colonies. In a later era, Newport attracted writers, such as Thornton Wilder, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Henry James who observed of the Colony House, built in 1741: “Here was the charming impression of a treasure of antiquity.” So, since its founding in 1639 Newport has gone through many phases, from its growth as a major seaport, to a downward spiral during its occupation by the British during the Revolution, to its discovery as a summer place by Southerners, Bostonians, and then New Yorkers, to construction of the “cottages” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the 1920s and 30s Newport suffered and then in the 1940s and 50s came Modernism and urban renewal. While sad changes were made to areas of the waterfront, historic preservation eventually became credible and many structures were saved from the march of time.

In *Newport: The Artful City*, John Tschirch explicates the built environment of the city not chronologically, but visually and geographically in a series of profusely-illustrated chapters treating the various sectors of the city. The buildings in Newport have been treated by numerous scholars with perhaps the most important being Antoinette Downing and Vincent Scully’s *The Architectural Heritage of Newport 1640-1915* (1952, reprint 1967). As a former staff member of the Preservation Society of Newport County, Tschirch’s work reached beyond pure architectural history to encompass topics such as the lives of the servants in grand, technologically-complex mansions such as the Elms. Tschirch’s book, while indebted to previous scholarship, is not a study of individual buildings but a much broader view of the city, the built environment, and the streetscapes. To further broaden the narrative, three scholars wrote short “case studies” on specific topics: David Silverman examined the

indigenous Native Americans; Edward E. Andrews discussed African Americans and immigrant populations; and Ellen Warburton explored George H. Norman and the infrastructure of Newport. Yes, the “cottages” do appear, but not as isolated monuments; instead they are parts of a whole.

To tell the story, Tschirch uses a tremendous number of illustrations – 232 – mainly primary source material drawn from the Newport Historical Society’s archives. These include 146 photographs, and daguerreotypes ranging in date from c. 1870 to the 1960s, as well as old post cards, magazine illustrations, and paintings, drawings and other artworks. Very important are a series of photograph plates commissioned by the young Charles McKim in 1874 and taken by William James Stillman. These are perhaps the first photographic record of Colonial era buildings, documenting not just the front facades, but the side and the rear of these buildings with all their additions, sheds and even water pumps. Other dramatic photographs show houses being jacked up, or split in two for moving and urban clearing. Many images show events happening amid the buildings: parades, celebrations, and women promenading down the commercial part of Bellevue Avenue. Cars with tail fins and images of Navy uniform shops are unforgettable photographs and part of Newport’s history. Paralleling the wide range of photographs are the 42 maps, both overall and details. Especially interesting are the maps of Newport’s wards, which show the evolution of the town.

In sum, *Newport: The Artful City* employs an extremely innovative method that tells the story of the different parts of the city, from the dense urban waterfront, to the more suburban lots of Bellevue Avenue, to the countryside at the southern end of the Island. The book gives us a new view of Newport over the years and is a model for studies of other cities and landscapes.

*Reviewed by Richard Guy Wilson*

**Richard Guy Wilson** is Commonwealth Professor Emeritus of Architectural History at the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia. His research interests have long included the firm of McKim, Mead and White, and he has been the director of the Newport venue of the summer school of the Victorian Society in America.

# Milestones

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## Unsung Soprano: Madame Sissieretta Jones

Anne-Taylor Cahill

In 1893 Madame Sissieretta Jones (1868-1933) became the first Black American soprano to headline a concert at Carnegie Hall. Sadly, too few have ever heard of this remarkable woman billed as “The Black Patti.” Why this title? Let us look back a bit in American opera history.

In the nineteenth century Americans began to become seriously interested in opera. Opera companies were beginning to bloom around the country and European stars could sell out American opera houses. Much excitement was generated by the appearance of Adelina Patti. This soprano was an Italian beauty with an angelic voice, and Giuseppe Verdi described her as perhaps the finest singer who had ever lived. She became an international star. This was the singer to whom Mme. Jones was compared. It was considered a high compliment to any singer and was a usual public relations ploy to engender interest in upcoming singers. Mme. Jones did not feel she deserved this compliment, saying to a reporter, “It rather annoys me to be called The Black Patti...perhaps someday I may be as great but I have a long way to go.”

Mme. Jones became the most famous and wealthy of early Black sopranos. Although she broke many racial barriers, she never was able to penetrate the barriers that kept many nineteenth century opera companies segregated. Black opera singers today owe Mme. Jones a great debt because she paved the way for them to bring their talent to the forefront.

Born in Portsmouth, Virginia in 1869, Mme. Jones was the daughter of Jeremiah Jones, a pastor, and Henriette Jones, a housekeeper. Even at an early age she was constantly singing. It was said at age three she would climb up on a chair or a table and sing joyously. When she was about seven years old the family moved to Rhode Island, where her father became the pastor of a local Black church. It was the opening of a door. Mme. Jones was able to pursue her musical interests, studying voice at Providence Academy of Music, The New England Conservatory of Music, and the Boston Conservatory.

Her New York debut was in 1888 at Steinway Hall. It was there she earned the soubriquet “The Black Patti.” Shortly thereafter she signed a two-year contract for a tour of the West Indies and South America. She was warmly received with receptions and dinners everywhere she performed. Often local dignitaries awarded her a gold medal for her excellence. Over the two years Mme. Jones collected quite a few gold medals (seventeen in all) and proudly wore them on her concert gowns for the rest of her career.

After her return to the United States from the tour she was invited to sing at the Washington, D.C. AME Metropolitan



Madame Sissieretta Jones, c. 1895. Napoleon Sarony, photographer. Courtesy Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum Portrait Collection Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University

Church. Her fame preceded her. Every seat was filled. People had to be turned away. Her next stop was the White House. Although other Black singers had performed there Mme. Jones was one of the first Black female vocalists to perform there. Mme. Jones was invited to give a luncheon concert in the Blue Room for President Benjamin Harrison, his wife and their guests. First Lady Caroline Harrison, who had herself studied music, was so impressed that she presented Mme. Jones with a bouquet of White House orchids. Mme. Jones returned to the White House a number of times, singing for presidents Cleveland, McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.

A week after her White House debut the *Washington Post* declared, “She is of a very pleasing appearance and undoubtedly gifted with a voice revealing in strength and sweetness the tones of the world’s most famous prima donnas.” The *Washington Bee*, the Black newspaper, reported, “... she is the lady who has won a reputation of which she should be proud, one who is an honor to the colored race.”

1892 saw her at Madison Square Garden, where she received

rave reviews. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* declared, "...the statement made by her manager that she is the greatest singer of her race should be altered to the statement that she is the greatest singer of any race."

Shortly thereafter Mme. Jones signed a two-year contract with renowned promoter Major J. B. Pond. Major Pond represented such luminaries as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The contract specified \$150 a week, equal to \$3,650 today. In addition, this included travel expenses, in particular a sleeping train car, first class hotels, and a carriage as well as a personal maid. For a while, Mme. Jones was the most highly paid Black performer of the time.

A week after signing with Major Pond, Mme. Jones sang at Carnegie Hall in the Recital Room.

The concert sold out. Mme Jones sang popular songs as well as opera selections from Gounod and Verdi. Again she was a hit. That date was June 15 1892 and it was said the hall was "so crowded as to be suffocating." Such success engendered a tour of European capitals where she sang for crowned heads of state, including the Prince of Wales. Everywhere she was received enthusiastically.

Returning to this country, Mme. Jones formed the Black Patti Troubadours. It was her own troupe but under professional management. This nationally touring group presented popular songs and the grand finale was always *The Operatic Kaleidoscope*, which featured Mme. Jones singing operatic selections. Until her retirement in 1915 Mme. Jones continued to tour the nation, bringing opera to all.

After her retirement Mme. Jones was somewhat reclusive and lived quietly in her Rhode Island hometown until her death in

1933. At the end she was financially reduced. She had spent her time and much of her money taking care of her sickly mother. The kindness of friends saw her through difficult times. Despite her own ill health and financial problems she would often smile and say, "The sun is shining." The song never left her heart.




**Anne-Taylor Cahill** is a professor of philosophy at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and serves on the national board of the Victorian Society in America. She is a Docent Emeritus of Hunter House Victorian Museum and has a special interest in Victorian silver and nineteenth century landscape paintings.

For further reading:

James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*. (DeCapo Press, 1991).

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