

Charles Brigham biography by David Russo

Charles Brigham was descended through his father from Thomas Brigham, who emigrated from England in 1634, and after a short stay in Watertown settled in present-day Sudbury, where he practiced civil engineering, a somewhat unusual profession at the time. Brigham was descended on the maternal side from Lieutenant Griffith Crafts, who settled in Roxbury in 1630.

Charles Brigham, was born in Watertown, Massachusetts, on June 21, 1841, to a major Watertown lumber dealer, and lived in the Coolidge Tavern as a child, a Revolutionary War-era tavern where George Washington had slept and taken meals for a time. Brigham was educated in the Watertown schools and graduated at age 15 in 1856 in the first class of Watertown High School.

Thereafter, Brigham spent another year at the high school, preparing to pass a college examination. Instead, however, he became an apprentice in the office of Calvin Ryder, a Boston architect. This experience continued for three years, and he then secured a position as draughtsman in the establishment of the well-known Gridley J.F. Bryant, a man of talent who left his mark upon the Boston architecture of his day, including the Charles Street Jail and the Old City Hall.

Brigham, then, had no formal architectural education and his genius was therefore self-taught and self-learned.

This apprenticeship was interrupted when the Civil War broke out and Brigham enlisted in 1862. He served as second sergeant in a company of the K Company of the Fifth Massachusetts Regiment commanded by Captain Crafts, who may very possibly have been a distant relative of his. Brigham served until late 1863. During the war, Brigham provided topographical sketches as part of his reports to superiors.

After the war, he returned to Boston and found a position under John Hubbard Sturgis, an architect who had been more or less closely associated with Mr. Bryant. At twenty-five he entered into partnership with Sturgis, an association continuing until a short time prior to Sturgis' death in 1886, a period of twenty years.

In these earlier days of Brigham's professional experience his attention, as well as that of his partner, was mainly given to domestic architecture, especially in the fashionable areas of Boston's Back Bay, Newport, Rhode Island and elsewhere, including the Charles Joy House in the Stick style at 86 Marlborough Street in Boston. Indeed, Sturgis & Brigham are credited with introducing the English Arts & Crafts style to Boston. As time went on, Brigham became responsible for the major portion of the designs. Brigham

remodeled both J. Carey, Jr.'s gardener's cottage in Newport in 1877 and Henry Whitney Austin Dairy in Milton, in 1878, both in the Stick style.

Domestic design, however, did not wholly absorb the inventive energies of the firm, and they were engaged to design the Museum of Fine Arts, in Copley Square, their first and most important design of a public nature. Completed in 1876, the structure was credited as introducing the use of terra-cotta to building structures in the United States, although contemporaries condemned its use for external decoration. The building was demolished in 1909 to make way for the Fairmont Copley Plaza Hotel in 1911.

A much more important edifice from an architect's point of view is the Church of the Advent, on Brimmer Street, Boston, begun in 1876 but not completed until 1886, a cruciform building of moderate dimensions in a restrained and rather severe versions of First Pointed or Early English Gothic. It is in the main design of Brigham, and calls to mind to some extent the famous church by Pearson in Red Lion Square, London.

Another structure for which the firm of Sturgis & Brigham was responsible is the Boston Young Men's Christian Association Building at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets, which, with its main entrance gained by a broad and high flight of steps and its crow-stepped gables. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire in 1910.

For some twenty years following the death of Sturgis, until he organized the firm of Brigham, Coveney & Bisbee, in June, 1906, Brigham continued the exercise of his profession with a partner for a portion of the time only--John Spofford, well known for his designs in Maine--a period in which his practice covered a wide territory, instead of being confined mainly to New England as heretofore, and embraced a great variety of structures and styles of design. He designed many mansions within this period as far west as California (the immense structure at Redlands, the home of Albert Burrage) and as far south as Valparaiso in Chile, as also in the cities of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC, while yet other buildings of a public nature in these localities testify as satisfactorily both to his skill and his remarkable versatility.

During this period, Brigham also did continue designing public buildings. Indeed, after working with Sturgis, Brigham's first independent projects were designing subway stations in Boston, including the now demolished Scollay Square and Adams Square stations. Brigham also designed the Stoughton Railroad Station in a Richardsonian manner in 1887.

Brigham's Boston practice also continued to flourish. Albert C. Burrage's residence in Boston is a structure of note designed by Brigham, at the

southwest corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Hereford Street. It is spacious and well- designed light sandstone mansion in the ornate French Chateausque manner, which presents a striking contrast to its severer looking neighbors, in the Colonial Revival style. Indeed, Brigham introduced this ornate style to a more architecturally plain New England, twenty years after it was fashionable in other places such as New York. Predictably, commentators panned its ornate and lavish elements as garish, lacking taste and a waste of money. It remains the only French Chateausque building in Boston.

Brigham also collaborated with Burrage in designing the Burrage Hospital for Crippled Children on Bumpkin Island in Boston Harbor. Although this hospital was destroyed in a fire in 1945, it served as an important medical institution of its day and is a physical manifestation of Brigham and Burrage's philanthropy.

It is likely that Brigham met Burrage on one of Brigham's subway projects (Burrage was a member of the Boston Transit Commission, charged with building the subway system) or when Brigham & Sturgis designed the Ames-Webster House at 306 Dartmouth Street, with which Burrage would have been familiar.

The Public Library, Laconia, New Hampshire, however well suited to its purpose, offers no striking excellence of design and suffers materially from the conditions of its site. This building was designed by Brigham in 1903.

Of much greater importance is the New Bedford Institution for Savings (now an office building), which displays Brigham's talent in a new aspect. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new style of bank building has been developed, a comparatively low edifice with an interior consisting practically of a huge apartment whose ceiling is the roof and which is lighted mainly from a dome, and the New Bedford structure has been designed on these lines. The most striking exterior feature is the high-placed Corinthian portico adorning the northern facade.

In the late 19th century, the need for extensive enlargement of the statehouse in Boston, became imperative, and the square in the rear bounded by Mount Vernon, Temple, Derne, and Hancock Streets was selected as the site of the extension. The land was covered by a row of brick dwellings on Mount Vernon Street and a massive granite reservoir immediately behind them. After several years these structures were removed and Brigham was selected as the architect of the new building—a commission of great importance, but one in whose execution he was necessarily much hampered by the obligation of conformity, in a greater or less degree, to the lines of the time-honored Bulfinch original facing the Boston Common.

At the time, the current park located to the east of Brigham's wing was not contemplated and the buildings between the Statehouse and Bowdoin Street ("upper Temple Street" at the time) were demolished, exposing the eastern portion of the wing, which the architect expected to be obscured.

Nonetheless, when the decision was made to demolish those buildings, thus exposing the eastern flank of the proposed wing, it was too late to modify the plans. Had this been foreseen at the start, the architect would have planned his east facade with reference to the new conditions and with an eye to a more imposing effect. The real facts in the case being unknown to most persons, the rather unimpressive criticism-criticism legitimate enough had the present facade been designed for a park front, for which, indeed, it is certainly inadequate, but quite from the mark if considered with reference to actual conditions when first designed.

The dignified classic portico on a lofty basement that forms the north façade is remote and this is unfortunate since it is unquestionably the noblest exterior feature of the great structure and when viewed as the close of some narrow street vista, as, for instance, midway of Myrtle Street on the west, is strikingly effective.

If under existing conditions portions of the exterior may not unjustly be charged with inadequacy of effect, the same cannot be said as to the interior. The Hall of Representatives is a singularly imposing legislative chamber; the staircases and almost innumerable corridors are spacious and well designed; the State library, placed at the north end of the edifice, quite apart from the bustle of legislative business, is an attractive, restful apartment of ample proportions; the octagonal Memorial Hall, with its sixteen columns of Siena marble, its tattered battle-flags, and its subdued mellow lights is none too rich in effect for its purpose; and the great contrast between its tawny marbles and the white and variegated marbles (six different types of Italian marble in all) of the adjoining court and the Senate stairways is one to impress the least observing. The majestic marble Grand Staircase leading up to House and Senate chambers is flanked by intricately designed wrought iron railings called "black lace."

Another of Brigham's notable designs is the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, completed in June of 1906, designed with partner Coveney. Although as a whole the temple in its style exemplifies a particularly rich phase of Italian Renaissance, for a part of its motif we must go to the great mosque in Constantinople which Sultan Ahmed I erected in 1608-14, and upon which is superimposed a high colonnade crowned by dome and lantern, but in reality the body of the edifice is practically an ellipse 233 feet long and 125 feet wide. From the ground to the top of the lantern the height is 228 feet. Owing to the narrowness of the streets about it and the closely built character of the section of Boston where it stands, the exterior of the temple can be viewed, so far as the major part of it is

concerned, only at great disadvantage, but fortunately its noblest feature, the swelling dome, can be seen from many distant points of view, and when so beheld it dominates the whole of the region around it as does the dome of Bulfinch fame dominates the whole of Beacon Hill.

American taste inclines strongly to domes: including domed state capitals. The dome of the Christian Science temple is a concession to the same popular taste, and while in no sense a copy of an elder structure of the same nature, it nevertheless recalls in a general way several domes familiar to the European tourist. Built upon pendentives after the Byzantine mode, the colonnade of masonry around the base is a thoughtful reproduction of that on the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie at Milan, while the type of the exterior dome of terra-cotta is furnished by that surmounting the church of the Madona Della Staccata at Parma. Yet it is not the Parmesan dome which is viewed by the worshippers within the temple, but one designed after the mosque of Santa Sophia at Constantinople, though with only a little more than one half the diameter of that above the great church of Justinian.

After designing the Christian Science Church, Brigham designed St. Mark the Evangelist Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, a new parish set-off from St. Gregory's Church. In 1914 the parish commissioned Charles Brigham to design the red brick church in perpendicular gothic style, very derivative of All Saints', the well-known Episcopal church in Dorchester.

Brigham thereafter designed the Coddington School in Quincy, Massachusetts. He brought to the school the same clarity of design with classic details, but refrained from endowing the school building with a panoply of ornamentation. Instead, the elegance of the facade is manifested with few architectural details and an emphasis on the classic fenestration of the central pavilion.

Brigham also designed a significant number of public buildings in Fairhaven, overlooking Buzzard's Bay. Here, within a comparatively contracted area, are more structures of architectural significance designed by a single firm than elsewhere in New England, at the very least. The high school is a boldly designed edifice 172 feet in length by 101 in breadth. Brigham designed a public library of generous size, a town hall of yet more ample proportions, an inn of exceedingly hospitable aspect, and, forming parts of one architectural grouping, a towered stone church with parish-house and parsonage adjoining. Each of these seven structures is distinctly a building of note, and each is the work of Brigham. In Fairhaven, Brigham also designed the now demolished spacious country mansion of Henry H. Rogers, a wooden edifice which was engendered with a pleasing irregularity of outline.

Each of these buildings was the gift of Rogers to his native town, and cost

was not an object in construction. Had Rogers started with the intention of eventually erecting the entire eight, or could the architect have foreseen such a final result, some definite style might have been chosen in the first instance, to which the structures subsequently built should have confirmed. For example, the church is in the third Pointed or Perpendicular phase of gothic, and had the Rogers mansion, the school, the inn, the library, and the town hall been designed in the same style and executed in the same material, we should have seen wrought out in gray stone such harmony of architectural effect on a large scale as can be seen nowhere in America today. But presumably Rogers contemplated in the beginning no such series of architectural gifts to Fairhaven, and consequently his architect is not to be blamed for not seizing a non-existent opportunity.

The Millicent Library, the earliest of Brigham's designs in this locality, was erected in 1892, and was a gift to the town from the children of Rogers in memory of their sister Millicent. It is a commodious structure of Dedham stone and buff terra-cotta. Far different is the effect of the town hall across the street from the library, an edifice whose civic character is confessed in its outlines, while the warm, rich tones of the brick and stone and terra-cotta are especially pleasing. Its proportions are generous, and the ornamental details well studied.

Farther south, and fronting on the same street, is the Tabitha Inn, a well-planned and most attractive appearing country hotel occupying the centre of a square of green bounded by four streets. Of the Rogers mansion, at the end of the street already mentioned, there need little more be said here than that, while of great size, it is dignified without being in the least pretentious, and as the country home of a man of great wealth reflects much honor upon the architect who had already many beautiful mansions to his credit ere this one was erected.

Latest built of all the architect's Fairhaven structures is the high school. The exterior is imposing from its size and disposition of parts, and inspection of the interior quickly reveals how far Americans have traveled from the educational ideal once embodied in "the little red schoolhouse." The Elizabethan-influenced design includes marble floors, oak paneling and stained glass windows. Other unique architecture throughout the school include an auditorium with beamed ceiling and carved wood gargoyles, an indoor track and the school was the first to have an indoor basketball court.

Brigham's crowning achievement, not only at Fairhaven but in his professional career may be Fairhaven's Unitarian Church, which was rumored to cost over \$1 million. Rogers dedicated this church to his mother's memory. The church is in the Third Pointed Gothic style and in its outline includes a nave of five bays and choir of one, lean-to aisles reduced to the proportions of ambulatories only, a south porch, and a tower 156-feet

in height at the northwest angle. The major axis of the edifice is from east to west, and the entire length is 115 feet. Above the high pier arcade is a lofty clerestory, while the wide choir arch reaches nearly to the roof-level. The nave is spanned by a tie-beam ceiling of English oak with carved details of decoration; the choir and porch are vaulted in stone with stellar ribs; and the lower stage of the tower, entered both from the nave and the north aisle and designed for a baptistery, displays a fan traceried stone vault of great richness.

Interior and exterior both exhibit an infinite amount of detail in sculptured stone wrought out with the rarest skill and evidently with enthusiasm and individuality. The many windows, all from designs by Mr. Robert Reid, are worthy of their place, and the great choir window, whose subject is the nativity, particularly challenges attention with its glorious blues and vermilions and the sweeping curves of its various lines.

The last-named building is of stone in the lower story and of half-timber work in the upper ones, which slightly overhang the lower and display broad gables with richly carved barge boards possibly studied from such an English example as the fifteenth-century Moot Hall at Aldeburgh in Suffolk. Indeed, here, as in cloister and church alike, the wealth of inventive decoration is a most conspicuous feature.

Turning to Brigham's Watertown life and designs, he resided at 84 Garfield Street in a home he designed, along with two outbuildings: his wife's studio at 92 Garfield Street and the servants' quarters at 100 Garfield Street. His own home was a 3½-story building that reflected a panoply of architectural styles, including Tudor, Swiss Chalet, Craftsman and Queen Anne. Unfortunately, the upper stories of this house were destroyed in the great hurricane of 1938, although the first floor remains today and the house is an unusual looking cottage in the Queen Anne style. The servants quarters today is a private home at 100 Garfield Street and is in miniature form, a substantial representation of the original master house, complete with massing, Tudor half-timbering, organic brackets supporting the attic projection, porch balustrades and decorative cement-work.

Brigham's genius in Watertown and beyond was his ability to meld varying and seemingly incongruous architectural elements into a coherent working mass. Many of Brigham's residential designs in the proposed historic district reflect the fusion of late Queen Anne and Shingle styles with the seemingly incongruous Colonial Revival. Gone is the spindle work and lace-like brackets associated with the typical Queen Anne style, replaced with more classical features of the Colonial Revival. Excellent examples of this are the houses at 40 Garfield, 51 Garfield, 69 Garfield, 77 Garfield, 105 Garfield, 2 Brigham and 3 Brigham. Indeed, each of these houses is barren of any detailed spindle work, are massed in the traditional Queen Anne form but

clad in shingles.

Other Brigham-designed buildings within the proposed district that exemplify this fusion of styles include, 24 Garfield Street, 32 Garfield Street, 50 Garfield Street, 68 Garfield Street, 92 Garfield Street, 100 Garfield Street, 110 Garfield Street and 116 Garfield Street.

Brigham was a native of Watertown and thoroughly active in civic matters. He was in the first graduating class of Watertown High School in 1857. Later, he served as Selectman, a member of the School Committee, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Free Public Library for more than thirty years (1889-1922). He was also Director of the Union Market National Bank, the first President of the Watertown Cooperative Bank, a long-time member of the Watertown Historical Society (with his peers and fellow Garfield Street residents, Rev. Edward Rand and library founder, Solon Whitney) and even served on the town's Water Commission from 1900-22.

Brigham was instrumental in the preservation of the Edmund Fowle House (the house that served as the Massachusetts legislature in 1775 and 1776 and where the first treaty of the United States was signed) and contributed his design services to the First Parish Church for the former Parish house (and current church). He also donated plans for a high school building (later the East Junior High, and presently "Brigham House" an assisted living facility). He also designed the Watertown town seal.

He was thoroughly a native son of Watertown who gave back to his town tremendously and without cost.

Charles Brigham's work in Watertown reflects the eclecticism and historicism prevalent in the last quarter of the 19th century. His work initiated fusion of the complex eclectic references of the English Queen Anne revival with American colonial design. The resulting coastal New England houses of the 1880s by Brigham and other Boston architects defined the shingle style in one of the most original and distinguished epochs of American architectural history, from which other notable architects, such as Henry Hobson Richardson, emerged.

A member of the First Parish Church in Watertown, he designed its social hall located at 36 Church St. Constructed in 1888, it serves today as the sanctuary of the First Parish Church. In addition to the houses in the proposed historic district, he designed a number of houses along the eastern portion of Marshall Street.

Brigham died in 1925 at Shelter Island, New York, where he resided for the last few years of his life with his sister Maria Brigham. He is buried in the Common Street Cemetery in the modest family plot.

Charles Brigham is an architect of the highest order and is of national importance.

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