

Parris' Perusal

By CHRISTOPHER P. MONKHOUSE

THE following study of Alexander Parris will deal with his career as architect and engineer entirely from the standpoint of his architectural library rather than the buildings that he designed. There are two reasons for taking this approach. First, two books originally owned by Parris are now in the Society's collections and are deserving of attention. And secondly, before undertaking a study of the buildings designed by Parris, it seems only logical to become thoroughly familiar first with the architectural books available to him. On this basis it is then possible to determine, in whole or in part, the sources for many of Parris' own ideas. These in turn find expression on the drawing board, and, ultimately, in the buildings themselves. Therefore, analyzing a building before consulting the books used by the architect is much like putting the cart before the horse—a rather unsatisfactory approach. In a sense, then, this study will attempt to lay the necessary groundwork for future and more strictly architectural discussions of Alexander Parris as architect and engineer.

Alexander Parris was born in Hebron, Maine, on November 24, 1780. With the death of his father, Matthew Parris, in 1783, his family returned to their former home in Pembroke, Massachusetts. Here Parris was educated in the "common schools." Upon completion of his formal education, Parris taught at the Central School of Plymouth.¹ That he was a teacher may well account for his love of books, which is reflected in the library he eventually amassed, and

the success he evidently had in training apprentices for the architectural profession in his office. It was during these formative years that Parris was himself apprenticed to the carpenter's trade at the shop of Mr. Bonney in Pembroke. According to tradition, "The occupation of his leisure moments was the study of Nicholson's [*Principles of*] *Architecture*."² According to Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings, Nicholson's *Principles of Architecture* does not appear frequently among the books used by housewrights in New England.³ Possibly this was due to the comparatively technical nature of its contents, which did not make for ease of understanding on the part of the average builder. Yet, as Parris was eventually to show great prowess as an engineer as well as architect, it is not altogether surprising to find him reading Nicholson's *Principles of Architecture*, even before the age of twenty.

After Alexander Parris' marriage to Sylvania B. Stetson on April 10, 1801,⁴ he apparently came to Portland, Maine, and set himself up as a housewright. For the next six years, until the time of the Embargo of 1807 and Portland's subsequent economic downfall, Parris appears to have been fully employed, judging from the number of drawings which still survive for these years.⁵ During Parris' Portland period, it is difficult to imagine that he was in a position to make large outlays of cash for architectural books, what with his practice so recently begun, and marriage besides. At the same time, Portland's library resources were severely limited. Yet to imagine that Par-

ris did not have access to architectural books while practicing in Portland would be wrong. Another housewright, John Kimball (1758-1830), had already been working in Portland for a decade previous to Parris' arrival. It is known that Kimball had a surprisingly good collection of English architectural design books. And as Parris and Kimball are thought to have worked together on many of the same buildings, it is not too difficult to assume that Parris had ready access to Kimball's library.⁶ Just the same, it must be mentioned that Parris was well traveled for his time, and thus not entirely dependent upon published sources for new ideas. As his Portland drawings readily suggest, he was particularly aware of the work of Charles Bulfinch in Boston. And as much of this work had yet to be disseminated through architectural or other publications, Alexander Parris must have known Bulfinch's work from firsthand experience. For example, the motif of pierced interlacing circles which Bulfinch introduced to replace the balusters in roof parapets on houses at the front of Park Street, Boston, in 1804, was, as noted by Fiske Kimball, brought to Portland in the following year by Alexander Parris in his designs for the Hunnewell House. Asher Benjamin first published a detail of this motif in his *American Builder's Companion* of 1806.⁷

The first indication that Parris had transferred his practice from Portland to Boston is found in a book which recently entered the Society's library, *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey*, written by Lionel Charlton, and published in York in 1779. This book bears the bookplate of the Architectural Library of Boston.⁸ Another recent addi-

tion to the Society's library is *The Catalogue of the Architectural Library of Boston*, which was published by T. Kenard in Boston in 1809. *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* is "No. 40" in *The Catalogue*.⁹ Therefore, this book must have been in the Architectural Library by 1809. What makes these two items of interest to this study is the fact that written in pencil in the upper right-hand corner of the title page of *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* are the words "Parris donation." It is therefore logical to conclude that Parris was in Boston by 1809, and was probably also a member of the Architectural Library, as was his friend and associate, Solomon Willard (1783-1861).¹⁰ Unfortunately, at present, little more can be learned about the Architectural Library of Boston and its membership.¹¹ In considering Alexander Parris' donation to the Library, that is *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey*, the book can be dismissed as having little pertinence to architecture. That Parris should have owned this book certainly suggests that his interests were wide ranging, and not just confined to architecture and engineering.

Another book which would not normally have been found in an American architect's library is *Essays of the London Architectural Society*. The volume that Parris owned includes *Essays* for both 1808 and 1810, which had subsequently been bound together. Parris' reason for including this series of essays in his library may well derive from the fact that several of the essays are concerned with topics on engineering, such as "On Bridge Building" by James Savage. Four useful plates on bridge construction are included with the essay.



FIG. 1. ALEXANDER PARRIS, CRAYON PORTRAIT BY
W. E. CHICKERING OF BOSTON

Photo courtesy of the Bostonian Society.

This book is now in the Society's library, and it is a particularly fine copy to have in that on the inside front cover is pasted Parris' own bookplate, along with that of Luther Briggs, Jr., about which more will be said later (Fig. 2).

Of all the books that have been located formerly belonging to Parris, probably the most extraordinary is a 1717 edition of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*.¹² Such a book could hardly be considered required reading for a nineteenth-century architect or engineer, particularly in an edition of such antiquity. Its antiquity is further enhanced by an inscription of the presumed original owner in the upper right-hand corner of the title page, "R. Walpole." This may well be the signature of one of Horace Walpole's first cousins.¹³ In trying to explain why Alexander Parris had this particular copy of *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, one possible interpretation is that he was a collector of rare books, and especially those having associational value, altogether an extraordinary if not far-fetched conclusion in light of today's image of the provincial American architect. But, before going any further with this particular interpretation, it is necessary to consider other supporting evidence.

The series of Parris drawings, which is now in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, is a key document in any study of Alexander Parris. Together with these drawings are bound two separate manuscript pages, presumably written in Parris' own hand.¹⁴ One of these pages reveals his interest in architecture from an art-historical point of view, which in turn lends further credence to a many-faceted image for Parris. Under the heading "Names of Celebrated Architects," Parris listed the

following names much as a student of art history does today in an attempt to commit them to memory:

Bramante	
Sangallo	
Michel Angelo Banaroti	
Carlo Maderno	
Cavalier Bernini	1598
Borromini	1599
Pericles an Athen Genl	} BC400
Phidias - - Sculptor	
Polygnatus & Myro Paintrs	
Ctesifonte	
Dinocrates	

The more significant of the two pages, particularly within the context of this article, is headed "A List of Books I wish to Peruse," under which the following books are listed:

Brittons Architectural Antiquities
Modern Finishing for Rooms
 by W. F. Pocock
The Bricklayers Guid by T. W. Dearn
 Ware on *Arches* and there abutments
Rafaels ornaments of the Vatican & Parts
 Chambers (Sir William) *Treatis on Civil*
Architecture 3Edt-
Ancient and Modern Architectural Dic-
tionary by P Nicholson

In this list of titles the familiar mingle with the less familiar, the commonplace with the exotic, much as they must have in Parris' own mind, and out of which he would make his own syntheses.

In discussing the books themselves, Sir William Chamber's third edition of his *Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1791)¹⁵ and Peter Nicholson's *Architectural Dictionary* (1812-1819) can both be included in the "familiar" and "commonplace" categories owing to the more practical nature of their contents, as well as the large number of copies known to have been used in this country.¹⁶ As an aside, it should be mentioned that Parris eventually purchased Nicholson's *Dic-*

tionary for his own library, and it is now in the collections of the Boston Athenæum. Unlike other books belonging to Parris, its ownership is indicated by a stencil of his name rather than a bookplate. Though less frequently found in libraries of other American architects,¹⁷ Thomas D. W. Dearn's *The Bricklayer's Guide* (1809) and Samuel Ware's *Arches*, which in all likelihood refers to his *Treatise of the Property of Arches* (1809), at least by their titles suggest inclusion in the "commonplace" category because of the practical concern with construction techniques. On the other hand, *Brittons Architectural Antiquities*,¹⁸ William F. Pocock's *Modern Finishings for Rooms* (1811), with its several plates for English Regency interiors, and *Rafael's Ornaments of the Vatican and Parts*¹⁹ fall within the "exotic" and "less familiar" categories because of their apparent emphasis upon decoration, which is often remote in time, as well as in space. And, to the best of the author's knowledge, with the exception of Pocock's *Modern Finishings for Rooms*, the other two titles have not appeared among books used by American architects.²⁰ Quite possibly, then, the inclusion of these last two titles on Parris' reading list is further indication that he was unwilling to remain content with the usual prescribed books in his search for new ideas.

Before this survey of books associated with Alexander Parris can be concluded, one more title must be mentioned. On October 22, 1828, the Boston Athenæum bought from Parris his copy of *The Philosophy of Domestic Economy as Exemplified in the Mode of Warming, Ventilating, Washing, Drying, and Cooking, and in Various Arrangements*

Contributing to the Comfort and Convenience of Domestic Life, Adopted in the Derbyshire General Infirmary, and More Recently, on a Greatly Extended Scale in Several Other Public Buildings, Newly Erected in This Country (1819).²¹ The author was Charles Sylvester, an engineer of Nottingham. The large amount of information on hot-air stoves, water closets, laundries, and the like, complete with diagrams and floor plans, must have recommended it to Parris, who was designing the Naval Hospital at Chelsea during the 1820's and thus required the latest information on such technical matters. By way of interest, it should be added that partly on the basis of this book Solomon Willard was able to make his own innovations in hot-air heating.²² And as Solomon Willard was previously an "inmate" of the Parris household,²³ and worked with Parris during the 1820's on many of the same projects, such as Saint Paul's Church, Boston, Parris' copy of Sylvester may well be the very one Willard used. This historically significant book, both for a study of Parris and Willard, is still in the collections of the Boston Athenæum.

Having discussed the books that are known to have been available to Alexander Parris, the fear now arises that possibly undue stress has been put upon them in relation to Parris' over-all career. Fortunately, in the case of Parris, contemporary evidence has survived which seems to validate this emphasis upon books. In a letter of recommendation written to General William G. McNeill by General H. A. S. Dearborn on Alexander Parris' behalf on November 30, 1844, General Dearborn felt that Parris was more than qualified to assist in the construction of the Dry Dock at

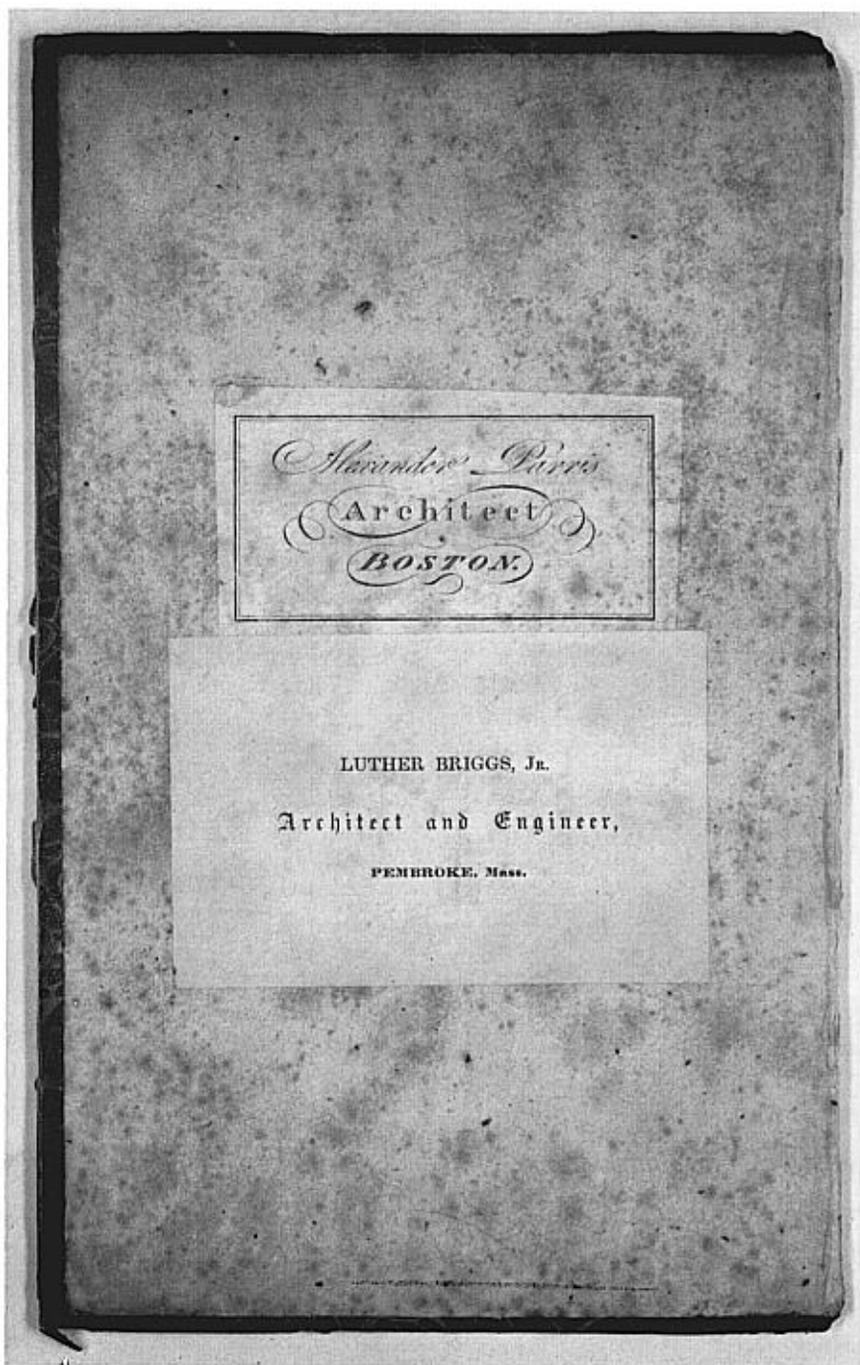


FIG. 2. INSIDE COVER OF ESSAYS OF THE LONDON ARCHITECTURAL SOCIETY (1808 AND 1810) WITH BOOKPLATES OF ALEXANDER PARRIS AND LUTHER BRIGGS, JR.

Brooklyn. Some of the reasons he gave are as follows:

... I do not know a man who has so much experience in the *science and art of erecting all kinds of structures in wood, stone, and brick*, as Mr. Parris. He has an excellent Architectural Library—is an accurate draftsman, and executes drawings in a beautiful and correct manner, for the guidance of mechanics, in all the branches of his profession.²⁴

Clearly, General Dearborn felt Parris' ability to carry out a commission successfully was secured as much by his owning a fine architectural library as having good draftsmanship—high praise for the role of books in an architect's career. But only Parris could fully appreciate the value of his library as a stimulus and aid to his work. That he did is seen in his last will and testament, written on May 21, 1852.²⁵ Aside from monetary bequests, the only other specific bequests made concerned his library and drafting tools.

Third. I give and bequeath unto my wife's Nephew, Luther Briggs, Jr., the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars, and all the Books in my Library, that shall have his name written therein, in my hand writing.

Sixth. I give and bequeath unto the said Benjamin F. Chandler, Esq. [husband of the niece of Parris's wife], a complete set of *Ree's Encyclopedia*, all my surveying and drawing instruments, and such other Books in my library, as shall have his name written therein, in my hand writing.

Through these two bequests Parris demonstrated concern for his books, and their disposition after his death. Previous to the writing of his will, he had taken the precaution of writing the name of the person in the book for whom it was intended. By so doing, he assured himself that his books would have rightful heirs. In the case of Luther Briggs, Jr., who was a draftsman in Parris' office, and a relative besides, he knew full well that his books would find continued use. Thus, upon Parris' death,²⁶ *Essays of the London Architectural Society*, along with other books, entered Luther Briggs' library, which in turn accounts for the bookplates of both Parris and Briggs appearing one above the other on its inside front cover (Fig. 2).

With the multitude of new building materials and methods that were patented during the second half of the nineteenth century, not to mention the march of styles, "isms" in search of the bizarre and the novel, Parris' library was soon outdated. Probably Luther Briggs was only able to look forward to a decade of use, at most, for many of the books he inherited from Parris. All the same, in the light of this present study, hopefully Parris' books will again be used, now by the architectural historian in his attempt to evaluate Alexander Parris as architect and engineer.

NOTES

¹ James Wendell Parris, *The Parris Genealogy, 1635-1958*, a typed copy of which is in the library of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

² Justin Winsor, *The Memorial History of Boston*, IV (Boston, 1883), 478.

³ This and following quantitative judgments are based upon an index of architec-

tural books with American ownership kept by Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings.

⁴ James Wendell Parris, *op. cit.*

⁵ Collections of architectural drawings, largely from the period Parris was practicing in Portland, are now preserved at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, and the Boston Athenæum.

⁶ Information from a series of newspaper articles written by William Goold and published in *The Portland Transcript* in 1892. The series was entitled "Old Houses and Their Builders."

⁷ Fiske Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (New York, 1922), pp. 233-234.

⁸ The Architectural Library of Boston was instituted on November 15, 1809, and was to be known as "The Social Architectural Library of Boston" (*The Constitution of the Proprietors of the Architectural Library of Boston*, Article II, Section 2, as printed in *The Catalogue*). The Architectural Library was apparently dissolved in 1850, at which time *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* and other books were presented to the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association Library. More recently the Boston Architectural Club also acquired books formerly in the Architectural Library. These books are now in the library of the Boston Architectural Center, successor to the Boston Architectural Club.

⁹ For interest's sake *The History of Whitby and of Whitby Abbey* was valued in *The Catalogue* at \$2.00, the price of the book being established by the Government of the Library for the purpose of ascertaining at any time the value of the Library (*The Constitution of the Proprietors of the Architectural Library of Boston*, Article VII, Section 5, as printed in *The Catalogue*).

¹⁰ William W. Wheildon, *Memoir of Solomon Willard* (Boston, 1865), p. 105.

¹¹ The Architectural Library was one of a number of associations in Boston in which an architect such as Parris not only could be assured of like-minded company, but also the most recent architectural and scientific books and periodicals through the libraries they maintained. Other associations were the Associated Housewright's Society, the Athenæum, the Scientific Library, and the Boston Mechanics' Institution (William W. Wheildon, *op. cit.*, p. 105). The Boston Mechanics' Institution was originated in 1826, incorporated in 1827, and had Solomon Willard for one of its Vice-Presidents, and Alexander Parris on its Board of Directors. In January, 1840, the Institution was dissolved, and its library was transferred to the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, thus meeting much the

same fate as the Architectural Library of Boston (William W. Wheildon, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-57).

¹² On the inside front cover of this book is pasted Parris' bookplate, which is similar to the one found in the Society's copy of *Essays of the London Architectural Society* (see Fig. 2). The author would like to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. David McKibben, Art Librarian at the Boston Athenæum. Had it not been for Mr. McKibben, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* and other books formerly belonging to Alexander Parris, and now in the Boston Athenæum's collections, would not have come to the author's attention.

¹³ Suggested by Wilmarth Lewis in conversation with the author.

¹⁴ It is difficult to establish a date for the two manuscript pages. As noted, they are bound with architectural drawings, the latest of which is dated 1812. On the front cover of the volume thus formed is pasted Parris' bookplate. This is a variant to the bookplate already described in that the word "engineer" is inserted along with "architect." According to the *Boston Directories*, Parris did not describe himself as both "architect and engineer" until 1822, which may suggest a similar date for this particular bookplate. Still, there is no way of telling how long Parris used this bookplate, or when he actually put it on the cover of the book in question. A further means of dating these pages more clearly is through an examination of the titles of the books listed on one of these pages. All appear to date from 1811 or before, with the exception of Nicholson's *Dictionary*, which was in the process of publication from 1812-1819. With the dates of 1819 and 1822 in mind, it can be conjectured that the pages date somewhere between the end of the second decade and the beginning of the third decade of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ The date of publication for this book and those that follow, as well as complete titles in certain instances, are taken from H. M. Colvin's *A Biographical Dictionary of the English Architects, 1660-1840*, Cambridge, 1954.

¹⁶ Cummings' index.

¹⁷ Cummings' index.

¹⁸ The exact title and date of publication are uncertain.

¹⁹ The exact title and date of publication are uncertain.

²⁰ Cummings' index.

²¹ This book was published in London. The information regarding the sale of the book was written on Parris' bookplate, found on the inside front cover. The bookplate is similar to that in *Essays of the London Architectural Society* (see Fig. 2) without having the black line border.

²² William W. Wheildon, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁴ Taken from a letter in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, to whom

permission to quote from it is gratefully acknowledged.

²⁵ A copy of Parris' will is in the probate records for Plymouth County at Plymouth, Massachusetts.

²⁶ On March 1, 1852, Parris was first taken ill when making one of his many trips to Washington. Eventually, he was removed to his home in Pembroke where he died on June 16, 1852. He was buried in the Briggs cemetery in North Pembroke (James Wendell Parris, *op. cit.*).

(continued from page 50)

⁵ *Guardian of Freedom*, Haverhill Public Library, Vol. II, no. 48, August 20, 1795.

⁶ Proprietors' Acts and Records of Haverhill, Massachusetts, City Clerk's Office, Haverhill, Massachusetts, Book 2, p. 308.

⁷ Essex County Deeds, Book 44, p. 214.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Book 105, p. 246.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Book 155, p. 257.

¹⁰ Proprietors' Acts and Records of Haverhill, Massachusetts, City Clerk's Office, Haverhill, Massachusetts, Book 2, p. 226, March 7, 1698; Proprietors' Acts and Records of Haverhill, Massachusetts, typed manuscript, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, p. 565, May 1, 1759, and p. 575, August 2, 1759.