

# Some Aspects of the Development of the Architectural Profession in Boston Between 1800 and 1830<sup>1</sup>

JACK QUINAN\*

The distinction between housewrights and gentlemen amateurs in American architecture of the eighteenth century stands in sharp contrast to the architectural profession as it developed during the nineteenth century. In a little more than fifty years "polite" architecture ceased to be the occasional preoccupation of a few educated gentlemen and emerged as a true profession, that is, one in which its practitioners could support themselves by designing buildings. The change was momentous, and we may well ask how it came about. The topic is broad, of course, and this paper shall be confined to events in Boston with the hope that similar studies of other American cities will soon follow.

In a period of intense activity between 1800 and 1830 a number of architectural schools, professional organizations, architectural libraries, and other related phenomena, materialized and provided the groundwork for the new profession in Boston. Architectural schools occupied a place of special significance among these activities, as they made it possible for young men to keep abreast of both the stylistic changes and the technological developments that were occurring so rapidly during the early nineteenth century. In time, schools tended to supercede the venerable apprenticeship system and gradually elevated architectural instruction to a theoretical level in some instances. The establishment of the first American architectural degree program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1865 represents the culmination of this scholastic activity.

The earliest architectural school in Boston has been attributed by several scholars to Asher Benjamin at a date close to 1805.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the school has never been adequately documented. Benjamin had submitted the following proposal for an architectural school to the *Windsor* [Vermont] *Gazette* of 5 January 1802, which seems to have led Talbot Hamlin and Roger Hale Newton to conclude that Benjamin subsequently established a school in Boston:

To Young Carpenters, Joiners and All Others concerned in the Art of building:—The subscriber intends to open a School of Architecture at his house in Windsor, the 20th of February next—at which will be taught The Five Orders of Architecture, the Proportions of Doors, Windows and Chimneypieces, the Construction of Stairs, with their ramp and twist Rails, the method of farming timbers, length and backing of Hip-rafters, the tracing of groins to Angle Brackets, circular soffits in circular walls; Plans, Elevations and Sections of Houses, with all their ornaments.

The Art of drawing Plans and Elevations, or any other figure perspective will also be taught if required by

ASHER BENJAMIN  
December 28, 1801<sup>3</sup>

Since Benjamin moved to Boston shortly after submitting the proposal, it is unlikely

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\* Jack Quinan is an Assistant Professor of Art History at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His doctoral dissertation was on Asher Benjamin (Brown University, 1973). Mr. Quinan has contributed previously to OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND.

that the school ever materialized in Windsor, but the possibility that he subsequently established a school in Boston should remain open.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, a form of architectural instruction was available in Boston in 1802 at a school advertised as follows:

Osgood Carleton's school is open days and evenings, in the upper chamber of Mr. Haggard's brick building, near the draw bridge, for teaching Navigation . . . Surveying, Gauging, Measuring, Architecture, book-keeping, etc.<sup>5</sup>

With all due respect to Mr. Carleton, who would apparently teach anything in order to attract some pupils, this was an inauspicious beginning — nothing, certainly, to threaten the integrity of the apprenticeship system. Indeed, nearly two full decades passed before other, more developed architectural schools began to appear in Boston. There were stirrings from other quarters in this first decade, however, that also contributed to the emergence of the architectural profession.

In 1804 a group of Boston housewrights gathered at the Green Dragon Tavern to found the Associated Housewright Society of Boston. At the outset they sought to regulate certain aspects of their trade, such as wages and costs of jobs, and to provide a measure of security, through the collection of annual dues, for the families and apprentices of members who might be incapacitated.<sup>6</sup> Despite these very practical intentions, the Associated Housewright Society became the nucleus of the emerging architectural profession in the course of a few decades. Most Boston housewrights also belonged to the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, an organization founded in 1795 for the benefit of all mechanics and manufacturers, but the financial burden of two such memberships was too great for many housewrights, and this contributed to the dissolution of the Society in the 1830s.<sup>7</sup>

Just as the Associated Housewright Society provided a locus for the growing professionalism, a large part of the intellectual and visual stimulation continued to come through architectural pattern books. During the eighteenth century it had been customary for housewrights to employ one or two English pattern books for the decorative detailing of chimneypieces, frontispieces, and other interior surfaces, while their general knowledge of carpentry was acquired during apprenticeship. By the early nineteenth century, however, the art of building had become increasingly complex and specialized, and its literature was proliferating beyond the means of an ordinary housewright. In 1810 Ithiel Town, and Solomon Willard (architects), Nathaniel Critchett, and Samuel Waldron (housewrights), and John Gill (a stucco worker) founded the Boston Architectural Library as a means of making more books available to the local housewrights.<sup>8</sup> The catalogue of this library, published in 1809, includes some fifty-five items, most of which are eighteenth century English pattern books.<sup>9</sup> Works such as Charles Middleton's *Plans, Elevations, and Sections of the House of Correction for the County of Middlesex* (London, 1788); Rev. James Dallaway's *Observations on English Architecture, Military, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London, 1806); Joshua Kirby's *The Description and Use of a New Instrument Called an Architectonic Sector by Which Any Part of Architecture May Be Drawn with Facility and Exactness* (London, 1761), as well as two works by Sir John Soane and several histories of English towns and counties, reflect the growing range of material available to Boston housewrights at this time. Two of the earliest architectural pattern books published in America, Owen Biddle's *The Young Carpenter's Assistant* (Philadelphia, 1805), and Asher Benjamin's *American Builder's Companion* (Boston,

1806), were included in the catalogue of the Boston Architectural Library. These had come into being out of a growing dissatisfaction among American builders with English books for American usage.<sup>10</sup> The desire to change the situation is characteristic of this period and, in fact, reflects a major change in the attitude toward the architectural profession in this decade. This extended even to the way in which would-be architects identified themselves.

The title "Architect" does not appear in the *Boston Directories* before 1806. Charles Bulfinch, the designer of most of the major buildings in Boston up to that time, was identified as "Superintendent of Police."<sup>11</sup> Asher Benjamin, the one other person in Boston who might be identified as an architect at that time, continued to list himself as "housewright" in those same Directories until the arrival of Peter Banner, about 1805. The English-born and English-trained Banner proceeded to advertise himself as "Architect and Builder" in the *Columbian Centinel* of April 9, 1806, and in the *Boston Directory* of 1809. Asher Benjamin then identified himself as "Architect and Carpenter" in the 1806 edition of *The American Builder's Companion* and changed his title from "Housewright" in the *Boston Directory* of 1809 to "Architect" in the 1810 *Directory* in apparent response to Banner's claims. A significant change of attitude is unmistakable in this as neither Banner nor Benjamin could conceivably be identified as gentlemen amateurs. Following their lead, as many as twelve "Architects" appeared in the *Boston Directories* during the next three decades.<sup>12</sup> They were, without exception, men trained originally as housewrights, but they, like Banner and Benjamin, wished to separate themselves from the realm of mere carpentry.

Toward the close of the second decade of the nineteenth century many of these va-

ried activities began to coalesce under the catalytic influence of a few strong personalities. Charles Bulfinch, Boston's gentleman amateur *par excellence*, left the city in 1817 to become architect of the United States Capitol in Washington. Leadership of the architectural interests in Boston then fell to Alexander Parris, a young man who had been trained as a housewright and had served as an engineer in the War of 1812. "Captain" Parris, as he was usually called, ran a thriving office on Court Street which was the focus of most of the major architectural activity in Boston during the 1820s and early 1830s.<sup>13</sup> This was the first professional architectural office in the city, and a generation of Boston architects were trained there. The following advertisements from the *Columbian Centinel* of 1818 attest to the stature that Parris had gained only three years after he settled in the city. They also provide considerable insight into the nature of architectural schools and practice at that time.

#### ARCHITECTURE

JOHN MILLIGAN, Architect and Civil Engineer, intends to open a School for Architectural Drawing, next room to Captain Parris's Office, over 93 Court Street as soon as sufficient number offer, (which will be limited to 15). Hours from 7 to 9 o'clock, every evening except Sundays. Terms one dollar per week. Reference to Messrs. Alexander Parris and Ashur Benjamin, Architects, Boston.

Plans made with accuracy and despatch, of every description, in the line of his profession.

Apply at the above mentioned room, or at his house in Elliot Street, corner of Nassau Street.<sup>14</sup>

Milligan submitted a second advertisement for his academy a few months later:

#### ARCHITECTURE

JOHN MILLIGAN, Architect and Civil Engineer, respectfully informs those intending to build, and corporations for public works, that he makes Plans, Sections, and

Elevations, for town and country houses of every description, from the splendid mansion or elegant villa, to the simple cottage; together with their ornamental accompaniments of porter lodges, gate-ways, casines, temples, etc. as also. Plans for Wet and Dry Docks, Bridges, Canals and Railways; likewise, Designs for Sepulchral and other Monuments. N.B. — J.M. can accommodate and attend to a few more scholars, both in his evening and day classes, at his Architectural Academy, No. 1, over the Boylston Market, where the strictest attention will be paid to their instruction in the true principles of the science. — terms moderate.<sup>15</sup>

Despite John Milligan's thorough program and ambitious visions, there is no concrete evidence that the Milligan Academy ever actually existed. John Milligan's name appears only once in a *Boston Directory*, in 1820. He joined neither the Associated Housewright Society nor the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, and his name has never been associated with any Boston buildings nor with any Boston architects. If his academy functioned at all, it would have been briefly. What became of John Milligan remains a mystery, but his impressively conceived school proposal might be credited with inspiring two other architectural schools in the 1820s.

One of these schools was conducted by Solomon Willard, the man who collaborated with Alexander Parris on the first Greek Revival buildings in Boston. His biographer, William Wheildon, records that Willard, as a young man, "provided himself with the most approved works on architecture and perspective drawing; purchased an encyclopaedia and other standard books, and paid for his tuition at a drawing academy for at least two terms."<sup>16</sup> Wheildon described the school that Willard ran in the early 1820s as follows:

Willard received pupils at his studio near St. Paul's church and gave lessons in architecture and drawing. (a pupil writes —

'he taught the first principles of geometry and perspective and as they progressed he gradually brought them to comprehend and understand the orders of architecture and their true application and appropriate purposes . . . He not only had his juniors as pupils, but many who for a score of years had been practical architects and mechanics were solicitous of his instruction, and to some of these he gave private lessons.')17

Solomon Willard was more vitally involved in Boston architecture during the formative 1820s than is generally realized. He gained a very broad knowledge of American architecture through his collaboration with Peter Banner, Asher Benjamin, Charles Bulfinch, Alexander Parris and Isaiah Rogers, in Boston, and with numerous other architects in New York, Providence, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington. He passed some of his wisdom on to others through his school, but he practiced architecture for only a decade before retiring to Quincy, Massachusetts, where he occupied himself with the local granite quarries. Wheildon's biography indicates that Willard was intelligent and talented, but it also suggests that he was too restless to maintain a position of leadership in the architectural community. This was left to Alexander Parris. The records of the Associated Housewright Society show that Parris was a member of a committee of three formed in 1822 to purchase a majority of shares in the Architectural Library (presumably the same Boston Architectural Library that had been established in 1809).<sup>18</sup> The library shares were purchased and the committee was asked to organize the library in 1823.<sup>19</sup> Three years later, when it was decided that a school for the instruction of apprentices in architectural drawing should be established within the Associated Housewright Society, Alexander Parris was made a member of that committee as well.<sup>20</sup> He was finally elected President of the Associated Housewright Society in 1834 and again in 1836.<sup>21</sup> The decision to move the architectural library to the Parris office, for convenience, in 1837 seems to indicate that his office was

very closely allied with the Associated Housewright Society.<sup>22</sup> In effect, the Society had become a vehicle for his success and for the emergence of the architectural profession, even though it was never intended to function in these ways. Housewrights were better served by the broader-based Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, and in their best interests that Association absorbed the Associated Housewright Society in 1837.<sup>23</sup> Almost simultaneously, the Boston architects, Alexander Parris, Asher Benjamin, Isaiah Rogers and Ammi B. Young, joined together with their counterparts, Thomas U. Walter, Minard Lefever, Ithiel Town, A. J. Davis, William Strickland and other architects from various eastern cities, to establish the American Institution of Architects, in New York City.<sup>24</sup> This gathering suggests that the sequence of activities and events that have been described in this paper had close parallels in every major American city. They did, of course. People in the building trades everywhere were experiencing similar pressures for change. The rapid turnover of revival styles that characterized the first half of the

nineteenth century; advances in technology (in Boston one thinks of Willard's new method of heating buildings and Isaiah Rogers' introduction of indoor toilets into the Tremont House); the use of new materials such as tin for roofs, decorative iron, and monolithic granite as structural members for building facades; such new building types as hotels, railroad stations, warehouses and factories; and the numerous engineering advances associated with canals, dry docks, railroads and jetties — all of these endeavors contributed to the emergence of the architectural profession. These were the immediate causes, however. Hovering over these innovations and developments were larger events that trace back to the Enlightenment itself. In America the memories of colonial oppression, the Revolutionary War, and the establishment of a democratic government were still fresh in the minds of men. These upheavals, which were scarcely a generation old, established a desire and a willingness to effect change, an attitude that was vital to the development of the architectural profession.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, in Los Angeles, in February, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Hale Newton, *Town and Davis, Architects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942) p. 26; and Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Published in Herbert Wheaton Congdon's *Duke of Castleton* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1949), pp.11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Asher Benjamin wrote a letter from Boston in August of 1802 to Gideon Granger in Washington. The letter, now in the Gallatin Papers of the New York Historical Society, seems to indicate that Benjamin had moved from Windsor, Vermont, to Boston. There was no *Boston Directory* in 1802, but Benjamin is listed in the *Boston Directory* of 1803.

<sup>5</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, October 6, 1802.

<sup>6</sup> *The Constitution of the Associated Housewright Society of the Town of Boston* (Boston: Printed by J. T. Buckingham, 1812).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph T. Buckingham. *Annals of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association* (Boston: Press of Crocker and Brewster, 1853).

<sup>8</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, November 15, 1809.

<sup>9</sup> *The Catalogue of the Architectural Library of Boston* published with the *Constitution of the Proprietors of the Architectural Library of Boston* (Boston: Printed by T. Kennard, 1809).

<sup>10</sup> The imported English pattern books, such as William Pain's *The Practical House Carpenter*, 5th ed. (London: I. and J. Taylor, 1794), contained too much vaulting and elaborate detail, too many huge house plans, and were too costly for the American builder.

<sup>11</sup> Typical entries are: "Bulfinch, Charles, Superintendent of Police; house Bulfinch st." *Boston Directory*, 1803, and "Bulfinch, Charles, Superintendent of Police, house Middlecot st." *Boston Directory*, 1809.

<sup>12</sup> These were Alexander Parris, Richard Bond, Solomon Willard, Isaiah Rogers, Edward Shaw, Charles G. Hall, Ammi B. Young, Luther Briggs, Gridley J. F. Bryant, John Milligan, William Sparrill, and Charles Roath.

<sup>13</sup> Parris gained the commissions for the Sears Mansion, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Faneuil Hall Market complex, and the First Parish Church in Quincy, along with numerous lesser commissions. The Tremont House, by Isaiah Rogers, was one of the few major commissions that he did not obtain during the 1820s.

<sup>14</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, October 3, 1818.

<sup>15</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, January 31, 1818.

<sup>16</sup> William Wheildon, *A Memoir of Solomon Willard* (Boston: The Monument Association, 1865).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of the Meetings of the Associated Housewright Society for January 17, 1822. These are contained in the Records of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes for October 16, 1823.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes for February 27, 1826.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes for October 16, 1834 and 1836 (no day or month given).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes for October 13, 1837.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes for October 27, 1837.

<sup>24</sup> Everard M. Upjohn, *Richard Upjohn, Architect and Churchman* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1968), p. 157.