

History and Special Interests

A Historian's Experience of Architectural Collections

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Abstract: Studies by the author of the history of the architecture and architects of Canadian post offices and of the Lincoln Memorial demonstrate the usefulness of architectural records. Because architectural design is not undertaken in isolation, the influences it and the architect receive from outside sources can be discovered through the review of a variety of architectural records. There is no single definition of what does or should make up an architectural collection. The historical value of such records for a variety of research purposes suggests that collections should be kept complete and intact to the extent possible, guaranteeing their availability for the many sorts of architectural record users.

About the author: Christopher Thomas studied Art History at the University of Toronto and Yale University and has published on subjects ranging from nineteenth-century Victorian Gothic architecture in Canada and Britain to the work of Arthur Erickson in the 1950s. He is the author of *The Architecture of the West Building, National Gallery of Art*, and a forthcoming study of the Lincoln Memorial in the context of American culture and politics. Thomas teaches the history of art and architecture at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSULTING original architectural records was borne in on me early. As an M.A. student in art history at the University of Toronto in 1976, I participated in a seminar on Canadian architectural drawings, and I chose as the topic of my paper and presentation the post office and custom house in Stratford, Ontario, built in the early 1880s (figure 1). Since it was demolished many years ago, any existing photographs of it are quite old. At the time, the only important writing on early Canadian post offices was a passage by Douglas Richardson (who in fact was conducting the seminar) in *Ontario Towns*, published two years before:

In the 1880s the Dominion Government added an important series of urban structures which were truly landmarks: the Post Offices. . . . They were designed as two-and-a-half storey rectangular buildings with a one-storey extension at the rear. The longer face was turned to the street, taller than it was wide, and had a high gable in the centre. There was a door to either side, one for the Post Office and one for Customs. [The architect's] manner was a distinctive combination of French Renaissance composition and High Victorian Gothic detailing—a forceful mixture of massively-proportioned blocks with roughly-textured surfaces, incorporating rhythmically-varied but strongly-grouped elements.¹

The description pretty much fits the building shown in figure 1, perhaps not in every detail, but generally. Richardson goes on to say that all these buildings had the “strongest family resemblance,” since

all emanated from the office of Thomas Fuller . . . the English architect who had emigrated to Canada in 1856, won the competition for the Centre Block of the parliamentary complex at Ottawa in 1859, then worked extensively in the United States before returning to Ottawa as Dominion Architect in 1881.²

That all the post office designs were by Fuller created, in effect, an unbroken line of succession between the Parliament Buildings (figure 2) and the local federal buildings, making them “branch plants” in design as well as in function, a pattern the Stratford post office seemed to fit to a tee. So, obedient student that I was, I went off to research my paper on this “typical” example of the “Fuller post office.”

The key source on Dominion public buildings of the period is a set of bound volumes of drawings and specifications from the Chief (or Dominion) Architect's office in the Department of Public Works in Ottawa, which are now in departmental records in the National Archives of Canada. There I found drawings for the Stratford post office, including a plan of the ground floor, in one corner of which is a handwritten note: “Approved of by Minister / Sept. [indecipherable] 1881 / Thos S. Scott.” Scott was Fuller's predecessor as Chief Architect. He retired on September 9, 1881, and, at the end of October, Fuller returned from the United States to replace him. So the Stratford post office

¹Ralph Greenhill, Ken Macpherson, and Douglas Richardson, *Ontario Towns* ([Ottawa: Oberon, 1974), unpaginated. The quotation is from the chapter “Public Buildings and Schools.”

²Greenhill et al., *Ontario Towns*.



Figure 1. Post office, customs, and inland revenue building, Stratford, Ontario, begun 1881, demolished 1961. Photograph from the 1950s. (*Courtesy of Stratford Beacon-Herald.*)

was designed, if not by Scott, at least under him; but in all events, not by Fuller, as I had believed.³

³The issue is treated fully in the author's article "Architectural Image for the Dominion: Scott, Fuller



Figure 2. Fuller & Jones, Parliament Buildings for United Province of Canada, Ottawa, 1859-1866. (Courtesy of National Archives of Canada.)

Well, so what? Doesn't this just show how bureaucratic bureaucratic design really is? What does it matter if a building was designed by one government architect instead of another? In theory, not much, but in this case a link had been forged, using the architect's identity, between a key symbol of the Dominion—the Parliament Buildings—and local government offices. The year I made this discovery, 1976, was the end of about a decade of heightened Canadian nationalism, which had begun in 1964 or 1965 with the preparations for the centennial of confederation in 1967. During that period, Canadians were conditioned to find national significance in all kinds of phenomena, among them architecture. The mere fact that we were studying Dominion public buildings of the era after confederation was indicative of the mood. So the tie, through Fuller, between the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa and the post offices in local communities bore a subliminal message of nationhood. Yet here was evidence that the post office type—not all or even the best of its manifestations, to be sure, but the type—had been defined before Fuller returned, and, even more damaging to a nationalist interpretation, from the United States.

Furthermore, the drawings for the Stratford post office were signed by T. S. Scott, who is generally considered a skilled administrator but a bit of a nonentity in design, and, worse, an advocate of the Second Empire mode, marked by lavish, layered orders and

and the Stratford Post Office," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 3 (Fall 1976): 83–94. For information on Fuller, including a bibliography, see the author's sketch of him in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 343–46.

bulbous mansard roofs of a kind inspired by the design of the wings added to the Louvre in the early 1850s.⁴ Of all nineteenth-century period revival styles disparaged by critics of our time, none has received more opprobrium than Second Empire. It is eclectic, "impure," and garish, like an overstuffed Victorian parlor, and, for Canadians, has the added tarnish of association with the post-Civil War era in the United States. The building erected to house the State, War, and Navy Departments in Washington (now the Old Executive Office Building) is an example. Indeed, its designer, supervising architect of the U.S. Treasury Alfred B. Mullett, was asked by the Canadian Public Works Department to propose a design for a new post office to be built in Toronto, and his sample design was probably followed quite closely.⁵ Although this occurred about a year before Scott was appointed Chief Architect, his period at the Public Works Department is identified with this type of florid Franco-American imagery. So it was no small matter in the mind of an earnest Canadian graduate student that Fuller, the specialist in Victorian Gothic who had designed our parliament buildings with all their medieval and British associations, could not be considered the founding genius behind the post office type seen in Stratford.

This was my first brush with architectural documents, but hardly my last. Over and over again I have found that consulting the original record challenges received ideas and alters the intellectual gestalt of a question. This is the reason historians find research in primary materials essential. But what should be kept for consultation? Again, an illustration from experience may help; but I would precede it with a general observation.

In recent years the scholarship of architecture, like that of most areas of the humanities, has grown exponentially in kind and quantity, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the history of architecture today is a different field from the one I entered in 1976. In the mid-1980s, the journal *Art Bulletin* asked Marvin Trachtenberg to write an overview of recent literature in architectural history; it appeared in the June 1988 issue. At the outset, he confessed himself flummoxed by the task, which to my mind you could compare to the parable of the blind men who were asked to describe an elephant and each answered differently, depending on which part of the animal he touched. You probably know the story: one said, "An elephant is rough and deeply veined;" another, "It is like the trunk of a tree;" and still another, "It is loose and floppy, like a big leaf." Recent writing in the history of architecture is something like that—some, formalist; some, rooted in social and political history; some, Marxist or feminist in orientation; some, based in recent critical theory, and so on.

Trachtenberg summarized the situation, which has only grown more polyglot since he wrote, by observing that scholars today are generally less interested than their predecessors in, as he put it, "the 'horizontal' connections between formal events . . . the internal stylistic process" and more interested in what he called "the external process, the 'vertical' processes by which architecture relates to everything else."⁶ That is, architecture is less

⁴For information on Scott, see the article by Dana Johnson in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XII, 957–59, and Janet Wright, "Thomas Seaton Scott: The Architect versus the Administrator," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 6 (1982): 202–19. On Canadian federal design in the period more generally, see *By Federal Design: The Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works, 1881-1914* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1983).

⁵Christina Cameron and Janet Wright, *Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture*, Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History, no. 24 (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch of Parks Canada of Environment Canada, 1980), 50.

⁶"Some Observations on Recent Architectural History," *Art Bulletin* 70 (June 1988): 212. (The entire article is on pages 208–241.)

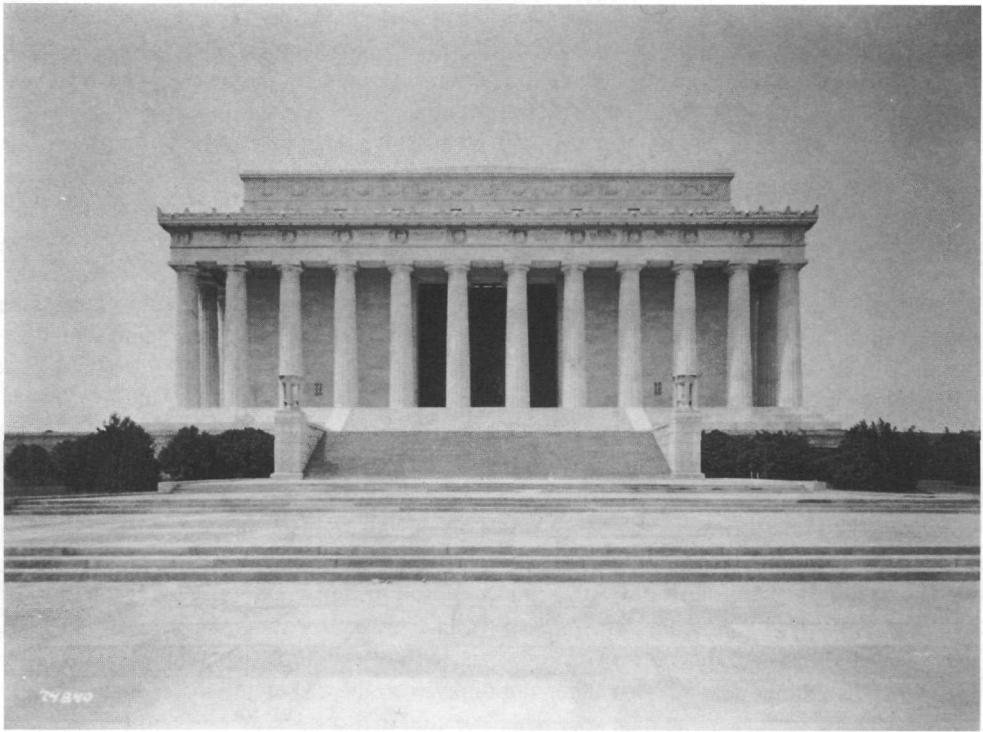


Figure 3. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C. 1911-1922. (*Courtesy of Commission of Fine Arts.*)

often viewed in isolation from other forms of activity and discourse than before, although its previous isolation should not be exaggerated. While this is a healthy trend in scholarship, it poses a challenge for those in charge of research collections, for, at a time when a researcher is as likely to be looking up train schedules or strikes in the building trades as at an architect's diaries, it is not always clear just what an architectural collection is.

My experience in researching my dissertation (and soon, I hope, book) on the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (figure 3) and its architect, Henry Bacon, is typical of the trend I have described.⁷ It included, as core material, an investigation of how, in 1911, when the memorial was begun, Americans remembered and understood Lincoln and the Civil War; what attempts had been made to memorialize him in Washington before and why they had failed; and how the memorial has been used as a site for private contemplation and public debate since its dedication in 1922. I was even led into the history of the automobile, since, between 1908 and 1913, the emerging motor industry tried to divert the funds and feelings for Lincoln into a plan for the federal government to build an interstate highway in his honor. (It failed, incidentally.)

My project is not unique; in fact, it is probably close to the norm of architectural scholarship now, and in surveying new literature in architectural history, one is struck by its particularity and heterogeneity of approach. For instance, many of the most satisfying new studies are close, multidimensional readings of single sites or issues, in the form of

⁷Christopher Thomas, "The Lincoln Memorial and Its Architect, Henry Bacon (1866-1924)," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History of Art, Yale University, 1990.

long articles, books, and exhibitions. This means, however, that no single archives or library can do everything for the researcher; the list of desiderata is simply too long. It also means that certain types of documents previously thought marginal are starting to be considered. For example, it has long been the practice of architectural historians to confine their research quite closely to the architect's process of design, as distinct from the building's construction or the architect's collaboration with builders, consultants, reviewing bodies, and so on. So design drawings and the architect's words, in the form of autograph letters, interviews, and the like, have been the mother lode for researchers. While this is not likely to change fundamentally—why should it?—it is an approach that overlooks much of value. Whole categories of records tend to be bypassed: building contracts and the working drawings and specifications that accompany them (which make tedious reading but can be revealing), and records of construction such as change-orders and builders' correspondence. As the materiality of buildings and their place in social and cultural history receive more attention, we can expect such documents to grow in usefulness.

But back to Bacon and the Lincoln Memorial. I was fortunate in that, after his death in 1924, Bacon's office records, library, and even his office furniture were given to the library of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. It is a most unusual collection which affords unique access to the mind of a skilled modern classical designer. But, sadly, before giving them to Wesleyan, his heirs culled the papers brutally, leaving the design drawings for the Lincoln Memorial (figure 4), but jettisoning what may have been hundreds, even thousands, of more prosaic sheets, and most records of his other projects. A few sets of working drawings of other buildings were kept; but for most, including his projects for settings of monuments (of which he did well over a hundred), only one sheet was usually kept, and nothing else: no textual material whatsoever. As a result, I have had to research those projects from the client's end, so to speak, adding immeasurably to the task. The moral for architects, executors, and archivists is to resist, whenever possible, the temptation to discard, for you never know who will want what, when, and why.

In Bacon's case, particularly, the lacunae have had serious results. A modest, personable man not given to self-promotion, he was, nevertheless (thanks to the Lincoln Memorial), one of America's best-known architects in the early 1920s, when Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright were in eclipse. In 1923, he was awarded the American Institute of Architects' highest honor, the Gold Medal. But he died a year later and, unlike Daniel Chester French, who modeled the figure for the memorial statue of Lincoln inside, he was survived by no one in his family with the skills and temperament to perpetuate his memory. When the modern classicism that was his specialty fell from favor around World War II, he was all but forgotten. Not only is most of his other work unknown, making it hard to understand why the Lincoln Memorial Commission chose him as its consulting architect in the first place, but even his role in that project has been downplayed. I have met people who think the statue is the memorial! Yet, if anything, just the opposite is true, for French was commissioned to model a figure for a memorial that was already under construction. So, without claiming that Bacon's other work is as important as the Lincoln Memorial or that he alone was responsible for it, I would suggest that the picture formed of him has been inaccurate and has done his memory a disservice.

For all their limitations, though, the Bacon papers at Wesleyan are uniquely valuable, and I spent several months in 1986 working with them, piecing together the story of the memorial, reconstructing Bacon's career, and trying to enter his mind vicariously by skimming his library and picture collection.

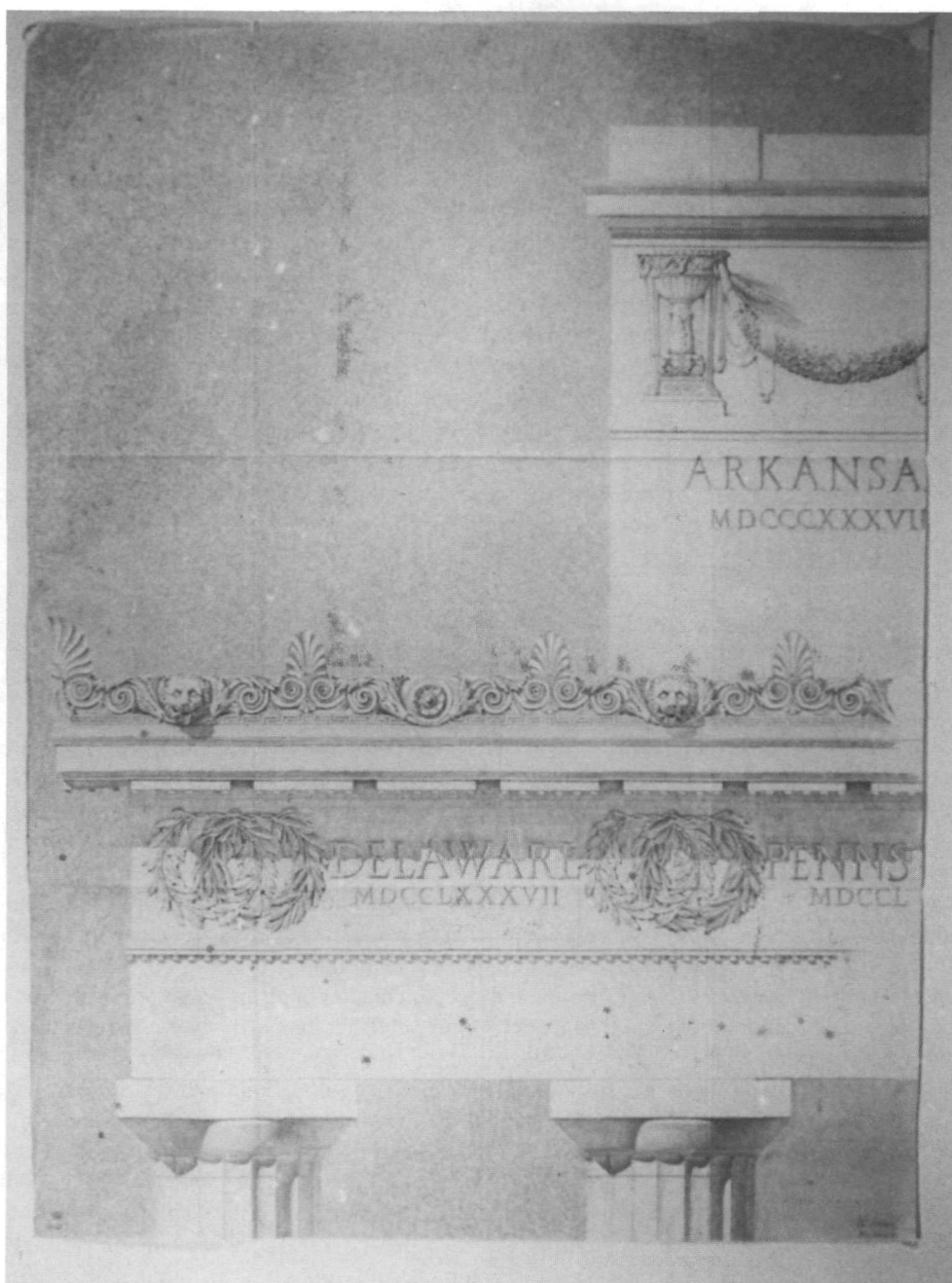


Figure 4. Henry Bacon, detail drawing of entablature at southeast or “Delaware” corner of Lincoln Memorial. (Courtesy of Henry Bacon Collection, Wesleyan University.)

Meanwhile, other collections in Boston and New York were helpful in tracing Bacon's training and early practice. In 1889, he won, hands down, the Rotch Travelling Scholarship, administered by the Boston Society of Architects, whose records I consulted

in Cambridge. In 1888-1889 and again in 1891-1903 (and intermittently thereafter) Bacon worked as a designer for McKim, Mead & White, especially Charles McKim, on projects like the Rhode Island State House, a design to which his contributions were crucial. The office papers of McKim, Mead & White, perhaps the most important architectural firm in the eastern United States around 1900, are divided between the New-York Historical Society and the drawings collection of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University. After leaving McKim, Bacon continued to practice in New York City and had many commissions in the Manhattan area. Perhaps the best known is a savings bank in Union Square, which is still standing—and I have had to turn for help to many agencies and repositories in the city.

Because his major design, the Lincoln Memorial, was built by a commission appointed by Congress, assisted (and sometimes hindered) by the Secretary of War, the key repository of documents on the memorial is the National Archives and Records Administration, in Washington, D.C., with textual records and still pictures in the archives proper and drawings at the graphics annex, then in Alexandria, Virginia. The memorial's construction was supervised by the Army Corps of Engineers, so the memorial commission's records are filed in Record Group 42, among those of the Corps' office of public buildings and grounds, which at that time was responsible for federal parks and properties in Washington. The papers of the Commission of Fine Arts, Record Group 66, were also helpful because the Commission reviewed the memorial's design and all changes to it and its setting. (Indeed, the Lincoln Memorial was the first large project to which the Commission of Fine Arts, founded in 1910, contributed.)

My problem in dealing with the National Archives was the reverse of what I had faced at Wesleyan: every memorandum and change order concerning the memorial, regardless of how minor, had been filed with a thoroughness known only to army engineers, and the records of the project occupy most of a section of shelving. I would probably still be working there had I not been selective. Reasoning that all important questions of design would have been reviewed by the memorial commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, I emphasized their minutes and correspondence, along with the drawings in Alexandria, dipping into the Corps of Engineers' construction records only for correspondence with Bacon. So I did just what I have taken architectural historians to task for, but even at that, spent eight or ten weeks in the records and accumulated enough information on the memorial's construction (as opposed to its design) to publish a long article on its marblework alone.⁸

Several other archives in Washington were also helpful, including those of the American Institute of Architects and its foundation; the drawings, photographs, and manuscript collections of the Library of Congress; and the photographs collection of the Commission of Fine Arts, material which was not transferred to the National Archives, including period views of the memorial, such as the one in figure 3. The Architect of the Capitol's collection also proved remarkably rich. Though the seat of a great democracy, Washington is a nest of fiefdoms, and because a proposal was entertained in 1908-1909 to build the Lincoln Memorial on or near the grounds of the Capitol, its architect commissioned a study of ways a memorial could be incorporated in the composition. This is part of the prehistory of the present memorial.

⁸Christopher Thomas, "The Marble of the Lincoln Memorial: 'Whitest, Prettiest, and . . . Best,'" *Washington History* 5 (Fall/Winter 1993/4): 42-63.

But enough of this. You get the message: conscientious historical research requires attentive study of the record, and in its absence scholarship suffers, historical treatment is superficial, and truisms and legends are repeated from generation to generation. Of course, the opposite is also true—that excessive attention to detail leads to constipated scholarship that no one reads or learns from, and striking balance is, perhaps, the historian's toughest task.

The projects I have described would have been impossible without liberal access to archival collections of architectural materials. Architectural archives are an aid to memory, fleshing it out, exposing its omissions, and righting its overbalances. Does this eliminate talent, even genius, from architectural history? No, for in good design two and two always add up to five. But it does invite reflection on the nature of talent and how it negotiates contingencies like clients' often inconsistent demands, limits on time and money, the design context, structural systems, and shifting tastes in style.

With these examples I rest my case. In recounting them I have tried to make two points: that architectural records are a vital resource for historians and the community at large and should be so recognized in practice and before the law; and that, given the variety of scholarly approaches today, where possible, whole bodies of records should be preserved intact. All of us, across the range of our specialties, have an interest in opening a way to guarantee more effectively the preservation of architectural collections for the sake of that elusive, wonderful stranger—posterity.