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The Sleuth's Dilemma: Uncovering the Hidden Histories of Early Women Architects

For decades, the contribution of women to the built environment has gone unrecognized – and worse – often unrecorded. However, in the past ten+ years, an international demand to acknowledge the work of women has led to a renewed interest in historical women architects and landscape architects. Sadly, there are very few archives dedicated to these women, and many women practitioners did not leave complete records of their work or lives. Fully understanding their practices, their motivation for entering the profession, and the obstacles they overcame often requires investigation beyond a study of the buildings or landscapes these women designed. This can lead to hours (weeks, months, years) in non-architectural archives and correspondence with heirs and distant relatives in search of fragments of information that will complete a satisfactory portrait that honestly describes the woman, her context, and her contribution.

This leaves the intrepid historian with a dilemma: accept the limitations and create a story that might not be satisfying to anyone involved. Or take the risk – a risk that may add years and uncertainty to the project – and launch into unknown territories of discovery which may or may not yield new information. Such is the case I encountered in my years of researching the life and career of Louise Bethune, FAIA, the first professional woman architect in the United States, where I chose the path of the sleuth in search of a hidden history.

Louise Blanchard Bethune, FAIA

On December 18, 1913, the architect Louise Blanchard Bethune passed away of kidney disease.¹ Bethune was the first professional woman architect in the United States, and arguably the first woman architect in the world in the modern era (Renaissance Italy's Plautilla Bricca, 1616–1705, is credited as the first woman architect known to date²). Bethune was raised and practiced in Buffalo, New York, while the city was experiencing unprecedented growth and wealth. She was accepted in

1 N.N., "Woman Architect, First in Country Dies in Buffalo," *Buffalo Courier*, December 19, 1913, 7.

2 Shelley E. Roff, "Did Women Design or Build Before the Industrial Age?," in *The Routledge Companion to Women in Architecture*, ed. Anna Sokolina (New York: Routledge, 2021), 21–31.

the professional associations by the most well-respected architects of the time; the country's most acclaimed architects such as, Daniel Burnham and Louis Sullivan, were her colleagues and champions. Bethune was not only admitted into the “boys club” of professional associations – the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) – but she also became one of its leaders during a crucial period in its maturation from a craft and gentleman's pastime to a serious profession. She was nationally recognized, not just in architectural circles, but in the public as a trailblazing woman architect, and the profession's first woman member.

Bethune's death made local news and it was picked up by the national press and, of course, architectural newsletters. Her passing inspired these publications to take stock of the advancement of women in architecture since the groundbreaking opening of her office in 1881. Sadly, these advances were not as significant as many had hoped, herself included. Noting that Bethune had achieved a position that few other women equaled as architects, the *Western Architect* stated that “It is therefore, not because of a lack of example that the woman architect has not become a feature in architectural practice.”³

However, despite her reputation during her lifetime, within ten years of her death, Louise's name would slip into obscurity. In the 1910s, many American architects had forgotten that a woman had broken the gender barrier to the profession a generation earlier.⁴ By the 1920s, the AIA began to admit more women to their ranks, but Louise Bethune's name, and her legacy as the country's first woman architect, were largely forgotten.⁵ How did this happen? And why is she unknown outside of small circles of architectural historians and Buffalo enthusiasts?

One reason for Bethune's obscurity is that her professional and personal papers have been lost. While Bethune founded her own architectural firm, its office records and most of its construction documents no longer exist. Many of the buildings that she designed have been destroyed over the decades. Of the approximately 180 known Bethune, Bethune & Fuchs' buildings, only 30 are standing today.⁶ If Bethune did keep diaries, they, too, have been lost. For years, there was only one known photograph of her, and little other information was available about her family or history. Another reason is the collective amnesia of the profession's male members – purposeful or otherwise – regarding early women members. A few articles were written about Bethune after she passed away in 1913, however, they were accompanied by others litigating a case that she had already successfully debunked

3 “Feminism and Architecture,” *The Western Architect* (April 1914): 34.

4 Kelly Hayes McAlonie, *Louise Blanchard Bethune: Every Woman Her Own Architect* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 101.

5 Hayes McAlonie, *Louise Blanchard Bethune: Every Woman Her Own Architect*, 101.

6 Hayes McAlonie, *Louise Blanchard Bethune: Every Woman Her Own Architect*, 227.

in 1881: whether women had the intellectual and physical abilities to perform the work of an architect. Women experienced opposition to entry in certain local chapters of the American Institute of Architects until after World War I. Only a handful of women were admitted to the AIA until the 1920s, but it was not until the 1970s that the AIA began to address its longstanding indifference to its women members.

A third reason is because Bethune was such an early trailblazer. Most of the nineteenth century women architects left the profession when they married, or they focused on strictly residential architecture. Louise Bethune was the opposite; she married her colleague and business partner, Robert Bethune, and together they ran a very successful, albeit small, practice with their longtime protégé, William Fuchs until she was forced to retire due to ill health in 1911. Bethune designed schools and commercial structures as well as homes, handling the full gamut of architectural projects available at the time.

Each decade of the twentieth century saw women architects in the United States making significant contributions to the built environment, in their firms or as members of larger studios. However, the number of women architects never rose in equal numbers comparable to other professions, such as medicine or law. Despina Stratigakos noted in *Where Are the Women Architects* that the United States occupational census reported 379 women architects in 1939, 300 in 1949, 260 in 1960, and 400 in 1975.⁷ One hundred and one years after Bethune began her career as an intern in 1876, the sluggish growth of women in the profession led *New York Times* architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable to complain:

[The woman architect] has been excluded from the male clubbiness so characteristic of the profession, and once in a firm, is limited in her contacts with clients and site supervision. She has never been admitted to the architect "star system". . . architecture is apparently going to be the last 'liberated' profession – behind medicine and law.⁸

Huxtable was not alone in her frustration. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s eventually impacted the architectural profession in the mid-1970s. Almost a decade after Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed, growth in women entering the architectural profession began. And, along with that, came an interest in the history of women architects and dissatisfaction with their treatment by their male peers. Activism during this era was manifested in two ways: critical writing of practitioners, such as Ellen Perry Berkley's "Women in Architecture" article, which ran in architectural publications; and women in architecture groups. It was because of this activism the A.I.A. was forced to confront the inequity its women members

⁷ Despina Stratigakos, *Where Are the Women Architects* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 2016), 15.

⁸ Ada Louise Huxtable, "The Last Profession to be 'Liberated' by Women," *New York Times*, April 13, 1977, 93.

claimed. In 1970 just one percent of A.I.A. members were women.⁹ As Gabrielle Esperdy notes, the organization was confronted in 1973 for being “an exclusive gentleman’s club” at its national convention. A.I.A. New York, A.I.A. New Jersey, and the Boston Society of Architects jointly introduced the “Status of Women in the Architectural Profession” resolution: “In society at large we are in the midst of a struggle for women’s rights brought into sharp focus by the current feminist movement. A.I.A. and the architectural profession have not responded to this climate change.” This led to the A.I.A.’s formation of the “Women and Minorities” Subcommittee, which studied the topic and released an “Affirmative Action Plan” in 1975. The report listed grievances of women that included sexual harassment, structural obstacles hindering promotions, and a sense of being unwelcome in the institute. The report called for every A.I.A. chapter to conduct a self-analysis to identify any practices of discrimination, stating that not acting would harm the organization and the profession.

It was also amid this activism that Louise Bethune was “rediscovered.” In the 1950s to 1970s, a few publications focused on her life and work. These were Madeline Stern’s short biography in *We the Women: Career Firsts of the 19th-Century America* in 1963 and George E. Pettengill, Hon. A.I.A.’s article in the March 1975 issue of *AIA Journal*, March 1975 titled “How A.I.A. Acquired its First Woman Member, Mrs. Louise Bethune.” Gwendolyn Wright acknowledged Bethune in her chapter on early practitioners in Susana Torre’s *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* in 1977. And Bethune was a secondary character in Jeanne Madeline Weimann’s 1981 recount of the Women’s Building competition at the World Columbian Exposition titled, *The Fair Women*.

Starting in the 1980s, Buffalo architect and A.I.A. member Adriana Barbasch spent years researching Louise’s life and career. She was approached by A.I.A. New York State in 1986 to write a brochure on Bethune. This request began a 20-year initiative that resulted in a foundation of research on her career, from which all subsequent biographers have drawn. Barbasch wrote “Louise Blanchard Bethune” in *Architecture: A Place for Women*, which was published in 1989.

I first learned about Bethune in 2002, when I attended the unveiling of a memorial dedicated to her at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, organized by Adriana. My interest with Bethune’s story might have ended then, except that when Adriana retired, she offered to bequeath to me her research on the trailblazer. After receiving this cache of materials, I lectured often and wrote articles on Bethune.

⁹ Gabrielle Esperdy, “The Incredible True Adventures of the Architectress in America,” *Places Journal* (September 2012), <https://placesjournal.org/article/the-incredible-true-adventures-of-the-architectress-in-america/?cn-reloaded=1> (date accessed, 3 June 2024).

I also curated two exhibits: the first was a small permanent one for the Bethune Conference Room at AIA Headquarters in Washington, DC in 2006, and the second was, *Buffalo's Bethune*, a temporary exhibit at the Buffalo History Museum in 2011. In 2013, I worked with A.I.A. Buffalo/WNY and A.I.A. NYS to dedicate a foot marker on her grave to honor her, as her gravesite did not include a marker with her name.

By 2016, I began the process of writing a biography on Bethune. There had already been two biographies on Bethune at that time – *Louise Blanchard Bethune: America's First Professional Woman Architect* by Johanna Hays in 2014 and *Storming the Old Boys Citadel: Two Pioneer Women Architects of Nineteenth Century North America* by Carla Blank and Tania Martin in 2016. In the absence of a Bethune archive or personal/ professional papers, these authors focused on her portfolio of buildings and the few biographical references known to exist.

I wanted to write a different story. I was interested in discovering the woman behind the Gilded Age veneer and identify the reasons why this particular woman chose to challenge the patriarchy of the Victorian-era architectural profession and how she did it. I had several advantages. Firstly, as a practicing woman architect living in Buffalo who specializes in educational design, my life closely resembles hers. Additionally, as the 2008 President of AIA Buffalo/WNY and 2012 President of AIA New York State, I also share Bethune's history as a leader within our professional association. Secondly, as many archives and libraries have digitized their documents in the past ten years, I was able to find over eight hundred articles on Bethune written during her lifetime, which provided me with a wealth of information not available to previous biographers. And thirdly, I invested the time to research materials in archives related to Bethune's hobbies and interests, and not just her career.

One of the most rewarding discoveries I made while exploring Bethune's life outside of architecture was that she was a bicycling enthusiast. In fact, she was the first woman in Buffalo to own a bicycle and was a founder of the Buffalo Women's Wheel and Athletic Club, the second all-female cycling organization in the country.¹⁰ Just as in the architectural profession, few women had previously adopted cycling as a sport and means of transportation, because of the limitations of contemporary bicycle design, their bulky clothing, and the general feeling that only men had the physical strength to ride long distances. This was all eliminated by a group of pioneering women – many of whom were also part of the nascent women's rights movement – who defied common prejudices, adopted less-restrictive garb, and formed self-supporting clubs to encourage others to take up the sport.

10 N.N., "Ladies of the Wheel," *Buffalo Illustrated Express*, August 14, 1892, 7.

This discovery led me to question the long-held belief promoted by her previous biographers that Bethune was not a feminist. In researching the rich history of “wheeling” and its impact on the women’s suffrage movement, and in my other research on her, I found many indications that Bethune was a staunch believer in women’s equality and actively advocated for her beliefs. While earlier historians and biographers – including Adriana Barbasch – felt that Bethune was not concerned with promoting women’s rights, it became clear to me after considering the social atmosphere of the time and viewing her life and activities in the context of other women of the era, that Bethune was very engaged in women’s equality on her own terms. It also led me to my favourite quote from Louise Bethune, “Every woman her own architect,” which was the title of a toast that she delivered at a Wheeling banquet in 1894.¹¹

The Buffalo and Erie County Grosvenor Library holds records from the Women’s Wheeling and Athletic Club and the Buffalo Genealogical Society. The Women’s Wheeling and Athletic Club records provided remarkable insight into her personality and her network of friends – who were also professional women trailblazers like her. The Buffalo Genealogical Society also holds the research that Bethune compiled on the Bethune and Blanchard families. Her correspondence, mostly from the last decade of her life, provided excellent information on her unrelenting work schedule, how hard she pushed herself despite illness, her ultimate declining health, and her relationship with her immediate and extended family. I also used the local archives to further explore the lives of the people within Bethune’s orbit, who greatly influenced her life, such as her parents Emma and Dalson Blanchard; her mentor, Richard Waite; her husband, Robert Bethune; her protégé and business partner, William Fuchs; and her son, Charles Bethune. Expanding my research to include the lives of Bethune’s inner circle enriched my understanding of Bethune’s life and the choices she was empowered to make.

According to historian Anne Lawrence the term “Hidden History” is used when “the history of a neglected group begins to appear: it also has an explicit message that these groups have lacked a history because society has been unwilling to see them as a separate group with particular rights. Groups hidden from history are hidden because of prejudices against the group in the past, because of modern prejudices; and because of the absence of records.”¹² For decades, the contributions of women have gone unacknowledged, resulting in comparatively few monographs to women compared to those of men who have impacted our built environment and

¹¹ Louise Bethune, *Women’s Wheel and Athletic Club Annual Dinner Program*, April 29, 1894.

¹² Anne Lawrence, *Women in England in 1500–1760: A Social History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

a lack of women's work in academic architectural curricula. It is incumbent on all of us to uncover our collective hidden histories to better understand the world in which we live, and the contexts from where we came. To that end, in March 2023, the University at Buffalo announced the opening of the Zina Bethune Collection on Louise Bethune, which is the only collection solely dedicated to Louise Blanchard Bethune, FAIA. The collection documents the life and work of Bethune and includes records on the Bethune family, the life and work of Dr. Charles William Bethune (Louise Bethune's son), photographs of the Blanchard family, ephemera, and architectural floor plans designed by Bethune, Bethune, and Fuchs Architects.

At this very moment, the women who joined professions in the built environment – architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and urban planning – in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism are retiring. The documentation of their work, and therefore their legacies, are at risk of being lost like so many of the women who preceded them. We have an opportunity to save these stories from becoming hidden to future generations. It is by remembering those who came before us that we can build on the momentum in favour of women architects reaching a footing in the profession equal to their male counterparts and fulfilling Louise Bethune's prophecy made in 1891: "The future of women in the architectural profession is what she herself sees fit to make it."¹³

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13 Louise Bethune, "Women and Architecture," *Inland Architect and News Record* 17 (March 1891): 20.



ORT

- andre kommuner
- områder udlagt til sommerhus, camping og feriebyer
- eksisterende og udlagte byområder
- skove og plantager
- gule badestrand
- foreløbet og offentlig badebælt
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Figure 1.7: Ogee with Rubin plans. Pattern inspired by “Between Growth and Preservation – Anne Marie Rubin’s landscape planning in Denmark during the 1960s building boom”.