

Three Victorian Architects of New Bedford

While researching information for a web-site on the Stick Style of Victorian architecture, I came across three architects, virtually unknown today, who had strong links to New Bedford during the last half of the 19th century: Solomon K. Eaton, Willard T. Sears and John M. Allen. Sears had the most distinguished career as a high profile designer in Boston but Eaton and Allen also led lives of considerable accomplishment.

New Bedford has a rich architectural history. Well-known designers such as Richard Upjohn, Russell Warren, Peabody and Stearns and others designed buildings here that continue to grace the city's landscape. Home grown architects Nat C. Smith, Samuel C. Hunt and Caleb and Edgar B. Hammond continued this tradition into the early 20th century. Eaton, Sears and Allen expand the depth of this tradition.

Solomon K. Eaton was the oldest of this trio of men. Born in 1806, he spent his entire life as a resident of Mattapoisett. He kept an office in New Bedford for many years at 24 Union Street, which he maintained until his death. His New Bedford commissions include the original Public Library, now City Hall, the Abby Taber Hunt House at 100 Madison Street and the Pacific Meeting House long demolished but which was at the site that is now the "octopus" formerly Foster and High Streets. He is credited with designing many buildings in the surrounding towns including the Mattapoisett Congregational Church, and the First Congregational Church in Marion. A young man by the name of Willard Sears began his architectural career in Eaton's Union Street office.

Eaton was active in civic affairs, being a church deacon and serving in the state legislature. The most amazing fact of his life is that he volunteered for the Union Army during the Civil War at age 55. His unit saw action in North Carolina. Eaton died at a job site in Middleboro on October 9, 1872. He was 65.

Willard Thomas Sears was born in New Bedford in 1837 to Willard and Ruth (Cushman) Sears. Ancestors on both sides of his family were Mayflower descendants. His initial architectural training was with Eaton. Around 1860, he moved to Boston serving as a draftsman for the architect Gridley Bryant (1816-1899). In 1867, he formed a partnership with Charles Amos Cummings (1833-1905) that proved very successful. Cummings and Sears developed an excellent reputation for residential and commercial design throughout the Boston metropolitan area. After Cummings retired in 1890, Sears continued to receive high profile commissions. He designed Fenway Court for Isabella Stewart Gardner, now the Gardner Museum as well as the Pilgrim Monument at Provincetown. He died in Boston on May 21, 1920. The passing of this native son was duly noted by the New Bedford press.

The biography of John Mitchell Allen presents an interesting case for me. It appears that he may have designed my house at 97 Madison Street.

Allen, born in 1842, was a life long resident of Marion. After receiving technical education at the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, he served as a draftsman for the

architectural firm of Ware and Van Brunt. He then established his own practice with offices in Boston and for a short time in New Bedford (New Bedford City Directory, 1879-1880), but always called Marion home. He was elected a Fellow of the Boston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1879. He appears to have acquired an excellent reputation although evidence of his work is scant. Allen served as a town official in Marion late in life as well as being a real estate developer. He died February 13, 1912 leaving a wife and two children, one of which was Dr Horatio C. Allen of New Bedford.

Allen designed a house that appeared in the American Architect and Building News (AABN) on November 25, 1876. It was a very large Stick Style mansion that was to be located at the corner of Bush and Orchard Streets in New Bedford. (Bush St was later changed to Madison St) This house was never built. A comparison of the Allen drawing to the house that currently stands at 95 Madison St, the Peleg C. Howland House, shows many similarities. Although unproven to date, the Howland House could be a scaled-down version (albeit still very large) of the house published in the AABN. Two houses, 95 and 97 Madison Street, both in the Stick Style were built simultaneously in 1875-76 on one subdivided lot. Perhaps it was more cost effective to build two homes rather than one enormous mansion. Whether Allen had a hand in the design of these two houses is still to be determined.

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