

# Peter B. Wight

(A BIOGRAPHY)

PRESENTED TO THE MEMBERS AND GUESTS OF  
THE ILLINOIS CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN INSTI-  
TUTE OF ARCHITECTS BY WILLIAM W. CLAY ON  
PRESENTATION OF A PORTRAIT OF MR. WIGHT TO  
THE CHAPTER BY ALLEN E. PHILBRICK, JUNE 10, 1913,  
AT THE CLIFF DWELLERS CLUB, CHICAGO, ILL.



ETER B. WIGHT was born in the City of New York, August 1, 1838. His Father was of Puritan extraction from Mass. His Mother was of Irish and Dutch extraction from Newburg, New York.

Mr. Wight was educated in the Public Schools of that City, graduating into the Free Academy, now the College of the City of New York, at the age of twelve. He took the Classical Course, and graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1855.

He began to be interested in Architecture and Building while at College, where he was the highest of his class in freehand drawing, and read such architectural books as were in the library, especially John Ruskin's works, the first English edition of which was then coming out. He made plans for two buildings during his senior year, one of which, a stone country residence, was erected. He continued as a post graduate Student in drawing for one year, when he entered an architectural office as a student draftsman. In 1857 and 1858 he made plans for his first job in a suburban village, being a row of brick stores and offices. In October 1858 he was offered some business in Chicago, then being but twenty years of age. While in Chicago he remodeled the old Commercial College building on the S. W corner of State and Randolph Streets, the site of the present Bay State block.

Returning to New York he continued his studies in the Astor Library, and undertook any kind of work in drawing, both architectural and mechanical, that offered. The only building to his own credit being the Middletown bank, Middletown, N. Y, still standing and being occupied by that bank. He also redesigned the Inebriate Asylum at Binghampton, now a State Insane hospital.

In 1861, immediately after the breaking out of the Civil War, Mr. Wight studied Military Drill and Military Engineering. He completed this course in six months. In 1865, he was recommended for a commission by General Burnside, who was to have appointed him as Military Engineer on his staff for the siege of Newbern, N. C., but was greatly disappointed when Secretary of War Cameron

refused to issue the commission on technical grounds, for up to that time no volunteer engineers had been appointed. General Burnside was obliged to take General Parke from the command of a brigade to do the work.

From that time Mr. Wight decided to devote himself to the arts of peace. At the suggestion of a classmate, E. Dwight Church, he got permission to enter the competition for the New Academy of Design, to be erected on the N. W. corner of 4th ave. and 23rd st., a vacant lot which he had passed during four years of his College life, and upon which he had already built many an air castle. He was opposed by all the prominent New York Architects. He became a volunteer competitor, but when the Council of the Academy, to whom he was entirely unknown, saw his design, he was placed with the paid competitors. His design was selected, but no award or appointment was made for more than a year thereafter. The Civil War was most prominent in everybody's mind. During this time a financial scheme was completed for raising a much larger sum than was originally contemplated. Accepting this opportunity for a finer building, Mr. Wight made two more designs. The first was shown in the Annual Exhibit of 1862, and the Council proposed to adopt it; but before they took action Mr. Wight had perfected a third and final design, after which this splendid building was erected.

Mr. Wight then hired an office for the first time in conjunction with the late Russell Sturgis, whom he had first met at College. The building was commenced in 1863, and completed in April, 1865, on the day before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. It was to have been dedicated the following day, but the dedication was postponed, and the Architect was directed to drape the whole building in mourning.

During the erection of the Academy of design Mr. Wight was commissioned to design the Yale School of Fine Arts, founded by the late Augustus Russell Street, which was completed in 1867. After another limited competition with most of the Architects who were in the Academy competition, he was appointed Architect for the Brooklyn Mercantile Library, now part of the Public Library of Brooklyn. His other works up to 1871 were mostly dwellings.

After the great fire in Chicago he was invited to join the old firm of Carter and Drake in that city, with an equal interest, he being at that time but 33 years of age. Their work in Chicago is well known, the cost of buildings erected from their plans and under their supervision during two years having been about \$3,000,000, and showed a united frontage of about three quarters of a mile.

During this period Mr. Wight rebuilt the Commercial College buildings, now called the Bay State Block, which he had remodeled in 1859 for the same owners.

Mr. Carter died in 1873 and the business was continued one year more by Drake and Wight, after which Mr. Wight was in independent practice until 1882. In 1872-3 he was associated with H. H. Richardson in the erection of the American Express Building on Monroe street, and from 1873 to 1875 he was Architect for the residence of Eliphalet Blatchford on North La Salle street, between Elm and Maple.

In 1881 he was consulting Architect with Burnham and Root for the Montauk Block, now removed, for which he designed the first grill foundation ever used for any building, using old iron rails for concrete reinforcement. In the same year he planned and supervised the great stables of the American Express Company at Lexington avenue and 47th street, New York City, now removed for the Grand Central Depot. This practically ended his Architectural work until 1891.

His inventions in the field of improved Construction led to the organization of the Wight Fire Proofing Co., an Illinois corporation, of which he was General Manager until its dissolution in 1891. The operations of this company covered a period of ten years, during which he resigned his membership in the Institute; but the Chicago Chapter declined to accept his resignation. He did not, however, take any active part in its proceedings during those years.

After he gave up his contracting business his name was restored to the list of Fellows of the Institute without election.

In resuming practice in 1891 his work was mainly in connection with the World's Columbian Exposition. He had a branch office on the grounds until the exposition closed. He redesigned the California Building, which was commenced by the late A. Page

Brown, of San Francisco, and was supervising Architect for the Ohio, Maryland, Venezuela and Merck Buildings, the Homeopathic Hospital and many small structures and exhibits.

Those were lean years at Chicago, from the close of the fair to the passage of the Architects' license law. Two of these years Mr. Wight gave to appraising 600 buildings for the Northwestern Elevated R. R. Co., and remodeling a few of them. He worked on all the committees perfecting the license law of Illinois; from 1905, when it was introduced, to 1907, when it was passed; and in the fall of 1907 was appointed by Governor Tanner as a member of the Board. He was elected Secretary and Treasurer at the first meeting of the Board, and has continued in that important capacity ever since.

Mr. Wight has been a contributor to the literature of Fine Arts and Architecture all his life; was editor of the New Path, a Fine Art journal in New York in 1869; has been a contributor to the American Architect from 1875 to 1893; to the Pall-Mall and other magazines, to the Inland Architect, Architectural Record and Building Progress; was editor of the Fire Proof magazine from 1904 to 1908, and contributed many papers to the Chicago Literary Club.

In 1866 Mr. Wight was elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects without passing through the grade of associate membership. He was Secretary of the Institute in 1869-70-71, and has been a prominent figure in the Institute, and especially in the Illinois Chapter, ever since.

He was one of the organizers of the New York Chapter of the Institute when the Chapter system was introduced. He resigned when he came to Chicago, and was elected a member of the Chicago Chapter in 1872. Between that date and 1880 he served several terms as Secretary and President. He also served several terms as Vice President of the Illinois Chapter between 1892 and 1900. He was Secretary for many years succeeding Mr. Beaumont's term, until he was elected President in 1911.

There are only four other members of the Institute whose terms of membership are longer than Mr. Wight's.

Certainly this is a most notable and active career.

Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Illinois Chapter, of the American Institute of Architects, held at the rooms of the Cliff Sweller, Chicago, June 10, 1913.

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From 6:30 to 7:30 a social hour was enjoyed, followed by an informal dinner.

There were present the following members:-

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|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Prest. Riner C. Jensen, | Melville C. Chatten,   | D. H. Perkins,      |
| Peter B. Wight,         | Robert C. Berlin,      | J. M. Hoskins,      |
| Wm. W. Clay,            | Robert C. Fletcher,    | Wm. K. Fellows,     |
| Irving H. Pond,         | Morrison H. Vail,      | Albert E. Colcord,  |
| Joan J. Hamilton,       | Francis W. Fitzgerald, | E. B. Hallbert,     |
| Thomas A. Tallmadge,    | Geo. W. Maher,         | Alfred E. Mannerre, |
| C. E. Hammond,          | E. E. Wheelock,        | Normand S. Patton,  |
| Frank A. Carpenter,     | E. W. Crownen,         | Leon W. Stanhope,   |
| Fred W. Worst,          | Chas. S. Prindeville,  | J.E.O. Fridgeore,   |
| Forbes E. Fowers,       | C. W. Busch,           | Edwin F. Gillette,  |
| Arthur Woltersdorf,     | Chas. D. Waterbury,    | F. J. Weber,        |
| E. S. Roman,            | Geo. Beaumont,         | Allen E. Pond,      |
|                         | E. Webster Tomlinson,  | and                 |

Honorary member, F. Baumann, and the following guests:

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|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Messrs. Lawton Parker,  | W. M. Carpenter,    |
| Ralph Clarkson,         | Allen E. Philbrick, |
| Francis M. Barton,      | E. T. Culbertson,   |
| Charles Francis Browne, |                     |

Total of 45.

At 8:57 Prest. Jensen called the meeting to order and after announcing the guests present, called for the minutes of the May meeting and reports of the Treasurer, Executive Committee, and for Communications. These were read and approved.

The Prest. then called upon Mr. Ralph Clarkson to propose a toast to our guest, Mr. Lawton Parker, Painter and receiver of the first Gold Medal of the Paris Salon, to be awarded an American.

Mr. Peter B. Wight read the report of the Committee to report upon Committee Reports and moved "that the reports of Committees be laid over for consideration at the September meeting of the Chapter and to be the special matter for that meeting, unless it should be deemed by the Executive Committee, to be elected at this meeting, to be of sufficient importance to call a special meeting during the vacation". Upon vote the above motion prevailed.

It was moved by Mr. Wight, duly seconded and voted "That it be referred to the Executive Committee to decide whether or not the Illinois Chapter should join with the Architects Business Association in employing investigators and attorneys to prosecute violations of the Architect's license law in view of the absence of appropriations.

Mr. A. B. Pond made a verbal report upon the Architects' liability under the State Laws and referred to the opinion of Mr. Wilson, of the

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fine of Wilson, Moore & Mellyvaine. It was suggested that the secretary send a copy of this Committee's report to each member of the Chapter in advance of the September meeting.

The Jury to award the Chapter Gold Medal made report through Mr. I. K. Pond, that the Jury had awarded the medal to the firm of Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton for the "Lion House" at Lincoln Park, Chicago.; there was one dissenting vote, by Mr. Roche who favored the awarding the medal to Mr. Simmons for the *C. P. Kimball & Co's Factory Building* at 30th St & Michigan Ave.

The medal was presented to Mr. John L. Hamilton, representing the firm, by Prest. Jensen, and Mr. Hamilton responded.

The Committee on Nominations made report by its Chairman, Mr. H. B. Wheelock as follows:

"Your committee appointed to nominate the officers for the ensuing year, begs leave to report that the work of the present officers has been so satisfactory in every respect that the Chapter cannot do better than re-elect each officer to succeed himself for the ensuing year, therefore, the Committee takes pleasure in nominating the following officers:

|                 |                       |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| President       | Elmer C. Jensen,      |
| 1st Vice-Prest. | Chas. H. Prindeville, |
| 2nd " "         | Robert C. Berlin,     |
| Treasurer       | Joseph C. Llewellyn,  |
| Secretary       | Webster Tomlinson,    |

Respectfully submitted,

H. B. Wheelock,  
A. E. Pond,  
J. C. Llewellyn."

Upon motion made and put by Mr. I. K. Pond the unanimous vote of the Chapter was cast for the nominees as reported above and they were declared elected.

The following message from Mr. Otto Matz was read.

"Mr. Otto Matz, honorary member of Illinois Chapter, A.I.A., now 64 years of age, sends greetings.

He regrets exceedingly his inability to be with us this evening at the Annual Meeting. Though his physical condition prevents his attendance at our meeting he wishes the Chapter prosperity and longevity."

Message borne by  
Arthur Welterdorf.

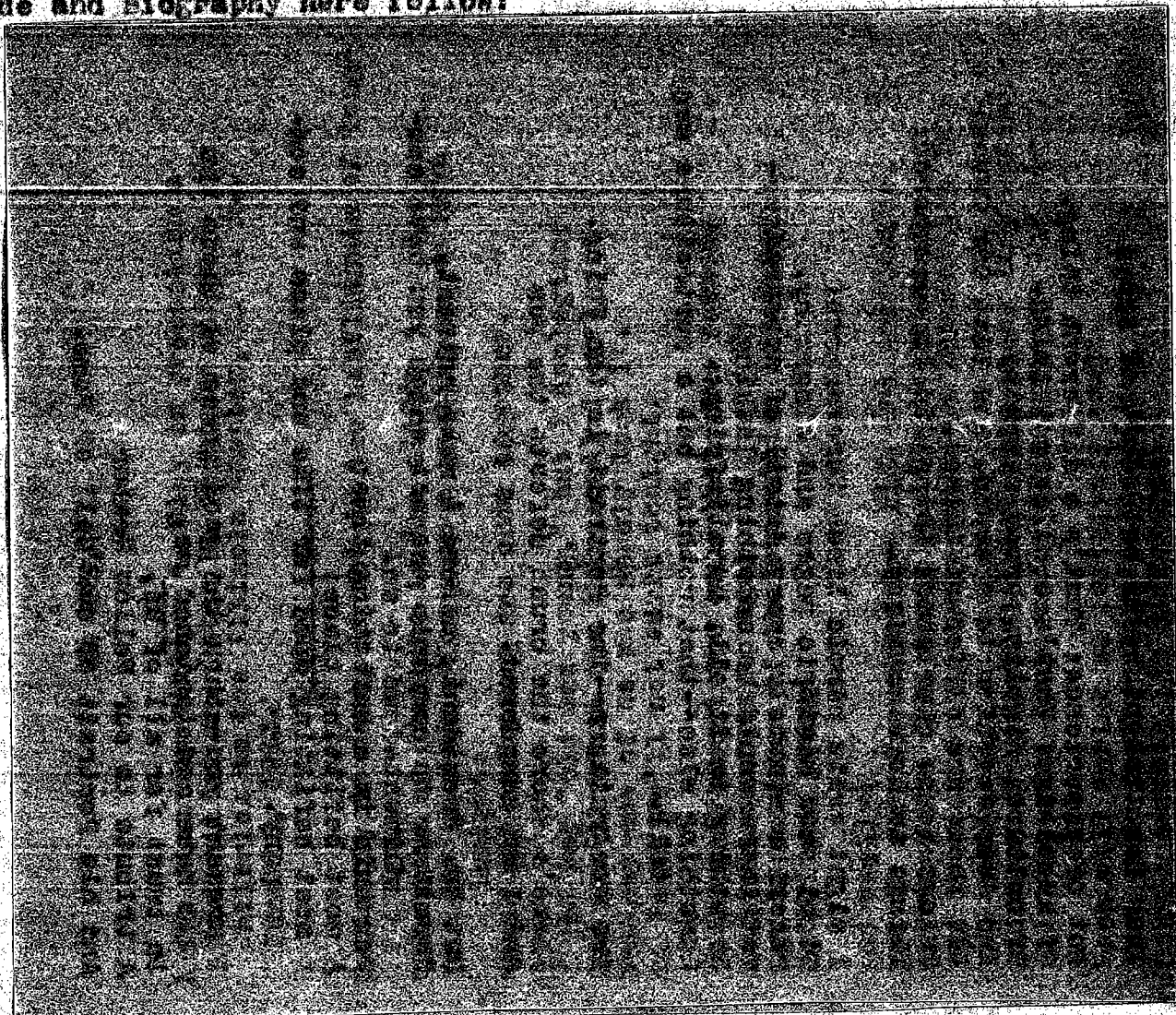
June 10, 1915.

The Secretary read the report of the Executive Committee which was approved. (on file).

Prest. Jensen made his report as president (on file) after which he explained that the "event" of the meeting would be the unveiling of a portrait, the first, of which it was hoped would be a worthy collection of portraits of men distinguished for their ability, attainments or devotion to the profession of Architecture. He called upon Mr. W. W. Day to make the presentation, who for this purpose composed an original poem and a biography. The biography having been printed,

each guest was presented with a copy and the portrait of Peter B. Wight, painted by Allen S. Philbrick was unveiled.

The Ode and Biography here follow:



In responding Mr. Wight said that he felt quite embarrassed at such distinguished honor and accepted the portrait recalling the many arduous hours he had spent as a draped model; when he was in the life ~~and~~ class he said, they gave the model an opportunity to rest, but Mr. Philbrick had been a severe as well as a patient task master, and he felt gratified with the efforts not only of the painter but of those present to secure if possible, a speaking likeness.

Lawton Parker, who was the gold medalist of the Paris, responded briefly. He considered the portrait quite outside the conventional. "It has character and befits the man. I wish to add my expressions of appreciation to those who have preceded me".

Charles Francis Brown made a very brief but happy address, his manner and what he said accounting for the desire of those who know him to have him present.

H. H. Carpenter, secretary of the Art Institute, responded briefly and pleasantly and urged that the architects get into closer touch and cooperate more generally with sculptors and the painters. "The Architect is apt to forget all about anything else but architecture, the thought of sculptor and painting never seems to enter his head". He illustrated his idea by calling attention to a monument designed by an architect, in which there was not the least suggestion or thought that there could be any sculptor in connection with it and the efforts of a sculptor to avoid anything that might possibly be termed architecture in his work.



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I did say "old and young," but I apologize  
For we'll admit the thing called Age?  
Not any one of us who merely look it.  
At least we'll not admit tonight.

If we only count the eons that have passed,  
We might confess to age;  
But if we dream of the eternities to come,  
We all are young!

And really!  
Not so very far apart are kids and graybeards,  
Or those who file along in life between:  
Add to the ages that are past the futures yet to  
come.

And then compare that total with those tiny spans  
Which we call Youth and Middle Age, and Age it-  
self.

Each will shrink so infinitely small  
That even Brother Winslow's sliding scale  
Cannot compute the difference.

Thus for tonight we'll not admit of Age.

But of experience: That's a different thing.  
Of knowledge: That's a different thing.  
Of culture, dignity, broad sympathy  
And deep devotion to a cause, and that Our Cause:  
All these are different things.  
Things to be cherished; things to be remembered:  
Things to be recognized.

I might write heroic lines forevermore;  
Might read historic pages and biography.  
Describe minutely every detail of appearance--  
Yet there would be something lacking:  
Something in it all, unsatisfying:  
Something else--that nothing but a portraiture can  
tell.

The Portraiture--The Portrait is the Thing.

There's where the brush defeats the pen  
And I am conquered.

But Mr. President, before I make retreat,  
Permit me to complete the act which you have com-  
plimented me to do.  
For this is a befitting time;  
A most befitting place;  
A most befitting deed for time and place and com-  
pany.

I present you--thru the good grace of those who  
have commissioned me,  
In trust for all of us,  
A tribute to our Fellow Member  
And his Portrait of our Hall of Fame.

nd the portrait of Peter B.  
unveiled.



The discussion was at this point reading out a little from its immediate application to Mr. Wight and his portrait but the contributions were to the point and much enjoyed. For example, Bernard S. Patton told about a young artist going abroad and apparently completing his early training in Paris, and after he returned to this country the young man's father called upon the father of Mr. Patton and urged that he might let the young man paint the portrait of his father. Referring to Mr. Parker Mr. Patton said: "The young man is present this evening in the person of the gold medalist of the Academy of Design of Paris".

Ralph Clarkson discussed the necessity of a fitting hall for the Chapter and concluded his remarks by offering his services for the next unveiling, and was greeted with enthusiastic applause.

Arthur W. Woltersdorf told how the idea of a collection of portraits of distinguished men had originated. The subject was one of the chosen topics of discussion among a group of friends one afternoon last winter at the rooms of the Cliff Dwellers. Among those present including himself, was Mr. Philbrick, the artist, Messrs. Beman & Weber, maybe there were others; and the more they talked about it the more they felt that it was a great opportunity to pay a tribute to the men who were so worthy of it. Mr. Philbrick had very generously offered to paint the first portrait. He said, however, that if he did so he must be allowed to select his own subject. "There is one man among you who has marked characteristics, and to whom I think I can do justice. That man is Peter B. Wight". We grew enthusiastic about the matter and Mr. Philbrick was encouraged to go about his work. Mr. Wight was approached and after some hesitancy he accepted the honor.

Mr. Woltersdorf continued and referred to the names of others who might be worthy subjects for gallery including the portraits of the late Dankmar Adler, William LeBaron Jenney, Daniel H. Burnham and John W. Root. He thought it might be possible to add one, or perhaps two, a year.

Mr. Beman, whose early association began with Mr. Wight in New York about forty years ago, was called upon. Mr. Beman said that it gave him pleasure to respond to a tribute to Mr. Wight. He felt that he was just as handsome a man to-day as he was then.

Messrs. Woltersdorf and Weber were appointed a Committee of two to hang the portrait of Mr. Wight on the Illinois Chapter's walls.

George Beaumont led the singing of a number of popular songs expressive of comradery and good fellowship, in which all joined with a zeal reflecting the pleasure of the occasion and the high esteem which this body of professional men have for each other.

Meeting adjourned at 10:05 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

*A. Webster Johnson*  
Sec'y.