

Introduction

It was June 1876 in Buffalo, New York. Richard Waite, the most prominent architect in the city, was very busy. The construction of the Pierce Palace Hotel was about to begin, and there were other significant projects on the boards in his office. Waite's exciting new projects promised to elevate his firm's reputation beyond the confines of Western New York.

Summer is warm and pleasant in Buffalo, a welcome respite from the long and snow-filled days of wintertime for the Queen City of the Great Lakes. During one of these warm and busy days, nineteen-year-old Louise Blanchard entered Waite's office in the German Insurance Building at Lafayette Square, looking for employment. This was most unusual because there were no woman architects practicing at the time in the United States, or anywhere else for that matter. Architects were expected to do more than just draw plans for a building; they had to oversee construction, negotiate rates, maintain budgets—to manage the entire process that goes into successfully completing a project. Women just didn't seem to have the required capabilities to be successful architects. For starters, they were thought to lack the physical stamina to work on construction sites. Why, even their clothing—which included tight corsets and long skirts with bustles—precluded this kind of work. The idea of a woman performing the many duties of an architect was hardly thinkable.

Blanchard told Waite that she had wanted to be an architect since childhood. She said her friends mocked her in grade school, but she persevered in her ambition to pursue her dream. She graduated from Buffalo High School in 1874 and continued in its two-year college preparatory program with the intention of attending Cornell University's newly opened architectural department. She took advanced courses, tutored other students,

and traveled in preparation for her continued studies. She hoped Waite would hire her for the summer until her program began. And—despite the common prejudice against women working in the profession—Waite hired her in June 1876, enabling Louise to fulfill her dream and become an architect.

This book traces the life and career of a largely forgotten woman and places her within the context of her city and the times in which she lived. Louise Blanchard Bethune was the first professional woman architect in the United States. She was raised and practiced in Buffalo, New York, while the city was experiencing unprecedented growth and wealth. She was accepted in the professional associations by the most well-respected architects of the time; Daniel Burnham, Louis Sullivan, and especially John Root were her colleagues and champions. Louise was not only admitted into the “boys’ club” of professional associations—the American Institute of Architects (AIA)—but she also became one of its leaders during a crucial period in architecture’s maturation from a craft and gentleman’s pastime to a serious profession. How did this happen? And why is she unknown outside of small circles of architectural historians and Buffalo enthusiasts?

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

Another reason, I think, is because Louise 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 was the opposite; she married her colleague and business partner, Robert

Bethune, they had one child, and together they ran a very successful, albeit small, practice until Louise was forced to retire due to ill health in 1911. She designed schools and commercial structures as well as homes, handling the full gamut of architectural projects available at the time.

Louise Bethune was complicated: She was simultaneously very much of her era, and very far ahead of her time. As a professional in a male-dominated industry during the Gilded Age, she had to chart her own course. After winning an apprenticeship with Waite, she chose to forgo college training and then founded her own firm, confronting potential prejudice from male colleagues and builders and winning architectural commissions from—mostly male—clients. Yet, Louise's story is very familiar to contemporary women. She went into business with her spouse, and theirs was very much a partnership of equals. She balanced the conflicting demands of managing a firm, caring for her family, and pursuing personal interests with her friends. She believed that women should be treated equally in business and fought for pay equity, and she managed to fit a regular exercise regime into her busy day.

Louise faced more opposition within the profession than she admitted. Publicly, she stated that her male colleagues, clients, and contractors had been nothing but respectful of her and her opinions. However, we know that some AIA members were hesitant about admitting her to their ranks and only did so at the lowest level, and her firm fell out of favor with the City of Buffalo when it became apparent that Louise was a partner and not just an employee.

While she had close women friends, Louise was not the beneficiary of a women's network in support of her practice. While women who followed Louise received commissions from women of means, Louise did not find support among Buffalo's newly wealthy women—despite her fame. She was unable or unwilling to court favor from potential upper-class female clients as other women architects did and would do in the future.

Louise may appear to us today as a rather conventional, if not conservative, woman. We must remember that she was the head of a commercial business at a time when many of her clients were local businessmen and homeowners who would rarely have considered hiring a female architect. She couldn't align herself with the more progressive women who publicly called for voting rights and women's equality. Nonetheless, Louise would not be a victim; she wrote her own narrative. Beneath her veneer of Victorian manners and dress, she was a rebel and activist with a steely backbone and iron will. I am aware that as a white, Protestant woman born to educated

parents Bethune benefited from the opportunities to advance from which people of color and immigrants were excluded. Nonetheless, she did face the common prejudices against women, not to mention the difficulty a woman faced to be successful in the architectural profession.

One of the most interesting aspects of Louise's story is that she was a bicycling enthusiast. 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. 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.

This discovery led me to question the long-held belief promoted by her previous biographers that Louise 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 have found many indications that Louise was a staunch believer in women's equality and actively advocated for her beliefs. While earlier historians and biographers felt that Louise 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 Louise was very engaged in women's equality on her own terms.

An 1892 profile that appeared in a Buffalo newspaper, titled “A Clever Woman's Work,” perfectly captures Louise's stature as a forward-thinking woman. In it you see a woman who is in complete control of her life and career. The author marvels at the fact that Louise undertook all the many duties of a professional architect, including heavy onsite work and overseeing project costs. Despite its quaint language, this description of Louise could apply to a woman architect today:

Mrs. Louise Bethune of this city is a very successful architect. And that does not mean that she is simply able to design and do office work, although she is proficient in this difficult line. But Mrs. Bethune does all that a capable, practical architect is expected to do. She handles all the dwelling houses that come to

the office of the firm of which she is a member. Designs, makes estimates and directs the work. More than half of her time is spent in personally superintending the building.

She goes from place to place on her bicycle, which she finds to be a great convenience. Mrs. Bethune is full of ideas, clever and well read. She devotes herself almost entirely to her work, rarely going out “on pleasure bent,” and finds her lot a very happy and satisfactory one.¹

Louise performed all these duties while wearing a corset and full skirt with bustle. Her mere presence on the streets of Buffalo actively challenged pre-conceived ideas of what a woman in a dress could do.

Louise lived during a time of profound changes in the architectural business as well as broader social forces that would greatly impact society. She worked in an industry that was maturing into a profession from a craft and technologically advancing in its use of building materials and new systems. Throughout her life, the women’s movement increased in intensity, with advocates seeking reform on many fronts. She also lived in a city that was quickly growing in population and wealth just like the country at large. The society in which she navigated was moving from a rural economy to an urban, industrial one, with social upheaval and ethnic and class discrimination along the way. How this remarkable Gilded Age woman charted her own course by navigating these currents is the story I will tell.

Louise Blanchard Bethune, like many women at that time, changed her name when she married and soon after her husband became her business partner. Therefore, their personal and professional lives were inextricably interconnected. For consistency I have applied the following naming conventions: in each chapter I initially introduce them as “Louise Bethune” and “Robert Bethune.” Thereafter, I reference them by their first name. Anytime I refer to “Bethune” for variety I am referencing Louise.

I first learned about Louise in 2002, when I attended the unveiling of a grave marker dedicated to her organized by Buffalo-based architect Adriana Barbasch. In 1986, the AIA had asked Adriana to research Bethune for a brochure on women in architecture. Adriana continued her research, contributing to several books on early women architects until 2004, when she retired. As one of two women on the AIA Buffalo/WNY Board, I was deeply struck by Louise’s trailblazing spirit and accomplishments. My interest in her story might have ended then, except that when Adrianna retired, she offered to share her research with me.

Since receiving this cache of materials, I have lectured often and written articles on Louise, getting to know her from my twenty-first-century vantage point. In 2006, I successfully nominated Bethune to the Western New York Women's Hall of Fame. During that process, I met Louise and Robert's great-granddaughter and sole heir, Zina Bethune. Zina was an accomplished actor, ballet dancer, multimedia artist, and philanthropist. Zina and I stayed in touch, exchanging information on her ancestors as they were found until, in 2012, Zina was tragically killed in a car accident. To ensure the legacies of both women, Zina's husband, Sean Feeley, generously donated the historic family records, photo albums, and other ephemera to the University at Buffalo Special Collections.

The Zina Bethune Archive on Louise Bethune is a rich resource, containing unique images of Bethune and the people she held dear. A second source of information came from Nancy Herlan Brady, a descendent of business partner William Fuchs. Nancy shared a small collection of annotated photos of Fuchs from the 1890s. In this collection was a photograph of Bethune, Bethune & Fuchs, which became the second photo of Louise Bethune that was known to exist. This collection also included photos of their architectural office and candid family photos that included the Bethune family. These demonstrated the close relationship of the three partners. Additional sources came from many newspaper articles about her I have found. The Buffalo and Erie County Grosvenor Library holds records from the Women's Wheel and Athletic Club and the Buffalo Genealogical Society, two clubs in which Bethune was a member, have yielded information on her relationships with her friends, how she juggled a busy career, and pursued personal interests. The Grosvenor Library also holds the research that Louise compiled on the Bethune and Blanchard families. Her correspondence, mostly from the last decade of her life, provides good information on her declining health and her relationship with her immediate and extended family.

When I began my research on Louise, I was a junior architect learning my strengths and interests in the profession. In the years since, as I have grown as a professional, my life and career have eerily paralleled Louise's. Like Louise, I wanted to be an architect as a child and my passion has always been in educational design. I was fortunate to be able to dedicate my career to this type of work, which is a luxury Louise did not enjoy. Like her, I feel strongly about the importance of service to our professional association. I served on the AIA at the local, state, and national levels, becoming the second woman president of the Buffalo/WNY Chapter, which Louise

founded. I later served as president of AIA New York State and served on the AIA National Strategic Council, mirroring Louise's participation with the national AIA. Following in her footsteps again, I was the first successful woman applicant after her living in Buffalo to become a fellow with the AIA. Where Louise suffered illness as a young child and at the end of her life, I suffered a life-threatening illness in the middle, when I contracted Guillain-Barré syndrome. Like Louise, I fought for my right to work, and I was even restricted in the clothing I could wear for a time, while I regained my strength and dexterity over a four-year period.

Our parallel lives in Buffalo and careers in architecture have provided me with strong points of reference while I have been writing this book. As I drive through the city, passing her buildings and visiting her gravesite, I can visualize the city Louise helped build, because many of the landmarks from her lifetime still stand. As I attend AIA meetings, I participate in discussions regarding the future of the profession and the academy that are similar in tone, if not the exact topics, in which she participated. As I attend project meetings, poring over floor plans, discussing budgets, schedule, and client needs, I am reminded of Louise's experiences holding similar conversations. I believe these parallels gave me a unique insight into her life and career and it certainly enhanced my passion in researching and telling her story.