

# GLENN BROWN, AIA: *An Alexandria Architect's Monumental Vision*

## INTRODUCTION

Glenn Brown (1854-1932), an Alexandria native, was one of the most influential American architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He designed scores of notable buildings and served as Executive Secretary of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Locally, Brown was a driving force behind the establishment of the McMillan Commission, which created the monumental core of Washington, DC; was instrumental in the founding of the Commission of Fine Arts; was an influential architectural historian; a driving force of the "City Beautiful Movement" and urban planning; and a presidential advisor. This exhibition acknowledges these important contributions



(Image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)

on the national stage but focuses on his architectural contributions to his hometown of Alexandria.

Brown served as Secretary of the AIA from 1898 to 1913, during a period when the fundamentals of American architectural practice were being established. His published works were extremely influential and some continue to be standard references. As a practicing architect he designed a number of houses and buildings, both in Washington and in his hometown of Alexandria, and was an early proponent of documenting and preserving our architectural heritage.

## CREDITS

This exhibition is presented by the Northern Virginia Chapter AIA in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the American Institute of Architects, an organization that Glenn Brown helped create.

*The exhibition was organized by Peter H. Smith as Guest Curator, with Al Cox, FAIA; Kristin Lloyd, Curator/Assistant Director at the Lyceum; James C. Mackay, Acting Director, Office of Historic Alexandria and with the help of:*

*Tom Laebke, AIA, Secretary, US Commission of Fine Arts;  
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Museum.*



# ALEXANDRIA BOYHOOD

Glenn Brown was born in Fauquier County, Virginia. His grandfather was Bedford Brown, a well-known antebellum United States Senator from North Carolina. Though a Unionist, Bedford Brown supported the Confederacy, and passed his southern sympathies on to his family, including his son (Bedford Jr.), Glenn's father.



Bedford Brown Building,  
113-115 S. Fairfax Street  
(photo 1968, demolished  
1970), Historic American  
Building Survey

Glenn Brown grew up  
in this house on South  
Fairfax Street. His  
father, Bedford Brown,  
Jr., was a well-known  
local physician, whose  
office occupied part of the  
family home. The house  
was later expanded to  
the north, using Glenn's  
design.

*My father, after serving four years as surgeon in the Confederate Army, moved to Alexandria, Va., to be near his mother's family who lived in Washington. Here he began the practice of medicine. His practice in the South had been utterly destroyed by the devastating reconstruction days which were so ruinous to the South. He never forgot his inheritance and acquired southern tastes and principles. I was slated for the medical profession in my youth as my father thought only medicine, law or ministry were callings fit for a gentleman.*

— Glenn Brown's memoirs



Aspinwall Hall, ca 1858, Episcopal Seminary,  
Alexandria, N.G. Starkweather, Architect

113 - 115 S. Fairfax Street today  
following urban renewal



While he originally began to study medicine like his father, Glenn soon determined that he was much more interested in building and turned to architecture. From 1873 to 1875, he worked as an apprentice in the office of N. G. Starkweather, a well-respected designer who is best known in Alexandria as the architect of a number of buildings at the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary.

Interested in more formal architectural training, Brown enrolled in architecture school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1875, the first school in the country to offer formal architectural education. While there, he was profoundly influenced by the immensely popular works of Henry Hobson Richardson, who was creating a distinctly robust American style of architecture.

# EARLY ARCHITECTURAL WORK

Following his architectural studies, Brown went to work for Norcross Brothers, the contracting firm that constructed many of Richardson's designs, and became "the Clerk of the Works" for the Richardson designed Cheney Building project in Hartford, CT, today considered a fine example of "Romanesque Revival."



Cheney Building, Hartford Connecticut. Henry Hobson Richardson, Architect, 1875.  
(Photo: Constance Layton, Connecticut Historical Commission, July 1970)  
This building is a powerful composition of granite and ironstone, with semi-circular arches and roughly cut stone emphasizing the building's mass. Brown became Clerk of the Works for the construction of the Cheney Building and worked on it for two years until it was completed. By the time he left Hartford, Brown was extremely familiar with the design and construction of Richardsonian Romanesque style buildings. Not surprisingly, much of Brown's early work in Alexandria, both residential and commercial, shows the unmistakable influence of his training while working on this building.



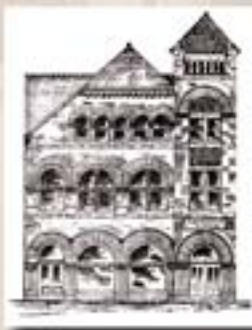
228 N. Columbia Street, 1881  
Known locally as "The Mart House," this building includes many of the same Richardsonian Romanesque masses and design motifs that Brown was familiar with from the Cheney Building experience. In many respects Brown's Richardson-inspired Alexandria involvement displayed unmistakable modernity in Alexandria, and must have seemed refreshing and visually interesting to citizens of the period when contrasted to the severely symmetrical, monochromatic brick Federal and Georgian rowhouses for which Alexandria is more well known.

Alexandria Armory, 1887 (demolished, 1933)  
(Alexandria Special Collections)  
Among Glenn Brown's early architectural commissions in Alexandria was this Armory for the Alexandria Light Infantry, constructed in the 200 block of South Royal Street. Like some of his early Alexandria residences, the Armory was a product of his Richardson design training. The building had a low broad arch and massive exterior pilasters executed in brick, suggestive of the stonework on some of the residential buildings. The Armory burned in a spectacular fire that neighbors talked about for years.



203, 217 & 219 N. Columbia Street, 1886  
In addition to his work with Richardson Romanesque style buildings, Brown was perfectly capable of designing in variety of popular late 19th residential styles. His use of row houses at 203, 217 and 219 North Columbia Street made use of the widely popular Queen Anne style, one closely allied to Romanesque. All of these houses displayed (before later alterations) asymmetrical masses and a juxtaposition of different surface treatments including "German lap" and "fish scale" siding, and covered porches.

Drawing of the Alexandria YMCA building proposal, 1889 (Alexandria Gazette, March 30, 1889)  
In the same year as the remodeling of the Second Presbyterian Church, Brown produced this rendering for a proposal to construct a building for the YMCA in Alexandria. Although unbuilt, the proposal bears a striking similarity to the remodeling that was carried out for the Second Presbyterian church. Both are typified by Romanesque arches on the first level and a corner tower element that use cast expressive local brick to achieve surface texture rather than stone.



*The Clerk of the works on these buildings . . . was a general utility man. While enlarging the scale details to full size, making the shop drawings and patterns, I became very familiar with other drawings from Richardson's office – was much impressed with their artistic qualities and wondered at his abilities in ignoring practical considerations when attaining artistic effects.*

— Glenn Brown's memoirs

Brown returned to Alexandria in the late 1870s and lived with his father on South Fairfax Street, opening his own architectural practice in Washington in 1880. His early work was largely residential, and he designed houses and apartment buildings not only in Washington but in his native Alexandria as well. Over the years, Glenn Brown designed well over a hundred houses in Washington, D.C. alone, with scores more for clients in Virginia, the surrounding countryside, and in the Mid-Atlantic region. As his practice developed, he also received commissions for a number of different building types, including churches, bridges, zoological structures, office buildings, the Marine Corps base at Quantico (Va.) and a number of restoration projects.



The Harlow House, 1891 (demolished mid-20th century)  
(Alexandria Special Collections)  
Glenn Brown designed this mansion, which formerly stood at the southeast corner of Cameron and North Alfred Street, for M.F. Harlow, a local land developer. Stylistically the house displayed a familiarity with the prevailing architectural tastes of the day and included Italianate, Gothic Revival and Queen Anne influences, resulting in a richly detailed and ornamental residence.



Second Presbyterian Church as originally constructed, 1849  
(Alexandria Special Collections)



Second Presbyterian Church as re-modeled by Brown, 1889  
In 1889, Glenn Brown received a commission to remodel the facade of the Second Presbyterian Church at the corner of Prince and South St. Asaph Street. The original 1849 structure was a simple form, Greek Revival-style church. Brown's remodeling added a new front and a bell tower in what the Alexandria Gazette described as "modern in its style of architecture" making a "tour of the handsome structures in Alexandria." Like the Armory of a few years earlier, Brown used brickwork to suggest the stone massiveness typical of Richardson-designed structures. The building is no longer used as a church and is now an office building for a landscape architecture firm.

# A RESTORATION ARCHITECT

In the first two decades of his professional practice, Brown became well-known for his restoration work. His interest in the early colonial architecture of the nation mirrored the patriotic fervor of the American public following the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, which celebrated the first century of nationhood.

During the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, architects became increasingly enamored of colonial architecture of the early years of the Republic. Through studies and drawings of old buildings, they created the first body of scholarship on this heritage.

*"In an old warehouse which has recently been torn down in Alexandria, Va., four old books were found and presented to me filled with plates of doors, cornices, mantels, etc., one by Langely, 1739, another by Wm. Pain; of the others the titles were lost. These English works show clearly where the carpenters and builders of the day received their inspiration."*

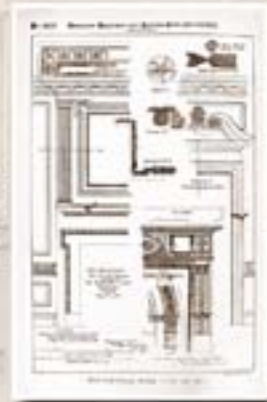
— American Architect and Building News

Glenn Brown's acknowledgment of the importance of the design sources for the early architecture of the country foreshadowed much scholarly work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His measured drawings often resulted in commissions to "restore" colonial buildings and, by the late 1890's, preservation and restoration projects had become an important part of his practice.



Carlyle House, 1751-53.  
421 N. Fairfax Street,  
Alexandria, VA

*The American Architect and Building News,*  
November 26, 1887, No. 422: Old Colonial Work in the South - The Carlyle Mansion now part of the Smithsonian House, Alexandria, Va. Measured and Drawn by J. G. Glenn Brown, Architect



Plan of the Octagon Property, Photocopy of Plate III from  
Brown, Glenn, *The Octagon*, Washington, 1848

*The American Architect and Building News,*  
November 18, 1887, No. 421:  
Old Colonial Work in the South - Gaddy's Tavern (City Hall). Measured and Drawn by J. G. Glenn Brown, Architect



Glenn Brown was in the forefront of the preservation movement; in 1887, he published a series of measured drawings and sketches in *The American Architect and Building News* detailing the interiors of buildings in Alexandria. Included in his survey were Gaddy's Tavern, the "Broadback House" (the Carlyle House today), the Bank of Alexandria, the Cathcart House at Episcopal High School, and The Octagon in Washington.



Christ Church, 1775, 118 N. Washington Street,  
Alexandria, VA  
Restored Colonial Revival Style Interior 1891  
(Alexandria Special Collections)  
Brown restored Christ Church to a colonial appearance from its mid-century make-over in the dark Gothic Revival style. His restoration reinforced and utilized the original remaining brick and woodwork, as well as the original Amherst's reading desk and chairs. He also designed the "rose glass" pulpit and reinstalled original pews. Today it is Glenn Brown's interior that defines Christ Church's architectural image.

Glenn Brown's other early restoration work included Pilchuck Church in 1892, where he restored woodwork which had been destroyed by Union troops during the Civil War. Labeled "a stiff essay in Colonial Revival design," the woodwork was listed, according to Brown himself, as "old Georgian shrouds of the period like Christ Church in Alexandria, Kings Chapel Boston and the Newport Church."



Gaddy's Tavern Ballroom (Alexandria Special Collections)  
Nearly two decades after his initial recording of the building's woodwork, Glenn Brown remained intensely interested in the fate of Alexandria's colonial architecture. By 1897, the venerable Gaddy's Tavern, the setting of balls for George and Martha Washington, Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural party, and many other significant events, had fallen into a deplorable condition. Brown learned that the Metropolitan Museum of Art was buying examples of American architecture for its forthcoming American Wing, and mounted an effort to save the ballroom woodwork by having the museum acquire it. In the 1890s, renowned restoration architect Thomas Eliason Waterhouse traveled to New York to take measurements of the original woodwork in order to create the replica ballroom which visitors to Gaddy's Tavern see today.

## MATURE ARCHITECT, PUBLIC SERVICE & NATIONAL CIVIC ACTIVITIES

The “White City” created for the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 had a profound effect on Glenn Brown and his thinking. Brown had visited the Chicago exposition as the guest of its lead architect, Daniel Burnham. In the decade after the fair, Brown’s design philosophy evolved from the romanticism of much late 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture to one based on a more formal Classicism. This change found its way into not only his individual building commissions but also into his approach to urban design. His ideas from this period were extremely influential and their legacy can be found throughout America today.



*Joseph Beale House, 2201 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC, 1907-1908. Glenn Brown, Architect. (J. Alexander, Photographer, 1971, HABS)*

Beale House reflects the work of Brown as a sophisticated designer near the apex of his career. One architectural historian has called him “one of the city’s most polished and erudite architects in the first half of the twentieth century.” Working within a Renaissance Revival style, Brown created a well integrated design that uses a gently curved façade to respond to its site almost located on Sheridan Circle, just west of DuPont Circle.

In 1898 Brown, a founding member of the DC Chapter of the AIA, became the Secretary of that national organization. While continuing his own practice, he increasingly devoted time to work on behalf of his fellow architects.



*Old Harvard Street Bridge, Spanning Rock Creek at National Zoological Park, Washington, District of Columbia, DC. Glenn Brown, Architect, ca 1900. (photo Historic American Engineering Record, 1968) This bridge reflects the more formal Neo-Classical detailing of Brown's later work.*



*Joseph Beale House, Sitting Room. (J. Alexander, Photographer, 1971, HABS)*

*Joseph Beale House, First Floor plan (1973) L.L. Sibley Jennings, P., Delmonaco, HABS  
The bilateral symmetry of the floor plan, arranged around a circular foyer recalls the plan of the AIGU Oratory, which Brown had previously restored.*



# PLANNING MONUMENTAL WASHINGTON

**D**uring his tenure at the American Institute of Architects, Brown organized a successful effort to restore the original vision of Pierre L'Enfant for the mall area between the Capitol and the White House. Brown was well versed in the history of the founding of the nation's capital and has written a two volume history of the Capitol building which had been published in 1900 and 1903.

Beginning at the annual convention of the AIA in Washington in 1900 celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Washington, DC as the seat of government, Brown organized a successful campaign to realize L'Enfant's original plans and revitalize the monumental core utilizing the principles of the classical style which had been espoused with such success at the Columbian Exposition. Restoration of L'Enfant's plan was nothing less than a crusade for Brown to restore the original vision of the nation's founders. The initial success of Brown's vision was the creation of the Senate Park



Senate Park Commission General Plan  
(Image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)



Union Square at the U.S. Capitol, McMillan Plan  
rendering by Charles Graham. (Image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)

Commission in 1901. Popularly known as the McMillan Commission, its members produced a plan for the monumental core of Washington which focused on creating a proper seat for the national government using Classical forms. The end result a century later is the National Mall of today, flanked by classically inspired governmental buildings and defined by the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol Reflecting Pool and the Memorial Bridge



McMillan Plan rendering of early concept for the  
Lincoln Memorial by Charles McKim.  
(Image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)



Senate Park Commission rendering  
by Charles Graham of the Washington Monument Gardens and Mall looking toward the Capitol  
(Image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)

As part of this overall thrust, Brown's work included the creation of a body to advise and oversee the architecture created by the Federal Government. The Commission of Fine Arts, established in 1910, still functions as an arbiter of aesthetics for the works of art and architecture of the Federal government. In his autobiography Brown characterized the McMillan Commission as a great moral force for creating a monumental civic core for the nation's capital.



*Bird's Eye View of Washington from Arlington, VA.  
McMillan Plan rendering by Francis L.V. Hoppin, 1902.  
(image courtesy US Commission of Fine Arts)*

# FINAL YEARS



Dumbarton Bridge (Buffalo Bridge), 1913. Glenn and Bedford Brown, Architects. (Jack Roscher, photographer, IABR 1993)  
Brown designed the Dumbarton Bridge, known colloquially as the Buffalo Bridge, with his son and partner Bedford Brown, IV. This masonry bridge displays the heavy stone and semicircular arches ingrained while working on A.L.I. Richardson's project many years ago. The bridge is unusual in that it carries an accommodated Q Street, NW over Rock Creek Park between 18th century Georgetown and the rigid geometry of the Washington street grid. Above the five arches are 56 carved Indian heads and the entrances are flanked by stylized trees.



Dumbarton Bridge, Detail of bronze American Bison sculpture by A. Phimister Proctor, 1913. (Jack Roscher, photographer, IABR 1993)



Dumbarton Bridge,  
Detail of Indian head impost block sculpted  
by A. Phimister Proctor, 1913.  
(Jack Roscher, photographer, IABR 1993)

In 1921, Brown accepted an appointment by General John A. Lejeune, USMC to help determine the future of the Marine base at Quantico. Believing that Quantico should rival the Naval Academy and West Point, his plans called for a greatly enlarged facility, laid out with classical symmetry. Brown's designs were published in *Architectural Record* in 1925, but unfortunately received little support, and most were never realized.

Following his service at Quantico, Glenn Brown retired to an apartment in Washington within sight of the Lincoln Memorial. He died in 1932 and is buried in Rock Creek Cemetery under a tombstone of his own design.

## GLENN BROWN AWARD



Glenn Brown continues to be well respected in Metropolitan Washington for his local architectural contributions, as a founding member of the DC Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, his national work with the AIA, and for his substantial contributions to reshaping of the monumental core of our national capital. The Washington Chapter of the AIA presents the Glenn Brown Award "to an individual who has raised public awareness of architecture and its benefits to society and who has improved the quality of life in Washington DC."