1-1-2012

Specialization and Significance: An Assessment of the Career and Works of Minerva Parker Nichols

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Abstract
Although her formal practice lasted just ten years and was concentrated in the Philadelphia area, architect Minerva Parker Nichols (1861—1949) serves as a focal point for a study of women and the built environment in late nineteenth-century America. As the first woman in the country to practice architecture independently, Nichols carved out a prominent place in the male-dominated field of architecture—all while specializing (as she deemed it) in projects associated with female clients and uses. These themes in Nichols’ career make her an apt case study through which to examine questions of significance, contesting our presumptions about how her work can be appropriately framed, understood, and commemorated. Animated (rather than deterred) by the ambiguities and questions of her career, this thesis is an assessment of the works of Minerva Parker Nichols and the challenges that her career presents for preservation and interpretation.

Keywords
women, architecture, history, significance, professionalization

Disciplines
Historic Preservation and Conservation

Comments
Suggested Citation:
SPECIALIZATION AND SIGNIFICANCE:
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CAREER AND WORKS OF MINERVA PARKER NICHOLS

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A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2012

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To my family, who made my excitement about this subject their own, and to my classmates, whose support and friendship made it all worth it.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks must go, first and foremost, to my advisor, Dr. Aaron Wunsch, for his help throughout this process. Without his support for my thinking out loud, and without his encyclopedic knowledge of architectural history sources, this thesis would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the chair of our department, Professor Randall Mason, as well as the other faculty members who offered encouragement, direction and advice at critical points in my research.

Additional thanks go to Jeffrey Cohen and William Whitaker for their insight into Minerva Parker Nichols’ career, and to Judy Hickman for her time and tour of the Delaware Children’s Theatre.

Finally, I am immensely grateful to Charles Sullivan, of the Cambridge Historical Commission, and to Kelly Kennedy, both of whom offered invaluable research assistance despite never having met me.
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INTRODUCTION

Although her formal practice lasted just ten years and was concentrated in the Philadelphia area, architect Minerva Parker Nichols (1861—1949) serves as a focal point for a study of women and the built environment in late nineteenth-century America. As the first woman in the country to practice architecture independently, Nichols carved out a prominent place in the male-dominated field of architecture—all while specializing (as she deemed it) in projects associated with female clients and uses. These themes in Nichols’ career make her an apt case study through which to examine questions of significance, contesting our presumptions about how her work can be appropriately framed, understood, and commemorated. Animated (rather than deterred) by the ambiguities and questions of her career, this thesis is an assessment of the works of Minerva Parker Nichols and the challenges that her career presents for preservation and interpretation.

Minerva Parker was born on May 14, 1862, in Peoria, Illinois.¹ After her father’s death in the Civil War, her mother moved the family to Philadelphia and

¹ Minerva Parker Nichols’ principal practice was conducted under the name of “Minerva Parker” until her marriage in 1891, at which point she continued to practice and advertise until 1896 as “Minerva
opened a boarding house for medical students. Following in the footsteps of her maternal grandfather, Seth A. Doane, who designed both houses and prairie schooners for western settlers, Ms. Parker pursued a career in architecture. She graduated from the Philadelphia Normal Art School in 1882, and also trained at the Franklin Institute Drawing School before joining the office of Edwin W. Thorne in 1886. This apprenticeship in Thorne’s office on South Broad Street lasted only two years. In 1888, Thorne moved his practice to Arch Street. Succeeding him in his Broad Street office, Parker became the first woman in the country to practice architecture independently, with no man attached to her firm.

For the next several years of formal practice, the life and work of Minerva Parker (who married and became Minerva Parker Nichols in 1891) were full of seeming contradictions, as she both represented and rejected gendered assumptions about architecture. The woman who practiced (under her own full name) without a man was the same architect whose commissions were predominantly residential works and women’s clubs. She argued vociferously for the presence of women in the architecture profession, and was recognized by many contemporary trade publications for her achievements—asserting a place in both branches of the divergent field of architecture. Magazine profiles celebrated her as a “lady architect,” yet she herself resisted using her sex as a crutch. Most strikingly,

Parker Nichols.” The names cited in historic documents will vary accordingly, as will the discussion of her career path in Chapter One. All other thesis discussions will refer to Nichols by her full married name to avoid confusion with later sources.


she designed and supervised the construction of over 40 commissions in eight years, then retired from formal practice just five years after she married. Her projects, therefore, resist simple classification as those of a “female architect”—a label that she herself contested—and any examination of feminine influence in her designs, or attempt to confine her work to a separate “sphere,” would oversimplify her career and distort her significance.⁴

Perhaps because of these complexities and apparent incongruities, which interrupt a narrative of her accomplishments at the forefront of women’s contributions to architecture, Nichols has garnered little scholarly attention. Various academic articles and books mention her in their surveys of women’s early work in the field, but other female architects such as Louise Blanchard Bethune (1856—1913) and Julia Morgan (1872—1957) usually receive more scrutiny. Bethune’s and Morgan’s careers were both longer and more prolific than that of Minerva Parker Nichols, and each earned superlatives in her own right. Louise Blanchard (who practiced with, and eventually married, Robert Bethune) was the first woman inducted into the American Institute of Architects, while Julia Morgan’s astonishing number of commissions (over 800) and her projects for prominent clients such as William Randolph Hearst have merited enduring recognition. For these reasons, Bethune and Morgan have been the primary foci of research into women and the

early professionalizing years of architecture, while Nichols has often been relegated to a brief discussion or footnote.

The same was not true during Nichols’ active career. Minerva Parker Nichols was a celebrated figure throughout the period of her formal practice in late nineteenth-century America, with frequent recognition in both trade catalogues and national publications. The opening of her office in 1889 was heralded with an editorial announcement in the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide*, and she was still well respected enough at her death in 1949 to warrant a headlined obituary in *The New York Times*. Educated through various technical programs and as an apprentice in the office of E. W. Thorne, Nichols consistently garnered praise for her practical experience and, in the estimation of one publication, her “energy and push.”5 Until her move to Brooklyn with her husband in 1896, and her subsequent retirement from formal practice, Minerva Parker Nichols seems to have earned unusually wholehearted endorsement from her contemporaries—nearly all of whom were male. In Chapter One of this thesis, I will examine the trajectory of Nichols’ career and commissions, and possible reasons for her professional success and acceptance.

The sources of that enthusiastic praise are evidence of the late-nineteenth century’s expanding rift between the architecture field’s building trades and its professionalized associations. As I discuss in Chapter Two, Nichols’ career coincided with the late-nineteenth century’s ideological debates between the building trades

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5 *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* IV, no. 32 (August 14, 1889): 378.
and the academy-trained "professional" architects. This chapter considers the emerging (and shifting) definition of “professional,” and the ways that Nichols and other women were—or were not—considered eligible for that label. From that study of women as “professional” architects, I turn in Chapter Three toward an examination of the expanding role of women as architectural clients, and how the late-nineteenth century’s burgeoning women’s clubs shaped new roles and networks of association for women in the built environment fields.

Building on this analysis of Minerva Parker Nichols’ career and professional context, I consider in Chapter Four the preservation challenges that Nichols’ career presents today. Even as this thesis claims a place for Minerva Parker Nichols in history, it challenges the presumptive link in preservation policy between an architect’s significance as an individual and the commemoration of her built legacy. Preservation planning for the interpretation of that built legacy cannot begin until her significance is clarified, and for that, we must examine the current preservation categories for defining that significance—and the ways in which Minerva Parker Nichols does, or does not, adhere to those norms. This chapter questions our definitions of “significance” and the effect that those definitions have on our preservation, interpretation, and commemoration of complicated histories. Using Nichols’ career as a focal point, this chapter identifies our current limitations in framing unconventional narratives, and it explores an expanded understanding of the assignment of significance.
While this thesis seeks to call to light and clarify the significance of Minerva Parker Nichols’ career, it is only the first step toward a full inventory and preservation plan for her surviving work. The archival research contained in Chapters One to Three should serve to inform subsequent documentation efforts, while the discussion in Chapter Four and the Conclusion may help to shape the direction of such commemorative efforts. A preliminary inventory of her work, based on her published notices of commissions “on the boards,” is included in the appendix to support any future research and documentation.

Although it lasted only a few years, Minerva Parker Nichols’ tenure as the first female architect to practice independently introduces these complex questions about the record of American architectural history and the frameworks that interpret that history. With a stated specialization in residential commissions, Nichols’ career both reinforced and rebuffed the nineteenth-century link between women and domesticity, and the notion of women as the arbiters of taste. Given the complexities of her architectural training, professional acceptance, clientele, and networks of association, her work resists simple categorization. The career and works of Minerva Parker Nichols therefore serve as a foundation for an assessment of the definition and designation of significance.
In her stories to her grandchildren late in life, Minerva Parker Nichols traced her life’s themes of independent women and architecture back to her childhood roots in Peoria County, Illinois. There, as the daughter of a Civil War widow, she grew up surrounded by self-supporting women, including her mother and her aunts. The experience permeated her memories of her childhood, and indeed, shaped her architectural education, apprenticeship, and self-employment in Philadelphia. As was evident later in her uncommon client base of financially-independent women, Minerva Parker Nichols' childhood experience and family structure exerted a strong influence on her formal practice, professional life, and legacy.

Born in Peoria County in 1862, Minerva was the younger daughter of Amanda and John Parker, a schoolteacher. With the Civil War seething in other parts of the country, her father enlisted in the Union army three months after Minerva was born, later dying of dysentery when "Minnie” was just fourteen months old. When he died in 1863, Amanda joined the ranks of the war’s widows who, having taken on work to supplement their husbands' soldier's pay, now faced a future of
fending for their households.⁶ This unconventional Parker family structure—although it was increasingly common in the years after the war—had a formative influence on Minerva, even as she reflected in her later stories about how much her mother shielded her from the impact of their financial situation. In her tales to her grandchildren in 1944, Nichols observed: “The marvel was that [my mother and Aunt Sadie], overworked, unhappy, without modern methods to chart their way in child care, succeeded in providing long happy days for their fatherless children.”⁷ Indeed, though Minerva and her cousins may not have noticed their fathers’ absence as they played, Amanda’s widowhood defined Minerva’s upbringing—she refers to it frequently in her memoirs—and put her in close contact with her grandfather, the architect Seth A. Doane.

Doane, who is described in some biographies as one of the founders of Chicago, was a constant and significant presence in Minerva’s childhood. Her own stories, as well as the various newspaper profiles published during her active career, mention the architectural training of her grandfather (as well as her mother) as they traced her interest and progression in the field. Seth Doane lived in New England before moving west, and was a jack-of-all-trades in the early years of Chicago and Peoria County. He designed both buildings and prairie schooners, for those settling

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⁷ Ibid., 15.
in the county and for those moving farther west, and his workshop and farm abutted the house where Parker lived with her mother and sister Adelaide.⁸

Having never known her father, Parker spent much of her time on her grandparents’ farm and in her grandfather’s company. In addition to his explosive swearing that she claimed he passed on to her, Minerva evidently inherited some measure of his spatial awareness and interest in the built environment.⁹ Her recollections are riddled with detailed descriptions of her various houses in Illinois, including an exhaustive mental tour of her Grandfather’s house and an account of the kitchen in Normal, Illinois, that was “so stream-lined that it was a forerunner of the modern kitchen.”¹⁰ (This description in particular, which was recorded in 1944, has echoes of the popular principles of domestic efficiency outlined in Catharine Beecher’s The American Woman’s Home, which was published in 1869. The kitchen and house that Nichols mentions have no defined date of construction, but the family’s move to Normal, Illinois, took place around 1867.) For his part, Minerva’s grandfather frequently put her to work building corn cob houses and giving her drawing lessons—skills he also instilled in her mother Amanda, who designed the plans for one of their later houses.¹¹

After a series of moves within and near Peoria County, the Parker family moved to Chicago, and Amanda married Dr. Samuel Maxwell in 1875.¹² A year later, lured by the Centennial Exhibition, Minerva and her family moved to Philadelphia,

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⁸ Adelaide Nichols Baker Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.
¹⁰ Ibid., 28.
¹¹ Ibid., 27.
¹² Ibid., Addendum 1.
where they lived at 1612 Green Street. When Dr. Maxwell died in 1877 and Minerva’s half-brother Samuel was born soon after, her mother opened a boarding house for medical students in order to provide once again for her family.\footnote{Ibid.}

The late-nineteenth century offered particularly fertile opportunities for a young woman like Minerva with an interest in architectural education. Both formal architectural programs and emerging schools of design began to admit women, including the first university departments at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Cornell University. These architecture programs, established in 1865 and 1871 respectively, were based at land-grant institutions, and were therefore required to admit women (although MIT did not admit them until 1885).\footnote{Sarah Allaback, \textit{The First American Women Architects} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2008): 24.}

It was not until 1879, however, that Mary L. Page became the first woman to graduate from an American architecture program, when she received her degree from the University of Illinois.\footnote{“That Exceptional One”: \textit{Women in American Architecture, 1888—1988} (Washington, DC: American Architectural Foundation, 1988): 13. Allaback, \textit{First American Women Architects}, 24.} By 1891, twelve women had earned degrees from American architectural schools.\footnote{Mary N. Woods, \textit{From Craft to Profession: the Practice of Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 76.} They remained a small percentage of the overall student population in these departments, but the increasing number of specialized educational opportunities for women nevertheless signaled an expanding role for women in the architectural field.

Predating these formal curricula at universities, and with more emphasis on a female student base, were the era’s emerging schools of design that trained men...
and a growing number of women in the visual, industrial, and architectural arts.

With courses in subjects such as mechanical drawing, lithography, and engraving, these design curricula were closely related to the contemporary, fledgling programs that schooled women in domestic arts. Unlike those proto-home economics courses, however, these schools of design offered women a socially-sanctioned education and skills outside of the home. Their areas of emphasis had a natural proximity to trade, earning many single women—like Minerva Parker—a measure of independent employment.

Indeed, as an undated report in the archives of the Franklin Institute makes clear, these marketable skills were seen as crucial for students such as Minerva who needed to help support their families:

[This school] is directed to the welfare of a class who are particularly deserving of attention from the limited means of employment which are at present in their power, and the very insufficient remuneration which such employment now affords them. We need hardly recall to your memory how often the disasters which from time to time arise...from the peculiar situation of our country, overwhelm many families who have been brought up in the enjoyment of the luxuries of life, with absolute poverty, or how frequently the death of the head of a family...leave[s] a widow and children with no means of support.17

The Civil War was only a decade past, and American society—along with these schools of design—faced a new social reality of women who, as the heads of households, needed the appropriate, adequate training to provide for their families.

Far from just a charitable investment in widows’ families, however, the school of design movement was also an outgrowth of the social sensibility that

women were the arbiters of taste. The popular assumption was that if women could learn to properly hone that inherent artistic taste, they could then shape a national aesthetic, both within and beyond the home.\textsuperscript{18} The philosophy was reflected in the Philadelphia School of Design's own 1875/6 prospectus, which stated: “We maintain that the practice of the Arts of Design is one peculiarly adapted to the female mind and hand,” and that “in the lively competition of skilled labor which is now observable...among rival nations, it is obvious that the community which presents objects of utility the most graceful in form...will be the most successful.”\textsuperscript{19} The education of women in the arts was therefore an issue of national consequence and benefit, and schools of design emerged in the mid-nineteenth century to fulfill that national imperative.

Philadelphia was especially rife with these nascent institutions, including the Philadelphia Normal Art School, the Franklin Institute (which later supported the founding of the School of Design for Women), and the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts—all of which Minerva attended. These schools offered courses and lectures in architecture, as well as a teacher's certificate program in drawing at the Philadelphia Normal Art School in which Minerva enrolled at the age of 17.\textsuperscript{20} She continued to live with her mother in their boardinghouse, listing her occupation in the 1880 Federal Census as “governess” while she completed her

\textsuperscript{19} Chalmers, Nineteenth-Century Art World, 91n.
\textsuperscript{20} Nichols, Nichols and Fischer, “The Baddest Day,” Addendum 1.
certificate. After graduating in 1882, she enrolled two years later in the Franklin Institute’s two-year course in architectural drawing—a program that was itself started by a woman, Sarah Worthington King Peter, who saw the need for women to be suitably trained under the auspices of a respectable institution.

Ms. Parker was not the only woman who studied at the Franklin Institute; the school’s roster included women’s names beginning in the mid-1870s. She did, however, earn an honorable mention in 1885, and special distinction upon her graduation in 1886 for her “commendable Zeal and ability.” Soon after her graduation, she landed in the office of a Philadelphia architect, working as an architectural drafter for various projects while pursuing another certificate from the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts from 1888 to 1889.

Minerva’s mentor was likely architect Edwin W. Thorne, rather than the frequently cited architect Frederick G. Thorn (or his son, Frederick G. Thorn, Jr., who also practiced in the city). Both Edwin Thorne and Frederick Thorn were in active practice as Minerva began her career in 1886, but their specialties were quite different. Frederick G. Thorn worked as a partner in Wilson Brothers & Company, with a background in engineering and extensive experience with various railroad

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companies.\textsuperscript{26} (Frederick G. Thorn, Jr., also a civil engineer, worked in various offices around the city, including that of his father in 1895.)\textsuperscript{27} Edwin Thorne, meanwhile, was associated with residential projects, many of which were in the suburbs of Philadelphia—consistent with Minerva’s later focus on domestic architecture and her commissions in the Main Line suburbs of the city.\textsuperscript{28}

In addition to these divergent areas of expertise, historian Kathleen Sinclair Wood notes that for the three years prior to Minerva Parker’s first independent listing (in 1890) in the \textit{Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide (PRERBG)}, Parker and Nichols used the same address in \textit{Gopsill’s Philadelphia City Directory}. Other offices were also listed at this address at 14 South Broad Street, so the connection might have been a coincidence, but that seems unlikely when considered with other evidence from contemporary publications. In December 1887, both Parker and Thorne published letters in the \textit{PRERBG} arguing that an architect’s name should be included with the published mention of any project. As Wood observes, the letters were printed side by side, and were consistent in content and syntax.\textsuperscript{29} It seems clear, therefore, that in spite of the sources that name Frederick G. Thorn as Parker’s mentor, it was in fact Edwin W. Thorne.

Minerva’s enrollment in 1888 in the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Arts coincided with Edwin Thorne’s decision to move his office to 1305

Arch Street. Deciding to take over his office at 14 South Broad Street rather than follow him to the new location, Minerva Parker became the first woman in the country to practice architecture independently. She was not the first to open an architectural practice; that superlative is generally accorded to Louise Blanchard, who opened her firm in Buffalo in 1881, in partnership with Robert Bethune. (She was 25 at the time.) Blanchard married Bethune three months later, practicing for nearly all of her career as Louise Blanchard Bethune, and in 1888 (the same year Parker started her firm), she was admitted to the American Institute of Architects as their first female fellow. In addition to Parker and Bethune—both of whom received their training through technical programs and schools of design—eight other women graduated from university architecture programs between 1878 and 1894. Nevertheless, female practitioners were still rare enough that Minerva Parker's new office garnered significant press in the building community. In Philadelphia, where Parker was not only the first woman to practice independently but the first woman to practice at all, several trade publications noted her arrival around the time of her first listing in Gopsill's City Directory. An editorial in the August 14, 1889, edition of the PRERBG announced that "It is with pleasure that we note the advent of another entrance into the profession of architecture, and the pleasure is deepened by the fact that it is a woman, and the only one in this city who

has chosen [sic] this useful occupation.” The reception was strikingly supportive—wishing her “an abundance of work”—and cited her sex not as a constraint but as a useful bludgeon against “the tottering barrier—the divine right of man only, to enter into the active duties of a business career.” As the PRERBG makes clear in this and subsequent profiles of Parker, she had the full breadth of necessary credentials for the job, including both formal education and apprenticeship experience.

Parker received accolades from other, more geographically-dispersed publications as well—some of which were printed just after she opened her practice. In 1890, the same year she first advertised in the City Directory, the Chicago Tribune highlighted the field’s new entrant, even claiming her as a native daughter: “Miss Parker was born in Chicago, but she has been educated in Philadelphia….Miss Parker is the only lady architect in Philadelphia, and there is only one other practicing in the United States, Mrs. Louisa Bethune of Rochester, NY.” That same year, and even farther away from Parker’s center of work, the California Architect and Building News called her “the only woman in America actually practicing the profession of Architecture.” (California’s trade catalogues evidently did not know of Louise Blanchard Bethune’s practice.) Written at the western fringes of the country, these publications were associated with the professionalized strains of the architecture field but were removed enough from the East Coast’s architectural

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34 “Visited the Proposed Sites,” Chicago Daily Tribune, August 29, 1890. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.
35 “Notes and Comments,” The California Architect and Building News 11, no. 6 (June 20, 1890): 66.
academies and associations to be fascinated by the introduction of a “lady architect.” Whether it was due to her professional merit or the novelty of her career, therefore Minerva Parker’s sex and practice garnered national coverage from the moment she first advertised her new firm.

From the start of Parker’s career, these newspaper articles and profiles noted her stated specialization in domestic architecture—her “particular forte,” as the Chicago Tribune described it. This line of work offered a natural continuation of her projects in Thorne’s office, where as The California Architect and Building News wrote, she had already “satisfactorily designed and executed a number of residences and dwellings.”36 Indeed, her success in Thorne’s office apparently translated to little trouble securing clients upon opening her new office; the PRERBG noted in March of 1890 that, “It was neither Miss Parker’s wish nor intention to assume the title of architect for some time to come, but a rapidly increasing number of clients made it a necessity.”37 Indeed, within the first two years of her firm’s existence, Parker had eleven notices published in the PRERBG of projects on the boards in her office—nearly all of which were residential commissions.38

Domestic architecture proved to be Parker’s specialty throughout her career, with many of her projects concentrated along Pennsylvania Railroad’s Main Line in the developing suburbs of Philadelphia. With commissions stretching from Overbrook to Elm Station (known as Narberth today) to Radnor, Parker was

36 “Notes and Comments,” 66.
37 Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide 5, no. 12 (March 26, 1890): i.
involved in several projects for the “Main Line’s” emerging concentration of
suburban middle- and upper-class residents, as well as for large-scale speculative
developers.\textsuperscript{39} Her work with the latter also included several houses near 49\textsuperscript{th} and
Market Streets in the city, as well as a second collection of development houses for
the Overbrook Land Company, built in 1891 near 61\textsuperscript{st} Street and Columbia Avenue.\textsuperscript{40}

For these residential commissions, Parker was known for her designs that
employed a range of architectural styles—in keeping with the nineteenth-century
belief that the design of a house should reflect the individuality of the owner. Even
more than the principles of Catharine Beecher, then, Minerva Parker advocated the
design ideals of contemporaries such as A. J. Downing, believing that the exterior of
the house should resonate with the client (male or female) as much as the interior.
In an 1893 editorial that she penned for the front page of \textit{Housekeeper's Weekly}, she
wrote that “the chief charm of any house is its individuality. There are many things
which houses or people possess in common; but the thing which charms us is the
thing peculiar to a certain house or a certain person.”\textsuperscript{41} Her projects accordingly
exhibited the full spectrum of styles that were characteristic of late-nineteenth
century architecture in Philadelphia, including Colonial Revival for the Misses M.
and J. Campbell, Queen Anne for Irwin Megargee, and eclectic Romanesque for the
New Century Club of Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{40} Tatman, “Nichols, Minerva Parker: Projects.”
**FIGURE 1**
Pair of dwelling houses for Miss M. and J. Campbell, Germantown (Phila.), c. 1891

*Source: Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania*

**FIGURE 2**  Pen-y-Bryn, home of Irwin N. Megargee, Gladwyne, PA, 1892

*Source: Lower Merion Historical Society*
FIGURE 3
Minerva Parker Nichols design for the New Century Club of Philadelphia

Source: “The Baddest Day” and Other Stories

FIGURE 4
Elevation and plan of the second floor, New Century Club of Philadelphia

Source: Women in American Architecture
FIGURE 5
Reproduction of an 1892 photograph of the New Century Club of Philadelphia

Source: Historic American Buildings Survey

FIGURE 6
Window details, New Century Club of Philadelphia, 1973

Source: Historic American Buildings Survey
Parker’s article in *Housekeeper’s Weekly* was noteworthy not just for its perspective on residential design, but also for its insight into her client base. Throughout the article, Parker offers instructions to architectural clients—with universal use of the pronouns “she” and “her.” This obviously is in part attributable to the publication for which she is writing (one that targets the women of the house), but the fact that she would directly address such an audience at all indicates the unconventional demographics of Parker’s clientele. Where contemporary male architects designed mostly commercial and institutional buildings, and worked primarily with those large-scale projects’ male clients, Parker focused on residential commissions—a specialty that skewed her client base predominantly female. This was not typical in late nineteenth-century American society, where the male-dominated field of architecture habitually discounted the ideas of female clients. This included contemporary architect John Root (of the firm Burnham and Root), who once offered a toast at a banquet that mocked “Madame,” with her “little plan on scented note paper she had studied at home.” In contrast, Root used that same speech to applaud the opinions of his male clients, welcoming them with the acknowledgement that the architect’s “technical and professional point of view in art is not always the truest.”  

42 For Minerva Parker, therefore, to write to a female audience and to praise individuality as a home’s and a woman’s “chief charm” was an unmistakable response to the entrenched masculine attitudes towards female clients. Her editorial, and its intended audience, also signifies that women clients

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were now numerous enough to warrant gender-specific marketing from the architect.

Parker’s female clients were not just those individuals associated with her residential commissions. In an era of emerging women's clubs and benevolence associations, some of her highest-profile projects were her designs for the New Century Clubs of Philadelphia and Wilmington, and for the Queen Isabella Association. Her building for the New Century Club of Philadelphia, built in 1891 at 12th and Sansom Streets, was one of the earliest New Century headquarters in the country—and the first designed by a woman. She oversaw its construction (as she usually did), and—as the New York Times noted in the announcement of her marriage—she supervised its completion on December 23, 1891, the day after her wedding to the Reverend William Ichabod Nichols. Her plans for the Pompeian brick and terra cotta building garnered her much press and praise for its “striking, yet delicate, homelike, and very harmonious” design. It also earned her the subsequent commissions for the New Century Club building in Wilmington and for the Queen Isabella Association’s pavilion for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

In the case of the latter, the Queen Isabella Association planned its pavilion as a complement to the Woman’s Building at the Exposition. Both projects would be

FIGURE 7
Elevation rendering of Minerva Parker Nichols design for the Queen Isabella Pavilion, 1893

*Source:* “The Baddest Day” and Other Stories

FIGURE 8
Minerva Parker Nichols design for the Queen Isabella Pavilion, 1893

*Source:* The Fair Women
FIGURE 9
Sophia Hayden design for the Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition, 1893

*Source:* The Fair Women

FIGURE 10
Plan for the Woman's Building of the Columbian Exposition, as designed by Sophia Hayden

*Source:* The Fair Women
FIGURE 11
Queen Isabella Pavilion, as built, in deviation from Minerva Parker Nichols design

Source: The Fair Women
overseen by a Board of Lady Managers whose hope was that, by organizing around self-determined goals and projects, women would gain a sense of solidarity and purpose for subsequent campaigns for suffrage and social issues. Unfortunately, in the two years of planning leading up to the Exposition, the Queen Isabella Association and the Board of Lady Managers ended up sowing more unrest than unity among their constituents.

The Queen Isabella Association, as its name suggests, saw the World's Columbian Exposition as an opportunity to commemorate Queen Isabella who, along with her husband King Ferdinand, dispatched Christopher Columbus on his 1492 voyage, which was the basis for the 1893 fair (originally planned for 1892). In the lead-up to the fair, a Mrs. C. W. Waite raised the question at a women’s meeting: “Why should Columbus only be honored when Queen Isabella was the one that made the discovery of the New World possible?” To mark her contributions to America’s founding, therefore, the congregated women established the Association, and its members set about raising funds for a pavilion and a statue in her honor.

The “Isabellas” (as they called themselves) hired Minerva Parker, evidently by choice and not by competition, when Parker was just 20. Recommending that the pavilion should incorporate characteristic “Moorish motifs” (as she called them) to reflect Isabella’s native country, Minerva Parker Nichols (now married) sent to

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48 “Visited the Proposed Sites.”
Spain for plans of the Alhambra palace as inspiration.\textsuperscript{49} The final design—which included apartments for women and children, as well as “medical, press and legal departments”—was a testament not only to the organizing power of the women who funded it, but to the social independence of the women who would travel and stay there.

The design’s promising intentions were lost, however, in the disputes between the Queen Isabella Association and the Board of Lady Managers. In a gambit of politics among the associations, the Board of Lady Managers, led by Bertha Palmer, outmaneuvered the Isabellas and convinced the Exposition’s male-governed Committee on Grounds and Buildings to outlaw any private clubhouses on the fairgrounds.\textsuperscript{50} Because the Association’s pavilion was underwritten by individual donations, unlike the Exposition-funded Woman’s Building, the Queen Isabella Association abandoned its intended site, as well as Minerva Parker Nichols’ proposed scheme. When they later built a smaller pavilion just outside the Exposition’s gates, they used a more reserved plan than Nichols’ Moorish design.\textsuperscript{51}

The Woman’s Building commission, meanwhile, was awarded by competition to the young Sophia Hayden, a recent graduate of the architecture program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Thirteen other women (of various levels of architectural training) entered the competition, including Lois Howe, who won second prize, and Laura Hayes, who won third prize despite (or perhaps because of)

\textsuperscript{49} Adelaide Nichols Baker Papers, 4—5.
\textsuperscript{50} Weimann, \textit{The Fair Women}, 66.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 67.
her job as Bertha Palmer’s private secretary. Louise Blanchard Bethune did not participate in the competition, which was only open to women architects, because both she and the American Institute of Architects (of which she was a member) objected to competitions on principle. She also protested the $1,000 prize money, arguing that it was a paltry comparison with the fair’s $10,000 commissions for its male architects and firms.52

Only a year out of university and willing to accept the modest honorarium, Hayden submitted her entry from her home in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, where she was teaching art in a high school because she could not find a position in an architect’s office.53 For the next year, Hayden traveled back and forth to Chicago to oversee the project, although she had little experience in supervising the construction or execution of her plans. Over the course of the project, her inexperience was evident, and her interactions with Bertha Palmer and the Board of Lady Managers proved overwhelming. In the summer of 1892, she suffered a nervous breakdown.54

Hayden’s collapse was publicized as an attack of “melancholia,” and as she traveled home to recover, the press quickly seized on it as a pretext for excluding women from the architectural profession. The American Architect and Building News was particularly critical, questioning “how successfully woman with her physical

52 Ibid., 147—9.
53 Ibid., 145.
54 Weimann, The Fair Women, 177.
limitation can enter and engage in the work of a profession which is a very wearing one.” The article went on to lament:

If the building of which the women seem so proud...is to mean the physical ruin of its architect, it will be a much more telling argument against the wisdom of women entering this especial profession than anything else could be.55

The coverage of “Miss Hayden” and “the ‘Lady Managers’” smacked of the same patronizing tone that permeated Root’s comments about women clients. Even as the *American Architect and Building News* bemoaned that ”Miss Hayden has been victimized,” its commentary seemed to relish the conflict between her and “her fellow-women.”56

It was another “fellow woman” who came to Sophia Hayden’s defense, as Minerva Parker Nichols submitted “A Woman on the Woman’s Building” to that same newspaper in *AABN*’s December 10, 1892 issue. Despite the political maneuvers that had cost Nichols her own pavilion design at the fair, she was firm in her rebuke of the *AABN*’s criticism of women and the Exposition:

Comment on the success “or lack of success” of the Woman’s Building designed by Miss Hayden is unfair to her and to the general architectural profession. The conditions of the competition and the selection of a design made it impossible to secure satisfactory results. What other building, whether given by appointment or by competition, could have fallen into the hands of an architectural student without experience or practice?57

This, to Nichols, was the real cause for Sophia Hayden’s breakdown: Hayden’s inexperience and lack of practice with the demands of real clients—not her sex.

56 “To our subscribers,” *American Architect and Building News* 38, no. 885 (December 10, 1892): 158.
Nichols did not necessarily fault Hayden for these shortcomings in training, since she wrote extensively on the weaknesses of the architectural field’s education system, but she did carefully separate the fate of Hayden from the prospects of women practitioners in general:

It is not fair, because one woman makes a doubtful success, to draw conclusions from her example. It is time to put aside prejudice and sentimentalism, and judge women’s work by their ability...We do not need women as architects, we do not need men, but we do need brains enough to lift the architecture of this country beyond the grasp of unskilled and unqualified practitioners.\textsuperscript{58}

She went on to compare Hayden’s situation and the \textit{AABN}'s preferred, conventional domain for women:

Because one woman suffers from exhaustion in the daily wear and tear of her household duty, you would not say that women were unfitted for domestic life. Because one woman, worn with the care of her children, died, or was a nervous wreck, you would not withhold from women the most sacred occupation which a woman can undertake. And because one inexperienced woman, tried by a new position,...is ill, you rush into the ranks to save all other women from a like fate.\textsuperscript{59}

To Minerva Parker Nichols, Sophia Hayden’s breakdown offered cause to question the architecture field’s system of practice; it did not justify the eradication of the field’s newest practitioners.

Nichols’ critique was widely circulated and remarkably well-received, even within that same edition of \textit{AABN}. As was typical throughout her career, Nichols received endorsements for her own credentials even by the same people who dismissed the qualifications of other women architects. Indeed, the editors of \textit{AABN}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
highlighted her article in their prefatory comments, saying that they were "pleased to publish elsewhere the protest of Mrs. Nichols—who has proved her own ability to work side by side with masculine architects without asking favor on the score of sex." They maintained their own veiled critique of Sophia Hayden, pitting her against the "ignorant self-confidence of her fellow-women." Nevertheless, they separated Nichols from those same women on the grounds that Nichols herself never exploited her gender to advance her career. She was, therefore, well-received as a woman architect precisely because she never played up her womanhood.

Instead, the AABN—and other publications over the course of Nichols’ decade in practice—praised her on-site experience and practical knowledge. A builder working on the New Century Club in Wilmington reportedly declared that "he had never worked for an architect who better understood the business," while another project’s building contractor went one step further: “She knows not only her business, but mine too.” Coverage of her work consistently cited comments such as these, and her expertise in all aspects of the design and construction process earned her regular praise from the building community. Although the architectural press was still at times acutely aware of her sex—coverage of her work was not without its own gendered overtones—Nichols’ reputation was clearly predicated on a vocal respect for her training, persistence, personality, and competence.

60 “To Our Subscribers.”
This admiration carried through Nichols’ decade of practice in Philadelphia, and was included in retrospective profiles of her career even after she retired in 1896. Her move to Brooklyn that year marked the end of her formal practice, although she continued to design occasionally for family and friends. Her later commissions included a building for her brother-in-law’s Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1894), as well as several residences for family members for which she supervised the construction even as decades passed since her supposed retirement. It was, in fact, while she was inspecting the roof of her daughter’s Westport, Connecticut home—a house that she designed—that she fell in 1949 and later died.62 She was 87.

The New York Times ran an obituary upon her death under the headline “Mrs. Nichols Dead; Retired Architect,” citing both her active practice from 1895 to 1895, as well as her continued “interest in architectural matters” after her retirement.63 The column named many of her projects and highlighted her status as one of the first women to practice architecture in the country. It was, however, one of the few profiles of Nichols published in the twentieth century, despite resurgent interest (fueled by the feminist movement) in other early women architects, such as Louise Blanchard Bethune, Lois Howe, or Julia Morgan.

Nichols’ name is still relatively unknown today, even in her adopted city of Philadelphia. A small number of local history sources, such as the Lower Merion

Historical Society, have cited her work, and a handful of historians have studied and written about her career. Most discussions of her life are included in the context of biographical dictionaries of noteworthy women, or as a portion of a larger text about women in architecture. These sources—with their emphasis on compensatory history in general and Minerva Parker Nichols’ story in particular—often treat women’s history as something to be unearthed, deploying the novelty of Nichols’ career simply to counterbalance decades of male-centric history. For these reasons, both Nichols’ life and her buildings have gone unnoticed by several compendia of sites significant to women’s history, including *Women Remembered: A Guide to Landmarks of Women’s History in the United States*, as well as *Susan B. Anthony Slept Here: A Guide to American Women’s Landmarks*. Both books include sites associated with Nichols’ female contemporaries.

With the exception of research by architectural historian Kathleen Sinclair Wood on Nichols’ suburban houses, many of her local projects have not been identified or inventoried, due in large part to their status as private residences. Most of her public commissions—including two spaghetti factories (for which no documentation exists), the New Century Club of Philadelphia, and the Browne and Nichols School building in Cambridge—were demolished in the last few decades. Her best known surviving public building is the New Century Club of Wilmington, which is owned and used today by the Delaware Children’s Theatre.

According to her obituary, Minerva Parker Nichols was active in both women’s groups and architectural matters up until her death—as she had been
since her childhood in Peoria County, Illinois. Shaped by her experiences in a single-mother household, and by her close relationship with her architect grandfather, Minerva Parker Nichols forged her own brand of independence and architectural practice in the late nineteenth century. Even after she married and gave up her formal office, she continued to apply her practical experience and academic expertise to a series of commissions and their supervised construction. With a client base of other financially- and socially-independent women, Minerva Parker Nichols helped to define a new relationship between women and the built environment.
The career of Minerva Parker Nichols, for all of its apparent acceptance from peers and professionals, played out in an era of uncertainty about the very word “professional.” As the divide deepened between those trained in the building trades and those educated in the academies, members of the architectural field in the nineteenth century engaged in an identity debate over credentials and certification. The result was an ideological rift between the two branches of the field, with each discipline rushing to eliminate the unqualified from its ranks, in an effort to elevate the professional status of its own members. In their eagerness to exclude, both the building tradesmen and professional architects defined their avocation in terms that explicitly reinforced masculine conventions, and implicitly limited the access of women to their field. In spite of the gendered associations of both her residential commissions and her female client base, therefore, Minerva Parker Nichols claimed these specializations in order to claim a role in the professionalizing architectural field.

Practitioners did not even use the classification of “professional” until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Before Benjamin Latrobe claimed in the first
years of the nineteenth century that he was the first “professional architect,”
designers and tradesmen were identified as builders or carpenters—“master
builders” if they were particularly skilled and renowned.64 Professional societies
such as the American Institute of Architects did not emerge until the middle of the
century, and while some men studied architecture abroad at the École des Beaux‐
Arts in Paris, most American architects in the United States studied and trained
domestically in the apprenticeship system.

Latrobe’s claims notwithstanding, historians disagree about who the first
“professional” architect was—on much the same grounds of dispute as the
nineteenth-century architects themselves. As architectural education opportunities
expanded in the antebellum decades, graduates of these university programs
claimed that their education earned them the mantle of the architecture
“profession,” above the mere craft of builders and carpenters. Building tradesmen,
meanwhile, pointed to their centuries-old industry as the foundation of the field,
with the apprenticeship system as the basis for professional status.

Complicating the debate was the introduction of pattern books in the first
half of the nineteenth century, which marketed residential designs on a mass
scale—potentially empowering the client at the expense of the professional
architect (whatever the definition of “professional”). Asher Benjamin’s Country
Builder’s Assistant in 1797 was the first to introduce pattern books to the American
public, but countless others—including the most popular ones by Andrew Jackson

64 Woods, From Craft to Profession, 4.
Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis—followed in the ensuing decades. Their appeal stemmed from their perceived democratization of the building process, such that middle-class landowners could purchase architectural expertise (and taste) in the pages of a book, rather than with the more expensive services of a professional.65

This threat to the profession of architecture, from both the building trades and pattern books, spurred its professional societies to call for credentials in the latter half of the century. The American Institute of Architects (AIA), established in 1857, was founded on the principle that the field needed professional rules and standards, and, in 1876, it sanctioned two routes to professional status. The first was through the academic system, with a degree from one of the growing number of university programs in architecture. The second recognized the apprenticeship path that many in the field had already taken, adding the requirement of an application for a license after an “appropriate” apprenticeship period.66

Both of these paths were considerably more accessible for men than for women. Although the AIA saw them as an equalizing force for women, since they clarified the routes to formal practice and offered alternatives for credentialing, neither path could fully counteract several centuries of ingrained masculine control of the field. Instead, women faced obstacles with either the academic path or the apprenticeship track. University departments and schools of design did increasingly

admit and attract women, but these programs’ distance from the practical
challenges of real commissions limited the education of architectural students, both
men and women. Where men could later secure an apprenticeship to complement
their university training, however, women—dependent on the receptivity of the
supervising architect—faced limited access there as well.

Moreover, the AIA’s own definition of the title of “architect” framed the
profession in explicitly masculine terms. In 1906 (a full thirty years after the AIA’s
endorsement of professional paths theoretically opened the field up to women), its
Committee on Education characterized “the architect” as follows:

> An architect we define as one ranking in the class of men of culture, learning
> and refinement, differentiated from the others of his class solely by his
> function as a creator of pure beauty….From these assumptions, it follows
> necessarily that the objective of architectural education must be the breeding
> of gentlemen of cultivation…who can inspire, organize and direct widely
different classes of men.⁶⁷

Guided by this depiction of the architect, which frames the profession as the realm
of “gentlemen” and “men of culture,” the path to professional status through the
academies was not as accessible to women as its advocates presumed.

The alternative of credentialing after an apprenticeship was no more
receptive to women than the academic path. Where male students could join the
apprenticeship track and seek out a position in an architect’s office, thereby learning
the trade through practical experience, women’s access to apprenticeships was
limited. They were dependent on the favor of individual mentors, who were
inevitably men. Faced with the prejudices of the same men who codified the

profession in masculine terms, most women habitually lost any available apprenticeship positions to their male counterparts.\footnote{Ibid., 27—28.}

Even if they could earn experience working on site, women’s dress customs did not help their apprenticeship prospects in the early years of the professionalizing architecture field. Constricted by the corset, they faced limited mobility and maneuverability at all times. Corsets reduced the lung capacity of its wearer by half, making it doubly difficult to navigate the construction site’s inevitable ladders and obstacles.\footnote{Zaitzevsky, \textit{Long Island Landscapes}, 258.} It was no doubt for this reason that Minerva Parker Nichols advocated change at a rally in 1893. The \textit{Chicago Tribune} included her on the list of women “who wish to put themselves on record as favoring dress reform,” although the newspaper also archly observed that “the women who were present to listen may have had the subject of dress reform near their hearts, [but] it was conspicuously absent in their toilets.” By the newspaper’s inspection, the room featured an abundance of unreformed “small waists, large sleeves, [and] beflounced skirts.”\footnote{“Many Leaders Talk On Dress Reform,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, May 24, 1893, 10. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.} Given such conventional outfits, it is little wonder that even apprenticed women had more difficulty gaining practical on-site experience with architectural commissions.

Even before they faced the challenges of securing an apprenticeship, women hoping to enter the field of architecture faced an uphill battle against the social conventions of professional women and the home. The social revolution of
Catharine Beecher’s *The American Woman’s Home* (published in 1869) did much to link women’s equality with domestic efficiency—arguing that if the home was efficiently arranged, women could devote more time to other concerns—but it still upheld the societal connection between American women and their homes.71

This link remained firm for decades after the book’s publication, as literature both within and beyond the architecture field reinforced the correlation between women and the home. In 1896, nearly thirty years after the release of *The American Woman’s Home*, the association was still entrenched enough for Lyman Abbott, author of *The House and Home*, to observe:

> The house is pre-eminently the woman’s province, yet it is only within the last ten or twelve years that women have entered the field of house-decoration as original designers. Everything in the house concerns the mistress more nearly than the master, for most of his life is passed away from it.72

Abbott’s unfinished thought was unmistakable: the house concerns the mistress precisely because most of her life is passed away *in* it.

The association of nineteenth-century women with the home, however, cannot be reduced to an understanding of separate spheres, where women occupy the domestic realm while men work outside of it. Such a categorization—conceived by later historians evaluating women’s opportunities in the nineteenth century—creates a dichotomy of two domains whose boundaries were, in fact, much more nebulous. Nineteenth-century literature did employ the idea of the “woman’s

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sphere” in reference to the concept of domesticity, but it was twentieth-century historians who framed these associations as discrete and completely separate domains of public and private, or male and female, space. Thus, while women were most definitely associated with the home—and an abundance of late nineteenth-century literature attests to this—the “cult of domesticity” (as historians have called it) did not signify that a woman’s place was only in the home. Instead, social realities of the late-nineteenth century were much more complicated, particularly as women found (and, in some cases, founded) increased opportunities for education outside of the domestic realm.73

Indeed, the late-nineteenth century’s schools of design, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, were clearly established as responses to this presumption of women’s domesticity. By giving women an education at respectable institutions, these programs offered their female students a way to earn credits and credentials outside of the home, where they were already seen as the skilled experts of domestic efficiency. The schools’ curricula, then, was both a continuation of, and an expansion beyond, the modernization and rationalization of the home that Catharine Beecher promoted.

Minerva Parker Nichols’ career shares similar themes with the Beecher domestic movement and the popular lady’s home magazines of the nineteenth century. Like them, she believed that the home was worthy of individual design that considered women’s domestic needs. The opening of her firm in 1890, however,

amplified the social radicalism of these other nineteenth-century currents, as Nichols worked not only outside the home but also independently.

With a depth of both education and practice, Minerva Parker Nichols and Louise Blanchard Bethune are anomalies in this professionalized context of women in the architectural workplace in the late nineteenth century. Both women trained in the offices of established male architects (Nichols worked for Edwin Thorne, Bethune for Richard A. Waite and F. W. Caulkings), gaining enough practical experience to start their own firms and secure their own commissions. Nichols, who received even more formal education than Bethune, received considerable training from Philadelphia’s various schools of design, including degrees and certificates from four different institutions. Neither woman, however, studied in a university architecture program—ostensibly the more accessible route for women to gain entry in the field. (After graduating high school with a special interest in architectural drawing, Louise Blanchard Bethune decided against studying at Cornell, taking the drafting post in the office of Waite and Caulkings instead.)

The success of Nichols and Bethune in securing apprenticeships begs comparison with women such as Sophia Hayden, the designer of the Woman’s Building who could not find regular employment in the architecture field after earning her degree. Existing class and gender norms obviously influenced each woman’s professional trajectory, but the divergence in their professional standing and success—despite the relative contemporaneousness of their careers—suggests

74 Allaback, First American Women Architects, 45.
that other factors were also involved. One element was likely personality and persistence. In the case of Nichols, the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* summed up this factor as it profiled her personal qualities and professional achievements: “Energy and push generally meet with success, and as there is every evidence that she possesses both, the latter is evidently within grasp.”\(^{75}\) Bethune’s own writings and practice hint that she was apparently equally determined, offering some indication why the two women were able to thrive.

In an era of uncertainty about professionalism in general, and ambivalence about women architects in particular, however, temperament does not entirely explain Nichols’ and Bethune’s success. The shifts in economic climate may have been another extenuating circumstance that worked in Nichols’ and Bethune’s favor, but worked against Sophia Hayden when she graduated from MIT just a few years later. In 1876, while Minerva Parker was still in school and before she sought an apprenticeship, the country was in a depression. Buffalo, however, managed to withstand the economic climate, and its building boom sustained firms such as Waite and Caulkings’ practice—along with Louise Blanchard’s early years of apprenticeship and practice. By the 1880s, the country had recovered, and architectural firms had enough work that Minerva Parker—with several technical degrees as recommendations—could find a drafting position in the office of Edwin Thorne.\(^{76}\) By 1893, as Sophia Hayden graduated and searched for a position, the country had descended once again into an economic panic—one with a sharp

\(^{75}\) *Philadelphia Real Estate Record* (August 14, 1889): 378.

\(^{76}\) Zaitzevsky, *Long Island Landscapes*, 257.
impact on architecture projects and journals (such as the *American Architect and Building News*).\(^77\) Unable to secure an apprenticeship, as so many other female graduates of architecture programs had trouble doing as well, Sophia Hayden took a job teaching in a high school instead.

Whether it was because of her sex, her personality, her academic education and lack of technical training, her personality, or her economic timing, Sophia Hayden never gained the practical experience that Minerva Parker Nichols considered foundational and imperative. Nichols was adamant about the education and experience that was necessary for architectural practice, dismissing those people (men or women) who sought positions without proper training or education. In her editorials that asserted women’s qualifications for the field, she faulted some of her female contemporaries for their insufficient preparation. As was clear in her defense of Sophia Hayden during the Woman’s Building incident, she thought that Hayden and too many other would-be architects lacked proper training in working with clients. Having made “a thorough study of the business” herself, Nichols questioned those who blithely pursued it without educating or preparing themselves. Her respect for the emerging profession—torn as it was between its building trades and its academy curricula—convinced her that architecture “is a business that has to be learned and thoroughly mastered like any other.”\(^78\) Those women (or men, for that matter) who discounted the appropriate procedures and


\(^78\) Ibid.
practice were not “professional” architects, by Minerva Parker Nichols’ definition of the word.

As she advocated architectural standards and the qualifications of the “professional” architect, Nichols was careful to stake out the middle ground in the debates over professionalism. Believing that both methods of training were valuable, she supported both apprenticeships as well as professional credentials, calling for architects to be licensed.79 However, unlike the AIA’s similar recommendations (issued in effectively gendered terms), Nichols was firm that these requirements should pertain equally to men and women, rather than codified in terms that instinctively favored men or reflexively benefited women.

If these issues of access, education, and credentials could be addressed, Minerva Parker Nichols (along with Louise Blanchard Bethune) was optimistic about the opportunities and prospects for women interested in the architecture professions. In her editorial in *Housekeeper’s Weekly*, she equated the new profession—and the evolving place of women in the profession—with “the new land in the far West,” where “there are many claims not taken.” She urged women to invest their “courage, some capital, much labor in traveling,...and a real love talent for the work.” These were the qualities that, when coupled with thorough training, could offer women in the built environment professions some measure of success.

Of course, a significant factor—both advantageous and difficult—in Minerva Parker Nichols’ career was the fact that she practiced independently, rather than

under the auspices of a larger, male-dominated firm. There is no testimony of her time in Edwin Thorne’s office, and no specific evidence to suggest that her sex was a factor (positive or otherwise) in her professional standing there. By leaving his office in 1888 and starting her own practice, however, she managed to avoid some of the discrimination in private firms’ hiring, salaries, and advancement that other women working for larger offices regularly faced.80

Still, despite these advantages of designing alone, Nichols faced clear and constant challenges of independent practice. Most pressing among these was the pursuit of commissions, which (for an architect specializing in small-scale projects) was a perpetual concern. The issue presented palpable reminders of the difference between the men adopting the architectural profession in the nineteenth century, and the small number of women who sought to do the same—beginning with the availability of networks of association for men and for women. Where men’s clubs had existed for decades, and professionalized societies such as the AIA were clearly variations on those same masculine gatherings, equivalent women’s were only beginning to emerge in the late nineteenth century. These new spaces and associations increasingly allowed for women to meet socially and interact—as was the case with the New Century Clubs in Philadelphia and Wilmington, which had a measurable impact on the trajectory of Minerva Parker Nichols’ commissions and clientele. These clubs were still young and small, however, and Nichols and other female practitioners still enjoyed far fewer opportunities to secure patrons or

commissions than their male counterparts, who could find both colleagues and potential clients at their various well-established social leagues.

This disparity contributed to a perception on the part of some women in the field that they owed their professional access to the men who traditionally limited such admittance. Minerva Parker Nichols insisted on her training as her commendation for practice, and without joining the AIA or other professional societies, she could avoid gendered deference. Louise Blanchard Bethune, however, was eager to join both the Western Association of Architects and the American Institute of Architects—professionalized societies that share an understanding of the architect as “one ranking in the class of men of culture.”81 As a result, Bethune’s speech at her induction in 1888 into the AIA signaled a gratitude to her “fellows” (a gendered term in itself) for their benevolence in admitting her. She was careful to note that women in architecture were not “warmly welcomed” by the public or the profession, but she also argued that they met no serious hostility—a claim that, in her case (and possibly others’), was not necessarily true. In a 1900 article about Bethune and other women architects, Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly noted that Bethune’s membership was, in fact, “met with much opposition.”82 Whether or not she was aware of this dispute over her induction, Bethune described herself as grateful—even indebted—to the men who ultimately admitted her to the Institute. Thus, although she claimed that “the future of woman in the architectural profession is what she herself sees fit to make it,” Bethune could not avoid casting her own

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81 Paine, Pioneer Women Architects, 62.
success as the thankful result of “the noble-hearted men whose far-seeing polity and kindly nature has laid this stepping-stone.”\textsuperscript{83} To Bethune, gaining entry in the professionalized echelons of the architecture profession depended on personal talent, thorough education—and approval by the men of the club. Despite her calls for a new norm of “equal remuneration for equal service,” Louise Blanchard Bethune could not avoid a concession to established conventions and patrimony in the male-oriented profession of architecture.

These entrenched associations of the “professionalizing” field of architecture accentuate the gendered implications of Minerva Parker Nichols’ concentration in residential architecture. They also underscore the unusual composition of her client base, with its high representation of financially independent middle- and upperclass women. In an era of debate over the professionalization of architecture, with its divergent branches that each excluded women, Minerva Parker Nichols accepted her specialization of commissions and clients in order to assert her own place in the profession.

Although Minerva Parker Nichols embraced domestic architecture in her professional practice, capitalizing on its opportunities as a specialization, she could not avoid or escape the type’s traditional associations with women. Her decision to specialize in residential commissions, then, would seem to be less of a choice than much as an acquiescence to contemporary conventions for female architects. Indeed, given that female architects were so closely identified with the “domestic sphere” in their education and attempts to practice, it is of little surprise that they would then be linked with that same domain for their professional commissions.

Indeed, that putative feminine or maternal instinct served as the basis for women architects’ unavoidable associations with the architecture of domesticity. As Lulu Stoughton Beem remarked in the *Inland Architect* in October 1884: “Women are naturally better judges of color, better in the blending of fabrics, besides knowing intuitively what is wanted about a house—wants too small for men to perceive.”\(^{84}\) *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* evaluated these feminine skills similarly, writing specifically of Minerva Parker Nichols: “As with most of these ladies, it is the

home features of the work in which, with true feminine instinct, [Mrs. Nichols] takes
the greatest pride.” Even as they earned professional status outside of the home,
therefore, women architects were nevertheless very much still associated with the
traditional gendered roles assigned by contemporary gender norms.

Almost without fail, the praise for the talent of women in domestic architecture was, in the same breath, dismissed because of the negligible skill that such residential commissions required. As with Beem, who characterized the “wants too small” of residential design, these commentaries frequently echoed the 1876
words of the American Architect and Building News (the same newspaper that later
backhandedly defended Sophia Hayden in 1893):

First, the planning of houses, at least so far as the convenience of their arrangement is concerned, though a very necessary part of an architect’s duty, is not architecture at all; and the ability to arrange a house conveniently does not in the least make an architect.  

The double standards were unmistakable: women architects’ credentials and talents were best suited to domestic architecture, but domestic projects did not qualify as “architecture” at all. The ascension of women to the architectural profession was therefore progress only insofar as it earned many women work outside of their own homes. Residential architecture secured them a place within the nascent trades of architecture, but their standing within that class was one of second-tier rank. Their professional status could not help Minerva Parker Nichols or

85 Miller, “Women as Architects,” 2.
86 As quoted in Wright, 282.
other female architects avoid altogether the homes of their clients or the hierarchy of professional commissions.

Female architects’ client networks were equally encumbered with the implications of their gender. Just as women architects’ access to professional societies was hampered by their gender, they had less access to networks of associations—including well-established social clubs or professional associations—for commissions as well. As was the case with their quest for apprenticeships, therefore, women needed to curry favor and commissions on a personal, rather than corporate, basis. As the educator Henry Frost assessed the situation in 1936:

[Women’s] professional work, both in architecture and landscape architecture, is likely, though this is by no means always true, to be in domestic fields. The sentimental reasons for this can be ignored. The true reason is that women practitioners thus far are more likely to be commissioned by individuals than by corporations and organizations.87

Thus, since projects for individuals were much more likely to be private residences rather than institutional buildings, women architects’ work was more likely to involve domestic, rather than corporate, designs.

There were, therefore, many circumstantial reasons why Minerva Parker Nichols would adopt domestic architecture as her “particular forte”—rationales ranging from professional training to gendered assumptions to access to clients. All of these were no doubt factors in her decision to specialize, suggesting that it was in some measure an obligatory specialty. However, her decision to specialize was not one of passive acquiescence. Rather, she actively embraced this niche in clients and

87 Wright, “Fringe of the Profession,” 283.
commissions for her independent practice. As several profiles published during and soon after her career noted, Nichols felt that “specialists in architecture, as in medicine, are most assured of success.”  

Her specialization in domestic architecture was therefore more than a simple acquiescence to societal assumptions; rather, it was an acceptance of professional realities in order to claim her own professional status. Just as she took advantage of the few avenues available to women in order to earn her place in the male-dominated field of architecture, Nichols capitalized on the presumed specialty of residential architecture, seizing the opportunities for clients and commissions that such a specialization could generate.

Nichols’ specialization in domestic architecture also asserted the importance of the professional architects in general. In this era of tension between architects, builders, and pattern books, residential commissions could be particularly difficult for professionalized architects to secure. Tradesmen argued to clients that the architect was an unnecessary go-between in the homebuilding process, while (from the perspective of the client decades) of pattern book popularity had usurped some of the expertise of the architecture profession. In contrast to contemporary large institutional, corporate projects—which presented obvious justification for the involvement of professional (male) architects—residential commissions had been somewhat democratized by this point, with professional architects edged out by empowered clients and cheaper builders. Domestic commissions therefore required

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much more education of the clients, as Nichols needed to convince them of the need for professional design in general, and for her specialization and expertise in particular.

Nichols’ published editorials focused on this topic, as she seized on columns in *Housekeeper’s Weekly, Woman’s Progress*, and elsewhere to emphasize this theme of architecturally-informed and savvy clients. “I wish first to remind you of the duty architectural clients owe to themselves, and secondly, the one they owe to the architect,” she wrote in *Woman’s Progress* in 1893. This responsibility that clients owed to themselves was one of education, as she urged them to “be as familiar with the broad general styles of architecture and architectural ornament as they are with general literature.”

Believing, as many in the nineteenth century did, that a house’s architectural style reflected the owner’s individuality, she bemoaned the architectural illiteracy of clients that resulted in “the wild conglomerate style which assails us on every side.” While she encouraged the education of the client, therefore, she rejected the replacement of architects with the democratization of pattern books—arguing that the design and the client would suffer without the architect's expertise.

It was natural, therefore, that the client’s second responsibility, as defined by Nichols, was to the architect, who could serve as an authority and advisor in these architectural styles. (Nichols’ familiarity with these issues with clients demonstrates the depth of her own experience and expertise in these matters.) The populism of

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90 Ibid., 61.
pattern books and residential design, she claimed, had distorted the building process and demoted the architect:

Your duty to the architect, I beg of you, in the name of a suffering class of laborers, do not say, because you furnished the architect with some rude sketches, from which to work out your design, that ‘I was my own architect.’...It would seem [today] that the architect is employed as a delicate charity or as a scapegoat between owner and contractor, the latter getting the profit, the former the credit, and the architect all blame on both sides.\footnote{Ibid., 62.}

Instead, Nichols advocated for the professional architect (much as the AIA and other professional societies were doing as well), valuing the role of specialized, professional expertise in choice of style and the quality of design.

Nichols’ own commissions, both residential and otherwise, represented a broad range of architectural styles, ranging from Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts (for many of her domestic projects) to Moorish Revival (for the Queen Isabella Pavilion). Such variety spoke to the individuality of Nichols’ clients, and to the academic architectural training that equipped her for such disparate commissions. Her works were the tangible reinforcement of her writings, which deplored architectural populism, and insistently justified the architectural profession.

Nichols’ strategy of professionalization through specialization succeeded, as her domestic projects earned her plaudits, clients, and higher-profile commissions. In 1887, just a year after she joined E. W. Thorne’s firm—and a year before starting her own—she had four pages of plans published in the October 1887 issue of \textit{Carpentry and Building}. These plans, elevations, and details were her contribution to

\footnote{Ibid., 62.}
the journal’s Seventeenth Competition, and in publishing them, *Carpentry and Building* noted the exceptionalism of her gender in the field of architecture and in the pages of trade catalogues: “It is not often that *Carpentry and Building* has the opportunity of laying before its readers evidences of the ability of women to act in the capacity of architects and designers. With the exception of the letters from [a] ‘Farmer’s Daughter’ and ‘A Carpenter’s Wife,’ all that we have so far published has come from the other sex.”92 In printing her work, the journal acknowledged the rarity of her career, as well as the specialization of her work.

Nichols’ specialization and special status also earned her coverage in the March 1890 issue of *The Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide*. *PRERBG* was the premier directory for Philadelphia architects and their projects, which made it all the more notable when she garnered a full front-page profile and picture. She was just the fifth person selected for this distinction, the only architect, and the first woman.93 The article, published in the same year that she first advertised in the *Gopsill’s Philadelphia City Directory*, made note of her specialty in domestic architecture. Rather than the large-scale commissions that earned most contemporary architects their praise, or the real-estate moguls who were the usual subjects for *PRERBG*’s profiles, it was Minerva Parker Nichols’ “beautiful and artistic homes” that earned her plaudits in the journal. Indeed, the sheer number of active commissions seems to have been cause for recognition, with a listing of projects that

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92 *Carpentry and Building* 9, no. 10 (October 1887): 197.
included eleven different residential projects—“only a few of the many excellent plans that have been furnished to customers by Miss Parker.”  

The PRERBG’s profile highlights the anomaly of Minerva Parker Nichols’ professional reception. Where other women were backhandedly praised or outright dismissed as practitioners, Nichols was unusually—and almost unequivocally—well-received and respected. The PRERBG article was not without its gendered overtones, drawing many of the same parallels between women and domestic architecture as other contemporary publications, including the American Architect and Building News. But where those newspapers concluded that domestic architecture was the ideal scale for women’s talents, and therefore the test of female designers’ success, the PRERBG assured even “the most skeptical” that Nichols “will use the opportunities thus afforded her with honor to herself and the profession she so ably represents.” While her domestic commissions served as her foothold for publication, therefore, her specialization garnered her praise not simply for the novelty of her gender, but for the quality of her work and the promise of her professional prospects within, and even potentially beyond, domestic architecture.

As is evidenced by the projects enumerated in the PRERBG profile, Nichols’ stated specialty also helped her to secure numerous clients. Indeed, her clientele grew so quickly that she leapt into independent practice much earlier than planned, as the PRERBG noted when it first included mention of her firm. In the first two years alone of her private practice, she placed notices in nearly every issue of the

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biweekly PRERBG, announcing projects on the boards for individual clients that included a cottage, a dwelling, a stone house, and a residence.

Aside from their sheer quantity, Nichols’ notices in the PRERBG are most significant for their clues to her client base—one unusually dominated by independent women. There are men among her patron list, including George M. Christy, Louis T. Brooke, and James F. Beale. More striking, however, are the commissions for Mrs. S. E. Bewley, Mrs. Maxwell, Miss L. E. Gallagher, and fourteen other women, along with two women’s clubs and the Queen Isabella Association. Their presence and prominence in Nichols’ list of clients speaks to the late nineteenth century’s emerging networks of socialization and financial independence for women.

Nichols’ commissions for the New Century Clubs and the Queen Isabella Association point to the burgeoning women’s societies of the late nineteenth century, which emerged as a counterbalance to the traditional men’s clubs. Capitalizing on women’s growing social independence, these clubs often formed with a reformist mission, and their clubhouses served as headquarters for these emerging discussions of politics and social change. The associations’ founding documents often stated the principles for their creation—a proud sign of governance and self-organization. The New Century Club of Philadelphia, for example, highlighted its intention as an independent, progressive headquarters for its female members:

To create an organized center of thought and action among women, for the protection of their interests and the promotion of science, literature and art,
and to furnish a quiet and safe place in Philadelphia for the comfort and convenience of its members.95

The very presence of a clubhouse in the city was a signal of the progressivism of women’s causes in Philadelphia, as the clubs fostered a new era of political and social growth and independence.

The fact that the New Century Club buildings were designed by a woman was another source of pride for the club’s members. (The same was true of the Queen Isabella Association, which boasted of its pavilion design by a female architect.) The official history of the New Century Club highlighted the fact that “the work, as far as possible, was done by women,” and that the design details were overseen by the club’s self-appointed committees.96 (Mrs. J. C. Croly’s chronicle of the Philadelphia club also remarked that “the design was Mrs. Henry C. Townsend’s, the architect was Mrs. Minerva Parker Nichols”—an ironic statement in light of Nichols’ complaints about design ownership in Woman’s Progress.)97 With funding secured entirely from member pledges, the whole design, financing, and construction of the New Century Club headquarters was a tangible assertion of women’s social standing and redefined independence in the late nineteenth century.

Although the New Century Club kept its records private in its early years—in an effort to shield the nascent club from any external (male) disapproval—the members of these women’s clubs (including the Queen Isabella Association) were far from socially objectionable. Rather, they were among the most respected women

95 Croly, History of the Women’s Club, 1022.
96 Ibid., 1026.
97 Ibid.
in their respective cities, associated with some of Philadelphia’s and Chicago’s “noblest activities.”\textsuperscript{98} The members were educated, and in many cases professional, middle- and upper-class women (both single and married). The Queen Isabella Association, for example, comprised a remarkable collection of prominent women from the city’s highest social echelons, including:

- Dr. Julia Holmes Smith, a “tall and queenly” woman from New Orleans, who had just graduated from school when the Civil War broke out, and had subsequently studied medicine and practiced for fourteen years;
- Mrs. Catherine Van Valkenberg Waite, who studied law with her husband (a judge) and published the \textit{Law Times} in Chicago before conducting a successful real estate business;
- Mrs. Corrine S. Brown, the wife of a Chicago Banker, who acted as the corresponding secretary for the International Labor Congress and was an advocate for labor and economic reform;
- Dr. Frances Dickenson, “a born organizer in spite of her frail and delicate appearance.”\textsuperscript{99}

Far from existing at the edges of acceptable society, therefore, these women’s clubs gathered the most prominent female members of society. Their commissioning of Minerva Parker Nichols as their architect was an indication of her social standing, and professional status, as well.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 1028.
\textsuperscript{99} Adelaide Nichols Baker papers, 3—4.
Equally significant for Nichols’ career was the role that these clubs played in her own professional networks. Although her gender precluded her participation in many of the societies that earned her male counterparts their commissions, these women's clubs offered new venues for interaction and association. Indeed, these clubs served as Nichols’ foothold in securing for future commissions—a strategy that other female architects (including Julia Morgan, who designed the Berkeley Women's Club in 1929) later adopted to gain entry to the profession.

Among the rosters of members at the New Century Clubs in Philadelphia and Wilmington are names that also emerge in Minerva Parker Nichols’ oeuvre as individual commissions. Women such as Rachel Foster Avery and Emily W. Taylor knew Minerva Parker Nichols through her work with women’s causes, and each woman hired Nichols in 1890 to design a house before also supporting Nichols’ design for the New Century Club headquarters. Moreover, the Club's member rolls included Miss Emily Sartain, the President of the Philadelphia Academy of Design, who that same year hired Minerva Parker Nichols to teach classes on historic ornament and classic architecture.\(^\text{100}\) A supporter of women's reform causes herself, Minerva Parker Nichols practiced architecture in an era of increasing social independence for women that translated to an expanding patronage of women’s clubs and clients.

In addition to these upperclass women and widows, Minerva Parker Nichols’ client roster includes many financially independent, middle-class women—

\(^{100}\) Wood, "Nichols, Minerva Parker."
evidence of the same social phenomenon of which Minerva’s own mother Amanda was a part. These women—“the single and self-supporting”—were an expanding demographic in nineteenth-century America, as the Civil War and industrialization produced self-sufficient women by circumstance and by choice. Minerva Parker—before her marriage to Reverend Nichols—was herself a member of this class, as were many of her clients, including the Misses Campbell (one of whom was a schoolteacher), Miss L. E. Gallagher, Miss Marry Botts, Miss Elizabeth Newport, and Miss Sarah Stewart. For each of these women, Nichols designed a house that explicitly expressed the individuality of the home as it implicitly signified the independence of the homeowner.

In its profile of Minerva Parker Nichols in 1893, *Woman’s Progress* commented on the opportunities that Nichols’ career presented for women and architecture:

If women adopted architecture more generally as a profession, there would certainly be demand for their services—for many women prefer to have business relations with members of their own sex. It would probably be an inducement for more women to build houses, if they were sure they could secure the assistance of a competent woman architect.

These observations—along with Minerva Parker Nichols’ instructions to the female client in *Housekeeper’s Weekly*—are a clear indication that women’s participation in the field was still fledgling. New to the world of architecture in the professionalized sense, women (as architects and as clients) needed to cultivate an understanding of

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both the theories and the practice of the field. Minerva Parker Nichols, well-versed in both, was consequently a strong advocate for both the educated architect—and her clients. Together, as Woman’s Progress predicted, they could advance the professional and social standing of each other in the field of architecture.

As the field of architecture found its professional footing in general in the late nineteenth century, it also faced the tandem emergence of women as architects and women as clients in the built environment fields. Faced with these shifting roles and identities, the architecture field erupted with debates of not only professionalization but also specialization, in both commissions and clientele, in the late nineteenth century. In light of those debates, and the surviving remnants of Nichols’ career, and we must consider the legacy and significance of her designs and commissions today.
CHAPTER FOUR | SIGNIFICANCE: THE PARADOX OF THE SURVIVING WORK

Minerva Parker Nichols’ independent practice and financially-independent clientele offer a compelling window into women’s social and professional development in the nineteenth century. The strength of her story, and its relation to the trajectories of other women in the built environment fields, would seem to suggest an imperative for preservation action. Yet the gender implications of Nichols’ career, and the shifting acknowledgement of her female-ness in her practice and profession, affect how we frame her role in both women’s history and architectural history. The same complexities that have hampered her inclusion in architectural histories now complicate the commemoration of her built legacy, revealing and accentuating the limitations in our current understanding of significance and designation in the National Register of Historic Places.

Any discussion of Minerva Parker Nichols’ significance must begin with the acknowledgement that—even if we can clarify the narratives and importance of her career—designation does not guarantee the preservation or protection of her works. National Register designation imposes no mandates on its listings; the only supervisory authority it introduces is if the owner pursues tax credits for a
rehabilitation project. The threat of de-listing is rarely invoked, and a property could be demolished with no intervention from National Register administrators.

Preservation policy on a local level, guided by separate local registers, offers some measure of jurisdiction and regulatory oversight. Many cities such as Philadelphia—the place of some of Nichols’ highest-profile commissions—have their own historical commissions that supervise changes to local register-listed properties. Even these architecture review boards, however, are limited in jurisdiction by their enabling legislation; they can make demolition more difficult, but not bar it altogether. Smaller municipalities such as Lower Merion Township, which encompasses many of her residential projects, often have even less control over the fate of their listed properties. Even those boroughs or townships that have their own local register and architectural review board can only, like larger cities, deter but not prohibit the demolition of a locally-significant site. A thematic nomination of Nichols-designed resources in both Philadelphia and Lower Merion could begin to address these issues, but the resultant designated properties would still face the same threats as other National Register sites.

Parsing the themes and significance of Nichols’ career (or those of other historic figures) may therefore seem to be a futile exercise. But determinations of significance set priorities for preservation policy, and designation has the power to increase awareness, advocacy, and preservation opportunities. Furthermore, an overly-broad approach to significance—one that assumes a historic property or person is significant until proven otherwise—risks dulling the impact of designation
and damaging the public perception of significance. Such an approach is common practice in current preservation policy, as properties associated with certain prominent architects are often reflexively designated with little consideration for the quality or representative values of the work. After all, if we list and venerate all of the works of renowned architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Frank Furness, how do we distinguish between those architects’ best works and their worst? Too often, we correlate the importance of the person with the importance of the architecture—and instinctively assign significance to both. It is therefore worth scrutinizing the current frameworks for designation and how we assign and ascribe that significance.

The very definition of “significance” is a fluid and flexible concept in preservation policy, treated as—as Randall Mason describes it—a standard of self-evidence. Indeed, the National Register criteria, as well as the 60-page bulletin that explains how to apply those criteria, use the term “significant” frequently without ever offering a definition or clarifying its use. Instead, the definition is left to be implied by the criteria themselves, circling the issue without directly addressing it. As a result, the concept of “significance” is open-ended, the resultant “areas of significance” are vague, and the criteria are subjectively applied based on shifting understandings of the word. In the absence of a clearer understanding of “significance,” we must, in keeping with current preservation policy, use the criteria

for significance to approximate “significance” itself (thereby fulfilling that so-called “standard of self-evidence”).

The prominence of Minerva Parker Nichols’ architectural practice in the late nineteenth century does not pinpoint how we can understand her career and its architectural or associative values today. Rather, the complexities of her relatively short tenure of formal practice, her professional timing and reception, her stated specialization, and her unusual client base animate the first questions of categorization and commemoration. For these reasons, her biography and practice serve as a useful lens for examining our established notions of significance and our criteria for evaluating significant people and significant works. Are her life and works significant for architectural history? For women’s history? For both? Or for neither? It is this last possibility that we must consider—and dispense with—first.

The historical record on women in American architecture has, by default, deemed Minerva Parker Nichols insignificant in the evolution of architectural or women’s history. The brevity of her formal practice and the modest scale of most of her commissions have obscured her place in late nineteenth-century America and its architecture. A deeper reading of her career, however, and her professional timing as a woman and an architect, encourages a more nuanced understanding of her commissions and her clientele. With this proper understanding of her professional, architectural, and social contexts, we must therefore correct the historic record and allow that Minerva Parker Nichols’ career holds at least some measure of significance.
But under what category does Nichols’ significance fall? The National Register criteria include a great deal of vagueness in their guidelines, but that nuance that is so necessary to consider her career does not translate well to the strictures of commemorating her work. Rather, the criteria rely on “areas of American history” to silo the significance of properties associated with important individuals, segmenting out the preservation values of the property and conflating the import of the individual with that of the site. While the Register stops short of offering a finite list of options for these areas of significance, it suggests several—including “commerce, exploration/settlement, literature, politics, etc.”—which serve as the bases for a property’s research, documentation, and designation. In the case of Minerva Parker Nichols, then, we can only interpret the complexities of her career by ignoring those very contradictions, focusing instead on the easily-categorized themes of architectural history and women’s history.

At first glance, Nichols’ professional practice suggests a clear link between her career and the designation of significance under the theme of “architectural history.” After all, she was the first woman to practice architecture independently in the country, and significance in preservation policy has often fixated on the concept of “first” or “most” or “best.” Upon reflection, however, the same superlatives that make Nichols’ career interesting for architectural historians complicate the placement of her work in architectural history and the designation of that work within current preservation frameworks.
Nichols’ career trajectory is curious in that she spent nearly five decades in retirement and informal practice—compared with a mere ten years of formal practice (eight of which were independent). She designed over 40 projects while working on her own in Philadelphia, but she continued to design buildings for family and friends even after closing her firm and moving to New York. Some of her buildings survive today, including several of her residential commissions from both her practicing years and her later decades of work. (Her one large-scale project in these later years was the building for the Browne and Nichols School, which was torn down in 1968.) The distinction between her formal practice and her later, occasional commissions may therefore seem like a strange contrast to draw, given her continuous (albeit increasingly sporadic) work from the age of 24 until her death at 87. Yet, as with so many other anomalous aspects of Nichols’ career, the nuances of her formal and informal practice do not suit the established understanding of importance, in which significance has specified periods (without fixed definitions).

Nichols’ one clear superlative (as the first woman to practice without a man) in the evolution of the field of architecture is only a short chapter in the longer context of her life, yet our emphasis on her contributions in independent practice would seem to privilege those years above the rest. In fact, the National Register, as a rule, generally considers eligible properties to be “those associated with the

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104 Charles M. Sullivan, email message to author, February 6, 2012.
productive life of the individual in the field in which (s)he achieved significance.”\textsuperscript{105} But, as with the idea of “significance,” the concept of an individual’s “productive period” is open-ended. If Minerva Parker Nichols’ significance is predicated on her individual practice, does this mean that only those properties designed between 1888 and 1896 are significant and eligible for designation? After all, much like a political figure whose term in office serves as his “productive period” of significance, Nichols’ practice—which serves as the basis for her own significance—was relatively brief and finite, lasting for just eight years. Does her significance’s period of productivity, then, fade with her formal retirement in 1896? If so, our understanding of her significance would seem to exclude several commissions from later decades of her life that might otherwise be considered representative or exemplary works in Nichols’ oeuvre. Yet, if we do not limit the scope of her work to the years associated with her independent practice, opting instead to treat her work equally and indiscriminately, then we once again risk applying the values of significance in an imprecise, arbitrary manner. Once again, Minerva Parker Nichols’ career and works call into question the preservation and commemoration of a narrative that—as with so many others—does not conform to our established preservation parameters.

Minerva Parker Nichols’ relation to the nineteenth-century narrative of architectural education and professionalization is also difficult to isolate. She was

not the first woman to practice—that descriptor applies to Louise Blanchard Bethune—nor the most prolific—a label that could arguably be applied to Julia Morgan. Moreover, in a narrative of the professionalization of architecture in the nineteenth century, her story once again proves problematic: she was not the first woman inducted into the American Institute of Architects (Bethune was), or even any other professional society. The superlatives of those women are simpler—a fact reflected in their much more thorough study by scholars and their much more noticeable interpretation in commemorative landmarks. Instead, Nichols’ career occupied territory somewhere between the building trades and the academy-trained architects in the nineteenth century’s growing rift of architectural education and professionalization. She held no “firsts” or “mosts” in that middle ground that would be easy to venerate today.

Professionally, Minerva Parker Nichols did hold the “first” of independent practice, but architecturally, she was in some ways still very much within the status quo of women in the nineteenth century. Her few public projects notwithstanding, she specialized in a building type that was in many ways still associated with women, in the most limiting sense. She had few larger projects to her name, and those she did design—such as the two women’s clubs and the spaghetti factories—were far from the scale of Bethune’s, or even Sophia Hayden’s, largest works. As a result, if we are to understand her significance to American architectural history, we must reconsider the parameters of her career and the seeming ordinariness of her commissions.
Those commissions, and their associated client base, introduce the other potential area of significance for Minerva Parker Nichols’ career: women’s history. Applying this emphasis would tie into not only Nichols’ significance as an individual, but also that of her female clients. Using her personal stories and her clients’ commissions as the focal points, this categorization of significance could present a narrative of middle- and upperclass women’s social and financial independence in the nineteenth century.

As recent decades of scholarship by Joan Scott and others have demonstrated, however, applying this framework to questions of significance risks distorting the “spheres” of gender and constructing a history that retrospectively “discovers” women’s contributions to American society. In the case of the latter, Elizabeth Pleck, a professor of women’s history, argues:

The compensatory approach to women’s history, no matter how necessary as a remedy for the invisibility of women and their accomplishments, places too much emphasis on those women whose lives departed from the typical female experience through activism in public life.¹⁰⁶

The flaws in this approach, and its skewed emphasis on the “atypical female experience,” become all too clear in the study of Minerva Parker Nichols. After all, was she—with her independent practice and early architectural training—a departure from the typical female experience? Or do her marriage and subsequent retirement from formal practice conform to our understanding of the late nineteenth century’s “typical” woman, rendering her work unworthy of further

study and commemoration? Our concepts of significance, as guided by the National Register criteria, embrace the designation of both representative and exceptional properties but offer few clarifications of the distinctions between the two.

For the ten years that she practiced architecture, and particularly during the eight years that she conducted a solo practice, Minerva Parker Nichols was very much the atypical woman in nineteenth-century America. Newspapers highlighted her singularity, and her contemporaries noted her uncommon education, choice of profession, and depth of experience. Such coverage was common during her independent career, and even occasionally—in the case of the 1887 *Carpentry and Building* article about her work—before her independent practice. These distinctions, accorded by Nichols’ contemporaries during her active career, are important in understanding her historic context and defining her significance. In terms of the perception and reception of her career, then, Minerva Parker Nichols’ significance would seem to be predicated on that contemporary consensus in nineteenth century America that she was indeed atypical. The commemorative and interpretive challenges of her career could therefore be resolved by highlighting her singularity—and her atypical place in nineteenth-century society and professionalism—in order to understand the other norms that made her work so important and remarkable.

But what of Minerva Parker Nichols’ perception of herself? To what extent should *her* understanding of her own career’s typicalness, and its place in architecture and history, inform how we consider her today? Given how much
emphasis we place on primary sources in our research of historic context and our
statements of significance, it would seem that her thoughts should directly inform
our conclusions. What, then, do we make of the fact that she refused to rely on her
sex to justify and promote her career? Her editorial for the *American Architect and
Building News*, for example, was headlined “A Woman on the Woman’s Building,” but
it was firm in its dismissal of gender as the basis for an architect’s qualifications or
success: “We do not need women as architects, we do not need men, but we do need
brains enough to lift the architecture of this country beyond the grasp of unskilled
and unqualified practitioners.” Many of her other published columns echoed
these same words, arguing for educational opportunities and professional
credentials regardless of gender—and decrying both the men and the women who
did not uphold the standards of the profession. Her rejection of her sex as a crutch
for her career casts some doubt on our own associative link between her female-
ness and her significance. Can we then frame her works as those of a significant,
“atypical” female architect, when she would dispute the very basis of that gendered
designation? Once again, our relatively indiscriminate use of the word “significant,”
in the National Register criteria and elsewhere, are not clear about these
discrepancies between the historic record and reflective perception.

The same issues cloud the understanding of Nichols’ work in relation to her
female client base. If their relation to Minerva Parker Nichols is the compelling
narrative of her career—illustrating the tandem emergence of women in the built

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environment as architects and as clients—then the designation of properties
associated with Nichols should, in theory, depend not only on the architect’s
significance, but also on the client’s. This understanding of significance would seem,
then, to preclude the designation of Nichols’ projects for male clients, including
several possibly extant residential commissions. Thus, all of the complications in
defining Nichols’ career and significance would be compounded by similar questions
of her clients’ historical importance and—in the case of the women clients—their
“typical” or “atypical” female experience.

Once again, as with using architectural history as an area of emphasis,
employing women’s history as the silo for Minerva Parker Nichols’ significance
proves difficult. Her career simply does not adhere to our current methods of
understanding significance, offering a case study of the limitations in our current
assumptions and assignments of significance. Minerva Parker Nichols’ narrative and
works illuminate the weaknesses in our designations that are simultaneously too
narrowly categorized and too broadly applied. These omissions and ambiguities in
the criteria of significance may have been designed for flexibility, but they confuse
the framework of designation, challenge the interpretation of important narratives,
and conflate the stories of historic figures and sites. Consequently, our cultural
landscape of designated properties is the subjective, idiosyncratic result of policies
that equate significance with value—without ever clarifying either.

Given such vague, imprecise definitions and applications of significance, the
evaluation of the site’s integrity has typically served as our limiting filter for
preservation and commemoration. Indeed, the National Register goes so far as to identify seven aspects of integrity (although it admits that their evaluation may be subjective): location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. According to the Register bulletin, eligible properties “will always possess several, and usually most of the aspects” of integrity; without them, a property is automatically ineligible for designation.108

This emphasis on architectural integrity has particular ramifications for historic resources associated with minority populations. Antoinette J. Lee pointed out this issue while working for the office of the National Register. In her book The American Mosaic: Preserving a Nation’s Heritage, Lee cites historians’ concern that sites associated with ethnic or women’s history often fare worse than those of the dominant culture. The emphasis on architectural integrity in evaluating sites’ eligibility therefore skews our concepts of significance toward the dominant cultural narrative and built legacy.109 Page Putnam Miller echoes this argument, maintaining that “the search for pristine originals of women’s past is frustrating and near impossible, yet the need for identifying and landmarking sites that can connect us to women’s struggles, experience, and accomplishments is great.”110 The very measure of integrity, which in theory lends a degree of objective rationality to the

108 National Park Service, National Register Bulletin 15, 44.
109 Miller, Reclaiming the Past, 18.
110 Ibid., 21.
designation of historic sites, instead further distorts the preservation of our built environment as it privileges the physical fabric over the other values of the site.\footnote{Mason, "Fixing Historic Preservation," 68.}

Minerva Parker Nichols’ work has clearly been prone to the loss of integrity that Lee and Miller discuss. Domestic projects, like all buildings, pass through different owners and different architectural styles, but they are more susceptible to modification than many other building typologies. Her designs are therefore an ideal illustration of the limitations in the fabric-centric understanding of significance. Together, the use of significance and integrity to assess significance engenders glaring gaps in the preserved landscape of architectural and American history.

At times, these gaps are attributable not to misappropriation of “significance,” or to flaws in the National Register criteria. Rather, sometimes they are evident simply because of the inevitable loss of historic buildings. In these scenarios, other properties associated with a significant person or architectural style have been lost over time, resulting in a paradox of the surviving work. This begins with our assumption that tangibility of a site has value beyond the mere narrative of its story. The paradox arises, however, from the fact that we can only preserve and interpret what has already survived to the present day.

These sites that remain may not be the best representative resources for that interpretation or that significance. The National Register considers this possibility, and addresses the dilemma: “Some properties might be eligible as the only surviving property associated with a significant individual. Such a property might include a
person’s last home, even if most or all of his or her significant accomplishments occurred before (s)he lived in the house.\textsuperscript{112} Far from its emphasis on architectural integrity and physical fabric as a limiting factor, then, the National Register allows for the commemoration of less-representative sites when another, more appropriate site has already been lost. The surviving work therefore assumes a distorted significance by virtue of its survival, regardless of whether or not it best represents the associative values of the individual or the architectural values of the designer.

In the case of Minerva Parker Nichols, this paradox is evident in the demolition and designation of her designs for the New Century Clubs of Philadelphia and Wilmington (respectively). Both fit within our understanding of her career’s trajectory, and each building highlights the anomalies of her client base and professional moment. Yet, Nichols’ design for the New Century Club of Philadelphia was among her best-received, and most-publicized, designs. It was the first New Century Club headquarters designed for women \textit{by} a woman, and it employed an eclectic architectural style in keeping with its Philadelphia context. Its membership included many of the individuals that hired Nichols for other commissions, as well as the president of a school of design for women where Nichols at one point taught.

Moreover, its construction was entirely funded and overseen by the members of the Club, and its finished design incorporated accommodations for out-of-town members to stay overnight, as well as theater space, lecture halls,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{112} Boland, \textit{National Register Bulletin} 32, 16.}
committee rooms, and parlors. The building for the New Century Club of Philadelphia therefore touched on many of the salient themes of Minerva Parker Nichols’ career, including her own architectural training and education, her professional practice, the network of associations and commissions that these nascent women’s clubs provided, and the financial and social independence of women in the nineteenth century. It would be perhaps the perfect vehicle to convey Minerva Parker Nichols’ significance (using whatever understanding of that term)—if it had not been demolished in 1973.113

The New Century Club of Wilmington survives today as the only building associated with Minerva Parker Nichols and her commissions for women’s clubs. The building is architecturally interesting and historic in its own right, designed by Nichols in 1892 and funded once again by the women of the club. Its design is Colonial Revival, and includes rooms that serve many of the same functions as the New Century Club of Philadelphia’s halls and parlors. But it does not seem to have had the same impact on Nichols’ professional network, helping her to secure other residential commissions. It was also the second commission for a women’s club in her career, succeeding her work with the Philadelphia club by over a year.114 It still stands today, though, and assumes the significance that would otherwise be ascribed to the Philadelphia headquarters. It was nominated to the National

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114 The National Register does not draw the line at “first” or “earliest,” but it also does not define what cardinal number it does exclude. The New Century Club of Wilmington, for example, is promoted as “only the fourth structure in the United States designated for exclusive use as a woman’s club.” (Patricia A. Maley and Robert Briggs, National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form: New Century Club, January 1983): 3.
Register in 1984 and approved, bearing out the Register’s willingness to designate the surviving, but perhaps not most significant, work. This paradox of the surviving work renders all our other questions about significance moot, if the surviving site is designated anyway, yet it also (ironically) diverts the interpretive emphasis from the fabric-centric approach to the values- and narrative-based one that we now claim to seek.

What then should we make of both Minerva Parker Nichols’ career and the National Register's criteria for designating her work? Her biography offers a compelling interpretive lens for several themes of American social and architectural history, but our current assumptions of significance fall short of understanding and recognizing anomalous narratives such as hers. Too narrowly defined and too broadly applied, they leave several questions about “significance” unresolved, establishing a presumptive link between the importance of the architect (as an individual) and the interpretation of her architecture.

Framed in these terms, the limitations in our definitions of significance are clearly broader than the challenges of commemoration that Minerva Parker Nichols’ career introduces. Her story, with all of its ambiguities and contradictions, merely accentuates those same qualities in the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places and in our values of significance. Minerva Parker Nichols seems to be instinctively and clearly important, and yet the complexities of her career and work challenge our definitions and designation of that very significance.
Minerva Parker Nichols’ formal career was brief, and many of her works no longer stand. Nevertheless, her importance for architectural, social, and women’s history is palpable, no matter how complicated the themes of her biography and commissions are. History values complexity, and our preservation frameworks for designating and commemorating that history should be agile and articulate enough to accommodate that complexity. Our designations of significance are not, in their current form, suitable in the case of Minerva Parker Nichols—or indeed, any other person whose importance is not simple or sortable. Nichols’ career and works serve, therefore, not only to illustrate an important era of women in the built environment, but also to illuminate the weaknesses of our preservation frameworks that do not adequately recognize that importance.

The commemorative instruments for interpreting Nichols’ significance could take many forms and are fodder for future preservation planning. Although most of her higher-profile works no longer stand, several of her residential commissions as well as one of her women’s clubs survive today. Both types are key elements in the
story of her career, and each offers opportunities for interpretation of her narrative
and of its larger architectural, social, and historical context and impact.

As we have seen in our discussion of significance, however, we cannot limit
our interpretation to the tangible remnants of the built heritage. Doing so would
privilege the existing fragments over the broader body of work, disposing of the
complexities of Nichols’ career (and others with similarly complicated trajectories)
by favoring the surviving work. Instead, our recognition of her significance should
allow for the fullest understanding of that idea, and we should adopt a range of
responses—including, perhaps, virtual tools as well as exhibits or multiple-property
nominations—befitting the spectrum of themes that her career encompasses.

Our current limitations of framing and understanding significance do not
mean that we should not seek pluralism in our commemoration of heritage. Instead,
as an assessment of Nichols’ commissions demonstrates, the field of preservation
would benefit from an approach to complex narratives that embraces a broader
understanding of heritage—without resorting to a compensatory pursuit of
diversity. Nichols’ decade of formal practice, with its complicated themes of gender,
professionalism, and design, falls outside our established record of architectural
history and our current frameworks for significance. The career of Minerva Parker
Nichols, and the contradictions of her work’s specialization and social norms,
animates a worthwhile challenge to our understanding of significance and the ways
in which our designations are ascribed, assigned, and assumed.
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# APPENDIX | MINERVA PARKER NICHOLS COMMISSIONS

From the Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project, available at www.philadelphiabuildings.org

*Names are quoted directly from the source, retaining any typographical errors from the published references.*

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