

When Old Meets New: Researching Local History Through Architecture and Industry

By Jason Hatton

Columbus, Indiana, with a population of 44,000, has a history of architecture that belies its small size. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) has ranked the Midwestern city as the sixth best American city for architectural quality and innovation behind such cities as Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco. By far the smallest city on the list, Columbus boasts such famous architects as Eero and Eliel Saarinen, Harry Weese, Cesar Pelli, and Richard Meier among its architectural tradition. Our public library was designed in the 1960s by I.M. Pei, architect of John F. Kennedy Library, National Gallery of Art East, Louvre Pyramid, among other significant structures.

Most of the Columbus architectural wonders are the result of the foresight (and open pocketbooks) of businessman and local philanthropist J. Irwin Miller. His family helped found and then lead Cummins Engine Company, a Fortune 500 company with a primary focus on manufacturing diesel engines. In the 1950s, Mr. Miller created the Cummins Foundation which agreed to pay the architectural fees for new public buildings in Columbus. This building boom, which continues today, contributed greatly to the modern architecture movement in the United States. In the 1970s, the Bartholomew County Public Library realized that there was a need to make sure the architectural history of our city was not lost to future generations. The librarians slowly started collecting information related to each building being built. Over time this collection grew; however, time and money never allowed the library to catalog, organize, and promote the collection as needed. In 2004, a new 501(c)3 organization, the Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives (CIAA), was established to take the archives to the next level. Since then, they have carried on with the mission to “to collect, conserve, preserve, and promote the use of records that document the architecture, engineering, and arts associated with the built environment of Columbus, Indiana and Bartholomew County.”

Currently the CIAA has over 2,400 sets of blueprint drawings, along with numerous folders of supporting documents, photographs, and correspondence. Also, the archives are happy to collect many architectural models of buildings, both built and unbuilt, as envisioned by their designers. Most of the collection is housed at the Bartholomew County Library and access is available by appointment. Anyone can learn more at <http://www.columbusarchives.org>.

However, even before this time, Columbus had the distinction of being the home of prolific contractors George Caldwell and Lester Drake. Throughout their tenure, they constructed more than 250 buildings throughout the United States and it all began in Columbus.

Caldwell was born in Ohio in 1860. He moved to Indiana to receive his teaching education through the Northern Indiana Normal School in Valparaiso, Indiana. After graduation, he taught mostly in LaPorte County. In 1886, he got into the insurance and real estate business and by 1887 he found his way to Columbus through a claim he was handling and decided to call it home. Caldwell was very successful in this business, as is evidenced by the fact that his company grew to be the largest of its kind in Bartholomew County.

Caldwell decided to try his hand at the construction business and entered into a partnership with B. M. Hutchins. During the three year period this partnership existed, they built more than 147 houses and in one year did more than \$85,000 worth of business (about \$2.1 million in today’s dollars). In the 1890s, Hutchins decided to retire and Caldwell found a new partner in Columbus native Lester Drake.

Both Caldwell and Drake were active in the local political scene, serving as members of the City Council and Caldwell as Mayor from 1898-1902.

As a Democrat, this election demonstrated his high standing in the community as Columbus, even then, was normally a Republican city. He conducted the affairs of office as successfully as his business. During his tenure, more money was spent in public improvement projects than any other period and he reduced the tax rate to one of the lowest in the state and paid off all public debt. When he handed the reins of the administration over to the next mayor there was even a surplus of \$20,000.

It was during his term as mayor that Caldwell and Drake would have the opportunity to take their business to the next level. On June 14, 1901 a fire broke out in the West Baden Springs Hotel. The owner, Lee Wiley Sinclair, was determined to rebuild and make the hotel bigger and better than before. The design was ambitious and the schedule was daunting, but Caldwell and Drake knew that this unusual structure would make their names known nationwide. As they were the only firm to bid, they were awarded the \$514,000 contract. They also accepted the terms that construction was to be completed within 200 working days from the start of the contract- Oct. 1, 1901.

At 200 feet in diameter, the dome was to be the largest in the world. The U.S. Capital is only 128 feet while St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is 160 feet. The steel hub of the dome is 10 feet high, 16 feet in diameter and weighs 8.5 tons. Each of the 24 steel ribs extends from the hub to the brick walls surrounding the atrium and weighs 4.5 tons each. The total amount of steel in the dome is 120 tons. To compensate for the expansion and contraction of the metal, the ribs sit on rollers at the top of the surrounding columns. All in all, 1,275 railway carloads of building materials were used in the construction of the hotel which required a special daily train to keep the 500 men with a steady supply of materials.

Sinclair moved into his apartment in the new hotel on June 14, 1902- one year to the date of the fire. Caldwell and Drake had accomplished what some had deemed to be an impossible undertaking. This achievement raised the profile of the company immensely.

Courthouses would become their forte. In Indiana, county courthouses in Knox, Hammond, Greencastle, Lebanon, and Bloomington all were built by Caldwell and Drake. Also courthouses in Park Clinton, OH; Youngstown, OH; New Martinsville, WV; Parkersburg, WV; Somerset, PA; Perryville, MO; Hamburg, AR; and Omaha, NE were all constructed by the firm. In addition, they constructed the state capital in Arkansas, the capital annex in West Virginia, and the Louisville Armory in Kentucky. As the Louisville Courier Journal proclaimed in 1905, they were "the firm that does things."

One of the biggest recognitions of the firm's reputation came when they were asked to construct over 20 buildings for the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. The grandest of these was the Palace of Agriculture, to be the largest building at the fair. It covered more than 22 acres and contained more than ten million board feet of lumber. Astonishingly, it was built in just over 45 days.

Another of the structures created for the fair would come back to Columbus with Caldwell and become his home. Known as the Caldwell Mansion, this home featured nine fireplaces and was once considered one of the most elaborate homes in southern Indiana. Through the years, the house changed hands many times and was ultimately demolished to make way for a bank.

Though the house is gone, one of the only visible connections to Caldwell and Drake lives on through the street name- Caldwell Place. This residential street is marked with seemingly out of place street lamps that look like they belong more in the early 1900s. They are vestiges of a time gone by and markers of a once prominent and influential life. Sadly though, most people in Columbus would not be able to tell you anything about the man for whom the street was named.

This is the travesty that one finds when researching local history. Unless someone documents it for posterity, it is lost forever. For even an important company like Caldwell and Drake, information had to be gleaned from multiple sources to begin to reconstruct the details of their legacy.

Pulling resources from the public library, the local historical society, the Indiana State Library, and the local newspaper were critical in forming this rudimentary look at Caldwell and Drake.

Jason is also active in his community serving on the Board of Directors of the Columbus Indiana Architectural Archives and the Bartholomew County United Way.

As public libraries struggle to find their way through the digital evolution of information, the importance of local history collections cannot be overemphasized. Present and future generations look to the public library to not only collect this information, but to make it accessible so that our important past is not forgotten.

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About the Author

Jason Hatton is currently the Assistant Director at the Bartholomew County Public Library where he has been employed since June 2006. Previously he was the head of circulation at the LaPorte County Public Library. While there, he was named the 2006 ILF Outstanding New Librarian and the LaPorte County Public Library received the Outstanding Library award. In 2007, he was named to the inaugural class of the ALA Emerging Leaders.

Jason is finishing his term as ILF Treasurer and has begun a term as Co-Chair of the ILF Legislative Committee. He has also been active on both the District 1 and District 6 committees.