

**‘Promiscuous’ Competitions, the First American Professionals and Thomas U. Walter**

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A boon at the start of his career, open competitions became a target for Thomas U. Walter’s scorn by the time he reached his professional peak. Walter’s experiences in nine competitions between 1831 and 1850 amplify a significant note in the development of the professional architect in America. With manual, academic and office experience, Walter trod a rare path and strove to establish architecture as an “intellectual” profession. Commissions for his first civic projects were made possible by open competitions, in which his exceptional watercolor renderings and letters scripted with gentlemanly penmanship opened vocational doors that were otherwise shut to former masons like Walter.

Walter’s archives include records that detail his participation in several competitions. From remarkable successes of the 1830s (including Moyamensing Prison, Girard College, and Preston Retreat) to bitter failures (especially a series of failed court house projects in southeast Pennsylvania), Walter learned to navigate politically-charged arenas of architectural practice. These experiences reveal public perceptions about architects and the value of their work: some commissioners disregarded all entries, or directed one architect to assemble elements from several entrants (who would go without any remuneration) into a final design. Walter’s lessons of injustice and injury were shrewdly applied in his management of the competition for the US Capitol in 1850, in which he outmaneuvered other entrants by acting far outside the parameters of the official competition.

These experiences provoked Walter’s calls for professional recognition of architects and proper regard for their work. Walter was a founding member of two national organizations for architects and the difference between them reflects a significant attitudinal change among his peers. In 1836, the first club strove to improve the cultural and intellectual development among members; in 1857 the American Institute of Architects was founded to develop “real professional men” and, among other goals, defend them from the abuses of the competition system. Competitions, once described as welcoming and “open,” were by the 1850s denounced “promiscuous” by Walter for allowing the untrained to compete against, and the inexperienced to judge, the work of self-proclaimed professionals.