

# Asa Beebe Cross

Architect

1826-1894

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by Daniel Coleman

Kansas City's first professional architect was also probably its most prolific: an estimated 1,000 of Asa B. Cross' designs were built over the course of his nearly 40 years in Kansas City. Few of these structures remain, however, and for this reason Cross' life illustrates the importance of historic preservation in the struggle to appreciate the past's great buildings and their creators.

Asa Beebe Cross was born December 9, 1826, in Camden, New Jersey, and received a basic education in woodcraft and construction from his father, who was a carpenter. As a young man Cross traveled extensively, embarking on a voyage around the world at age 20, during which he was shipwrecked off the remote coast of Patagonia for six weeks. After his return, he studied architecture for a time in Philadelphia and then headed west to St. Louis around 1850.

In St. Louis Cross received training from architects Thomas Walsh and John Johnson. Johnson operated a professional school of architecture and eventually invited the promising Cross to be a partner in his firm. Cross met and married Rachel Taylor, a widow whose infant child, William, would later become Cross' most important collaborator. During these years Cross also became associated with lumber merchant Matthew Rippey, and with Rippey's support Cross and his new family moved to Kansas City in 1858 to establish the A. B. Cross Lumber Company.

When Cross arrived in Kansas City, he found a population of only about 4,000 struggling to carve a proper town out of the mud beneath a rugged and overgrown river bluff. His lumber business survived the crisis of the Civil War, and he became a civic leader during these difficult years, serving a term as city treasurer. A dealer of raw building materials, Cross demonstrated in his own constructions that he was also a capable designer, and this component of his business steadily outgrew his interests in the lumber trade. By 1871, his reputation as an architect was established, the town was booming with the arrival of the railroad,

and Cross focused his work entirely on creating the many new buildings needed.

Cross' commissions included nearly every type of structure then in use. Among his signature projects were Kansas City's first public school (Washington School), and one of its most visible early commercial buildings—the Vaughan Diamond Building, centerpiece of the busy “Junction” at 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Main, and Delaware. In 1878, Cross and his stepson's design of Kansas City's Union Depot was realized in the West Bottoms and remained a bustling transportation hub until Union Station opened in 1914. When a large hotel commission ran out of funding midway through construction, Cross was tasked with converting the building into the first Jackson County Courthouse in Kansas City, and nearly 25 years later another Cross design was used for its replacement. The Gilliss Opera House, which held Kansas City's largest audiences until its destruction in a 1925 fire, was also designed by Cross.

Asa B. Cross died on August 18, 1894, at age 67. Although he was the greatest Kansas City architect of his own century, most of his buildings would not survive the century to come, largely due to their having been located in busy, ever-evolving areas of the city. Many have been replaced by newer structures, freeways or parking lots, and most disappeared before the historic preservation movement in Kansas City gained strength in the 1970s. Among the several Cross designs still standing are the magnificent Vaile Mansion in Independence and St Patrick's Catholic Church, located at 8<sup>th</sup> and Cherry. The rest survive only in photographs and contemporary descriptions of Cross' work.

### **Sources**

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