

# Thomas and William D. Wight

Architects

Thomas (1874-1949); William (1882-1947)

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by Daniel Coleman

Upon his first glimpse of the Parthenon, Thomas Wight followed five minutes of stunned silence with a declaration: “Thank God, I’m an architect!” Wight and his younger brother William found their inspiration in the monumental spirit of Greek and Roman architecture, and their firm gave Kansas City its most important and lasting buildings of the first half of the twentieth century.

Thomas and William Drewin Wight were born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Scottish parents Robert Adam and Emmaline MacLean Wight; Thomas was born September 17, 1874, followed by William, nearly eight years later, on January 22, 1882. When he wasn’t fishing, canoeing, or pursuing the many other pastimes of a rough and tumble Nova Scotia boyhood, Thomas indulged an early aptitude for drawing scenes from nature and buildings he saw in picture books.

He came to the United States at age 17, seeking work in Boston, where he planned to stay with a childhood friend until he could support himself. Like his older brother Thomas, William Wight also left Nova Scotia as a young man, although later in life both returned regularly to the idyllic landscape of their youth.

Thomas found employment in Boston with McKim, Meade & White. The prestigious New York architectural firm was then designing the Boston Public Library. Without his knowing it, Thomas’ bold response to the firm’s advertisement for a “boy”—he demanded a promise that promotion was possible—secured an opportunity for him to learn from some of the best architects in the United States. Charles McKim himself, impressed with Wight’s talent and eagerness to learn, soon offered him a draftsman position at the firm’s New York headquarters. Over the course of the next decade his mentors included Henry Bacon, designer of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Pierpont Morgan Library was among the many projects with which he was involved.

By 1904, Thomas Wight went into business for himself, and he chose friend Edward T. Wilder as his partner. They believed Kansas City was an ideal location for their new firm—a young but rapidly growing city with many needed buildings yet to rise. Their early First National Bank of Kansas City commission maximized the building's 10th and Baltimore location without sacrificing its aesthetic appeal and struck a functional balance for which Wilder & Wight became known.

Younger brother William had been serving his own lengthy apprenticeship in travels throughout Europe and at McKim, Mead & White and came to Kansas City in 1910 to buy out Wilder's share in the firm. Thus renamed Wight & Wight, the firm incorporated its signature neo-classical symmetry to create some of Kansas City's most enduring designs. Early projects such as the Kansas City Life Insurance Company Building at 3520 Broadway and the Wyandotte County Courthouse in Kansas City, Kansas, were followed by the firm's 1927 commission to design the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art on the site of William Rockhill Nelson's former estate. Thomas Wight sketched his initial ideas for the museum building on a makeshift drawing board in the woods of Nova Scotia and famously defended his monumental approach with the statement that "one doesn't experiment with two and half million dollars." Additional landmark projects of the '20s, '30s, and '40s included Kansas City's 30-story City Hall, the Thomas Swope Memorial in Swope Park, and the Clay County Courthouse in Liberty, Missouri.

William Wight's passion for church architecture was exemplified by his Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral bell tower design and the St. Paul's Episcopal Church, on whose vestry he served. Interestingly, Thomas Wight's first major building—designed to house the First National Bank of Kansas City—reopened as Kansas City's Central Library in 2004; its dual functionality reflects the influence of the architect's involvement in the Boston Public Library and Pierpont Morgan Library projects during his early training. Thomas Wight died October 6, 1949, nearly two years after William's death on October 29, 1947. Both men were survived by their longtime partners in marriage—Grace Sheridan and Elsa Symonds, respectively—and each left two daughters.

### Sources

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