

## FIELD NOTES

# A Dinner at the Café d'Orsay, Paris, on Washington's Birthday, 1889

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Throughout the winter of 1888–89, a large, talented, and convivial group of Americans who were studying architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts gathered twice a day to dine at the Café d'Orsay in Paris. Over dinner on Washington's Birthday (22 February) in 1889, the young men conceived the idea of forming a club for the American alumni of the school. From this meeting came the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, which was formally inaugurated in New York in 1894 to champion French architectural education and French architectural values in America.<sup>1</sup>

The historic dinner was fondly remembered by many of the well-known architects who participated, and augmented by newly identified and interpreted memorabilia, their recollections comprise a vivid picture of that event and of student life in Paris in general. The new material includes a signed and dated menu, saved as a souvenir by Edgar A. Josselyn (1861–1943), which fixes the date and gives the names of the nineteen participants (Figures 1, 2). Josselyn also preserved photographs taken by fellow student John P. Benson (1865–1947), showing a watercolor class attended by eleven of the men present at the dinner (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> The photographs and the busy lives of their subjects are further described in Benson's letters.<sup>3</sup>

Mildred Lombard reconstructed a good account of the 1889 Washington's Birthday dinner in 1938, based on the recollections of Joseph McGuire and Whitney Warren, who both signed Josselyn's souvenir menu. She chronicled the activities of the American students and set forth their motives for founding the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects. It began with the quest for a good place to eat:

"After having had a club table at Duval's Les deux Magots, Blots and various other restaurants" [McGuire recalled,] "we finally settled down in the entresol of the Café d'Orsay on the Quay d'Orsay, a very celebrated old restaurant where we occupied the same room from which Edward VII in his gay youth had been forced to escape by means of the window when the police raided the place. Here we would meet twice a day, sometimes only five or six, but generally a dozen and occasionally as many as twenty.["]

From these social gatherings at the Café d'Orsay came the impetus which led to the American Beaux-Arts. Discussion turned often to the condition of architectural teaching in America, to the crying need for radical change and the immense benefits which would result from the introduction of the Beaux-Arts methods. . . . "Not only did we want," wrote Whitney Warren years after, "to keep the old crowd together with all its joyous memories, we wished also to continue our teachings and traditions, to keep the flame alive and to hand on the torch to those who were to come after us in our own country . . . At these meetings in the Café d'Orsay we made ardent vows to accomplish our high purpose."

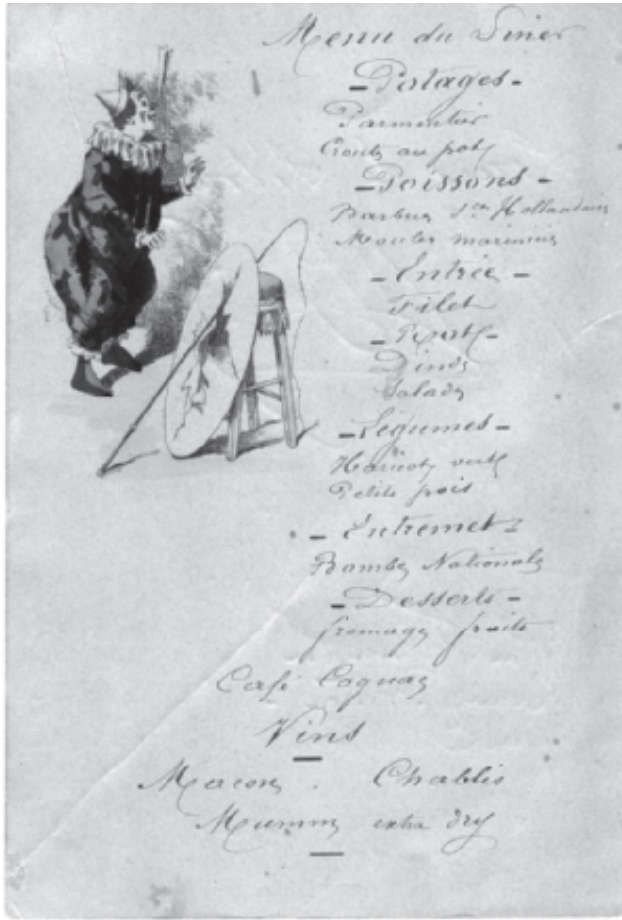
At a Washington Birthday dinner in 1889, they pledged themselves to keep in touch with each other in New York and to attend an anniversary dinner in New York ten years from that date, but the camaraderie established was far too strong to wait patiently for a formal dinner engagement ten years in the future. "When I returned to America in the fall of 1890," writes Mr. McGuire, "I looked up old friends and we got together as many as possible and had a dinner at Logerots. Each year thereafter we gathered up the new men as they returned."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps prompted by Lombard, McGuire and Warren corresponded in 1936, refreshing the memories of their youth. The evidence of Josselyn's menu is corroborated by McGuire's recollection of the date and the names of the participants:

In response to your request I have looked up old data and records of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects and turn over to you such as I thought might prove helpful.

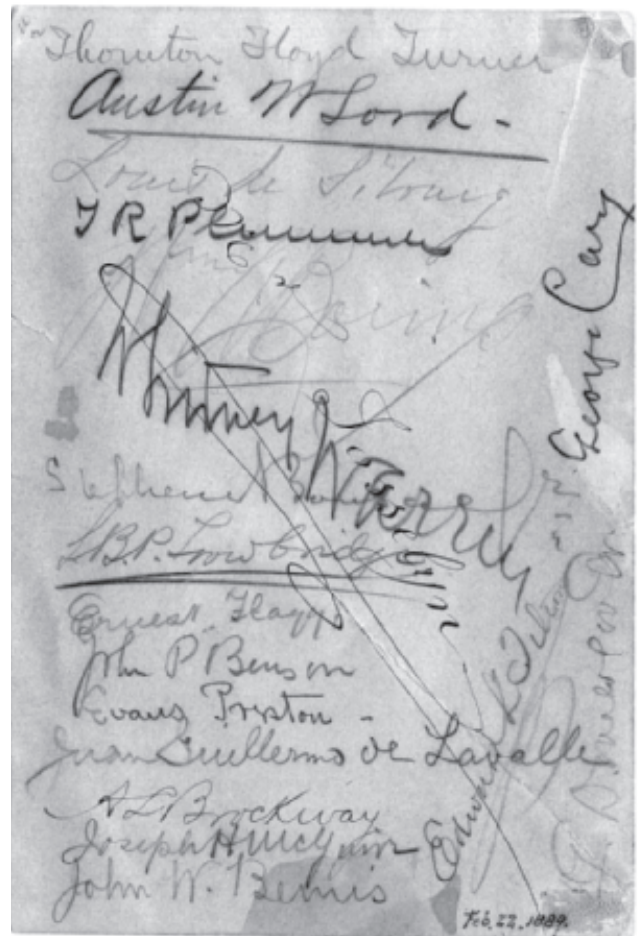
I have always thought that The Society had its real inception at a dinner held on Washington's Birthday, Feb. 22nd. 1889 at the Cafe D'Orsay in Paris.

Such a good time was enjoyed that the diners mutually pledged themselves to meet that day ten years in New York. Those who attended this dinner were—Bemis, John—Benson, John P.—Boring, W. A.—Brockway, Albert—Cary, George—DeSibour[g], Louis—Flagg, E.—Josselyn, E. A.—LaValle, John—



**Figure 1** Dinner menu preserved by Edgar A. Josselyn, 22 Feb. 1889

**Figure 2** Back of dinner menu; signed on the left: Thorton Floyd Turner, Austin W Lord, Louis de Sibourg, T R Plummer, Wm A Boring, Whitney Warren, Stephen Bonsal Jr., S.B.P. Trowbridge, Ernest Flagg, John P Benson, Evans Preston, Juan Guillermo de Lavallo, A L Brockway, Joseph H McGuire, John W. Bemis; on the right: Edward L Tilton, George Cary, J Donaldson Jr.





**Figure 3** 1889 watercolor class; from left, front row: John Prentiss Benson, M. Saglio; second row: Ernest Flagg, Joseph Hubert McGuire, F. Leteurtre, Austin Willard Lord, Louis de Sibourg, Edgar Alonzo Josselyn; rear row: Albert Leverett Brockway, George Cary, Juan Guillermo de Lavallo, Edward Lippincott Tilton, William Alciphron Boring. Photograph by John P. Benson

Lord, Austin—McGuire, Joseph H.—Plummer, Thomas—Tilton, Edward—Trowbridge, S. B. P.—Turner, Thornton—Warren, Whitney and also Bonsal, Stephen—Preston, Evans—and Donaldson, F. Jr.

On Feb. 22nd. 1889 every one of these men, except the last three did meet at a dinner at the Hotel Lafayette in New York. They came not only from New York but from Boston, Buffalo, Syracuse, yes even from Paris.<sup>5</sup>

Next to McGuire's assertion that the 1889 Paris dinner was the start of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, Warren wrote, "quite right—WW."

Ernest Flagg, who was also there that night with McGuire, Warren, and Josselyn at the Café d'Orsay, saved his own souvenir menu. As reported in *The American Architect*, he shared his memories at the annual meeting of

the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects on 21 November 1911: "Mr. Flagg exhibited to the members present a copy of the original menu of a dinner which was held at the Cafe d'Orsay in Paris on Thanksgiving Day in 1890, at which the idea of the formation of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects was broached. Those who were present at the dinner signed this menu and many of them were the founders of the Society."<sup>6</sup>

Flagg's account generally agrees with the other evidence, although the list of menu signatories that he recited did not include Stephen Bonsal, and he apparently confused the actual date of the dinner (Washington's Birthday, 1889) with another American holiday, Thanksgiving Day, 27 November 1890. As Mardges Bacon has shown, Flagg was in Italy in November 1890, and two of the men at the dinner, Benson and Josselyn, had returned to America.<sup>7</sup>

The celebrated gathering at the Café d'Orsay was only one incident in the busy lives of the young Americans in Paris, and McGuire's unpublished memoir, "Before the Gay Nineties," puts the event in a wider context. Among other details, he tells the story of the watercolor class that was photographed by Benson, which the Americans set up to supplement their architectural training in the winter of 1888–89 (see Figure 3):

Looking back at it now I do not know how ever in the world we ever did so many and such varied things, but from my diary I find that we were not only faithful to our Atelier, but skated at St. Mandé in the winter, took Turkish baths or swam in the Seine according to the season, did a good deal of formal dancing, dining, and calling, patronized the theatre and the Lameroux Concerts quite extensively, paid dozens of visits to the Exposition of '89, and even formed a water color class.

A dozen of us engaged a roly-poly little Frenchman to instruct us. Poor Professor Letoutre [Leteurtre],<sup>8</sup> although we paid him well, he must have been at times driven frantic, for he never could understand these tall men, half of them were six feet, who knew exactly what they wanted and who only required of him the manner of obtaining the quickest results.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the watercolor students, including Flagg, Josselyn, McGuire, and Benson, were among the founders of the Society of Beaux-Arts architects. Josselyn kept three small prints of Benson's photographs with his souvenir menu, and another print is preserved with letters that Benson wrote to Henry FitzGilbert Waters in London in 1889.<sup>10</sup> To Waters, a family friend, Benson described his studies, the photographs, and other aspects of student life in Paris. On 19 January 1889 he wrote,

I am having a good time here in Paris, there are a lot of Americans here and ten or twelve of us take our meals together at the Café d'Orsay down by the river, where I will take you when you come to Paris again. . . . At present I am studying French—working in an architectural atelier connected with the Beaux Arts, and taking four lessons a week in watercolors—so my time is well taken up.<sup>11</sup>

A month later, a week before the Washington's Birthday dinner, Benson had more to report and enclosed photos that he had taken of the class, together with a colorful verbal description of his classmates:

I have had the honor of having my pictures hung first in the watercolor class so I feel satisfied with my progress but expect to do work with more snap to it when I "get on the road."

I photographed the fellows and as usual got flattering likenesses of everybody—I am the person in the lower left hand corner and I took the picture by pushing a rubber bulb with a long stick. I will explain the people depicted: Cary, George of Buffalo a rich chap and good fellow—lives in same house—66 Rue de Seine. Lavalle of Boston, Parents South American perhaps you know of him. Tilton—New York—truly good. Boring—San Francisco. Flagg of N.Y.—also rich (I enjoy his dinners frequently). Maguire [sic] of New York, also rooms at 66. Lord, Rotch Scholarship man of '88—Boston. Leteurtre, our greasy garlicy clever little professor. Le Vicompte de Sibourg of Washington—his mother is an American—his family living here this winter, one of our crowd at table, nearly danced my feet off at his house last night. Josselyn—Rotch Scholarship man of '87—he looks rather ridiculous because he moved. Benson—an American offensively American in his tastes. Saglio a Frenchman who talks English and plays the violin like an angel. I omitted Brockway, he does not eat with us and we do not see much of him—tant mieux.

If you reverse one of the photographs and look through it at the light you will see who is who—we have had a fine time together this winter and I shall be extremely sorry when we break up—we cannot expect to have such a congenial crowd together again.<sup>12</sup>

The "congenial crowd"—or most of it—did convene again, under the auspices of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects in New York. Over the next two decades, they established an American network of architectural ateliers on the French model, and they fomented the recasting of architectural education at American universities. Every year, too, they gathered to rekindle their memories of the happy days they shared in Paris.

## Notes

1. For the teachings of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and its influence in America, see Ernest Flagg, "The École des Beaux-Arts," *Architectural Record* 3 (Jan.–Mar. 1894), 302–13; 3 (Apr.–June 1894), 419–28; 4 (July–Sept. 1894), 38–43; Richard Chafee, "The Teaching of Architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts," in *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, ed. Arthur Drexler (New York, 1977), 61–109; and Jean Paul Carlhian, "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts: Modes and Manners," *Journal of Architectural Education* 33 (Nov. 1979), 7–17.

2. The menu and photographs are in the Edgar A. Josselyn Papers, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York City. Josselyn was the author's maternal grandfather. He was the fourth recipient of the Rotch Travelling Scholarship, which enabled him to study and travel in Europe from June 1887 to Sept. 1889. He entered the architectural atelier of Jean-Louis Pascal in Paris in July 1887 and passed the examinations for entrance into the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Mar. 1888. A founding member of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, he had an architectural practice



in New York City from 1897 to about 1933. The caption of Fig. 3 identifies the twelve students and the instructor of the watercolor class. Josselyn's appearance is familiar to the author; Benson was identified by Margaret M. Betts (letter to Howard DeVoe, 30 Dec. 2003); Boring and Tilton were identified from photos; others were identified by notations by Josselyn on one of the preserved photos.

3. The letters and a copy of one of the photographs are in the Henry F. Waters Papers, Phillips Library, Salem, Mass. Benson studied at the Academie Julian and then at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He worked briefly with McKim, Mead and White, before forming a partnership with one of the Washington's Birthday diners, Albert Brockway. After 1921 Benson changed careers, becoming a painter of marine scenes.

4. Mildred E. Lombard, "The Beaux-Arts Institute of Design," *Légion d'Honneur Magazine* 9 (July 1938), 84. Excerpts from Lombard's article appeared in "Early Days at the Ecole," *Architectural Forum* (Dec. 1938), 13–14. Lombard quotes from Joseph H. McGuire, "Excerpts from 'Before the Gay Nineties,'" typescript, 1932, Van Alen Institute Archives, New York. I thank Marvin J. Anderson, who is currently working on a dissertation on the history and influence of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects, 1894–1942, for providing a copy of this manuscript.

5. Joseph H. McGuire to Whitney Warren, 25 Jan. 1936, Van Alen Institute Archives, New York. I am grateful to Marvin J. Anderson for finding this letter and sending me a copy.

6. "Annual Meeting of the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects," *American Architect* 100 (6 Dec. 1911), "Current News and Comment" sec., 4.

7. Mardges Bacon, *Ernest Flagg, Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer*

(New York, 1986), 326–27 n. 7. Josselyn returned in Sept. 1889 and Benson returned in May 1890. Edgar A. Josselyn, "Report for the Rotch Travelling Scholarship, 1887–89," Boston, 1889; and Margaret M. Betts, "John Prentiss Benson, Architect," in *The Artistic Legacy of John Prentiss Benson*, ed. Nicholas J. Baker (n.p., 2007), 3:7, [www.johnpbenson.org](http://www.johnpbenson.org).

8. The name was spelled Leteurtre by Benson in a letter and by Josselyn in notes on the back of a photo—probably the French painter F. Leteurtre.

9. McGuire, "Excerpts from 'Before the Gay Nineties.'"

10. Benson had been an avid photographer from a young age. Waters taught art in the Salem, Mass., school system and was later the school superintendent. Margaret M. Betts, "About the Artist," in Baker, *Artistic Legacy of John Prentiss Benson* (2003), 1:7.

11. John P. Benson to Henry Waters, 19 Jan. 1889, Waters Papers. I thank Margaret M. Betts for providing a transcription. Benson's address was 66 Rue de Seine, home to many of the American students studying at the Ecole, including Josselyn.

12. Benson to Waters, 15 Feb. 1889, Waters Papers. I thank Britta Karlberg for providing a photocopy. An excerpt with some transcription errors appears in Betts, "About the Artist." Only one enclosed photo has survived in the Waters Papers, another print of Fig. 3. On the back is the pencil notation "Removed—February 15, 1887 [sic] Letter from John P. Benson." Karlberg reported that no notations identify the sitters.

## Illustration Credits

Figures 1–3. Howard DeVoe; Fig. 3 digitally enhanced to improve contrast