

John Elder: Pioneer Builder¹

By KENNETH LOUCKS

Almost everyone is interested in some special thing—has a hobby, the pursuit of which affords unbounded pleasure in its following. I shall tell of my interest in the collecting of old letters, papers, and old documents of every sort. I believe that this will appeal to you and I intend to show that remarkable and valuable historical facts are obtainable through the pursuit of such a hobby.

For several years I have been acquiring old letters from various places, such as attics, abandoned files and the debris of auction house odds and ends. In this manner much entertaining information has been discovered, not to mention the valuable stamps reclaimed for my ever increasing collection.

About a year ago, I really struck a bonanza, when I bought an old leather trunk actually filled with letters and papers—a chance purchase, with no prior knowledge as to what the contents would foretell. Then came the *denouement*. First of all, I started laying out the many packets of letters. They were in little bundles tied with strips of cloth or string, with little slips of paper on the tops of the parcels, which read: “Correspondence of 1832”—“Correspondence of 1837”—“Correspondence of 1846”—and so on, covering most of the years between 1830 and 1860. Quite a few had stamps on them, but the majority, being written earlier, had only a pen-written number indicating the amount of postage in the upper right hand corner. The greater part were not in envelopes, but were just sheets of paper, folded somewhat in the form of envelopes with the writing on the inside, and the address on the outside.

Going deeper and deeper into my “gold mine,” I extracted next old newspapers of the 1840 vintage, from Indianapolis and from Baltimore; then came several books full of architectural designs dated 1846 and 1847; then rolls of plans; then two metal containers, common to architects of the past. Opening one of the latter, I pulled out a yellow parchment,

¹This paper was read at the Annual Indiana History Conference at Indianapolis on December 13, 1929.

a land grant, dated April, 1750, lettered in beautiful English script. It was a deed to 200 acres of land in Pennsylvania, from the owners, Thomas, Richard and John Penn, proprietors of the province of Pennsylvania. It was signed by John Penn. History tells us that William Penn willed Pennsylvania to his three sons, Thomas, Richard and John. Going into the other container, I found another land grant, or patent, dated 1812, also descriptive of land in Pennsylvania. At the bottom of this capacious chest, I found many different sized account books, some leather bound, others cardboard and paper, and all filled with writing and figures. One paper covered book was filled with names, and proved to be the register of a tavern, of which I shall tell later.

Getting back to earth, or to speak more properly, after the first big thrill of exploration, I started systematically to peruse more closely each article. This took some time, but from the first I noticed that most of the letters were addressed to a John Elder, and others to a John R. Elder. I soon found out that John R. was the son of John. The better part of the John Elder letters and note books pertained to architectural and construction matters, and naturally I was duly interested.

After a thorough examination of all materials pertaining to John Elder, I decided, that he had been a man of unusual ability in the construction of buildings. Indeed he designed and built many structures during the early days of Indianapolis and Indiana. He was a man of diversified accomplishment, abundant energy, substantial ability, adventurous nature, and best of all, a kindly parent. He was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the late part of the eighteenth century, no statement in any writing telling exactly when. Judging from the information at hand, I would say that he was born between the years 1785 and 1800.

Letters and papers dated 1828 are the earliest news, and tell of his activities while working on the Juanita division of the Pennsylvania Canal, near Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. The following letter from a man who knew his ability tells well and briefly of his competence in this type of work:

On the score of acquaintance I take the liberty of sending John Elder to you for work. He has done work to a large amount on this line, part of which was very important. His jobs have been executed in a substantial manner and finished in a superior style. He is an

honest, industrious, persevering and intelligent man, whose moral character is without reproach. I can cheerfully recommend Mr. Elder to you, as an experienced good contractor.²

During the year 1831, Mr. Elder worked on a contract to improve the navigation of the Tennessee River at the Muscle Shoals, Florence, Alabama. An interesting account of his various operations and disbursements were kept in a small note book. The chief pleasure I received from looking through these records was derived from studying his itinery from Pennsylvania to northwestern Alabama. He journeyed by stage to Pittsburgh, by stage to Wheeling, by stage to Cincinnati, by boat to Louisville, by stage to Nashville, by stage to Huntsville, Alabama, and finally by stage to Florence, Alabama.

In the Fall of 1831, Mr. Elder was back in Harrisburg where he observed in an eastern newspaper a legal notice, issued by the State of Indiana, asking for architects to submit plans for a State Capitol building at Indianapolis. The advertisement designated that any architect interested, should get in touch with the State Commissioners at Indianapolis, and was signed by James Blake. Enclosed in a letter from James Blake, in answer to one sent him by Mr. Elder, was the legal notice that Mr. Elder had first read. Mr. Blake's letter follows:

Your favor of the 23rd of August was received this morning but not in time to send an answer by return mail. To some of your inquiries I cannot give definite answers, not having such information as is necessary. How soon after the Legislature has convened it will consider the plans that may be submitted for approval, I cannot say. Probably during the second or third week of the session, its decision will be known which will be the middle or latter part of next December. I do not think the originator of the plan adopted will be entitled in virtue of that circumstance to the contract for raising the edifice; at all events that will depend entirely on the will of the Legislature. A law must be passed before the building is commenced, which may afford any disposed to undertake the work an opportunity of offering.

Timber of the dimensions stated in your letter can be obtained—oak, ash, poplar and walnut, can be procured within four to five miles

²Fred H. Petrie, Acting Engineer, to Benjamin Wright, Engineer in Chief of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, Huntingdon, Pa., Juniata Division of the Pennsylvania Canal, June 30, 1830.

from town. The ground on which the building will be erected is level and the nearest point on the Ohio River is eighty-five miles.

In reply to your last inquiry, I have hereby to state that the section of the country in which those reside, who compete for the work will not throw any difficulty in their way.³

Mr. Elder did not receive the contract to build the Capitol as Mr. Ithiel Town's design was selected, and he built a structure that served the state for forty years. Mr. Elder presented for consideration, three drawings of the exact dimensions of the successful plans. The designs were of the Grecian style of architecture.⁴

Mr. Elder's interest in Indiana culminated in his coming to Indianapolis to live in the latter part of 1833. He was accompanied by his family and a Joseph Mathers, also of Harrisburg. They took over the management of a tavern owned by Governor James Brown Ray. While Elder and Mathews operated it, it was called the Union Inn. Histories of Indianapolis do not mention any tavern called the Union Inn, but they do state facts, which combined with information that I have, signify that the building was located on the south side of Washington street, opposite the court house.

I arrived at this conclusion by a notation, written on the back page of a register of guests that was kept at the Union Inn. It reads: "Received Dec. 14, 1833, from Elder and Mathers, \$31.10, in full for plastering three rooms and patching others, in the house they now occupy, the property of Gov. Ray" This receipt was signed by William Lingenfelter. An early history of the City tells us that Gov. Ray purchased his tavern building from Major Thomas Carter. Major Carter was among the first to start a tavern in Indianapolis. He built a double log cabin in Berry's Trace, early in 1821, and called it a tavern. This cabin stood between Washington and Market streets just east of Illinois. A short time later he built a one and one-half story frame building in front of this double cabin on Washington street. He did not keep this tavern very long, but soon built another on Washington street, opposite the court house. Here he met

³James Blake, Commissioner, to John Elder, Indianapolis, Indiana, September 3, 1831.

⁴The Capitol designed and constructed by Mr. Town was nearly finished by December, 1835, and it stood until 1878 when it was torn down. The writer appreciates having in possession the plans submitted by Mr. Elder. Several present day architects have admired these plans.

with a great misfortune. About two weeks after the Legislature convened, in January 1825, this house burned entirely to the ground. It took fire from a keg of ashes. In the spring of 1826, Major Carter purchased a two story frame house of Jacob Crumbaugh, that stood on Washington street, just west of the canal. This house he moved along Washington street to the site of the burned building. The removal of this building occupied several weeks, causing more stumps and logs to be burned and removed from the street, than anything that had yet happened. Later he sold the property to Governor Ray who had a sign painted over it, one side reading; "Travelers' Ray House, Cheap;" and the other side, "Travelers' Ray House, Cash."

Mr. Elder operated this Inn from December, 1833, to April, 1836, and registered 4,663 guests in all during that period. These names occupy two registers and the design of these books is worth telling about. There were nine columns across the page for each entry. First came the date; then the signature of the guest; then a B, D or S, meaning starting at breakfast, dinner or supper; then the room number (ten rooms in all were used for guests); then the place of residence; then the destination; then the date of departure; then the registration number. Last and most interesting of all was a column for remarks—and what a variety of remarks! An entire book could be written about them alone. Some voiced their presidential preference—Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, William Henry Harrison, Van Buren, Dick Johnson, Davy Crockett, John Quincy Adams, and many others. Some stated that they were entering land; some *en route* to the Far West; and there were countless other remarks. One pathetic entry clings to my memory from its first reading: "While crossing White river this morning, I lost two horses by drowning."

John Elder started his building career in Indiana in 1836, first of all, building the Clinton County courthouse at Frankfort. All the letters, material bills and account books pertaining to this work are preserved. He was town assessor of Indianapolis, from 1836 to 1837, and served on the Town Common Council from 1838 to 1839, proving how quickly he had adapted himself to his new surroundings. In 1834, the Legislature chartered the State Bank of Indiana, with a capital of \$1,600,000. Up to that time Indianapolis had con-

tained nothing but a small private bank. In 1840, the Bank removed to its new building at the corner of Kentucky Avenue and Illinois Street. Mr. Elder drafted the plans and erected this building. The Indianapolis branch was organized by the appointment of Hervey Bates, president and B. F. Norris, cashier. Mr. Elder also erected the building for the branch. Interesting pictures of these two bank buildings can be found in the *Centennial History and Handbook of Indiana*. In 1837, John Elder erected Washington Hall, the best hotel building in the town, until, a few years later, he put up the Palmer House for Nathan B. Palmer, at the southeast corner of Washington and Illinois streets.

Letters of recommendation of John Elder, by prominent citizens of Indianapolis give an idea of his standing:

[By WILLIAM ELLIOTT]

Permit me to introduce to your acquaintance Mr. John Elder of Indianapolis who is on a visit to your City, for the purpose of undertaking the building that is to be let in Fifth street. Mr. Elder has been the builder of both bank houses in this place, also both the large hotels. He is looked upon as one of the best draftsmen in the west. He is an active, energetic man, of good character. Any assistance you may be able to render Mr. Elder will be reciprocated by many of your friends.⁵

[By GOVERNOR NOAH NOBLE]

I beg the favor of introducing to you, the bearer, John Elder, Esq., my friend and neighbor. He visits your City to offer the plans of a public building, of which you no doubt have some knowledge, but he has the benefit of few acquaintances, and therefore needs the advice and acquaintance of some one, to introduce him to the officers or committee to whom his drawing is to be exhibited. Mr. Elder most justly stands at the head of the list of builders and artists in the State, is one of our best citizens, is generally beloved and is highly deserving the confidence and respect of this committee.⁶

[By SAMUEL MERRILL, President of the State Bank]

Dear Sir:—Mr. Elder, a citizen of this place, who has been employed as an architect for some years, visits Cincinnati to obtain employment. Mr. Elder had the superintendence of the building of a very fine church in this place and also the State Bank, which is a good house, and he also had the oversight of the erection of several good

⁵William Elliott to William E. Marsh (Galt House, Cincinnati), Indianapolis, Indiana, December 9, 1843.

⁶Noah Noble to Mr. T. Williams (Cinn., O.), Indianapolis, December 8, 1843.

court houses in this part of the state. If it comes in your way to advance his interest and extend his acquaintance, I shall be grateful.⁷

Dr. John Evans of Chicago, who had made a study of mental diseases, delivered a lecture before members of the Indiana Legislature in 1843, and Gov. Samuel Bigger was directed to obtain plans for the erection of a suitable building for an insane asylum. John Elder was selected as the architect to draft these plans. At the next session of the Legislature, in 1845, plans were approved, and a tax of one cent on each hundred dollars worth of property was levied to provide means for erecting the buildings.

Dr. Evans, Dr. L. Dunlap and James Blake were appointed a Commission to obtain a site for the proposed buildings. They selected Mount Jackson west of the City, where the hospital now stands. The work of construction was begun at once and the main building was completed the next year at a cost of \$75,000. Every convenience and comfort for this class of unfortunates was provided. Mr. Elder kept his accounts of fees and superintending charges with such exacting detail that they afford very interesting reading.

In 1846, Mr. Elder prepared plans and specifications for the first store building erected by Charles Mayer. It is said that Mr. Mayer started business with a dozen ginger cakes, a jar or two of candy, and a keg of beer. He added a few toys and continued to expand until today the store of Charles Mayer & Company is the largest of its kind, at least, in the Middle West. Mr. Elder made plans for Hervey Bates who put up store buildings along Washington street. A young minister of the gospel, Henry Ward Beecher, afterwards to become famous as a lecturer and preacher, chose Mr. Elder to prepare plans for his dwelling house in Indianapolis in 1846.

The Methodist church in Indianapolis was then divided into the Eastern Charge Methodist Church and the Central Charge Methodist Church and their new buildings were designed by Mr. Elder. Many residences constructed about this time were of his planning. Between 1846 and 1848, he designed and constructed the courthouse at Rushville, and a Methodist Church there. He built the courthouse at Connersville, and a Presbyterian Church there. He submitted

⁷Samuel Merrill to E. Poor (Cinn., O.), Indianapolis, December 9, 1843.

plans for a courthouse at Helena, Arkansas; a church building at Madison, Indiana (said to be still intact); a seminary building at Noblesville; the Marion County poorhouse; a tavern house for Mathew Little; and a tavern house, warehouse and pork-house for B. T. Blythe. All these are mentioned in one little book, and his fee for plans is not over \$15 for any one commission.

John Elder may have had a part in the planning and construction of the Blind Institute buildings that are still used but which are soon to make way for the War Memorial Plaza. Just how much he had to do with this project is not definitely determined, but I shall present the information at hand. In the winter of 1844-45, through the efforts of James Martin Ray, William H. Churchman of the Kentucky Blind Asylum was brought here with some of his pupils to give an exhibition or two in Mr. Beecher's church. This had a decidedly good effect on the Legislature, which was then in session. James M. Ray, George W. Mears and the Secretary, Auditor and Treasurer of the State were appointed a commission to carry out the work, either by the establishment of an asylum, or by providing for the care and education of the blind, at the institution in Ohio or that in Kentucky. In 1847, James Martin Ray, George W. Mears and Seaton W. Norris were appointed to erect a suitable building for the purpose and \$5,000 was appropriated for a site. Mr. Elder has the following information jotted down in his fee book:

Trustees for Blind Institute	
To draftings for Main Building.....	\$50.00
To draftings & Specifications and sectional drawings for work shop.....	40.00
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	90.00
Received in cash.....	40.00
	<hr/>
Balance due	50.00

Local histories give Francis Costigan credit for designing the present buildings at the Blind School, and I cannot say that he did not furnish the plans, but I believe I have one point, Mr. Elder's notations, from which to argue that the work was done by the latter.

Mr. Elder was connected with many other important

things of that day but limited time forbids the giving of more details. Briefly, I will say that he drafted plans, and supervised the construction of prison buildings at Jeffersonville, his instructions being personally given to him by Governor James Whitcomb. He was a contractor on a part of the Indiana Central Canal, also on a part of the Indianapolis and Madison railroad. He worked with the Indiana Fund Commission, and in this work was acquainted with Mr. Lanier of Madison.

Now comes the adventure part of Mr. Elder's story and, if I did not have the concrete facts, I myself would believe that I was reading fiction. His wife died, his children grew up, the time came when the newspapers were full of the discovery of gold in California, and John Elder, with his work all cleaned up, could not resist the urge to go to this land of promise, and, like many others away he started. His description of his journey by boat to Panama, the trek across the isthmus, the voyage up the west coast, the journey into the "diggings," his hardships, experiences and thoughts, are all expressed in letters which he wrote back home to his family. But even in this land of gold, two other things were uppermost in his mind. First, of all his children, and second, his knowledge of architecture and construction work. While in California he submitted a design for the first Capitol for that state. He helped construct a dam whereby gold might more easily be gotten from the river. Unfortunately, his last piece of construction helped to cause his death. Being thwarted by the elusive gold, he conceived the practical idea of building a ferry boat for crossing a turbulent stream and successfully operated it. While doing this he contracted a cold from exposure and shortly passed away. Truly, John Elder was a pioneer to whom Hoosierdom owes a sincere appreciation.³

³Following the reading of this paper, Mr. George S. Cottman stated that he considers John Elder, Francis Costigan, and William Tinsley (the architect of Christ Church, Indianapolis) the three best and most conspicuous builders and architects of Indiana before the Civil War. He also called attention to the fact that a grandson of John Elder is still a well-known citizen of Indianapolis. A gentleman in the audience then arose and said that he was William L. Elder, the person just mentioned. He explained that a little more than a year earlier he and his family had moved from their old residence to another. In the process of vacating the old home he became worn out. At last, however, he reached the dusty attic. Looking over the odds and ends there accumulated, including an old trunk, he observed nothing which seemed to deserve longer keeping. Calling in a buyer of second-hand household goods, he sold to him the contents of the attic *en masse*. It was from this dealer that the writer bought the old trunk, a little later. At the close of his remarks the grandson of John Elder asserted that he was glad that the letters and other documents had fallen into the hands of one who had made such use of them.