

The Doorknob Collector



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LOUIS SULLIVAN'S SCHILLER - GARRICK

DOOR KNOB

By Allen S. Joslyn

So now we come to the end of the story, the last bit of builders' hardware commonly said to have been designed by Adler & Sullivan for installation in one of their buildings. We have previously explored the Chicago Stock Exchange and Richard Nickel's tragic efforts to salvage its decoration (TDC 129), the St. Nicholas Hotel in St. Louis (TDC 131), the restored Guaranty Building in Buffalo (TDC 134), the Union Trust Building in St. Louis (TDC 148 & 149) and the story of "Louis Sullivan, Ellis Wainwright, and the Art of Boodling in St. Louis" (TDC 151).

The last episode concerns the door knobs of the Schiller Building, later renamed the Garrick Theater, in Chicago. They are rare as those of the St. Nicholas Hotel. They were not made by Adler & Sullivan's traditional manufacturer (Yale & Towne) but by the Chicago Hardware Mfg. Co. in Bower-Barff finish, and feature an "S" monogram. Of course we have (with the exception of the Guaranty, signed by Sullivan) no documentation of any of their hardware designs, but given that the lush vegetative design is Sullivanesque and that the building was designed by his firm, I vote for its authorship. We do not know what the other hardware in the building – escutcheons, hinges, etc. – looked like.



The structure, named after the German poet Friedrich Schiller, was built in 1890-92. One of the earliest sky-scrapers, it had a seventeen floor tower; the rest of the building was nine stories. The building contained a theater and office space. It was sponsored by the Chicago German community as a permanent theater for operas to serve the growing German population and an office building to support the theater. A series of terra cotta busts of important German artists graced the second story arcade. Unfortunately, insolvency ensued in 1898 and the opera was replaced by vaudeville. Several years later the building was purchased by the Shubert Brothers, becoming the Garrick Theater. It was a popular vaudeville venue for performers such as Bob Hope, Mary Pickford and Al Jolson, among others. In 1950 it was converted to a CBS television studio. CBS eventually moved on, and the studio was replaced with a modernized movie theater. Apparently the office part of the building was never upgraded – it still ran on DC current, some floors had no toilets and it was heated by hand stoked coal. The quality of the office occupants deteriorated apace, and the ground floor featured a Ham n' Egger restaurant with a fake stone façade. In 1960 the owners decided to replace it with a parking garage. And that is when the rumpus began.

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This was an era when historically significant building after building in Chicago were being razed, much to the distress of architectural historians, especially Richard Nickel who was making a career of documenting Sullivan's work. He had begun photographing the Garrick in the early 1950s, and returned to that project when the demolition plans were announced. He needed permission from the owners to photograph (for example, he would often arrive after the last movie and shoot until dawn), but once his task was completed, he went on the warpath, as it were. He dispatched letters off to dozens of architects, a philanthropist, German-interested organizations, newspapers, etc, and the campaign to save the Garrick was underway. But the concept of architectural preservation was in its infancy, and although Chicago had a Commission on Architectural Landmarks, its powers were unclear. On the one side, its architectural significance was clear to many; on the other, it was old and in ill-repair and, many argued, where is the money to come from to preserve it? The City denied a demolition permit and the owners sued to force its issuance. Mayor Richard Dailey, who ran Chicago, was ambivalent: it was useful to burnish his cultural image to praise the building, but

his power was based in significant part on the support of Chicago developers. So he appointed a committee to try to find a solution. (Sound familiar?) But the Committee eventually announced, after several hearings, it could not find the funds to purchase the Garrick.

The suit seeking a demolition permit went to trial and, after some misgivings, the Judge upheld the denial. It was reversed on appeal, and the issue was whether the City would appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court. Dailey announced that the City could not come up with the estimated \$ 5 million to purchase and restore the Garrick. The wrecking began, although parts of it are preserved in various locations in Chicago. (For an extensive recounting the fight to save the Garrick, see They All Fall Down cited below.)

Needless to say, this was a fight that was going on all over America. In New York, we lost Pennsylvania Station in 1964 to the forces of "improvement and development", but saved Grand Central with the Supreme Court's decision in Penn Central Transportation Co. v. New York City, 438 U.S.104 (1978) holding that New York City's Landmarks Preservation Act did not constitute a "taking" of Penn Central's property under the Fifth Amendment and was a reasonable use of government land-use regulatory power.

References:

Richard Nickel & Aaron Siskind, The Complete Architecture of Adler & Sullivan (Richard Nickel Committee, 2010).

Richard Cahan, They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel's Struggle to Save American Architecture, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994)

Knob Photograph from Urban Remains, Chicago

A NOTE ON LOCKS

A common inquiry to the Club email address is how do I fix an old lock whose spring is broken. The current issue of The Old House Journal (March 2013, p. 11) carries a note from a reader with the answer. It recounts his failed efforts to find any in hardware stores, industrial spring businesses, home center stores and antique stores, only to find that they were, in fact, carried by full-service locksmiths. On reflection, that seems kind of obvious, no?

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RUSSELL & ERWIN
A CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNT
(PART 5): CONTINUED FROM TDC 176
FROM THE COMMERCIAL PATHFINDER, NOVEMBER, 1869

Continuation of “The New York Warehouse”

“The Second Floor is entirely stocked with Mechanics’ Tools of all kinds, a large and attractive assortment, including, in part, the entire production of the Douglas Manufacturing Co., the whole embracing a great variety in sizes and numbers of each of the following lines: Augurs, Bits, Chisels, Drawing-Knives- the most complete stock in the country – Axes, Hatchets, Hammers, Saws, including many kinds of Mill, Cross-Cut and Handsaws; Planes, Wrenches, Trowels, Compasses, Dividers, Screw-Drivers, Steel Squares, Plumbs, and Levels, Rules, Tri-Squares, etc., etc.

“The Third Floor is another world of multitudinous hardware, shelved on both sides of the entire length, and stocked exclusively with the goods of their own manufacture, such as we have already enumerated in part. One side of this long, broad hall is wholly stored with their own Door Locks and Latches, in numerical order from the number 0, upward, and embracing over 350 different patterns of these goods alone; the other side is densely filled with every variety of brass and plated wares, completing the assortment we have partially detailed before.

“We feel warranted in asserting that the style and quality of the goods of the Russell & Erwin Manufacturing Co. are probably better adapted to the wants of the American people than any other hardware of the kind in this country. The proprietors have been in the business so long that they are enabled to know by experience what the public require, and these demands they have succeeded in answering as far as it is possible to do so. We shall also note the circumstance that during the last 30 years there has been a multiplicity of changes and continual improvements in Door Locks and Knobs, and these mutations have not ceased as yet; the numerous changes have been caused by, and adopted to, the varying wants and tastes of the public; the styles now made seem to be much nearer than ever to that perfected stage – in point of convenience and durability – where they are likely to remain permanent.

“The Fourth Floor, like the others we have mentioned, is shelved throughout both sides, and closely packed with excellent assortments of

Miscellaneous Hardware, inclusive of Skates, Hand, House and Sleigh Bells, Currycombs, Tailors’ and Sheep Shears, Carpenters’ Braces, Sandpaper, Smiths’ Bellows, Stair Rods, Fluting Machines, Curling Irons, and what seemed to us to be an interminable variety of other serviceable articles in the hardware line as diverse as the wants of insatiable humanity.

“The Fifth Floor is largely occupied by the stock of Shovels, Spades and scoops (manufactured by the world renowned firm of Oliver Ames & Son of North Easton, Massachusetts), a vast and imposing array, completely filling a three-story rack extending along both sides of the floor, its full length; while in cases and packages upon the intervening floor we saw huge piles and stacks of coarser kinds of hardware, embracing Framed Wood Saws, Meat Cutters, Coal Hods, Curry and Wood Cards, Hand and Moulders’ Bellows, Garden Hoes and Rakes, Apple Pealers, Saw Frames, Egg Beaters, Counter Scales, Well Wheels, Hay, Straw and Corn Cutters, School Slates, and other speeders of the toil and ministers to the wants of civilized life.

“In closing the sketch of this remarkable establishment, we should not omit to mention that the proprietors were the first manufacturers of hardware who established a depot for the sale of their own goods in this country. Before they opened their salesrooms at 93 John Street in 1841, all such goods were sold through commission merchants, because no manufacturers had produced a variety large enough to pay for having a depot of their own. Since that period many others have followed in their wake, and now the jobbing business in hardware is rapidly going into the hands of the manufacturers exclusively. Probably in the next few years it will be done almost entirely by manufacturers so far as New York City is concerned. For Building purposes it is now pretty much admitted that American Hardware is decidedly the best, and it is fast superseding English Hardware, both here and abroad, a fact that is forcefully illustrated by the immense shipments of the Russell & Erwin Manufacturing Co. throughout the United States, Canada, West Indies, Mexico, Central and South America, and even to England, Australia and other

distant quarters of the globe, amounting in value, as we have said, to millions of dollars annually. Such are the fruits of manufacturing enterprise, when

characterized by skillful management, financial acuteness and commercial integrity.” **(Concluded)**

In Memoriam

Charles Wardell, (#9), age 92, was one of the earliest collectors of antique decorative hardware and other Victorian goodies, Charles Ware Wardell died on November 23, 2012 at the home of one of his sons in Star, North Carolina. He first was attracted to doorknobs and their like from saving stained glass windows in the Great War on Victoriana waged in the 1950s and 1960s. At first he gave no thought to hardware, only glass. He described his conversion as follows in the June, 1982 issue of TDC:

“As a result of my frequenting the wreckers’ yards and sites of demolition I saw the door hardware which I passed up, through ignorance, for a time, but there came a day of reckoning. While I was loading windows into my station wagon, I sat down to rest in the old church and gazed across the room at a door fitted with some beautiful knobs. These were the first doorknob I had ever appreciated and right there I became a collector and fancier of doorknobs.”

And he was off – scrap yards, flea markets, antique shows, yard sales and a few “liberation raids” on abandoned and fallen-in buildings. He also credited “the kindness of other collectors, namely Maudie Eastwood, Len Blumin, the Kaiser’s and a few others” who helped him build his “collection to over a thousand different patterns.”



In Memoriam

Dana Cratch (#893), age 82 of Hackettstown, NJ passed away on December 1, 2012. Dana was one of our newer members. He was a past president of the Warren County (NJ) Historical Society and also sat on the Warren County Cultural Heritage Commission. His keen interest in antiques led him to join the ADCA after attending a lecture given by Rich Kennedy. Dana is survived by his wife, Grace, six sons, a brother, eight grandchildren and one great-grand child. He enjoyed riding motorcycles and was still riding until the end. He was a friend of the Kennedys who live in the same complex at Heath Village Retirement Village, Hackettstown, NJ

Remembering Charles Wardell

His Son, Matthew

Charlie’s attendance at ADCA conventions was his way of “capping off” a year’s worth of hunting, buying, trading and scavenging for knobs and other hardware. He could pick up a piece of hardware and tell you a story about most any of it. For a while, Dad thought about donating his collection to The Smithsonian so that it could be enjoyed by others for years to come. After doing some research, though, he found that well over 90% of the items that The Smithsonian has are not even on display. They are simply stored in a warehouse somewhere.

Sadly, no one in my family shared his passion for the collection so most of it will be sold off so that others can enjoy the pieces and keep the collecting going. Dad was a firm believer of passing on his collection to other collectors. I will, however, keep some of the pieces to remember him by. I’ll have to admit, now that he’s gone, it will be kind of strange to get back on the task of liquidating these jewels. He’s got them displayed all over the house and I know that each time I move one, it’ll run through my mind that Dad had personally placed them in their location for his enjoyment.

Maude Eastwood

Some 40 years ago Charles Wardell of Trinity, North Carolina and I began a mutually rewarding relationship. He had been collecting knobs, hinges and knockers and trading hardware with several collectors across the country. At that point I was busily mailing copies of my first book on antique hardware. Common interest and a kind providence orchestrated our alliance.

In addition to a collection of hardware second in size only to that of Rich Kaiser, The Archdale Trinity News of Jan. 10, 1979 quoted the size of the Wardell collection at 10,000 overall--800 different kinds. Four years prior to that disclosure, a Greensboro Daily News article covered the showing of the Wardell collection in the New York City Hallmark Gallery. Charlie was a very early member of the ADCA and attended its second Convention in San Francisco, chaired by Len Blumin.

Over time, Charles was also to acquire a number of rare original manufacturer's catalogs. I was a grateful recipient of his unselfish loan offer, thus amassing material invaluable for my continuing literary efforts.

For all of Charles admirable qualities--well read, articulate, gifted writer--this man of faith by nature was not easy on himself. I quote from a letter in my bulging Wardell file: "I go from one hobby to another like a dog goes from pillar to post. I know that I do not do justice to anything and I simply must live another lifetime to fulfill all my aspirations: Metal founder, knob designer, inventor, writer, singer, traveler, and a dozen other things."

Extraordinarily gifted, Charles traced his interest in things mechanical to age three, playing with his father's tools. At age 10 he was staging shows in his garage to a full house. By age 12 was broadcasting the first entertainment in his town.

Charles Wardell was unique and individual. Reviewing dozens of letters he had written over the years it was clear that business and family were equally important. He valued acceptance. Had been urged to attend the first convention, but had felt "uneasy". Are there no Wardell "minuses" to report? Only one, to my mind, Charles' knowledge in 1979 was unmatched when it came to fine cast metal hardware, but what of the clay-based knobs? Charles' view: "Mention of Bennington in a sales pitch disgusts me. After all, who knows or cares if they are Bennington? There must have been billions of them made. I turn them down at 10 cents each."

Thank you, Charles, for your impact on my life and for that Christmas gift of years ago--a bona fide Portland Morning Oregonian Building doorknob.

Rhett Butler

Charlie rendered distinguished service to the ADCA in many ways, but one was unique: at annual conventions, he would sleep under the tables to guard the collections from being tampered with overnight. There were no reported incidents.

Len Blumin

Charlie was a true "old friend" of mine, as we began trading hardware in the early 1980's. I still remember his visit here in 1982 to our convention in San Francisco, at the Schlage Lock factory. We had breakfast with Charlie at a local diner and he astonished the waitress by ordering a glass of orange juice with a raw egg, which he drank down with relish! Charlie was able to visit us at our home in Mill Valley, and we enjoyed seeing him at many conventions after that.

Charles Wardell

To read Charles' own thoughts on collecting go to Newsletter Archives at AntiqueDoorknobs.org and download TDC #3, June 1982.

The Doorknob Exchange

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