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Bob Brinkman, Dan K. Utley

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The information presented in this article represents the results of an extensive, multi-state search for the details of Jasper Newton Preston's life. It began simply with his name on a cornerstone—the one for the 1885 Bell County Courthouse in Belton—and the natural curiosity of historians to know more about an individual's past. *Photos courtesy of Bob Brinkman.*

A Name on the Cornerstone: The Landmark Texas Architecture of Jasper Newton Preston

BOB BRINKMAN AND DAN K. UTLEY*

WHEN GOV. GEORGE W. BUSH CALLED FOR THE PRESERVATION OF TEXAS courthouses in his 1998 reelection campaign, he sparked increased recognition of the plight of the state's historic temples of justice and renewed interest in the architectural heritage of Texas. Building on this activity was the announcement in June of that year that the historic courthouses of Texas were included on the 11 Most Endangered Places list of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. At the same Austin press conference where the National Trust announced its list, Governor Bush called for a major preservation initiative to aid county courthouse restoration.¹ In the legislation that followed, creating the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program under the direction of the Texas Historical Commission, a fundamental tenet was the need to develop preservation master plans for each eligible building. Master plans contain detailed architectural and historical research about each building and its designers, many of whom have had their stories lost to time or overlooked by scholars. Such is the case with Jasper Newton Preston, among the more significant architects of late nineteenth-century Texas but now virtually forgotten.

The story of architect Preston stretches from coast to coast and spans parts of two centuries, with eleven years of his productive life centered in Texas. Despite his relatively limited time in the Lone Star State, he left behind a legacy of landmark structures that grace the cultural landscape to this day. In addition to a handful of existing courthouses, Preston also

* Bob Brinkman is a historian at the Texas Historical Commission. He is chairman of the Williamson County Historical Commission and president of the Texas Old Missions and Forts Restoration Association (TOMFRA). Dan K. Utley is Chief Historian with the Texas Historical Commission. A past chairman of the National Register State Board of Review for Texas and past president of the Texas Oral History Association, he currently serves as first vice president of the East Texas Historical Association.

¹ *Austin American Statesman*, Dec. 4, 1997, p. A1, June 16, 1998, p. B1.

designed ornate hotels and residences, noteworthy commercial buildings, and functional eleemosynary campuses. Although his work was centered primarily on Austin and San Antonio, it reached into other areas of the state as well. In addition to his buildings, he had influence both as a mentor to young architects and as an early promoter of his profession, which was in its infancy in the state when he arrived in the late nineteenth century. The focus of this paper is the collection of Preston's recognized landmark structures that remain to this day.

Throughout his life, J. N. Preston exhibited a frontier mentality, both in his design work and in his own personal history, which may have resulted in part from his family heritage. Preston's family tree had deep roots and a history of service in New York, with Revolutionary War and War of 1812 veterans and state assemblymen among his ancestors. His parents, Samuel and Rebecca Sprague Preston, were early settlers in the Ira township of Cayuga County in western New York. Ira formally developed in 1821, when local officials divided the earlier Cato township to include three new communities: Ira, Conquest, and Victory. Ira is situated twenty miles northwest of Syracuse and eleven miles north of the Erie Canal, an important trade and migration route finished only twelve years before the town's establishment.² It is an upland agricultural area, primarily forested and marked by drumlins, hilly remnants of the ice age. Despite the region's dense vegetation, it is not an area drained by major streams or water sources. An 1825 description of the township noted, "The soil, however, though light, is just such as some people fancy, and its population is increasing."³ Farms were typically small, averaging about fifty acres, yet providing self-sufficiency for the farming families.

When Samuel and Rebecca Preston married in 1827, Ira and most of the surrounding settlements were only villages.⁴ Small hamlets were the norm, and each developed a limited sphere of economic influence that provided both definition and connection for its inhabitants. Although the area's population increased steadily in the early years, a sense of frontier isolation prevailed.

Jasper Newton Preston, born on October 5, 1832, was the third of seven children of Samuel and Rebecca.⁵ The Prestons were a farm family, but the agricultural development of their region was one of great change and migration in the 1830s. As the family grew, new opportunities farther west began to draw them and others from their home region. Many settlers,

² Elliot G. Storke, *History of Cayuga County, New York, 1789-1879* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1879), 273; Dorothy Southard to Dan Utley, Feb. 21, 2002 (original in possession of authors).

³ Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany: B. D. Packard, 1824).

⁴ *Grand Ledge Independent*, Feb. 16, 1877, p. 2.

⁵ Charles Henry Preston, *Descendants of Roger Preston of Ipswich and Salem Village* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1931), 242. Their first child, Rodolphus, died in 1829 at the age of one month.

including the Prestons, opted to follow the line of the Great Lakes in their search for new and more abundant farmland.

In the winter of 1834–35, the Prestons migrated west to Michigan, settling first in Lenawee County. In February 1837, they moved to Eaton County, southwest of the state capital, Lansing. There, they made their home in the newly formed Oneida Township and, according to several accounts, were the second family to settle there permanently. A newspaper article from the 1870s noted that when the Prestons arrived in Oneida, it “was then a wilderness, their nearest neighbor being eight miles distant.”⁶ Another newspaper excerpt relates how Samuel Preston and his family arrived near their new homesite in Oneida County after a three-day ride on two teams of oxen. Samuel Preston left Rebecca and their children Sarah and Jasper at the home of Asa Fuller. Preston, Fuller, and Robert Wheaton set off for a three-day trip on foot, chopping down trees along the journey to carve a path to the Prestons’ new homesite eight miles away. The men were able to construct a crude log cabin for the Preston family, but their return trip was slowed by extensive snowfall, and the Prestons stayed at the Fuller home for several weeks before finally proceeding on to their new home.⁷

In Oneida, Samuel was once again a farmer. Additionally, he became involved in local public service as a postmaster of Oneida Center, serving for twenty years, and later as township supervisor. The Prestons were Presbyterians, and Samuel and Rebecca are listed among the organizers of Oneida Presbyterian Church in May 1848. Samuel was elected an elder, a position he held for the next thirty five years until his death.⁸

At Oneida, the entire Preston family was involved in early educational efforts. Emma Orinda Sprague, Rebecca’s sister, served as the teacher of the local school when it was organized in 1839 a half-mile east of the Preston cabin. Samuel Preston joined others as an organizer and early trustee. In an 1840 letter back to family members in New York, Rebecca Preston wrote “we shall have a schoolhouse here if they ever git [*sic*] it done. It is raised but it does not git [*sic*] along very fast.”⁹ The first class of scholars taught by Miss Sprague in 1840 included young Jasper Preston, age eight, his sister Sarah, age ten, and six other pupils. Records from the 1850s and 1860s indicate that the young adult Jasper, like his father Samuel, was also active in local school activities.¹⁰

⁶ *Grand Ledge Independent*, June 29, 1883, p. 1, col. 5.

⁷ “Reminiscences of Early Days in and around the City,” *Grand Ledge Independent*, Feb. 17, 1905, p. 1.

⁸ *Grand Ledge Independent*, June 29, 1883, p. 1, col. 5.

⁹ R. A. Brunger, “The History of Strange School, 1879–1979,” files of Eaton County Genealogical Society, Charlotte, Michigan.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

J. N. Preston grew to maturity in Oneida, and the 1850 census listed him as a farmer. In the 1850s, Jasper Preston received limited training in architecture at the Vermontville Academy in Vermontville, Eaton County, Michigan.¹¹ In 1857, he married Janet Johnston of Cornwall, Ontario, Canada, who was living in Oneida at the time. Three years later, Preston is shown in the 1860 census as a carpenter and joiner living in the third ward of Lansing City, the state capital in Ingham County, which adjoined Eaton County. With him were his wife Janet and two children, Samuel Adam Johnston and Sarah Rebecca.¹² Another daughter, Mary Ann, arrived in 1864.

Records of Preston's early career are scarce, but there is one anecdote of a harrowing incident from his days as a carpenter. In an undated newspaper article from a scrapbook referencing an event from the mid-1860s, Jasper Preston is noted as the contractor commissioned to repair a town bridge. At the same time he was repairing the old bridge, Preston also tried to move an old store building from the north side to the south side of the river, then covered in ice. As the ice broke loose and threatened the bridge and the store, the townspeople gathered to view what they were sure would be a major catastrophe.¹³

As the article noted:

Mr. Preston lived on the north side; he ran to the south side and started back with a nail keg full of tools on his shoulder. When about opposite the last pier toward the north shore, a tremendous cake of ice struck the remaining supports of the pier, knocking them out, thus letting the bridge down and Mr. Preston with it; he was unhurt and climbed onto a cake of ice.¹⁴

Local citizen John Burtch maneuvered a boat from the sawmill down to the river and proceeded "through the seething mass of ice and turbulent water . . . to rescue Mr. Preston whom he overhauled at about the head of the rocks." The article continued, "this was considered almost miraculous."¹⁵

By 1868, Jasper and Janet had returned to Oneida, and the 1870 census showed there were three more additions to the family: daughter Flora Cornelia and fraternal twins George and Georgiana.¹⁶ Tragically, though,

¹¹ United States Seventh Census (1850), Eaton County, Michigan, Population Schedules, Township of Oneida. The Vermontville Academy where Preston was educated was built in 1844. It still stands and has been designated a Michigan State Landmark.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "V. M. Kent's Tales of the Long Ago," undated newspaper clipping, Grace Porter Price scrapbook no. 38, p. 25, Grand Ledge Public Library, Grand Ledge, Michigan.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ United States Census (1870), Eaton County, Michigan, township of Oneida, p. 274, lines 21–29.

the return to Eaton County was accompanied by personal despair. The couple's son George died at age twenty-eight days. In 1870, daughters Mary Ann and Georgiana also passed away, followed two years later by the death of the couple's seventh child, Ella, on September 11, the same day she was born. Only three of Jasper and Janet's seven children lived to adulthood.¹⁷

J. N. Preston listed his occupation in the 1870 census as a carpenter and again, two years later, in an Eaton County business directory. In reality, he was a building designer and contractor, though the term *architect* was not yet widely used. As evidence of his work in the area, a group of buildings in downtown Grand Ledge, including the city council room, city jail and Masonic lodge, was referred to as the Preston Block.¹⁸ By 1875, he considered himself an architect and represented himself as such in the *Michigan State Gazetteer and Business Directory* of that year.¹⁹

Preston's personal evolution from builder to designer in the 1870s reflected a national trend then developing in the eastern and midwestern states, but not yet prevalent further west. Without a nationally recognized professional certification program, individuals within the building trades were free to adopt a variety of titles, most commonly builder or master builder, carpenter, or mechanic. Over time, some would come to call themselves designers or architects, even though a professional standard would be years away.

The 1870s and 1880s were decades of dramatic American economic growth, even in the former states of the Confederacy. The arrival of railroads, the influx of immigrants, and increased investment from out-of-state sources drove new development, which in turn increased the need for more specialized professionalism in the architectural and building trade fields. Competition between burgeoning cities and states heralded a new era of architecture that would be viewed later as a golden age of design. Within this era, public architecture played a major role in the redefinition of the associated professions. Impressive new capitols, courthouses, city halls, universities, and other public elements of the built environment were increasingly reflective of a progressive society's desire for stability, permanence, and even ostentation. It was in this milieu of change and foresight that Preston came of age as a master designer, bridging the schism then developing between amateurs and professionals to become an architect.

In 1875, Preston left Michigan to start a new practice in Texas. Austin's *Daily Democratic Statesman* briefly noted, "J. N. Preston, architect, has settled

¹⁷ Preston, *Descendants of Roger Preston*, 242.

¹⁸ *Brown's Directory of Eaton County, Michigan 1872-73* (Lansing: C. Exera Brown, 1872), 108-109, 116.

¹⁹ United States Ninth Census (1870), Eaton County, Michigan, Population Schedules, Township of Oneida; R. L. Polk & Company, *Michigan State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1875* (Detroit: The Tribune Printing Company, 1875), 524.

here,” and went on to state that Preston “will devote himself henceforward to adding style to the future building enterprises of the city.”²⁰ His arrival in the capital city was virtually unnoticed, yet perfectly timed. Austin, like the other rapidly growing population centers of the era—Galveston, Houston, and San Antonio—was transitioning from town to city. Architectural historian Binnie Hoffman noted in her assessment of the vibrant architectural environment in Austin toward the end of Reconstruction, “this small state capital focused intently on commerce and the acquisition of capital assets. There was a tremendous increase in ornate commercial buildings underscoring the community’s confidence in its economy and striving for both permanence and elegance.”²¹

As the *Daily Democratic Statesman* of June 14, 1876, recorded: “the spirit of rivalry in mechanical skill and building has become so proverbial in Austin that each builder now aspires to excel all others.” Talking about the builders, the article further noted: “these gentlemen make a specialty of ornamental architectural work, and they possess not only the skill and taste, but the energy to make it a success.”²²

While the business community was flourishing, resulting in a great number of new commercial structures and high-style residences, there were few, if any, schooled architects. The city’s most celebrated early designer, Abner Cook, whose body of work included the Governor’s Mansion (1854–56), the Neill-Cochran House (1856), and the Asylum for the Blind (1857–59), still listed himself as a builder, and not an architect, in the 1870s.²³ In the first Austin city directory published after Preston’s arrival, only two professional architectural partnerships are listed: Preston with Frederick Ruffini, and Jacob Larmour with Charles W. Wheelock.²⁴

Preston came alone to Austin from Michigan, and first boarded with foundryman George Erwin on San Jacinto Street before moving to several houses around town, as well as securing farmland northeast of the city. Preston’s offices were initially at Congress and Bois d’arc (Seventh Street) and then at Congress and Fifth Street.²⁵ His family arrived nearly two years after him in September 1877, and his son Samuel would follow in his father’s footsteps as an architect.²⁶

²⁰ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, Oct. 27, 1875.

²¹ Binnie Hoffman, “The Walter Tips Building,” (manuscript), 2, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark file, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

²² *Daily Democratic Statesman*, June 14, 1876.

²³ Kenneth Hafertepe, *Abner Cook: Master Builder on the Texas Frontier* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1992), 191–194.

²⁴ *Austin City Directory 1877–78* (Galveston: Morrison and Fourmy and Company, 1877).

²⁵ *Austin City Directory 1877–78, 1879–80, 1881–82, 1883–84, 1885–86* (Galveston: Fourmy and Company).

²⁶ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, Sep. 16, 1877, p. 4, col. 3.

Besides architectural partnerships, builders and designers of Austin also organized themselves into local guilds, as there were no statewide professional organizations or licensing standards. The Austin Building and Loan Association and the Texas Building Association represented cooperative agreements among Austin architects including Preston, Ruffini, James Wahrenburger and others. Several of the records of the day indicate that deeds, mechanics liens, and other agreements were transacted through these associations for the benefit of holding the architectural profession to high standards.²⁷

Preston's professional association with Frederick Ruffini, on the surface, appeared to be a promising partnership. The elder Preston—nineteen years older than his new partner—had by 1877 established a Texas practice and was well known for his design work. Ruffini, a self-described ambitious man, had garnered much experience in his relatively young career through work as a journeyman in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Indianapolis, before coming to Texas in February 1877. Soon after his arrival in Austin, he and Preston began their partnership. Important early commissions for the pair included the First Baptist Church of Waco, the Cotton Exchange building at Galveston, and the Williamson County Courthouse in Georgetown.

Despite early successes, the partnership, like many of the day, was based on convenience and was thus short lived. As Susan Jean Dickey noted in her thesis on architect brothers Frederick and Oscar Ruffini, "for unknown reasons the partnership [with Preston] soured and sometime in 1878 it dissolved."²⁸ The dissolution of the partnership was acrimonious, and the rift would continue to affect the work of the two men in the ensuing years. Ultimately, their strained relationship cost the pair what could have been a crowning achievement for either man, or both. Their disagreement became public during the planning for the most coveted and anticipated public commission in the state, the new Texas State Capitol.

For several years the state had planned to replace its 1852 statehouse, which proved inadequate to meet the needs of the expanding government following Reconstruction. The building, considered bland architecturally and therefore not artistically representative of a promising and vibrant state, was out of place within the energetic commercial landscape of Congress Avenue. In 1880, journalists and humorists Alexander Edwin Sweet and John Armoy Knox observed, "at a distance, [it] looks like a corn-crib with the half of a large watermelon on top of it." Sweet and Knox further commented that "the view from the Capitol Hill is beautiful,

²⁷ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, Mar. 14, 1880, p. 4, col. 1; *Travis County Deed Records*, volume 33, page 133, volume 46, page 44.

²⁸ Susan Jean Dickey, "F. E. and Oscar Ruffini, Texas Architects, 1877–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1993), 84.

unless you allow your gaze to rest on the Capitol itself,” and they dismissed the building as a “miracle of architectural absurdity.”²⁹

In November 1880, the state was finally ready to commence intensive planning for a new grand Capitol worthy of the largest state in the nation. The legislature had earlier created the Capitol Building Commission comprising Gov. Oran M. Roberts, Comptroller Stephen H. Darden and State Treasurer and former governor Francis R. Lubbock. They in turn were charged with selecting two commissioners and an architect to supervise the construction of the new building. On November 16, the commission selected Judge Joseph Lee and Col. Nimrod L. Norton as the overseeing commissioners. Meeting together the following day, the commission and its new appointees discussed the merits of several candidates for the position of supervisor and chose the elder statesman Jasper Newton Preston, “reserving the right to remove him at any time for cause.”³⁰

On the following day, November 18, Preston and the commission members made three important decisions that set the parameters for the project. First, they agreed there was a need for only one building, as opposed to several structures scattered around the city, and that funding would be provided through the sale of 3,000,000 acres of public land in the Texas Panhandle. Second, the new building would be of a size sufficient to house all government offices except the General Land Office, which had its own building on the Capitol grounds at that time. Third, Preston, with commissioners Lee and Norton, presented a copy of the call for “proposals for Plans and Specifications for a Building such as would be needed.” The notice appeared in the state’s leading newspapers.³¹

Over the next several months, the commission met sporadically as the members awaited the proposals. The call, however, failed to produce what the commission felt was an adequate response. Only eight firms had presented a total of eleven designs for this largest of public projects by the January 1881 deadline. In contrast, calls for even the smallest courthouse projects typically drew four or more submittals. By February, the commissioners decided to solicit an outside opinion to advise them on which design was preferable in order to avoid any appearance of impropriety, favoritism or lack of professional expertise. The Texas Legislature concurred and appropriated \$2,000 to enlist the services of “a skilled and impartial architect or architects” for that advisory role.³²

²⁹ Alex E. Sweet and J. Armo Knox, *On a Mexican Mustang through Texas: From the Gulf to the Rio Grande* (Hartford, Conn., 1883), 641.

³⁰ Minutes [Minute Book], State Capitol Board (May 16, 1879–July 18, 1881), Capitol Building Commission Records (Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² H. P. N. Gammel (comp.), *The Laws of Texas, 1882–1897* (10 vols., Austin: Gammel Book Co., 1898), IX, 219–220; Capitol Building Commission, *Report of the Capitol Building Commissioners to the Governor of Texas, Austin, January 1, 1883* (Austin: E. W. Swindells, State Printer, 1883), 16–17.

As historian William E. Green chronicled in his study on the Texas Capitol competition, the legislature's decision resulted in the introduction of a new player in the architectural review process, noted New York architect Napoleon Le Brun.³³ Although he did not arrive in Texas until April, the weight of Le Brun's legislative mandate in effect diluted Preston's influence in the design selection. However, Preston was not without some measure of power. He was still the supervising architect for the state project and, as such, stood to benefit from whatever decision was made. Even following the final selection of the key designer, Preston could look forward to several years of supervisory work on a high profile public project in his adopted state that would, no doubt, ensure his continued success and stature. Unfortunately, such promise proved to be fleeting, and his reputation became clouded in controversy.

By April 1881, the board was ready to make its decision, realizing that its evaluation would most likely result in a landmark structure that would, in the best case, make a grand statement and stand the test of time. They were equally aware, however, that the commission could prove to be a signal work for the chosen architect. The gravity of that decision was not lost on Preston, but he may not have been fully aware that one of the submittals, an anonymous proposal titled "San Jacinto," was in fact a design by his former colleague and now nemesis, Frederick Ruffini.³⁴

As the commission readied itself for Le Brun's arrival and direction, Preston's rivalry with Ruffini once again surfaced. The flash point in 1881 originated with an incident that occurred several years earlier in Georgetown, when Ruffini and Preston collaborated on the Williamson County Courthouse. Although neither man left a personal account of the exact nature of the conflict, the story unfolded before the Capitol Commission and is chronicled in the minutes. Ruffini obliquely referred to the matter the year before in a letter to his wife: "the [Williamson County] Judge said they didn't want anything more to do with Preston, that he didn't know his business, and they thought I am now the best architect in the state, because I had built more Court houses and Jails than any other architect in the State."³⁵

The situation came to a head when Ruffini and Austin native James Wahrenberger, two competitors for the Capitol competition, proffered charges of corruption against Preston. The charges stemmed from the Williamson County Courthouse project three years earlier. The timing of the charges came just as the final vote for the winning Capitol design was under consideration.

³³ William Elton Green, "'A Question of Great Delicacy': The Texas Capitol Competition, 1881," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 92 (Oct., 1988), 247-270.

³⁴ Dickey, "F. E. and Oscar Ruffini," 87; Green, "'A Question of Great Delicacy,'" 247-270.

³⁵ Dickey, "F. E. and Oscar Ruffini," 107.

On April 12, 1881, the Capitol Building Commission, in its afternoon session, considered the allegations. Governor Roberts reported that the claimants, Ruffini and Wahrenberger, were in the antechamber and were available for immediate testimony. As the meeting began, Preston appeared ready to defend his actions relative to the Williamson County Courthouse project, and specifically as they related to allegations of impropriety in the selection process. As the story unfolded, however, its complexity and seriousness became more evident, and Preston's reaction seemingly changed from one of confidence to that of resignation. A Georgetown contractor by the name of Loving alleged that he had paid Preston \$200 to secure his contract and that it was his understanding that Preston was to receive an additional percentage of contracting funds from the county.³⁶

The gravity of the contractor's testimony, coupled with the presence of Preston's rivals in the adjacent room, presumably ready to offer corroborative evidence, quickly changed the tone of the meeting. Comptroller William M. Brown, sensing the inevitability of the situation and the weight of the evidence, pointedly asked, "Mr. Preston, will you ask an investigation or will you resign?" As the minutes further note, "Mr. Preston replied that he was ready to resign, and asked for ten minutes to write his resignation. Mr. Preston presented his resignation, which was accepted by a vote of the Board."³⁷ The board then moved to settle Preston's account and adjourned. With the board's action, Preston's association with what should have been the largest and most ambitious project of his career, and which would have assured him a more prominent place in the architectural history of the state, came to an abrupt end.

The Capitol dispute was not the only architectural controversy facing state officials in 1881. Wahrenburger would also suffer through an ignominious episode. An incident involving other architects had tainted the design selection process several years earlier with regard to the State Lunatic Asylum. In the summer of 1881, the matter once again surfaced as planning began for additional buildings on the campus. The board of managers for the State Lunatic Asylum initially selected Austin native Wahrenberger and Englishman John Andrewartha as the supervising architects for the work. Following construction proposal requests, the board also chose the firm of Brown, Kendall and Company, which had recently worked with Wahrenberger on structures at the State Blind Asylum, to oversee the construction.

Once again, critical rumors began to circulate, this time about the professional credibility and past performances of the selected firm, especially with regard to the Blind Asylum and the Wahrenberger connection. The

³⁶ Minutes [Minute Book], (May 16, 1879 – July 18, 1881).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

architectural bid process in the capital city during the late nineteenth century was a cutthroat business, and it showed no signs of abatement where plum state projects were involved. In the months that followed the construction award to Brown, Kendall and Company, there were intense efforts on several fronts to address the public concerns. In the end, possibly due in part to the recent controversy regarding the State Capitol, the board chose to replace the firm with the partnership of Elijah E. Myers, who had received the final Capitol commission in May, and Jasper Preston. With the award, Preston proved his resiliency, further reflecting his professional standing in the state. Preston's association with Myers may have begun when both were practicing architects in Michigan many years before. As Myers's business partner in Texas, Preston may have also had an inside perspective on the work at the Capitol even after his official connection had been severed. A November 1881 article in the Austin newspaper stated that "E. E. Myers, architect of the new capitol, left the city yesterday for his home, in Michigan. He was accompanied by Mr. Preston, architect of this city, and Capt. W. M. Wilson, president of the board of trustees of the state lunatic asylum."³⁸ Preston designed a number of the asylum buildings around Texas, including much of the original campuses at Austin and Terrell.

Despite the specter of recent allegations, Preston retained his stature as a leading designer in Austin and the rest of Texas, due in some measure also to the paucity of qualified competition within the state, especially at the state capital. In 1882, architects submitting plans for the new University of Texas main building included the usual suspects—Myers, Ruffini, Wahrenburger, and Preston, plus Williamson County Courthouse contractor John Didelot.³⁹

The situation in Austin reflected in microcosm the broader deficiency nationwide. The known academic training of Jasper and Samuel Preston as architects mirrored national change in the profession. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) began the first formal architectural education program in 1868. Even when Preston moved to Austin seven years later, only four additional universities offered formal architectural training: Cornell and Syracuse in the Northeast, and Illinois and Michigan in the Midwest.⁴⁰ But even this was a significant step forward in the establishment of a professional standard for architects. In contrast with Jasper Preston's relatively informal education in the 1850s, Samuel Preston attended MIT in the early 1880s as a "special student, not a candidate for

³⁸ Hafertepe, *Abner Cook*, 180–181; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Nov. 6, 1881, p. 4, col. 3.

³⁹ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Mar. 12, 1882, p. 4, col. 3.

⁴⁰ Arthur Clason Weatherhead, "The History of Collegiate Education in Architecture in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1941), 33–43.

a degree.”⁴¹ In November 1885, Samuel went to St. Louis to attend a meeting of the Western Association of Architects, an organization for professionals based in Chicago, and he was the only Texas representative at the meeting.⁴²

Even though Samuel Preston received some formal training, the complete transition to academically trained architects was still years away in Texas. Hank Todd Smith, in his history of the Texas Society of Architects, noted, “In the 1880s there were probably only 50 or so men in the state calling themselves architects.”⁴³ By 1886, the numbers were increasing, and a group of self-styled architects assembled in Austin on January 19 for the purpose of forming a professional association, the first attempt to apply standard practices to the profession in Texas. Emblematic of Preston’s early influence and power within his profession was his election as vice president of the association. His son, Samuel, who was elected the first secretary at the same organizational gathering, called the meeting to order.⁴⁴

Jasper Newton Preston was at the height of his Texas architectural career in 1886. In less than a dozen years, he had established a remarkable body of work that brought him acclaim and statewide recognition for his innovative designs. The firm of J. N. Preston and Son expanded with a San Antonio office in the Groos and Company Bank building, advertising an array of architectural services but focusing on public buildings.⁴⁵ Jasper Preston’s prominence as an elder within his profession put him at the forefront of change. Rather than building on this reputation, as others might have done, Preston chose instead to seek a newly developing scene at the age of fifty-four. In May 1886, as he drew to a close on the high point of his work in Texas, the opulent Driskill Hotel in Austin, he decided to head west with his architect son to open a practice in California.⁴⁶

In 1887, shortly after the Prestons made their journey west, the *Los Angeles Daily Herald* reported, “Los Angeles, with its rapid improvement and the erection of numerous platial [*sic*] residences, large store houses and costly public buildings, presents a splendid field for talented architects. Messrs. Preston & Son realize this fact and a short time ago left

⁴¹ Lois N. Beattie to William Elton Green, May 23, 1991 (copy in possession of the authors); *An Illustrated History of Los Angeles County, California* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1889), 591–592.

⁴² *Austin Daily Statesman*, Nov. 27, 1885, p. 4, col. 5.

⁴³ Hank Todd Smith, *Since 1886: A History of the Texas Society of Architects* (Austin: Texas Society of Architects, 1983).

⁴⁴ Minutes, Texas State Association of Architects, 1886–1895, pp. 62, 83, Archives Division, Texas State Library; *Dallas Morning News*, Jan. 20, 1886, p. 3.

⁴⁵ *San Antonio Daily Express*, Mar. 22, 1883, p. 1, col. 8.

⁴⁶ *An Illustrated History of Los Angeles County, California*, 591–592.

Austin, Texas, where they stood at the head of the architectural profession and came to this city where the field is so much broader.”⁴⁷

The Prestons lost little time in developing their California practice. In the year of their arrival, the father and son team collaborated on the design of the new Los Angeles County Courthouse, a major project for the newly arrived professionals. Similar in many respects to Austin’s Driskill Hotel, the massive Romanesque Revival structure reflected the Prestons’ influence in its exuberant use of ornate detailing, such as spires, roof gables, arched windows, turrets, and a grand central clock tower. Prominently sited on a rise that added verticality to the overall massing, the building was a landmark in a rapidly growing urban center, lending dramatic public definition to an increasingly cosmopolitan and commercial city. Preston’s use of high-style architecture showed that he was, by then, even more comfortable with incorporating such elements into his natural design process. The courthouse showed a relatively uninhibited use of ornate detailing, especially in the upper floors and roofline, which dominated the appearance.⁴⁸

While Preston added to his architectural repertoire in his early California years, much of what he designed has not survived and has given way to more modern expressions of design and use. What can be verified, though, is the range of his body of work, both geographically and architecturally. His projects included commercial structures, courthouses and other public buildings, and residences both modest and elaborate. The archival evidence of his work shows that he had a good understanding of the Victorian vocabulary, working with popular styles such as Italianate and Queen Anne. While he focused primarily on the Los Angeles area where he made his home, he also worked throughout Southern California and even into neighboring Arizona, where his 1894 Coconino County Courthouse still stands in Flagstaff.⁴⁹

Preston’s early years in California were marked by both professional recognition and personal tragedy. Building on his reputation as a senior professional, well versed in national and regional influences of design, as well as the complexities of his profession, he was an erstwhile competitor in many significant projects. A review of *Builder and Contractor*, a Los Angeles trade publication, showed Preston was both prolific and diversified in his work. One notable contract was the Los Angeles Public High School (1880s), also a landmark in the downtown area, which featured Romanesque and Renaissance Revival details in a substantial edifice that more closely resembled a courthouse, with its dominant campanile, than the standard school structure of the day.

⁴⁷ *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, June 5, 1887, p. 5, col. 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *The Coconino Sun*, May 24, 1894, p. 7, col. 1.

In the midst of his success, though, Preston again faced the loss of a family member, this time his business partner and son, Samuel, who collaborated with his father for more than twenty years. He died of typhoid fever on August 17, 1889, at the age of thirty one. Surviving Samuel, in addition to his parents, were his wife Clara May (Bloomburg), and daughter Janet Maria.⁵⁰

Even after the loss of his son, the fifty seven-year-old Jasper Preston continued with his practice, relying in part, as he did in Texas, on partnerships with a number of prominent regional architects. Among them, as noted in the Los Angeles city directories, were Seymour Locke (1893–1894), Don MacKenzie (1896), Norman F. Marsh (1900–1901) and Ira H. Seehorn (1902–1907).⁵¹ Preston evidently operated alone, or with limited partnership in the interim years. A Tacoma, Washington, city directory from 1890 lists his name in partnership with A. Franklin Heide.⁵² This partnership was brief and probably represented only a project or two. It was with Seehorn that he had his longest association, when Preston was in his seventies, and the two architects enjoyed a wide variety of projects. In 1907, at the end of their collaboration, Preston received a high honor for his many years of architectural work in the Golden State. As recorded in *The Architect and Engineer of California*, “a motion was made and passed unanimously that J. N. Preston, one of the oldest members of the [Southern California] chapter, now seventy six years of age, be made a life member of the local organization [American Institute of Architects].”⁵³ Preston had served as president of the Southern California chapter of the AIA for many years.

While Preston enjoyed the esteem and recognition of his colleagues at the turn of the twentieth century, he was not reluctant to confront them in heated disputes when he felt it necessary. His public and prolonged diatribe with architect Hugh Todd, for example, leaves us with a record of his passion for his profession. In 1893, following the announcement that Preston and Locke were awarded the contract for the highly coveted San Jose Normal School (later to become the University of California at Los Angeles), Todd took to the pages of *Builder and Contractor* to defile Preston’s character by alleging duplicity and deceit in the selection process. According to Todd, the candidates were narrowed to a select group of

⁵⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 18, 1889, p. 7; *Grand Ledge Independent*, Sept. 6, 1899, p. 7.

⁵¹ *Los Angeles City Directory* (Los Angeles: W. H. L. Corran, publisher and printer, 1887–1893); *Maxwell’s Los Angeles City Directory and Gazetteer of Southern California* (Los Angeles: George W. Maxwell, publisher, 1894–1899); *Los Angeles City Directory* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Modern Directory Company, 1900–1903); *Dana Burk’s Los Angeles City Directory* (Los Angeles: General Directory Publishers, 1905–1906); *Los Angeles City Directory* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles City Directory Company, 1907).

⁵² *Tacoma, Washington City Directory 1889–91* (Tacoma: R. L. Polk and Company, 1889).

⁵³ *The Architect and Engineer of California*, 10 (Sept. 1907), 75.

architects, who made public presentations to the board of trustees. Reaching an impasse on selection of a designer, “the trustees left the architects in possession of the room.” Todd further noted, “Without any discussion almost, the architects resolved—with only one dissenting—not to compete again, and recommended the trustees should select one of the competitors as their architect.”⁵⁴

The same edition of *Builder and Contractor* announced that Preston and Locke received the hefty \$60,000 contract, and in Todd’s view, the result could have only come from unfair influence. He directed his ire squarely at Preston, although he did withhold the name, referring to him only as “the ex-president of the Architectural Association.” Todd was, in effect, calling Preston’s professionalism into question, and doing it in an embarrassing and public way:

In this connection I would ask the ex-president of the Architectural Association why he called on me, asking what I would do in again competing, and when I assured him I would hold by the resolution and not again compete, he, in return, assured me that was his and his firm’s position; they would not again compete, while he, if I am rightly informed, was at that time preparing his second competition design. I should think his [Los Angeles] High School record was enough for him, and all who were identified with the same, if they had the public interest at heart.

I trust all concerned in this ‘thimble rig’ competition are clear and desire to act fairly by the State.

One thing, however, is certain; not one of the trustees would employ in their private capacity an architect who would need 20 per cent extras to finish an ordinary piece of work.⁵⁵

Even though Todd did not mention Preston’s name, the following issue of the trade paper carried a response that left no doubt as to the identity of the “ex-president.” In his letter of response, Preston said, “In your issue of August 30th appears a scurrilous article over the signature of Hugh Todd in which are found some statements regarding the recent competition for the Normal School building that would be astounding had they originated from almost any other source, but coming from the pen of this man Todd the cause for surprise is largely removed.”⁵⁶

Preston continued, noting, “It is very unusual to see such an amount of prevarication, duplicity and dissimulation, either in political or professional questions, as are gathered together in the article referred to.” He followed the vitriolic introduction with a point-by-point refutation of the

⁵⁴ *Builder and Contractor* 1, no. 27 (Aug. 30, 1893), p. 1, col. 3.

⁵⁵ *Builder and Contractor* 1, no. 27 (Aug. 30, 1893), p. 1, col. 3.

⁵⁶ *Builder and Contractor* 2, no. 28 (Sep. 6, 1893), p. 1, col. 1.

allegations “for the purpose of answering such trash” and concluded by saying Todd’s remarks were in “very bad form, especially when coming from a man who cannot point to one structure as being the product of his brain, which bears on its facades the most remote indication of either skill or ability in, or knowledge of the profession which he assumes to practice. . . . Pique and sour grapes make an unsavory dish.”⁵⁷ The unrepentant Todd responded in the next issue of *Builder and Contractor*, but failed to draw another public reaction from Preston.

At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Preston’s abilities as an active architect had evidently run their course. He is listed as a practicing architect in the 1910 city directory at age seventy-eight, but only as a resident of the area in 1911, the same year his wife Janet died.⁵⁸ The following year, Preston left the Los Angeles area and moved farther north to Union City, where he became a resident of the Masonic Home for Adults. He continued to live there until his death December 8, 1922, at the age of ninety.⁵⁹ According to burial records, his body was returned to Los Angeles County and interred next to his wife’s grave in Hollywood Cemetery, now Hollywood Forever Cemetery. Reputedly in the same plot are Jasper’s daughter Flora and her husband Finley M. Hotchkis. As of the writing of this article, however, no gravestones exist at the Preston family plot.⁶⁰



In his lifetime, Preston contributed significantly to the built environments of Michigan, Texas, California, Arizona, Washington, and possibly other states. A search of landmark surveys in these states, however, indicates that his largest collection of extant buildings remains in Texas, where he practiced for eleven years, from 1875 to 1886. Eight of his buildings carry landmark designation, with six now listed in the National Register of Historic Places and five designated as Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks.⁶¹ These buildings collectively provide us with the best remaining body of his work in the United States.

Preston’s work in Texas dates from soon after his arrival in Austin. In the 1870s, he designed a number of commercial buildings, residences,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 4, 1911, part I, p. 16, col. 2.

⁵⁹ Jasper Newton Preston death certificate, Alameda County, California, Dec. 8, 1922.

⁶⁰ Nancy M. O’Connor to William Elton Green, June 10, 1994 (copy in possession of the authors).

⁶¹ Records of Texas Historical Commission, Austin.



Jasper Newton Preston's earliest surviving Texas work appears to be the J. W. Hannig Building at 206 East Sixth Street in Austin.

institutional buildings, and courthouses. His earliest surviving Texas work appears to be the J. W. Hannig building at 206 East Sixth Street in Austin. German native Joseph William Hannig, perhaps best known historically as the fifth husband of the celebrated Alamo survivor, Susanna Dickinson Hannig, was a successful Austin merchant. He operated a cabinet shop, a furniture store, and undertaking services, and had shops in Austin, Lockhart, and San Antonio.⁶²

Preston's design of the Hannig building reflects his understanding of the Renaissance Revival architectural vocabulary. Three stories in height and six bays wide, it features stylistic columns on the ground floor, mirrored by pilasters, or engaged columns, on the upper stories. Windows include both round-arched windows on the second floor and stilted arched windows above. A decorative projecting cornice with finials and heavy brackets includes an arched centerpiece that bears the name of Hannig. The Hannig building is a contributing property within the Sixth Street Historic District listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

⁶² Margaret Swett Henson, "Dickinson, Susanna Wilkerson" in Ron Tyler, Douglas E. Barnett, Roy R. Barkley, Penelope C. Anderson, and Mark F. Odintz (eds.), *The New Handbook of Texas* (6 vols.; Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), II, 637.



Preston's design for the Hannig Building includes both round arched windows on the second floor and stilted arched windows above. A decorative projecting cornice with finials and heavy brackets includes an arched centerpiece that bears Hannig's name.

It is significant, not only as Preston's earliest Texas work, but also for its obvious influence on the more elaborate and prominently sited Walter Tips Company building, on Congress Avenue, which remains the best representation of his early work in the state.

German native Walter Tips (1841–1911) was an influential early merchant and business leader in the capital city. Following participation in the Civil War, where he served as an artillery officer, Tips returned to Texas and opened a hardware store in New Braunfels with Wilhelm Clemens. Tips's older brother, Edward, had earlier opened a hardware operation in Austin and, upon his death in 1872, Walter Tips joined with two partners to take over the firm. With success and growth came the need for a new building and, utilizing the same site where his brother's operation was located, he commissioned Jasper N. Preston and Son to design an ornate new headquarters within Austin's burgeoning central business district.⁶³

The design brought a sophisticated Renaissance Revival style of architecture to Austin's most prominent avenue, three blocks south of the

⁶³ *A History of the Tips Building*. Commemorative booklet published by the Franklin Savings Association, Austin [note: no date, no page numbers. Circa 1979.]



The Walter Tips Company Building, on Congress Avenue in Austin, remains the best representation of Preston's early work in Texas.

Capitol grounds. It dominates the block in both size and style, making a prominent architectural statement. Preston's design features Italianate styling with Gothic Revival details. Binnie Hoffman, whose firm prepared the National Register nomination for the Tips building, attributed the stylistic influences to Renaissance buildings in Venice, Italy, particularly through the use of paired lancet windows and intricately carved stonework in the cornice and upper stories.⁶⁴ Further, John Wilson Randle wrote that Samuel Sloan's September 1868 issue of the *Architectural Review and Builder's Journal* "appears to have provided Jasper Newton Preston with his idea of Venetian Gothic."⁶⁵

The three-story limestone structure features an ornate cornice, carvings by local stonemasons, two skylights for interior lighting, and sidewalls of limestone rubble. Interior cast iron columns on the ground floor initially provided a large, open commercial area. The third floor originally included a room for Masonic lodge gatherings, as well as a 400-seat audi-

⁶⁴ Binnie Hoffman, "The Walter Tips Building" (manuscript), Recorded Texas Historic Landmark file (1980), Texas Historical Commission, Austin, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Daniel Wilson Randle, "Tips Building: A Style Unto Itself," *Texas Architect* (May/June, 1978), 61–63.

torium used by the library association. The openness of the third-floor space was accomplished by an intricate and unique wooden truss system Preston designed for supporting the vaulted ceiling and roof.⁶⁶

Adding to the unique architectural and structural character of the Tips building is the source allegedly used for the cast metal elements in the system. Lock McDaniel, who oversaw foundry work associated with the project, provided a detailed description:

It consisted of eleven fluted columns and arch plates sprung from one column to the other through the center of the building as the girder will show for itself now. In operating the foundry, I was forced to use scrap iron. I conceived the idea of making said girder a Confederate Memorial. I wrote Mr. Edmond W. Cauthon, my wife's father, a merchant at Anderson, to ship me several tons of the exploded shells from the Arsenal. He acceded to my request and shipped the shells to me. J. N. Preston was the architect. George Oldwright made my patterns and Maxine Marcot, an expert molder, the castings, and I certify that every ounce used in making the girder was from those pieces of shell which my father-in-law shipped me.⁶⁷

Praise for the striking new Tips building, even while under construction, was both profuse and immediate. An article in the Austin *Daily Statesman* noted, "Private enterprise is outstripping public enterprise in this city. The Capitol would look insignificant as compared to the Cook, Tips and Brueggerhoff buildings."⁶⁸ Given that the statement was written only six weeks after construction began, it is evident the author is basing his assessment in large part on the available plans. In October 1876, a *Daily Statesman* article noted that "many people gathered in front of the Tips building yesterday afternoon to see the massive arch stones that are to grace the front of this splendid edifice hoisted by derricks into their positions."⁶⁹ The work took just over a year to complete, and Tips's new hardware operation opened in May 1877 with an invitation for customers to visit the "mammoth store."⁷⁰

The Walter Tips Company remained in the building until 1927, when the first of a series of renovations altered the original architectural design. In that year, the first-floor columns were removed, and the upper floors were supported by a steel beam. The carved stone elements were supposedly used as landfill in the vicinity of what became the Terrace Motel on South Congress. Additional façade changes over the ensuing years

⁶⁶ *A History of the Tips Building*, [note: see note 63. No page numbers.] "Congress Avenue Historic District," National Register of Historic Places file, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

⁶⁷ Hoffman, "The Walter Tips Building," p. 30. McDaniel was referring to the former ordnance works at Anderson, Grimes County, Texas. "Grimes County, C.S.A.," Official State Historical Marker file, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

⁶⁸ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, May 12, 1876.

⁶⁹ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, Oct. 20, 1876.

⁷⁰ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, May 11, 1877.



The Tips Building dominates the block in both size and style, making a prominent architectural statement featuring Italianate styling with Gothic Revival details.

obscured the historic appearance of the Tips building. The radical but reversible alterations included division of interior space and the addition of lath and plaster slipcovers on the primary façade. In 1977, the Heritage Society of Austin purchased the structure from Tips family heirs and began the removal of non-historic materials. The following year, Franklin Savings Association purchased it and began restoration for use as its home office. In the process, the firm made the Tips building a focal point of its marketing strategy, which highlighted historic preservation through adaptive reuse. As noted in one of their promotional pieces,

Together with the recently renovated Paramount Theatre across the street, it forms a magnificent gateway looking north toward the capital [*sic*] complex. In addition, it makes a powerful and timely statement on behalf of downtown revitalization. As Franklin's brand-new "old" home office, the Tips Building represents the Association's finest gift yet to the City of Austin and the State of Texas.⁷¹

In 1980, the Texas Historical Commission designated the Tips building a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark. In the application for an Official Texas Historical Marker, Binnie Hoffman noted it was "a masterful blend of the

⁷¹ *A History of the Tips Building.*



The Calvary Episcopal Church in Bastrop is the only known extant example of Preston's ecclesiastical work.

architect's version of Venetian Gothic and Italianate Renaissance Revival styles bound together in a true High Victorian eclecticism."⁷² She further noted,

The five-bay east façade, framed by fluted and banded pilasters with Corinthian and foliated capitals, is divided horizontally by heavy string-courses at the second and third floors. The composite-Corinthian metal cornice is capped by a fan-shaped pediment visually supported by scroll brackets on each side. A large, urn-shaped finial projects vertically from the top of the pediment, with smaller finials at either termination of the cornice.⁷³

Franklin Savings Association completed a restoration of the building in 1978, the same year the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Congress Avenue Historic District.⁷⁴

In 1881, after the Hannig and Tips buildings were completed but while Preston dealt with state construction project controversies in Austin, he oversaw the development of a dramatically different project, the Calvary

⁷² Hoffman, "The Walter Tips Building," p. 4.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *A History of the Tips Building*.



The Calvary Episcopal Church features lancet windows, a cross-gabled roof, buttressed pilasters, an asymmetrical plan, and a dominant bell tower that anchors the primary façade.

Episcopal Church in Bastrop. The Austin newspaper reported on the August 11 cornerstone laying ceremony, noting, “The architect, Mr. Preston, of Austin, is to be congratulated upon having prepared a plan for a church, which, when complete, will be one of the handsomest buildings of the kind in this state.”⁷⁵

The significance of the Calvary Episcopal Church today is that it is the only known extant example of Preston’s ecclesiastical work. An early Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (1962), it is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing member of the Bastrop Commercial Historic District. The Gothic Revival sanctuary represents Preston’s interpretation of popular church architectural idioms of the time. The stately structure features lancet windows, a cross-gabled roof, buttressed pilasters, an asymmetrical plan and a dominant bell tower that anchors the primary façade.

In the principal entryway at the base of the bell tower, Preston demonstrated his attention to detail. Borrowing heavily from European influences, principally those of the British Isles, he accentuated the doorway

⁷⁵ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Jul. 7, Aug. 12, 1881.

with an arched gable that draws attention visually down from the verticality of the tower to personalize the entry.

Although Preston attended the cornerstone ceremony in August 1881, the work would continue at a slow pace for years. The congregants did not hold their first services in the new structure until April 25, 1883. Even then, interior works—especially work on original furnishings—continued into 1887, after Preston had left Central Texas for California.

In the late 1990s, members of Calvary Episcopal Church chose to modify the structure's original design to meet the demands of their growing congregation. The new design called for retaining the Prestonian chapel and realigning the interior space so it could serve as the sanctuary area. Forming the new nave in the reworked floor plan was an addition that dramatically increased the worship space while also replicating Preston's design detailing in such features as the pilasters and windows. With the addition and realignment, the bell tower visually moved from the corner to the center of the primary façade, accentuating the new asymmetrical cross design. Despite the changes, the structure retained its landmark status, in large part due to the significance of Preston's original work, which is still discernible to those aware of the architectural history of the property.

In Preston's day, architects found their greatest fame and fortune in the design of county courthouses. In 1881, the Texas Legislature authorized counties to issue bonds for the financing of new buildings for county business. This action resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of new courthouses constructed in the state. Some counties, only then newly formed, took advantage of the legal authorization to build their first courthouses, and older, established counties also took the opportunity to replace existing structures. This demand created a market for the state's nascent architectural profession, and the resulting competition brought about an era of public architecture that has been referred to as the golden age of courthouse construction. Several designers developed lasting reputations as the state's foremost architects during this era, including J. Riely Gordon, James E. Flanders, W. C. Dodson, Alfred Giles, Frederick and Oscar Ruffini, and J. N. Preston.⁷⁶

Preston's earliest courthouses in the counties of McCulloch (1878), Williamson (1878), Gregg (1879), Nolan (1882), Taylor (1883), and Washington (1883) are no longer standing, and so the oldest extant courthouse is in Bastrop.⁷⁷ Originally known as Mina when first settled in the 1820s, Bastrop began where a branch of El Camino Real crossed the Colorado River. Important to early Texas settlement, Bastrop remains one of

⁷⁶ Willard B. Robinson, *The People's Architecture: Texas Courthouses, Jails and Municipal Buildings* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1983), 108–121, 127–134, 160–179.

⁷⁷ Preston also designed the Mitchell County Courthouse in 1885, which was replaced.



J. N. Preston and Son designed the Bastrop County Courthouse in 1883 utilizing classical elements and a basic cross-corridor plan. It is the oldest extant example of Preston's courthouses.

the most historic communities in Central Texas. J. N. Preston and Son designed the Bastrop County Courthouse in 1883, utilizing classical elements and a basic cross-corridor plan. Noteworthy exterior features included articulated pavilions, triangular pediments over central entryways, pilasters, dentils, and a tall, central bell tower.

In 1924, county officials approved new architectural plans that significantly modified the original Preston design. These alterations converted the building's appearance to a Mission Revival style, which was popular at the time. Changes included the removal of classical embellishments, the truncation of the bell tower, the stepped reconfiguration of the parapet, the addition of new, more massive columns, and the addition of a heavy stucco finish that obscured the original brick façade and many detail lines. Regardless, the overall historic design and sense of place remained intact, which allowed the structure to be designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1964 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ "Bastrop County Courthouse and Jail Complex," National Register of Historic Places nomination, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.



J. N. Preston and Son designed the Bell County Courthouse in Belton, on which work began in 1884. The architects chose the Renaissance Revival style on a cross-axial plan using locally quarried limestone.

A more historically accurate and representative example of Preston's design is the Bell County Courthouse in Belton, forty-five miles north of Austin. Originally known as Nolan Springs and later Nolanville, Belton became the seat of government when the legislature organized Bell County in 1850. The county and the town were named in honor of Peter Hansborough Bell, then governor of the state. The new county seat was platted on a central square design immediately adjacent to Nolan Creek, and the county constructed the first courthouse there in 1851. They replaced it only eight years later, and, while the second one lasted longer than the first, it was determined to be structurally unsound by 1883. As a result, commissioners approved construction of their third courthouse and selected J. N. Preston and Son as architects.⁷⁹

Utilizing the Prestons' design, work began on the new courthouse in 1884. The architects chose the Renaissance Revival style on a cross-axial plan using locally quarried limestone, a building material that weathered to a golden hue. The exuberance of their design through the use of

⁷⁹ "Bell County Courthouse," National Register of Historic Places nomination; "Bell County Courthouse," Recorded Texas Historic Landmark file, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

pediments, loggias and colonnades, reflected in no small measure the identical vocabulary of the State Capitol, especially in the original designs of Myers. A comparison of design elements shows striking similarities between the courthouse entryways, for example, and the scaled-down prominence of the Capitol's north side.

The exterior of the Bell County Courthouse, as built, featured a pronounced ground floor of ashlar cut stone, accented with arched openings and a loggia that architecturally provided a visual base for the more elaborate second and third floors. Adding dramatic effect to the upper stories were columns, corner pavilions, and pedimented windows. Classical references were evident in the jutting porticoes enhanced by columns.

Capping the courthouse was a massive central bell and clock tower, evocative of Mansard detailing that included columns, a louvered central section and pedimented detailing in the domed roof. Topping the central tower was a goddess of justice statue, again an architectural reference to the Capitol. On the interior, detailing included marble tiling, lightly finished wood and, in the district courtroom, ornate fluted pilasters beneath a paneled ceiling.

Keeping with a design preference of the era, the Bell County Courthouse provided architectural elaboration on all façades, although architecturally the elongated elevations on the north (Central Avenue) and south (Avenue A) visually served as primary entryways. In reality, given the makeup of the square and the surrounding commercial district, the north side dominated in that regard.

The contracting firm of Ben D. Lee, Belton, completed work on the Bell County Courthouse in 1885, and county commissioners certified it for occupancy in May of that year. Built during the so-called golden age of Texas courthouses, the building was recognized as one of the premier courthouses of the era, even in its day. As the Fort Worth *Daily Gazette* noted soon after the structure's completion, "Among the many new courthouses built in the state during the past three years . . . the Bell County Courthouse surpasses all in beauty of design and elegance of finish."⁸⁰

A review of county commissioners court minutes showed relatively few extensive repairs to the courthouse in the early years. Work approved by commissioners related generally to cosmetic details, such as painting and metalwork repair, and to the updating of facilities, including wiring, plumbing, a new stairway, and added restrooms. The most dramatic change to the Prestons's original design came in 1950, when county commissioners approved removal of the central bell tower, which had deteriorated. With truncation of the dominant central element, the building assumed a more

⁸⁰ "Bell County Courthouse," National Register of Historic Places nomination, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.



Capping the Bell County Courthouse was a massive central bell and clock tower, which included columns, a louvered central section, and pedimented detailing in the domed roof. Topping the central tower was a goddess of justice statue.

modest appearance that failed to compete significantly with the surrounding commercial buildings. Nevertheless, enough historic fabric remained by 1976 to allow the structure to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Five years later, it was also designated a State Archeological Landmark, primarily for its historical significance.

In 1996, county commissioners voted to restore the courthouse, including its signature central tower, and to update it technologically for continued use as county office space, although they had years earlier constructed a large county annex on a lot opposite Main Street. Working with historic documents and photographs for detail, the county's consulting firm, The Williams Company, AIA, of Austin, oversaw replication of important missing exterior elements of the Prestons' original design. The work took four years to complete, and in 2000, the Texas Historical Commission approved the restored 1885 courthouse as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, its third historical designation.⁸¹

⁸¹ "Bell County Courthouse," Recorded Texas Historic Landmark file, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

A total of eight extant buildings in Texas can be attributed to Jasper Newton Preston, and all of them carry historical designations. The Cameron County Courthouse (1883) in Brownsville was the county's first permanent building and served for more than thirty years until a new courthouse was built on a new site. The two-story plastered brick building originally featured a prominent central tower and smaller corner tower extensions, as well as pediments above portico entries. The upper floor had extremely vertical windows flanking rounded-arch double doors on each façade, while the lower floors included quoins and arched windows. After serving for thirty years as the county courthouse, the building became the local Masonic lodge, all elements above the roofline were removed, and many of the window openings were filled in. Still, the building retained enough historic and architectural integrity to be designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1962.

An indirect example of Preston's work can be seen in the San Saba County Jail (1884). In this case Preston is listed as the supervising architect rather than the architect of record for this building, as the commissioners court minutes state that the firm of J. N. Preston and Son was paid to supervise construction rather than provide original plans.⁸² The jail, in Italianate style and resembling many others of the period, was undoubtedly designed to incorporate specific jail equipment that was ordered from manufacturers out of state. The jail, the oldest public building in San Saba County, was named a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1969.

Much of Preston's influence in his profession is intangible today, either because prominent buildings have since been razed or because Preston was listed as a supervisor or consultant rather than the architect of record. But such examples further demonstrate his status as an experienced elder of his trade at a transitional time in Texas's architectural history. In 1883, Preston was called to Houston to examine plans for the new Harris County Courthouse.⁸³ He also designed Allen Hall, a prominent building at Austin's Tillotson Institute, an African American college one mile east of the Capitol. The president of Tillotson spoke in Preston's defense when the Capitol controversy arose. Allen Hall was a four-story, Second Empire-style edifice with Mansard roof and was a notable downtown landmark until it was razed in 1958. In 2001, Preston's Austin design for a home for the Driskill family on Whitis Street, later occupied by the Scarborough family, was gutted by fire and subsequently razed. Other prominent Preston designs, including several residences and commercial buildings, have been lost over the years, leaving us with an incomplete record of his architectural achievements.

⁸² San Saba County Commissioners Court Minutes, July 7, 1884.

⁸³ *Austin Daily Statesman*, May 11, 1883, p. 4, col. 4.



The structure considered Preston's crowning achievement in Texas architecture is the ornate Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin. It was his largest and most complex creation.

But the work that survives forms an ample collection to be admired and analyzed. By 1885, Preston had clearly established himself as a pre-eminent architect in the state, and he was much in demand, especially for public commissions. His growing body of work was a product not only of his skills and his popular design acumen, but also of his times. He rode the crest of a rapidly developing Texas, and his position within the growing capital city and its environs, as well as the burgeoning field of architecture, put him at the forefront. His work in the mid-1880s represented the high point of his professional career in Texas. Perhaps the best example of his golden era of design—the structure considered his crowning achievement in Texas architecture—is the ornate Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin. It would prove to be his largest and most complex creation.

Planning on the Driskill began in 1883, and construction continued for more than three years. Preston received the choice commission from Jesse Lincoln Driskill (1824–1890), a Tennessee native who gained prominence in Texas as a cattleman and merchant. Known by the honorary moniker of Colonel, Driskill gained his early fortune selling cattle to the Confederate Army during the Civil War, but his fortune, amassed in Confederate scrip, vanished at war's end. He rebuilt his cattle herds and became a drover to Abilene, Kansas, following Jesse Chisholm's trail along

the way. Later, he established large ranches in South Texas, Kansas, and the Dakota Territory.⁸⁴

By the 1880s, Driskill had once again established himself as a successful and prosperous businessman, with the capital city of Texas as his home. He was a prominent figure in post-war Austin, and it was his desire to contribute to the city's cosmopolitan transformation in a variety of ways. Reflecting the boastfulness of Austin at a time when construction on the grand new Texas Capitol was underway, Driskill envisioned a commercial enterprise that was in many respects equally ambitious.

The new venture became known to the public largely through a series of newspaper references and accounts beginning in 1883. An article in the April 25 edition of the *Austin Daily Statesman*, titled "A Magnificent Hotel," provided the first details.

The *Statesman* has several times alluded to the fact that Col. J. L. Driskill has in contemplation the building of a magnificent hotel in this city. It is now an assured fact. Col. Driskill has instructed his architects, Messrs. J. N. Preston & Son, to prepare the detailed drawings and complete plans at as early a day as possible, as he wishes work to begin immediately. Col. [*sic*] Preston showed a *Statesman* representative the plans so far as completed, and they confirm the well known reputation of Col. [*sic*] Preston as an architect of the highest class, both as to design and beauty of form and finish.⁸⁵

Driskill chose a prominent location six blocks south and one block east of the new Capitol. Bounded on the north by Bois d'arc Street (now Seventh Street) and on the south by Pecan Street (now Sixth Street), and sited between Congress Avenue and Brazos Street, his hotel site afforded proximity to other commercial development. Congress Avenue and Pecan Street were then the two major commercial arteries in the city. Railroad lines and depots were located nearby to the south.

At a cornerstone-laying ceremony and celebratory supper for the new hotel on July 4, 1885, photographs and business cards of Jasper and Samuel Preston were included among the artifacts in the cornerstone, along with such items as a Bible, a ten-dollar Confederate note, a two-cent piece, and copies of several newspapers. At supper that evening at the Pearl House, Gen. Nathan George Shelley instructed the large seated crowd to "uncover your dishes and go to work like honest men." Toasts included two testimonials to Preston. The first was dedicated to "the Driskill Hotel: The energy and enterprise of its projector, the artistic skill of its architect exhibited in the beauty and symetry [*sic*] of its design, and the appropriateness of its appointments, give assurance of a hostlery [*sic*] for Austin

⁸⁴ Mary Jayne Walsh, "Driskill, Jesse Lincoln," in Tyler, et al. (eds.) *The New Handbook of Texas*, II, 704.

⁸⁵ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Apr. 25, 1883, p. 4, col. 4.



On November 25, 1969, the Driskill Hotel and the French Legation became the first Austin properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

unsurpassed by any in the state. May its cuisine always be as satisfactory as its external attractions." Preston gave the response to that toast, and later another was offered to "the architect who designed, and the laboring men who will construct the Driskill hotel, from the mudsill up: May their work be as profitable to themselves as its completion will be ornamental and useful to the city."⁸⁶

Construction on the Driskill began at a time when defining elements of Austin's architecture and social fabric were taking shape. Within a few blocks along the north-south axis of the city, work was then underway on three of the most anticipated architectural projects in Austin's history: the Driskill, a centerpiece of commercial enterprise; the new Capitol building, which would dominate the city and rival other statehouses and even the national Capitol; and the Main Building at the new University of Texas, which held promise as a leading educational institution. All of these projects gave hope to a city and state emerging from the shadows of Reconstruction.

As the Driskill project neared completion, Jasper Newton Preston made plans to move his practice to California. By the time of the dedication

⁸⁶ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Jul. 5, 1885.

on December 20, 1886, Preston, his son Samuel, and their families had already left the state. The exact reasons for his seemingly abrupt departure from Texas remain unknown, although a California newspaper article indicated he landed an important commission—the design of the Los Angeles County Courthouse—only four months after his arrival. The timing implies that work was under way several months previous. In the late nineteenth century, the city of Los Angeles was experiencing the same type of rapid growth that had marked Austin earlier, albeit in a more dramatic fashion.

Back in Austin, city and business officials prepared for the dedication of the grand Driskill Hotel. The *Daily Statesman* heaped lavish praise on the most prominent structure in town, since completion of the Capitol building was more than a year away. Built in the Romanesque Revival style made popular nationally by Henry Hobson Richardson and others, the four-story Driskill Hotel presented

a pleasing combination of brick and dressed limestone . . . The plinth course, imposts, caps, keys, carbels, dragoons, tablets, etc. being also of limestone. The building presents an imposing and inviting appearance, as it looms up like a palace above all the surrounding buildings . . . On the first or ground floor two spacious corridors thirty-five or thirty-six feet in width respectively, intersect each other at the rotunda, which is open, airy and capacious.⁸⁷

The Austin *Statesman* further alluded to what were then considered rare and desirable architectural elements, such as fireproof construction with brick and tile partition walls and floors, and an iron beam skeleton. It also recorded “there will be about 150 rooms for guests, all of which show an opening directly outside—this, perhaps, being the only hotel in the United States with this latter desirable feature.”⁸⁸ Interior details included “four grand stairways on each floor” and an elevator for easy access and security. Continuing with the florid language, the article described “three grand entrances, surmounted by magnificent towers, and on each floor, above the entrances, are arranged verandas so made, by an original and happy idea of the architects, as to form open vestibules [*sic*].”⁸⁹ The hotel had sixty large guest rooms and four suites, all steam heated. The dining room was skylit and was considered Austin’s most posh restaurant for many years.

Modern technology, such as an electric bell intercom system connecting all the rooms to the front desk, combined with rich furnishings and detailing to make the Driskill Hotel a most distinctive space. The Robert Mitchell Furniture Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, designed all the furniture exclusively for the hotel. A grand dining room and expert

⁸⁷ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Dec. 17, 1886, p. 17.

⁸⁸ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Apr. 25, 1883, p. 4, col. 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

culinary department outfitted a splendid restaurant frequented by hotel guests and Austin residents alike. A billiard room and bar, news counter, cigar and telegraph counter, walnut and leather chairs and sofas, silk draperies, lace curtains, velvet carpets, and finishes in brass, marble, ebony, heart pine, and cherry demonstrated that Jesse Driskill would spare no expense to make his hotel the finest experience a traveler could have.⁹⁰

In 1888, Jesse Driskill and his family once again dealt with bankruptcy, this time as the result of a blizzard and hard freeze that decimated their cattle herds. Jesse Driskill died of a stroke in 1890.⁹¹ The hotel went through a series of owners, bankruptcies, and financial problems through the years, and by 1966 it was threatened with demolition. The endangered building was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in that year, even as the owners planned to raze it and erect a new hotel. The Heritage Society of Austin was successful in raising funds to save the building through shares of stock, and on November 25, 1969, the Driskill Hotel and the French Legation became the first Austin properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places.⁹²

The Driskill Hotel has long been one of the grandest meeting places in the state, and has been the scene of countless ceremonies and special events, as well as a setting for politicians to wheel and deal, most famously as the unofficial office for Lyndon Baines Johnson during nearly three decades as United States congressman, senator, and president. As a building whose architecture and opulence has transcended time, the Driskill Hotel has indeed fulfilled the promise of the *Austin Daily Statesman* reporter in 1883 who predicted “when completed, this building will be not only an ornament to the Capital City of the empire state and a credit to the architects who designed it but it will be a monument to its projector and builder, J. L. Driskill; and will ever stand as the pyramids on the land of the Ptolemies, to make the name of Driskill synonymous with enterprise and public spirited energy.”⁹³

Two of the Prestons’ most substantial gifts to Texas converged with perfect symmetry after the architects moved on to California. The Texas State Association of Architects, which lost its vice president and secretary when Jasper and Samuel moved to Los Angeles, met in January 1887 to elect new officers and continue working toward raising professional standards statewide. The group that would eventually secure state licensing for architects, formulate standards for contracts, and engender the Texas Soci-

⁹⁰ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Dec. 17, 1886, p. 17.

⁹¹ Walsh, “Driskill, Jesse Lincoln,” 704.

⁹² “Driskill Hotel,” National Register of Historic Places nomination, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

⁹³ *Austin Daily Statesman*, Apr. 25, 1883, p. 4, col. 4.

ety of Architects and state chapters of the American Institute of Architects, held its pivotal meeting in a most appropriate new venue—Austin’s Driskill Hotel.



The information presented here represents the results of an extensive, multi-state search for the details of Jasper Newton Preston’s life. It began simply with his name on a cornerstone—the one for the 1885 Bell County Courthouse in Belton—and the natural curiosity of historians to know more about an individual’s past. What followed were a series of revelations, beginning with the realization that none of the standard biographical sources for Texas, nor any of the primary architectural archives, yielded much background. Where he was mentioned, references were generally brief, and not one included his date of death or details of his life outside Texas. Also lacking were the standard lists of projects and the anticipated collections of drawings, related papers, and photographs.

The search for Preston’s past unfolded slowly, but deliberately, following a course that eventually tracked across the nation from east to west. Along the way there were pieces of the puzzle that often provided more minute detail or trivia than substance. Even as sources came to light, there was the additional enlightenment that Preston’s life was more complex than the easily available written records could adequately reveal.

In the end, the most important revelation was that the best reflection of Preston is to be found in the vocabulary of his architecture. It is in the composition and details of his landmark design work in Texas, which represent the zenith of his professional career, that the substance of his life is most clearly revealed. In the elements of the cultural landscape he shaped while in the Lone Star State are glimpses of his past, his aspirations, his collaborations, his contributions to a developing profession, the cultural themes that influenced his work, and his appreciation for the era in which he labored.

As with Preston’s personal history, his architectural record is also incomplete. Given the lack of a comprehensive list of his projects, it is impossible to determine if what remains provides us an adequate overview of his design philosophy. Some of his structures have not survived and the designs of others have been compromised, and often the historian is left with only a physical description of a significant project, rather than a photographic image. Without the written records that would detail Preston’s thoughts, the evolution of his accomplishments provides the basis for an analytical review of his role in Texas architectural history. To

date, it appears his Texas work provides the best collection of his achievements, and certainly the landmark designations represent the best efforts of others to preserve what remains.

Preston's life and works were transitional in nature, providing future generations with insights into a broader context for understanding an era of architectural development that helped define the profession in Texas. Throughout his career, Preston brought great energy and personal drive to his projects, and that brought him in serious conflict with others in his profession on occasion. His work also helped to broaden the scope of public perceptions of architectural design. Jasper Newton Preston achieved much as an architect, as evidenced by the continuing viability of his concepts, by the development of his profession in Texas, and by those who seek to preserve, record, and interpret landmark vestiges of his remaining work more than a century after he left the state. He was among those who helped define the cultural landscape of an era, and the beneficiaries of his efforts are those who continue to recognize and appreciate his legacy, even if they do not know his name.