Ithiel Town, Architect of Trinity Church

by Joe Dzeda

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Ithiel Town (1784-1844) was born in Thompson, Connecticut and was destined to become one of America's first professional architects. His 1820 patent for the wooden lattice truss bridge brought him both fame and fortune. A visit to Trinity's attic, with its stout timbers and mortise-and-tenon joints still pegged together nearly two centuries after they were erected, reveals Town's clear understanding of the nature of wood and its load-bearing properties. Trinity Church, consecrated in February of 1816, was designed when Town was thirty years old, and today remains one of the first, if not the first, Gothic Revival churches in America.

In 1829 Town formed one of America's earliest architectural partnerships with Alexander J. Davis. This collaboration, which lasted six years, would produce a variety of important buildings including the U.S. Customs House in New York City and the North Carolina State Capitol.

Town was well-traveled, and his New Haven home had one of the largest libraries of books on art and architecture in the country, some of which found their way to Yale College. He was a noted bridge builder and wrote books on steamship navigation and mathematics; in many ways he was a true "renaissance man."

As a connoisseur of art, in 1839 Town commissioned Thomas Cole (founder of the Hudson River School and a gentleman architect who had a strong hand in the design of the Ohio Statehouse) to do a painting called The Architect's Dream. In March of that year, Town gave Cole several books and engravings from his library, a $225.25 deposit on the painting's $500 value, which today would

amount to a $10,000 commission. There is evidence that Cole used these books as reference sources for the painting, completed in the summer of 1839.

Thomas Cole, The Architect's Dream, 1840, oil on canvas; image © Toledo Museum of Art

The painting depicts a reclining architect, presumably either Town or Cole, resting with his eyes shut in a dream-like state upon a pile of books and portfolios. Surrounding him is an imaginary landscape showing a progression of historical architectural styles, perhaps signifying the power of human creativity to conceive and build an astonishing variety of structures through the ages. From the

Egyptian pyramid to Greek and Roman temples to the Gothic church in the lower left corner of the painting, the work suggests the history of Western civilization in its many forms.

When the painting was first exhibited at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1840, Town was listed as the owner. However, when he saw the painting he declined to accept it. Town stated, "I wish landscapes to predominate - the Architecture, History, etc., to be various and subservient..." He asked Cole to do another painting,

but Cole refused and returned the books and engravings he had received as a deposit. Cole did not, however, remove Town's name from the inscription painted beneath the reclining architect on the canvas, possibly thinking that in so doing he would eliminate an important clue about the origin of the painting's imaginary scene.

Today The Architect's Dream, which measures 53 x 84 inches, hangs prominently on a wall in the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art, where it is a favorite among the Museum's many distinguished holdings. Trinity Church gratefully acknowledges the Museum's written material on the painting as the source of much of the above information.

Below left: *Ithiel Town's original 1844 gravestone in Grove Street Cemetery, New Haven Below right: the modern replacement in Grove Street Cemetery*

Photos of gravestones and text by Joseph Dzeda