The two carpenters of this book are Calvin Stearns and his son George who lived between 1778 and 1859. They built houses in central New England and were part of a family that included several other builders. Their work spanned decades of change in the physical and economic landscape of New England, as well as significant stylistic changes in architecture, and it involved a variety of professional relationships between architects, builders, and clients. A close examination of New England building in the first half of the nineteenth century, this book analyzes the practices of builders, their interactions with architectural ideas, and the buildings they made.

The builders’ vantage point is a relatively new one in architectural history, but it is producing a growing corpus of work. Spiro Kostof’s edited volume The Architect: Chapters in the History of a Profession (1977) was one of the first contemporary books to deal with the history of the architectural profession; it was followed more recently by Mary Wood’s From Craft to Profession (1999), which concentrates on the emergence of American architectural professionalism in the nineteenth century. There have also been studies of particular buildings and building types including William Wallace’s Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Architect as Entrepreneur (1994) and Alain Erlande-Brandenburg’s The Cathedral: The Social and Architectural Dynamics of Construction (1994). Regional studies include Catherine Bishir et al.’s Architects and Builders in North Carolina (1990), Richard Goldthwaite’s The Building of Renaissance Florence (1980), James Ayres’s Building the Georgian City (1998), and numerous others. This work elucidates the intricate web of economic relations and social institutions within which architectural production happens. Two Carpenters is an admirable addition to this group. It contributes to our theoretical understanding of the process of building and also provides a new dimension to scholarship on the domestic architecture of New England.

J. Ritchie Garrison is a professor of history at the University of Delaware and director of the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture. His earlier book, Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1770–1860 (1991) set the stage by describing settlement patterns and houses in the place where the Stearns lived and worked, in the context of cultural geography and material culture studies. Two Carpenters offers the kind of close reading that the folklorist Henry Glassie sees as essential to understanding a culture from the inside. Garrison describes the careers of two men for whom craft, reputation, family life, economic well-being, and architectural product were intertwined. His finely nuanced description and analysis were informed by documentary evidence in the form of account books, daybooks, and buildings, many of which remain standing. This combination of evidence is often not available, particularly for modest wooden buildings constructed two centuries ago, and the author has taken full advantage of these resources. The analysis of the documents and buildings is tightly interwoven, and the architectural readings are carried out with a good eye for style, plan, and construction detail.

The book is organized chronologically, but transcending ordinary biography, it becomes a narrative of how New England building professions produced architecture and changed over time. The story begins in 1800, with Calvin leaving his home in Warwick, Massachusetts, for Brookfield, Vermont, to finish work on a house and tavern owned by his uncle, Ebenezer Stratton. He and two other journeymen also worked on other houses in Brookfield, including one apparently designed by Asher Benjamin; he then worked his way back to Massachusetts. The description of this phase of Calvin’s life is rich in detail, ranging from the $10.70 that Calvin charged his uncle, to the simple detailing of the tavern, to the role of a house in advancing Benjamin’s visibility as an architect and Calvin’s education as a builder. In 1800 the boundaries between architecture and building were fluid, and a journeyman carpenter could expect one day to assume responsibility for the design and construction of houses.

Calvin’s first new house was his own, in Northfield, Massachusetts, where he lived for most of his career. The house was designed with a view to getting more work. Completed in 1805, it is still standing, and Garrison uses it, along with knowledge of this stage of Calvin’s career, to explain the carpenter’s ability “to recognize, comprehend, and act within culturally defined patterns that collectively established ambiguous limits on what was acceptable and what was not” (17). With this house, Calvin took a risk as a young carpenter. The house was ahead of its time in its proportions and details, but still strongly connected to local practice and commonly understood conventions. One of the themes of the lives of Calvin and his son was the way in which these codes interacted with their own skills and desires for recognition.

Calvin became one of Northfield’s most respected builders. His designs reflected stylistic changes initiated in other places, and a house he built for his brother starting in 1819 was the first in town with a temple front. It had a helical stair and a basement kitchen, and the windows of the two parlors overlooked a picturesque view across the landscape. Unlike Calvin’s first house, this one was built “in the village center where the whole community could watch and pass judgment” (75). Garrison discusses the use of rooms, the organization of the construction team, the way the trim was built, and the visual impact of the stair. He brings the reader into that house and demonstrates how the various elements of the building culture—craft skills, stylistic understandings, the domestic lives of clients—are intertwined. Garrison sees the Stearns as being influential not because they were rich or politically important but through the quality and
force of their work. It is, perhaps, a particularly American story.

Calvin's stylistic innovations depended on his technical skill. Garrison describes such things as how Calvin eliminated the visible corner post in rooms; made wainscoting so that the shrinkage and expansion of boards would not cause them to split; and erected neo-classical columns out of staved wooden construction. Carpenters understood how to apply their skills to satisfy their clients' changing stylistic desires. Calvin's skills extended to the design of plans, and here the relationship of house plans to family and social life makes for a fascinating story. Calvin's plans were variations of the typical New England arrangement of central fireplace, central hall, and side-entry plans, often with double parlors that were a mark of status for many New England families. But Calvin was adept at adapting those plans to specific circumstances, and Garrison, alert to those adaptations, shows how the rear parlor in one house could symbolize bourgeois gentility and also functionally connect the house's front entry and rear portion.

Calvin's son George continued to innovate in his early houses but then became a building contractor. In the early 1850s the railroad was helping to strengthen a long-distance economy, and the book indicates how this economic change affected not only the Stearns' family business but, by extension, the overall organization of the building professions and trades. An outcome was the rise of the professional architect. One of the most telling stories is that of a summer house designed by Richard Upjohn, for which George acted as contractor. With the architect in New York, the client in Savannah, and the building in Brattleboro, Vermont, the relationships between the parties were not easy. There were numerous disputes, which might be ascribed to the architect's ego, the builder's pride, the client's desire to get what he thought he was paying for, or simple miscommunication. But the other story is that of an architectural profession struggling to emerge, and traditional craftsmanship struggling to survive. Partly this is a question of language itself. The meaning of the word “chamber,” for example, was interpreted differently by the architect and builder. Such differences among people working apart from each other occasioned the need for greater specificity in building documents. This kind of textual mediation was a principal issue in the bifurcation of the architect from the builder.

Garrison's close readings, along with continually insightful interpretations, give us a vivid picture of the building culture of New England between the Revolution and the Civil War. While describing the careers of two people, this book tells a much larger story of the profession, a place, a region within a nation. It is an important contribution to our knowledge of the human processes through which the built world gets its shape.

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David Gebhard with Patricia Gebhard, editor

Purcell & Elmslie: Prairie Progressive Architects
Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2006, 192 pp., 107 color and 76 b/w illus. $29.95, ISBN 1-4236-0005-3

Among the many midwestern American architects who heeded Louis Sullivan’s clarion call for a new architecture, which he variously termed modern, democratic, and American, were the disparate pair of George Grant Elmslie (1869–1952) and William Gray Purcell (1881–1965). Headquartered in Minneapolis, the partnership of Purcell, Feick & Elmslie, later Purcell & Elmslie, lasted from 1909 to 1921. One of the most prolific and diverse firms of the Prairie School, it left a legacy of distinct building types cast in a personal, simplified, decorated manner that seemed perfectly to capture Sullivan’s ideal. These included residences—from cottages to country estates—as well as banks, city halls, churches, and that quintessential American building form, the county courthouse. Indeed, the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City, Iowa, stands as one of the great monuments of American architecture.

Surprising as it may seem, until now there has never been a scholarly monograph dedicated to the work of Purcell & Elmslie. In this beautiful book, with a minimum of text and a generous assortment of modern color photographs and historic images in black and white, Patricia Gebhard has rescued, edited, and made available the long-awaited manuscript of her late husband, David Gebhard.

With eight chapters divided into three parts, the text presents as part one the nineteenth-century background to Purcell and Elmslie’s architecture and brief biographies of each man. Part two is devoted to the work of the partnership. Part three presents the late work of each architect and a discussion of the firm’s contribution and influence. These are followed by a building list and a short bibliography.

Purcell, a midwesterner as gregarious as his Scottish partner was taciturn (and as much of a pack-rat as Elmslie was tidy), was a natural proselytizer for the new architecture. Born in 1881, Purcell was a relative youngster compared with Elmslie, George Maher, and Robert Spencer, or even William Drummond and Walter Griffin. Purcell lived long enough, to 1965, to serve as a direct link, like Barry Byrne, between the architecture of America’s Progressive era and the first generation of scholars examining that work in the 1950s and 1960s.

Among these, in addition to H. Allen Brooks and Mark L. Peisch, was David Gebhard, who received a doctorate in 1958 from the University of Minnesota. Gebhard’s dissertation on Purcell and Elmslie followed a correspondence begun with both Purcell and Elmslie in 1951 and, after the latter’s death the following year, one that continued at great length with Purcell until 1964. Purcell also made his extraordinary archive available to Gebhard, and eventually, with Gebhard’s help, entrusted its care to the University of Minnesota. This situation contrasted