Owen Biddle and Philadelphia’s Real Estate Market, 1798–1806

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The master builder and protoarchitect Owen Biddle (1774–1806), despite a relatively brief career, stands as a pivotal figure in the historiography of American architecture. His landmark publication, The Young Carpenter’s Assistant (Philadelphia, 1805), was one of the first indigenous architectural books to rival the English literature that had dominated building practice in the colonial era. More significant perhaps is his reputation as a pioneer of architectural pedagogy in early America. Jeffrey Cohen, for example, has described Biddle’s unrealized plan to formalize design instruction with the foundation of an architectural school as “possibly the earliest such effort in the country.” James O’Gorman is arguably more effusive and situates Biddle’s emphasis on architectural draftsmanship, exemplified by his finely illustrated book, at the inception of “that separation of designer and builder that would produce an independent architectural profession by the mid-nineteenth century.” Throughout his working life, however, Biddle identified primarily as a carpenter; he is listed solely as “carpenter” in editions of The Philadelphia Directory published between 1801 and 1806, and on the title page of his acclaimed book he described himself first as “house carpenter” and second as “teacher of architectural drawing.” In spite of this, house building is the one aspect of his practice that has so far escaped the attention of his biographers, an irony compounded by the fact that his two ventures in real estate—the present 525 Delancey Street and 717 Spruce Street in Philadelphia—remain standing, if not fully intact (Figures 1 and 2).

Drawing on information from a variety of unexploited archival sources, this article sheds new light on the professional life of this important if enigmatic figure and presents a descriptive analysis of buildings hitherto unrecorded in his oeuvre. With reference to the social, cultural, and economic histories of Federal-era Philadelphia, it further situates those buildings, and Biddle’s business and property interests generally, within the contexts of his Quaker ancestry and the city’s prevailing building culture. More broadly, in response to the tenor of recent research on the domestic architecture of the Federal era, which has renewed the focus on the singular, custom-built house, this article reasserts the significance of the row house typology that constituted the city’s urban grain.

Biddle’s Early Career and Business Ventures

As with the lives of the majority of house carpenters and master builders of the Federal era, the established facts of Owen Biddle’s personal and professional life are quickly summarized. Born in Philadelphia in 1774 to a renowned clock maker, scientist, and member of the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Biddle trained as a carpenter and became, within a short time of reaching his majority, a prominent figure in Philadelphia’s building industry. This is evidenced by his role as principal contractor for some of Philadelphia’s most significant early nineteenth-century structures, including the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge (1798–1805) and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (designs by John Dorsey, 1805–6) (Figure 3). In 1800, Biddle was elected a member of the prestigious Carpenters’ Company, the city’s foremost association for building tradesmen, and in 1804 he proposed an
ultimately ineffectual motion that the organization consider “the propriety of establishing a school of Architecture” in Philadelphia. By then already active as a drawing instructor, Biddle soon turned his pedagogical interests toward the publication of The Young Carpenter’s Assistant; or, A System of Architecture, Adapted to the Style of Building in the United States. The significance of this book aside, his architectural reputation rests on his reticent design for the Society of Friends meetinghouse at Third and Arch Streets (1803), for which signed drawings survive (Figure 4). Biddle’s personal life was equally bountiful before it was cut short, on 25 May 1806, at the relatively young age of thirty-two: on 2 May 1798, he married Elizabeth Rowan, daughter of Quaker carpenter Moses Rowan, and together they had five children, four of whom reached adulthood. Given the importance of craft networks for prosperity in business during this period, the most important new biographical fact to add to this rudimentary portrait concerns the identity of the master under whom Biddle served his trade apprenticeship. On 26 March 1790, the minutes of the meeting of Friends of the Southern District record that Biddle was “placed an Apprentice” to Jonathan Evans Jr. (d. 1799), a house carpenter and master builder. Although little is known of Evans’s professional life, it has been established that he was from a renowned dynasty of Philadelphia carpenters and that he joined the Friendship Carpenters’ Company in 1769 before becoming a member of the Carpenters’ Company in 1787. In fact, Evans is best remembered for his dismissal from the Carpenters’ Company in 1792, and for the fact that his copy of the company’s “secret and closely guarded pricing book” was the source of an unauthorized edition published in 1801. In March 1790, as his apprenticeship began, Biddle was one month shy of his sixteenth birthday; by 1792, the year Evans was expelled from the Carpenters’ Company, Biddle was only two years into a formal term of service that traditionally took between five
and seven years. This potentially embarrassing circumstance, however, clearly represented no impediment to Biddle’s professional reputation. In October 1800, five years after reaching the age of majority, he was admitted as a member of the Carpenters’ Company by recommendation of George Summers (1768–1823), a master builder of some standing in the wider architectural community. Although he remained an active member throughout his life—he regularly attended meetings and contributed illustrations to an edition of the company’s price book published in 1805—Biddle never proposed or nominated others for membership.

The minutes of the Friends’ regularly held meetings also offer new information regarding Biddle’s professional relationship with carpenter and master builder Joseph Cowgill (d. 1813). To date, it has been established only that Biddle and Cowgill were in some form of business partnership between 1799—a year before both became members of the Carpenters’ Company—and 1801. According to an early history of the city, both were also founding members of the Philadelphia Fire Company, an organization that was formed by members of the Society of Friends in 1800. Cowgill first appears in the minutes of the Southern District of Friends on 12 November 1791, when his petition to join this meeting was endorsed by Clayton Cowgill, “Clerk,” who may have been a relative. By 1799, the year they commenced their business, Biddle was in his twenty-sixth year, and he no doubt formed his partnership with Cowgill with an expectation of securing professional opportunities predicated on the two men’s religious confession and shared artisanal networks. While we may only speculate whether Biddle’s business venture with Cowgill was financially “encouraged” by his immediate family, in her study of the city’s early nineteenth-century building industry Donna Rilling is unequivocal in asserting that Quakers in general “figured prominently in Philadelphia’s more highly capitalized artisanal occupations.” Good prospects in business
also depended on the availability of capital and credit, and Billy Smith has argued that this was "undoubtedly much more significant than legal or social factors in determining the ability of many journeymen to establish their independence." The Parent and Guardian’s Directory, published in London in 1761, certainly advised that a carpenter wishing to be a master builder should be

a good draughtsman, and be able to draw plans, and to survey and estimate the expence of buildings; and also have a good sum of money to enable him to buy materials and give credit. Without these qualifications, the youth must be contented with the

prospect of being a jobbing master; who does not require a great deal besides tools.

More broadly, Roger Moss has noted the difference between the apprenticeship system in Europe, which was rigidly hierarchical in regard to professional development, and that in the American colonies, where “no impediment blocked a young artisan from styling himself a master once out of his indenture.” Indeed, in some instances the business enterprise of a bound individual might be actively encouraged. In 1806, the indenture binding sixteen-year-old Thomas Whitssel to carpenter Alphonso C. Ireland contained the proviso...
that Whitsel “be allowed the use of his said masters shop and
tools to work after night for himself during the term.”25

While the origin and nature of Biddle and Cowgill’s busi-
ness relationship remain unclear, the pooling of credit
resources and the sharing of capital risk were likely motivat-
ing factors. Equally, while no records survive to indicate
the scale of their enterprise, their membership in the Carpenters’
Company identifies them as professional employers rather
than as jobbing carpenters. Given this fact, it seems likely
that they concentrated on the organization and management
of projects, and employed journeymen and laborers under a
variety of short-term or contract wage agreements. Rilling
describes the fluidity of carpentry businesses in the early
Republic, noting in particular that an aspiring entrepreneur
often “interspersed journeywork on one construction site,
with management as a master builder on another.”26

Regardless of the structure of the business or the nature
of the contracts undertaken, the partnership disbanded
by June 1801, a fact that was formally announced in the
25 August edition of the American Daily Advertiser:

The partnership of

COWGILL & BIDDLE,

House-Carpenters,

Having been dissolved on the 24th of the 6th mo. last, by
mutual consent, those persons who are indebted to them are
requested to make immediate payment; and those who have
any demands against said firm are desired to furnish their
accounts to either of the subscribers for settlement.27

Despite the laconic nature of this notice, it now seems certain
that the termination of Cowgill and Biddle’s professional
relationship was preceded by, or perhaps anticipated, con-
cerns about the moral and ethical integrity of their business
operation. Following a preparative meeting of the Southern
District of Friends on 29 July 1801—a month after the part-
nership between Biddle and Cowgill had been discon-
tinued—the minutes record:

We have been informed that the Overseers have treated with
Joseph Cowgill and Owen Biddle on account of frequent com-
plaints made of their being indebted to several Persons, and
not taking the necessary care for the discharge thereof—Joseph
Cowgill having mostly transacted the business of their partner-
ship has so often broken his promises and disregarded his
engagements that little dependance can be placed upon him.28

Even though Cowgill is here singled out as the troublesome
party, Biddle was of course equally accountable to their cred-
itors and to the Friends. Little wonder, then, that this
precipitated the dissolution of their business association.
Nonetheless, despite the seriousness of the accusation, the
Friends were evidently soon satisfied that both Biddle and
Cowgill had taken the necessary steps to address the situa-
tion. The minutes of a meeting on 28 October noted, “It
appears that their affairs are likely to be settled to the satisfac-
tion of their Creditors; and that they acknowledge their
departure from their word, and want of punctuality in their
contracts, but gave some reason to hope they would endeav-
our to improve in these respects hereafter.”29 In fact, with
the partnership already annulled (as of 24 June) and both
parties apparently willing to make amends, albeit indepen-
dently, the Friends decided that “upon deliberation” it was
“judged best to discontinue their case from our minutes.”30

This exoneration did not lead to the reestablishment of
the partnership, however, and less than a year later Cowgill
was again under suspicion. On 28 July 1802, the Friends
were disturbed by “accounts of his associating with unprofit-
able Company, not timely discharging his just Debts, fre-
fently breaking his promises, and sometimes attending exhibi-
tions at the Theater.”31 Despite being encouraged to
seek reparation, the members appointed to “extend further
care” later reported, on 25 August, that he did not appear to be
in “a disposition that would encourage further labour
with him.”32 Issued with a testimony against his misconduct,
and declining the right to appeal, Cowgill was formally “dis-
owned” by the Society.33 With his access to credit now com-
promised, it is perhaps unsurprising that he moved away
from Philadelphia, settling in Dover, in Kent County, Dela-
ware.34 Although his later building career remains obscure,
further glimpses into his character, or perhaps merely his
relationship to institutional authority, are afforded by the
minute books of the Carpenters’ Company. Following his
admission to the organization in January 1801, Cowgill
rarely attended meetings and, based on his continued
absences and arrears, he was categorized as a “delinquent
member” in 1809.35

Biddle’s career, in contrast, was about to flourish. Signifi-
cantly, his partnership with Cowgill never appeared in the
trade listings of The Philadelphia Directory, and Biddle made
his first appearance in the edition for 1801, in which he was
described as “house carpenter” and his address given as 23
Powell Street.36 Given that the listings for this directory
would have been compiled during the course of 1800 and
published in time for the new calendar year of 1801, Biddle
appears to have anticipated the demise of his professional
relationship with Cowgill. Indeed, given the evidence of
Cowgill’s dilatory character and lack of business acumen, not
to mention the importance of reputation for success in the
building trade, it seems particularly astute of Biddle to have
chosen this moment to advertise his professional
independence.17
The Building of 525 Delancey Street

In February 1798, Biddle purchased the ground rent at 23 Powell Street (now 525 Delancey Street) from John Douglass, cabinetmaker, and agreed to build and finish “a good three story brick house” within a calendar year (a condition of the sale and a typical clause of the period). This lot was part of a larger tract of 94 feet 9 inches frontage that comprises the present 519–529 Delancey Street, which was bought in 1796 by a partnership between Douglass and Benjamin Thornton, house carpenter. By December 1797, Douglass and Thornton, having already built two houses (numbers 519 and 521), agreed to “make Partition” of their business interests: on 16 February 1798, Douglass sold his two apportioned lots to Biddle (525) and Joseph Cowgill (523). Significantly, these property conveyances preceded the accepted date (1799) of the beginning of the professional association between Biddle and Cowgill. If these individual ventures initiated their business partnership, as seems likely, the partnership may have been intended as a speculative house-building enterprise. Property speculation, despite the attendant risks, was among the principal means by which a builder might achieve financial “competence” (or respectable livelihood). In this context it is worth noting that the two houses were first designed with identical elevations and plans, suggesting that they were erected in tandem. Also significant is the fact that 527 Delancey Street, adjoining Biddle’s plot to the west, was built by the house carpenter George Summers. This was the same Summers who had successfully proposed the election of Biddle and Cowgill to the Carpenters’ Company in July 1800. (In January 1799, Summers had already proposed the membership of Alphonso C. Ireland, carpenter, who was then building next door to Summers at 529 Delancey Street.)

This kind of professional mutuality, centered on house building and the exchange of labor, credit, and materials, demonstrates both the mechanism of discrete business networks and the means by which the Carpenters’ Company grew its membership from within the city’s burgeoning building community.

Powell (now Delancey) Street, between Fifth and Sixth Streets, was situated in a relatively undeveloped part of New Market Ward. Nonetheless, being contiguous to the two most exclusive residential neighborhoods in the city—the area today known as Society Hill and the streets in the immediate vicinity of the statehouse—the houses built on Powell Street had the potential to appeal to the “middling sorts.” Proximity to centers of commerce and/or fashion demonstrably affected ground rents—the principal means by which builders entered the world of property speculation—and ground rents were calculated by distance from what Mary M. Schweitzer has identified as the foremost “axis for real estate” in Philadelphia, located at the juncture between Market Street and the waterfront (Figure 5). At Powell Street in 1798–99, building lots of 15 feet 9½ inches frontage were sold at the annual ground rent of $48. At the same time, wider lots of 18 feet frontage in the nearby 300 block of Lombard Street cost only $32. Although larger in dimension than the Powell Street lots, and only minutes away by foot, the reduced ground rent almost certainly reflected Lombard Street’s status as a “modest residential area” at this time.

Though the façade of 525 Delancey Street has been altered slightly over time (see Figure 1), a 1916 photograph shows the house as originally constructed (Figure 6). The similarity with 523, built by Cowgill, is immediate and unmistakable, not only in the proportion of solid to void and the formal consonance between fenestration patterns and story heights but also in details like the shared belt courses and eaves cornice. Despite the fact that these houses were raised on individually held lots, Biddle and Cowgill clearly conceived and built them as a pair. Of further interest is the lack of deference to their immediate neighbors, 519 and 521, built a year earlier by the ground landlords, Douglass and Thornton. Such discordances and abrupt changes in scale were of course characteristic of even the most exclusive streetscapes in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. While the conditions and stipulations imposed by fire insurance companies improved standards of building construction across the city, controls and guidelines regarding the appearance of contiguous houses, and their relationship to one another in a street or block, were not a feature of urban design during the Federal period. With landowners demanding only that houses be well built and completed within specific time frames, master builders dictated architectural taste. House design thus regulated itself through established, long-standing building practices and protocols, but also, and increasingly after 1800, through wage labor agreements and the standardization of component parts—such as lumber—prepared off-site.

A fire insurance survey of 525 Delancey Street recorded in 1801, when the house was owned by Abraham Golding, provides a glimpse of its original spatial organization (Figure 7). The survey indicates that the house conformed to the common plan type of “Two Rooms on a Floor” (that is, two rooms on each of the first and second stories) and was adjoined at the rear by a “piazza,” a stand-alone space containing the staircase. The location of the kitchen “in The Celler,” as opposed to in a separate structure adjacent to the piazza, was a cost-effective measure typical of a house of this scale. Given the house’s conformity to one of the most characteristic of Philadelphian house types, it seems clear that consumer expectation rather than architectural innovation was foremost in Biddle’s mind.
Figure 5  John Hills, "This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Its Environs," engraving, 1797; this map contains a legend identifying fifty-four buildings, including such landmarks as the statehouse, Christ Church, and the Pennsylvania Hospital (courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University).

Figure 6  521–529 Delancey Street, Philadelphia, 1916 (Philadelphia Contributionship Collection courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania).
This is confirmed by his pragmatic approach to building construction: the plastered partitions and paint finishes (both “inside and out”), coupled with the solid 9-inch party walls, were clearly factors that influenced the low premium charged for this insurance policy (£400, at the rate of 40 shillings per £100). While references in the survey to the “lightly ornamented” mantels and frontispiece might be read as reflecting Biddle’s preference for “a due proportion of plain surfaces” in architectural design, they more likely relate to the modest character of the house overall, which extended to the cost-effective choice of white pine for the interior carpentry. At this time, houses built to higher specifications customarily boasted yellow pine flooring, marble mantels, stucco cornices, and open-newel stairs with mahogany handrails. Given its apparently unpretentious finish, not to mention its sale within eighteen months of completion, it seems likely that 23 Powell Street was built for selling from the outset. This contrasts with Biddle’s second house-building project in the 700 block of Spruce Street.

Building Houses and Selling Houses

In the 1802 edition of The Philadelphia Directory, Biddle is listed twice: at Powell Street and at “Spruce above 7th.” Biddle had acquired a lot of ground on the north side of Spruce Street in July 1801, at precisely the moment when his character and moral reputation were under scrutiny by the Friends. On this site, he pledged to build a house within eighteen months at a minimum value of $800. This house, the present 717 Spruce Street, remained Biddle’s home until his death in 1806 (see Figure 2).

A key difference between the property transactions for Powell Street and Spruce Street was the codicil that the houses in Spruce Street should be built “of the value” of a specified amount (originally $800, later rising to $1,000). While this almost certainly reflected the ownership and control of the Society of Friends—a letter patent of 12 November 1795 records that the ground was held in trust for “the use of [their] monthly meetings”—the proximity of the 700 block of Spruce Street to both the newly improving Washington Square area and the elegant and uniform row houses then being built between Seventh and Eighth Streets on Walnut and Sansom (ca. 1799–1802) was undoubtedly another factor (Figure 8). Moreover, as one of the principal east–west arteries determined by William Penn’s original plan for the city in 1682–83, Spruce Street was both more imposing in scale and more geographically propitious than Powell Street. Biddle’s lot was, at 19 feet 4 inches frontage, one of the larger plots on Spruce Street, with a stipulated building value of at least $800. Within a year, those purchasing lots with a smaller frontage of 17 feet 6 inches were requested to build houses at a minimum value of $1,000, an increase that almost certainly reflected Philadelphia’s fluctuating real estate market at the time.
On Spruce Street, Biddle was again in distinguished artisanal company. Further along the street, William Thackara Jr. (1770–1823), who created the decorative plasterwork in the Senate chamber at Congress Hall (completed 1793), was the builder-speculator of the present number 731. Thackara’s decision to build on Spruce Street may, of course, have been prompted or encouraged by Biddle—they were already neighbors in Powell Street—but it more likely relates to the particular social and professional advantages he enjoyed as a member of the Society of Friends.63 More significant still is the social demographic of the 700 block of Spruce Street. Before the Revolution, most Carpenters’ Company members lived in the Dock Ward, Mulberry Ward, or Southwark districts of the city, areas largely occupied by the lower and middle classes. Although Spruce Street boasted a higher proportion of nonmanual workers and genteel residents than Powell Street, 35 percent of those with addresses at “Spruce above 7th” in 1806 were building tradesmen.64

The house at 717 Spruce Street has fared less well than Biddle’s earlier property venture. While its original footprint and some structural fabric survive, the original façade and interior partitions have long been lost to the vicissitudes of time and redevelopment.65 Based on its description in a fire insurance survey of 1821, it can be established that the house was built on a more genteel model than 525 Delancey Street: larger in area and proportion (measuring 19 feet 4 inches by 43 feet), the rooms on both first and second stories were flanked by a discrete circulation “passage” (or hallway) (Figure 9).66 The principal stair, located in the piazza, served the entire four stories of the house (including the garret); a second “private winding” staircase served a detached two-story kitchen building and washhouse.67 Although Biddle’s motivation for building this house remains unknown—did he build it for speculation or as a family home?—the interior was well appointed. Here a more formal approach to architectural decoration was realized. While finely turned door and window architraves were described in both first- and second-floor rooms in the 1821 survey, the distinction between marble mantels and mantels of wood, respectively, on these stories, not to mention mahogany doors to the first-floor rooms alone, highlights the commonly observed spatial hierarchies of the “polite” urban interior.68 Although such elements cannot be absolutely attributed to Biddle and may date from later tenancies, refined decorative finishes were an increasingly common feature of houses built for sale or rent during this period.69 In 1810, four adjoining houses on Ninth

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Figure 8 Thomas Carstairs, “The Plan and Elevation of the South Buildings in Sansom Street in the City of Philadelphia,” ink and watercolor, ca. 1800–1802 (Library Company of Philadelphia).
and Race Streets, “built in the best style of modern architecture,” boasted “handsome fire places, cornices and stairways.” Significantly, this appears to accord with speculative building practices observed in late eighteenth-century London and Dublin.

Having established the Spruce Street house as his residence and workshop, Biddle attempted to sell 23 Powell Street in the spring of 1801, when it was advertised simply as “A New Three story brick House.” This terse notice evidently did not elicit the desired response—it was repeated in newspapers throughout June, July, and August—and Biddle turned to the preferred method for selling property, seeking the professional advice of Shannon & Poalk, auctioneers, of Market Street. The house was subsequently announced for sale by public auction on “the 26th Oct. inst, at 7 o’clock in the evening.” On this occasion, while focusing on location and the dimensions of the building and lot, Shannon & Poalk’s advertisement employed the most commonly invoked descriptors used to sell genteel real estate, describing the house as being both “convenient” and “well-finished.” Electing to present the house to interested parties himself, Biddle offered attractive terms, part of the purchase cost being deferred on “the security of the property.” Five days after the auction date, on 31 October, the house was sold to Abraham Golding (or Golden), mariner, for the sum of $1,900. Although built as part of a pair, Cowgill’s house, 21 Powell Street, sold for $1,650 less than a year later, a substantial reduction that may be attributed to a national business depression in 1802.

From Buildings to Books

Biddle resided at 717 Spruce Street for the remainder of his life. While living there, he completed the projects with which his name has long been associated: the design and building of the Arch Street Meeting House and the building of both the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Most significantly, at 717 Spruce Street Biddle composed his most enduring contribution to the American architectural profession, the text of *The Young Carpenter’s Assistant*, published in Philadelphia in 1805. A measure of his reputation within the building industry at this time can be determined by the relatively short period between the book’s announcement and its eventual publication by subscription, a process that frequently took a number of years and carried with it the risk of being “an embarrassing and degrading experience.” Proposals for printing the book by subscription were advertised in February 1805, when a local newspaper announced that it would be “contained in one neat quarto volume, strongly bound, and printed in a handsome style, on a superfine paper; illustrated with upwards of 40 copperplate engravings, in the execution of

Figure 9 Conjectural first-floor plan of 717 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, 1821 (author’s drawing).
which no reasonable pains or expense shall be spared to make
them complete. 78

As early as July 1805, the manuscript was copyrighted by
the printer Benjamin Johnson; by November 1805, having
secured a respectable 198 subscribers, the book was “just
published.” 79 It soon enjoyed a wide distribution, being avail-
able through bookshops in Philadelphia and New York in
1805, and in Richmond, Virginia, and Lexington, Kentucky,
by 1810. 80 By contrast, the distribution of Asher Benjamin’s
The Country Builder’s Assistant (first edition 1797), which
enjoys the distinction of being the first American-authored
builder’s handbook, was apparently limited to Boston and to
the small towns in Massachusetts where Benjamin was
employed. 81

Aimed squarely at the building mechanic rather than the
architectural connoisseur, The Young Carpenter’s Assistant
was a potent distillation of building design and practice in
Philadelphia at the turn of the century. Comparatively large
in scale and illustrated by some of the finest engravers in
the city, it was clearly intended as a rival to the established
English titles by Abraham Swan, William Pain, and others
that had long enjoyed circulation in the colonies. 82 Although
Michael Lewis is correct to suggest that Biddle’s book was
“a provincial variant of a European publishing genre” and
“highly formulaic in character,” Biddle outdid his English
competitors by addressing the immediate requirements of
the American building trades. 83 Heavily reliant on Pain,
Biddle nonetheless selected an optimum number of plates
(addressing both practical and aesthetic concerns) and
focused on structural clarity and consistency in textual exe-
gesis (Figures 10 and 11). Moreover, where Pain’s books
simultaneously, and often confusingly, published designs
both modish and retardataire, Biddle’s plates directly
reflected the established tastes of Philadelphian carpenters
and housewrights. 84

A further measure of the significance attached to Biddle’s
book is confirmed by its influence on Asher Benjamin’s sec-
ond publication venture, The American Builder’s Companion
(1806), which apes the format, tone, and quality of The Young
Carpenter’s Assistant and bears little resemblance to Benja-
min’s first, decidedly amateurish, effort. 85 John Quinan’s asser-
tion that the publication of The Country Builder’s Assistant
“originated out of Benjamin’s expressed dissatisfaction with
the expensive and excessively elaborate English architectural
handbooks which were regularly sold to American house-
wrights” is misleading. 86 In the preface to The Young Carpen-
ter’s Assistant, Biddle decried the content of imported books,
“two thirds” of which he characterized as “unnecessary” for
the “American student of Architecture.” 87 Benjamin’s state-
ment that “not more than one third of the contents of the
European publications” on architecture “are of any use to the
American artist” appears in the first edition of The American

Figure 10 “Mouldings, Balustrades &c.” (William Pain, The Practical
Builder [1774; repr., New York: Dover, 2013], plate X).

Figure 11 “Mouldings” (Owen Biddle, The Young Carpenter’s
Assistant [1805; repr., New York: Dover, 2006], plate 4).
Builder’s Companion published in 1806, and thus postdates Biddle’s identical sentiment by a full calendar year. While both authors relied on English sources for content and illustrations, Biddle’s book was unquestionably a more accomplished production than Benjamin’s Country Builder’s Assistant in terms of design clarity and textual lucidity. Furthermore, this high standard of presentation, coupled with its wider network of distribution, almost certainly brought The Young Carpenter’s Assistant to the attention of Benjamin and other New England carpenters (one named subscriber to Biddle’s book hailed from Rhode Island). Benjamin was in fact part of a coterie of Boston housewrights who had, in June 1804, requested advice from the Carpenters’ Company in Philadelphia regarding “the rules & regulations by which your Society is Govern’d.” While this indicates Philadelphia’s centrality with respect to an emerging national building industry, it also suggests a nascent yet dispersed network of building mechanics and aspiring architects located in different urban centers, brought together principally through the instruments of their shared interests.

Although Benjamin’s American Builder’s Companion included designs for the kind of city houses he was then erecting in Boston (Figures 12 and 13), Biddle provided no designs for the type of row houses he had built on Powell and Spruce Streets. But while this might indicate Biddle’s lack of interest in that particular building typology, it more likely relates to the didactic purpose of his book. The city house, as the province of master builders, was not customarily regarded as “architecture” per se, and Biddle was evidently inclined to provide more ambitious design exemplars. Two house elevations of his own composition—one conservative, the other more ambitious but gauche—were clearly intended to display his capacity for domestic architectural design in a modernizing, classical idiom (Figure 14); his self-built houses, and even his design for the Arch Street Meeting House, could not have satisfied this criterion. (Modesty, of
course, may have prevented Biddle from including the latter, although it is arguably not a building of any great consequence in architectural terms.) However, while attempts to “read” Biddle’s approach to row house design from The Young Carpenter’s Assistant are somewhat frustrated by the lack of plates and textual exposition, a comprehensible aesthetic emerges from the pages of the book. Biddle patently disliked the “unmeaning holes and cuttings of a gouge” that characterized the vernacular Adam style common in Philadelphia, favoring a more conservative classicism. His illustration of a “pitch pediment frontispiece,” for example, is plagiarized from a design by William Pain first published in 1766, almost forty years earlier (Figures 15 and 16).94

Conceiving his book primarily as a pedagogical tool, Biddle was also anxious that it provide examples of the most important buildings in the modern style then being erected in Philadelphia. The inclusion of architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe’s design for the Bank of Pennsylvania (1799), which Biddle described as both “beautiful” and a “neat specimen of the Ionic Order,” was therefore both instructive and astute.95

Figure 14 Owen Biddle, “Design for a large building” (Owen Biddle, The Young Carpenter’s Assistant [1805; repr., New York: Dover, 2006], plate 37).
Mindful of the vagaries of architectural fashions, *The Young Carpenter's Assistant* evinced a measured approach to the classical idiom that contributed to its continuing popularity among building tradesmen. Reprints of the original text were issued in 1810, 1815, and 1817, and a posthumous second edition, augmented with Greek revival designs by architect John Haviland, was published in 1833.

A curious coda to the book's early history is the fact that, despite Biddle's regular attendance at Carpenters' Company meetings, *The Young Carpenter's Assistant* received no mention in the association's minutes during his lifetime. In fact, of the 167 Philadelphian subscribers to Biddle's book, only 20 percent were members of the Carpenters' Company, suggesting that the company did not formally endorse or encourage the enterprise. Indeed, the record of a meeting of the Managing Committee on 4 March 1807 includes the request that member Alphonso C. Ireland purchase a copy on the company's behalf, suggesting that its library did not in fact already possess one. While we may only speculate as to why this was the case, it seems certain that any book that threatened to undermine the authority of Philadelphia's foremost craft guild, regardless of the identity of the author, would be regarded with a degree of suspicion.

**Biddle as Speculator or Carpenter?**

In the immediate aftermath of his death in 1806, Biddle's debts were called in, and his workshop, benches, tools, and architectural books were advertised for sale. With his brothers John and Clement engaged in other professions and his sons being minors, there was evidently no one willing or able to inherit Biddle's carpentry business. The workshop, described as being “new” and situated on “a lot of ground in Orange Street” between Seventh and Eighth Streets, evidently stood at the rear of the 130-foot-deep Spruce Street property. Donna Rilling's study of the early building industry in Philadelphia indicates that carpenters' workshops...
were typically utilitarian structures of timber-frame construction, often situated at the rear of dwelling house lots. In 1782, the sale of a “Carpenter's Shop” at the rear of a house in Arch Street described the structure as being “34 Feet by 15, one Story high.” An “old frame work shop” in Spruce Street in 1805, on the other hand, was advertised as “containing in breadth east and west, 5 feet 2 inches, and in length or depth, southward, 70 feet.” In an inventory of Biddle’s effects made on 20 June 1806, his “Work Shop & Benches” were valued at $75, while the “Sundry Tools & impliments of Trade” were valued at $76. Whereas the combined estimate of tools and shop, at $151, placed Biddle at the lower end of frame shop appraisals in Philadelphia at this time, the value of the tools alone was considerably higher than that of the average carpenter's chest, and the most valuable item of his personal estate (Figure 17).

Although much has been made of Biddle’s architectural library—his estate inventory listed fifteen books devoted to the subject—the authors remain, for the most part, unknown. While builder’s handbooks by William Pain and Peter Nicholson informed the text and plates of The Young Carpenter’s Assistant, and were duly acknowledged in the introduction, the suggestion that Biddle’s library may have extended to the more expensive folio volumes authored by renowned British architects such as James Gibbs and William Chambers is without foundation, and the influence of these architects is not readily discernible in the buildings and designs that constitute his oeuvre. Given the character and nature of his business and professional formation, it seems more likely that the remaining unidentified titles were drawn from the available “ready reckoners” and books of mensuration that were among the most widely circulating books in early America. That said, Biddle’s membership in the Library Company of Philadelphia would certainly have provided him with ready access to a wider range of architectural publications.

In his will of 10 May 1806, Biddle empowered his executors—his wife, Elizabeth, and his two brothers, John and Clement—to sell the Spruce Street house, “where I now dwell,” if required to satisfy his “just debts.” In January 1811, the property was sold by private contract to Samuel Simes, accountant, for $2,750. Despite the fact that itemized payments from Biddle’s estate to various building mechanics remain inconclusive, it seems certain that the majority of these individuals were retained, or newly employed, to undertake projects left incomplete at the time of his death. Of particular interest are sums paid to John C. Evans “for carpenters’ work” in 1808 and 1811. In 1806, Evans (fl. 1805–50) was Biddle’s immediate neighbor, having built the adjoining house, the current number 719 Spruce Street, and he was also one of two persons appointed to appraise Biddle’s personal estate. Evans was a carpenter and a builder-speculator of some standing, and he worked as a surveyor for the Philadelphia Contributionship for more than forty years. In April 1810, he sold 719 Spruce Street to Charles Stewart, a navy captain, for $5,100. Given that the years between 1809 and 1815 represented “one of the most profitable times in early nineteenth-century construction,” the smaller amount paid for Biddle’s adjoining house a year later, though of identical plot dimension and ground rent to Evans, cannot be readily explained. What is clear is that 717 Spruce Street was available for short-term letting from at least 1808, and its disposal by Biddle’s executors was likely anticipated from the outset.
What does the foregoing indicate? The evidence of Biddle's two houses suggests that he was not a builder-speculator of any significance. Independent research into the eighteenth-century building trade in London, New York, and Philadelphia reveals that competitive house-building businesses had up to six properties in progress at any one time. While creditworthiness was evidently a problem during the short-lived partnership between Biddle and Cowgill, it also remains unclear as to what kinds of financial instruments Biddle used to underwrite his property ventures. Unlike Summers and Ireland, his immediate neighbors and colleagues, Biddle did not borrow from the Carpenters' Company. At other times, however, he mortgaged both the Powell Street and Spruce Street properties to the same person, Lydia Johnson, spinster, and she continued to receive regular interest payments from his estate before being fully reimbursed in 1811. In light of the financial problems encountered by the Cowgill and Biddle partnership in 1801, it is interesting to note that both retained ownership, and raised capital, on their respective houses in Powell Street independent of one another.

How much journeyman carpentry work did Biddle undertake in these years? His composition of a book on the rudiments of architecture, coupled with the larger building projects he took on at this time, such as the Schuylkill Permanent Bridge and Arch Street Meeting House, signal a departure from manual labor and the employment of a shop foreman and apprentices. About this, however, the records are silent. The 1800 census taken in Philadelphia, when Biddle was resident in Powell Street, records that his household included one male between ten and sixteen years of age, two between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six years, and two between the ages of twenty-six and forty-five years. Discounting his son John, born in 1799, we might only hypothesize whether some of these individuals were apprentices to, or employees of, Biddle's business. While a master carpenter might keep only one or two apprentices full-time, employing journeymen and laborers as needs dictated, successful operations might engage numerous hands. No fewer than eight apprentices were bound to house carpenter Peter L. Berry between April 1802 and February 1806. Master builders, on the other hand, managed sizable numbers of contractors and subcontractors. For the completion of a house on Second Street, undertaken between 1795 and 1798, twenty-eight individuals (or firms), including carpenters, stonemasons, plasterers, and plumbers, were coordinated by the project supervisor.

That Biddle's self-built houses had nothing architecturally distinctive about them should come as no surprise. The domestic real estate market then constituted, as it does today, a delicate balancing act between producer and consumer, and his conventional elevations and plans are perhaps best understood as an expression of his good business sense. Size, location, and character were among the factors that dictated a property's valuation, and a comparison with houses of a similar type helps to place Biddle's buildings in context (Table 1). The U.S. Direct Tax Lists for 1798 record that Biddle's and Cowgill's properties in Powell (Delancey) Street were valued at $400 apiece. It is important to note, however, that these figures are based on the fact that these houses had yet to be fully built, the ground lots having been purchased only earlier in that year. The $731.25 valuation of the adjoining 1 Powell Street (built 1797), which boasts an identical areal footprint, provides some clue to the value of Biddle's house had it been fully built at the time. While the higher figure for 1 Powell Street (demolished) is perplexing in this context, given that the house was equivalent in area and frontage to its neighbors, its prominent corner location and orientation toward Fifth rather than Powell Street was likely a contributing factor. More difficult to account for are the considerably higher valuations for 427 Spruce Street ($3,825) and 244 South Third Street ($15,750). Although these houses were

| Table 1. Pennsylvania, U.S. Direct Tax Lists, 1798 |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| **House**   | **Street frontage** | **Date built** | **Master builder** | **1798 valuation ($)** |
| 23 Powell  | 15’ 9½"          | 1798–99        | Owen Biddle        | 400.00          |
| 21 Powell  | 15’ 9½"          | 1798–99        | Joseph Cowgill     | 400.00          |
| 19 Powell  | 15’ 9"           | 1797–98        | Benj. Thornton     | 731.25          |
| 1 Powell   | 16’ (dem.)       | 1796–97        | Wm. Thackara Jr.   | 1,237.50        |
| 427 Spruce | 22’ 9"           | 1790–91        | William Williams Jr.| 3,825.00      |
| 244 S. Third | 30’           | 1765–66        | n/a               | 15,750.00       |

certainly larger in scale and spatial dimension, here it seems likely that the less tangible qualities of association and reputation also influenced their appraisal: 427 Spruce was built by William Williams, one of the most celebrated builder/architects of the Federal era in Philadelphia, and was, in 1798, home to Don Joseph de Jaudenes, commissary general and envoy from the king of Spain; 244 South Third (the Powel House), one of the finest examples of the row house type in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, was successively home to some of the most distinguished families of the so-called Republican Court (Figures 18 and 19).124

More important, if we take into account the median dwelling space common to the city’s various occupational categories, from “low manual” to “high nonmanual,” we can surmise Biddle’s projected market. With a living area of approximately 1,417 square feet, 23 Powell Street was slightly larger than the median 1,335 square feet of the typical city-center houses occupied by storekeepers and other nonmanual workers, but smaller than the 1,812 square feet of houses favored by merchants, brokers, and other professionals. On the other hand, it was substantially greater in area than the 900 square feet common to the “high manual” category of skilled artisans (Biddle’s own particular demographic). With this in mind, it seems clear that Biddle’s house was aimed at a “middling” consumer class amply represented in the urban real estate marketplace.125

**Conclusion**

From arguably inauspicious beginnings—an apprenticeship to a master dismissed from the city’s foremost craft association and a business partnership that almost ended in disgrace—Biddle emerged as one of the leading figures in the building world of early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. Trained as a carpenter within the conservative milieu of the Carpenters’ Company, he evidently harbored loftier aspirations. This lay at the root of his attempt to establish a school of architectural design and, when that failed to transpire, to compose the first manual of architectural design aimed at the particular needs of the American building tradesman. His abilities and ambitions were complemented by serendipitous circumstances. Although historically disparaged as the “lower orders,” the mechanic and the craftsman were elevated within the social pecking order by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking. Nowhere was this more tangible...
than in America. Politically empowered in the aftermath of the Revolution, artisans emerged as part of the “independent producing class” during the 1790s, the decade when Biddle attained his majority and set up in business. By the time of his death from consumption in 1806, he had clearly achieved professional competence, a fact confirmed by his finely built, well-furnished dwelling in one of the city’s foremost residential districts.

Even though Biddle’s self-built houses cannot claim a place among the ranks of the more significant city mansions erected in Philadelphia during the Federal era and may not rank among the most important buildings of his own oeuvre, they nonetheless shed important light on his everyday practice as a house carpenter. As a statement of both his individual artisanal abilities and the milieu in which the buildings were made, Biddle’s row houses stand as testimony to what J. Ritchie Garrison has recently characterized as the importance of a builder’s “performance”—related to design, business, and reputation—in early American architectural culture. Given their unpretentious form and appearance, and Biddle’s modest ambitions as a speculative builder, they also find a pleasing equivalence with Latrobe’s posthumous examples.

Notes

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5. In the editions of The Philadelphia Directory published between 1801, when he first listed, and 1806, the year of his death, Biddle describes his trade variously as “house carpenter” (1801) or “carpenter” (1802–6). Owen Biddle, The Young Carpenter’s Assistant; or, A System of Architecture, Adapted to the Style of Building in the United States (Philadelphia, 1805), t.p.

6. The two houses built by Owen Biddle are identified in Society Hill (and Pennsylvania Hospital of Washington Square West) Historic District, a comprehensive list published by the Philadelphia Historical Commission on 10 Mar. 1999 (amended 13 Oct. 1999), 34, 156. The dates, however, are either incorrect or generalized: 525 Delancey Street is given as ca. 1808, and 717 Spruce Street is given as ca. 1801–6. These houses have apparently escaped the notice of Biddle’s biographers to date.


14. Ibid.

15. The apprenticeship system was less rigid in the American colonies than it was in Britain. See Roger W. Moss Jr., “Master Builders: A History of the Colonial Philadelphia Building Trades” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1972), 141. In fact, the period of an apprenticeship appears to have been determined by the age at which an individual was bound, and it terminated when the person reached majority (twenty-one years of age). For example, in 1800, Charles Trotter, aged sixteen years and eleven months, was bound to John C. Evans, house carpenter, for four years and one month. Apprenticeship and Redemption Indentures, 27 Oct. 1801–18 Oct. 1806, vol. 20.1, 8, Office of the Mayor, City Archives, Philadelphia.

16. Carpenters’ Company Minutes, 1798–1802, 21 July 1800, 1A.7, 116. George Summers, carpenter and master builder, was a prominent figure.
in the Carpenters' Company during the early nineteenth century, having been elected secretary of the Managing Committee in 1804. He was also, ironically, one of the committee members charged with investigating the possible legal action to be taken against the printer Richard Felwell, who had published Jonathan Evans Jr.'s copy of the jealously guarded price book. Ibid., 147–48, 153–54.

17. By contrast, following his admission in 1795, Summers proposed Alphonso C. Ireland in 1799, Biddle and Joseph Cowgill in 1800, and Joseph Corbit in 1802. Ireland, in turn, proposed John Rowen in 1802 and Moses Lancaster in 1810.

18. Tatman and Moss, Biographical Dictionary, 68. Cowgill and Biddle were duly elected to the Carpenters' Company at the meeting of 20 October 1800; they were sworn in, paid their admission fees, and signed the articles on 19 January 1801.


20. Cowgill is described in the minutes as an apprentice within the district, although the name of his master is not recorded. Certificates of Removal, 1772–1840, 12. Nov. 1791, MR Ph:424, Quaker Meeting Records.


22. Billy G. Smith, The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1730–1800 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 139. Smith further notes: "The sons of fathers who possessed the means to apprentice them to a ship captain, a merchant house, or master in a highly skilled craft and later to assist them in obtaining the capital necessary to establish their independence naturally enjoyed greater opportunities."

Ibid., 144. Rilling notes that Philadelphia at this time represented "one of the most unfettered capital markets in the nation." Rilling, Making Houses, 42.


24. Moss, "Master Builders," 141. Billy Smith argues that the graduation from journeyman to master was less easily accomplished "among 'lesser' Philadelphia artisans." Smith, The "Lower Sort," 5.


27. Paulson's American Daily Advertiser, 25 Aug. 1801. This announcement ran at regular intervals until October.


30. Ibid. While the details remain undisclosed, there is no record of any cases being brought against them. Minute Book 1800–1801, vol. 5, and Minute Book 1801–1802, vol. 6, Court of Common Pleas, 20.17, City Archives, Philadelphia.


34. Cowgill subscribed to Biddle's Young Carpenter's Assistant in 1805, giving his address as "Dover."

35. Carpenters' Company Minutes, 1804–25, passim. Between his admission in January 1801 and his death in 1813, Cowgill attended only two of a possible forty-eight meetings.


37. The dissolution of the business partnership did not go to arbitration at the Carpenters' Company and so evidently did not contravene that organization's article VII, which states: "If a difference arises between any of the members relative to the trade, the person who thinks himself aggrieved is enjoined to apply to the President, who, with the Assistants, shall endeavour to accommodate the affair." Articles of the Carpenters Company of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1786), xi. As noted above, Cowgill subscribed to Biddle's book in 1805, suggesting that there was no personal animosity between them.

38. Deeds D/74/177, Philadelphia City Archives. All deeds cited here by number are found in the Philadelphia City Archives.

39. Deeds D/76/415. On 2 November 1796, Douglass and Thornton pledged to "build and finish," within the space of one year, "two good three Story Brick Houses," and within three years "so many more good three Story Brick Houses" as would "fill up and occupy the remainder of the front" to Powell Street. All houses were to be at least 15½ feet frontage. Deeds D/69/178. Just over a year later, on 13 December 1797, and clearly anticipating Thornton's death early in 1798, the business arrangement was amended. Having satisfied the requirements of the original indenture by building two houses on the southeast part of the lot, Douglass and Thornton decided then "to make Partition" of these houses and the remainder of the unbuilt ground. Deeds D/69/173. Thereafter, Douglass and Thornton's widow, Rebecca, as executors, sold the remaining lots ascribed to Thornton.


41. The supposed similarities of plan and spatial organization between Biddle's house and Cowgill's house are based on the admittedly lacunar descriptions of these properties in fire insurance surveys. Insurance Surveys S02972 and S03636, Philadelphia Contributionship (Archives).

42. Deeds E.F./9/245.

43. Carpenters’ Company Minutes, 1798–1802, 116. Summers lived at 25 Powell Street (now 527 Delancey) from 1802 until his death in 1823.

44. Carpenters’ Company Minutes, 1798–1802, 36–37. Summers and Ireland were important contributing members of the Carpenters’ Company in the early nineteenth century, regularly attending meetings and sitting on committees. In 1811, for example, both were appointed members of a committee to “correct and explain the present Book of Prices and to price new work.”


46. The two most exclusive neighborhoods in 1790s Philadelphia were Society Hill, south of Chestnut and west of Second Street, and the vicinity...
of the statehouse, north and west of Chestnut and Fifth Streets. For a recent discussion on this topic, see Amy Hudson Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790–1800” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2008), 83–87.

47. Mary M. Schweitzer, “The Spatial Organization of Federalist Philadelphia, 1790,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1993), 39. Schweitzer states that population density “more than halved” beyond Fifth Street and notes a corresponding drop in the value of houses and lots. Nonetheless, certain neighborhoods distinguished themselves: she identifies a “noticeable peak” in real estate in the 500 block of Market Street, the location of the Robert Morris house, where George Washington lived.

48. Both Biddle and Cowgill took their plots at $48 in February 1798. William Thackara Jr. purchased a 16-foot frontage on the northwest corner lot of Powell Street at $48 per annum in 1796. Deeds E.F./16/36. Alphonsus C. Ireland’s plot was slightly lower in price, at $42 per annum, in January 1798. Deeds D/69/196.


50. Their similarity was altered sometime before 1857, when the upper stories of 523 were rebuilt to stand taller than 525. This intervention was retained in the 1990s when the interior of the house was remodeled as a professional office. In 1997, a request for a building permit to demolish the interior partitions that had “no structural significance” was granted, resulting in their irrevocable loss. A similar fate befell Biddle’s house, 525, which apparently lost its nonstructural partitions in 1995. Application for building permit dated June 6, 1995, “525 Delancey Street,” Philadelphia Historical Commission.


53. Insurance Survey S02972, Philadelphia Contributionship (Archives).


56. Biddle, *Young Carpenter’s Assistant*, description of plates 21 and 22.

57. The house was certainly built by February 1800; first advertised in March 1801, it was sold the following October. For an overview of fine city houses built in this period, see George B. Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian: The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of Its Eighteenth-Century Neighbors* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976).


60. The Spruce Street lot was in fact part of a larger tract originally conveyed in trust for the purpose of a burial ground for the Friends; when the tract was found to be “unfit” for its intended purpose, it was divided into building lots. Deeds E.F./20/189.

61. The extent to which these minimum values were conceived in imitation of house rates in London, introduced in that city by the Building Act of 1774, is unclear. (London houses were classified into four types, or “rates”: First Rate houses were worth more than £850 per year in ground rent and occupied more than 900 square feet of space; Fourth Rate houses were worth less than £130 per year in ground rent and occupied less than 350 square feet in space.) In the absence of design guidelines in Philadelphia, this codicil in the Spruce Street indentures was clearly intended to inform the quality of the houses erected there. On the London Building Acts, see Dan Cruickshank and Peter Wyld, *London: The Art of Georgian Building* (London: Architectural Press, 1975), 22–39; Clarke, *Building Capitalism*, 108–14.


63. Thackara purchased the plot on the northwest corner of Powell and Fifth Streets in 1796 and, having taken the plot in Spruce Street, sold the Powell Street house (since demolished) to Patrick Gorman, merchant, in April 1804 for $1,400. Deeds E.F./16/36. Thackara purchased the plot in Spruce Street in June 1803. In 1815 he sold it to Elizabeth Reford, widow, for $4,040. Deeds M.R./5/382. On Thackara’s career as a plasterer, see Robert Donald Crompton, “William Thackara, Jr., Master Plasterer of Early Philadelphia,” *Plastering Industries* 46, no. 3 (Oct. 1960), 27–37.


65. The present numbers 717–23 Spruce Street inclusive were extensively remodeled during the 1970s. See approved drawings titled “Renovation of Spruce Street Houses,” 20 July 1977, in “717–719 Spruce Street,” Philadelphia Historical Commission.
Insurance Survey S04039, Philadelphia Contributionship (Archives).

67. Ibid.

68. A second-story “chamber” above the kitchen block was also distinguished by carved “mouldings” and a mantel “with reeded columns & frieze.” Ibid.

69. An 1804 survey of two identical houses on Sansom Street, built as speculation in 1800–1802, reveals that both properties had stairs with mahogany handrails, architraves to all door and window surrounds, and “ornamented mantels” on both first and second floors. Nos. 3093 and 3094, Philadelphia Contributionship Survey Book 1794–1809, Philadelphia Contributionship (Archives). In fact, the twenty-two houses of Sansom Street, between Seventh and Eighth Streets, were built as speculation. The uniform size and spatial organization of all these houses evidently extended to identical interior finishes: compare Insurance Surveys 3116 and 3117, and 3120 and 3121 from the same source. For the history and context of Sansom Street, see Kenneth Ames, “Robert Mills and the Philadelphia Row House,” JSAH 27, no. 2 (May 1968), 140–46; Stillman, “City Living, Federal Style,” 162–63.

70. Page 1804 American Daily Advertiser, 21 June 1801.

71. In Dublin by the 1780s, for example, interior decoration formed an integral part of property speculation at some of the city’s grandest residential streets and squares. See Conor Lucey, “Classicism or Commerce? The ‘Town House Interior as Commodity,’ in The Eighteenth-Century Dublin Town House, ed. Christine Casey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 236–48.

72. Page 1804 American Daily Advertiser, 17 Apr. 1801. This appendix dates a March 14, “when the advertisement was presumably first composed and/or inserted.

73. Philadelphia Gazette, 21 Oct. 1801; Spera, “Building for Business,” 77. Similar descriptors were used to sell houses in eighteenth-century New York; see is named Abraham Golden. In the insurance survey (see note below), he is named Abraham Golding. In the 1803 Philadelphia Directory, “Golding,—, sea-captain” is listed at “23 Powell.”

74. Rilling, Making Houses, 15. Insurance surveys of both houses in 1814 also showed a divergence in price: 23 Powell (Biddle’s house) was valued at $1,200, and 21 Powell (Cowgill’s house) at $1,000. However, this may be explained by the fact that, in the interim, a separate two-story kitchen building had been built at 23 Powell. A similar two-story kitchen building was described in a “resurvey” of 21 Powell in 1822. Mutual Assurance Policy No. 3567; Insurance Survey S03636, Philadelphia Contributionship (Archives).


76. The Library; or, Philadelphia Literary Reporter, 16 Feb. 1805.

77. Aurora General Advertiser, 30 Nov. 1805. In Philadelphia, the book was also available at Bennett & Walton of Market Street. Philadelphia Literary Reporter, 1 Feb. 1809. In Britain, the typical print run for books of this type and size was often fewer than 250 copies. Archer, Literature of British Domestic Architecture, 8.


80. A letter from the Boston committee was read aloud to the assembled meeting of the Carpenters’ Company; among those attending were Biddle, Ireland, and Summers. Having received a favorable response to their Philadelphia brethren, the members of the Boston committee soon formed the Associated Housewrights Society in the Town of Boston.


82. The first American edition of Abraham Swan’s The British Architect (London, 1745) was published in Philadelphia in 1775. Books by William Pain, such as The Builder’s Pocket-Treasure, first published in London in 1763, were influential in America before the Revolution. American editions were increasingly common from the early 1790s. Hitchcock, American Architectural Books, iii.

83. Lewis, “Owen Biddle and The Young Carpenter’s Assistant,” 160. Benjamin’s Country Builder’s Assistant was octavo in size and closer to a type of pocket book or “ready reckoner.”

84. William Pain’s The Builder’s Pocket-Treasure, published simultaneously in London and Boston in 1794, is a good case in point. Many of its designs for chimneypieces are decidedly old-fashioned by London standards, being in the Palladian style and featuring overmantels, eared architraves, and pulvinate friezes. These are included alongside more fashionable Adam-style designs originally published by Pain in 1774. On Pain, see Harris, British Architectural Books, 338–40.

85. The Young Carpenter’s Assistant was also more competitively priced at $4.50, compared to $6.00 for The American Builder’s Companion, available from the bookseller William P. Farrand at Market Street. United States Gazette, 31 Jan. 1807. For further comparison, in 1797 William Pain’s Practical House Carpenter cost $5.50 at Thomas Dobson, 41 South Second Street, Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser, 16 Nov. 1797.


87. Biddle, Young Carpenter’s Assistant, 1.

88. Amos, American Builder’s Companion, v. For a different perspective on Benjamin’s motivations in 1797, see Hafertepe, “The Country Builder’s Assistant,” 146.

89. Sterling Boyd’s argument that Biddle’s “conservative” designs were “paradoxically progressive” is unnecessarily complicated. Sterling Boyd, The Adam Style in America, 1770–1820 (New York: Garland, 1985), 141. Elsewhere, confusingly, Boyd describes Biddle’s designs as “provincial.” Ibid., 148.

90. Carpenters’ Company Minutes, 1804–25, meeting of 15 July 1804. A letter from the Boston committee was read aloud to the assembled meeting of the Carpenters’ Company; among those attending were Biddle, Ireland, and Summers. Having received a favorable response from their Philadelphian brethren, the members of the Boston committee soon formed the Associated Housewrights Society in the Town of Boston.

93. Ibid., 28. For an analysis of Biddle's text within the context of Philadelphia's evolving architectural culture, see Lewis, “Owen Biddle and The Young Carpenter's Assistant,” 153–60.

94. William Pain, The Builder's Pocket-Treasure (London, 1766), plate II. This design remained a staple of Pain's architectural vocabulary. While the current door surround of 525 Delancey Street bears no direct resemblance to those exemplars illustrated by Biddle, it is a fair approximation of the “square head front door, neat pitch pediment, fluted pilasters” described in an insurance survey of the house in 1814. Mutual Assurance Policy No. 3567.

95. Biddle, Young Carpenter's Assistant, 53.


97. The Carpenters' Company may have feared that Biddle's book would expose the “mysteries” of the trade in ways that defied established apprenticeship models. Of the 101 living members recorded in Articles of the Carpenters Company (Philadelphia, 1805), only twenty (slightly less than 20 percent) subscribed to Biddle's book. Biddle, Young Carpenter's Assistant, 63–64.

98. Carpenters' Company, Managing Committee Minutes, 1806–12, 61, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.


100. Biddle's brother John was an apothecary, while Clement was engaged in the sugar-refining business. His sons, John and Owen, were born in 1799 and 1804, respectively. Biddle, Sketch of Owen Biddle, 49–51.

101. Orange Street is now the 700 block of Manning Street, parallel to Spruce Street.

102. Rilling, Making Houses, 41. The fact that Biddle's Powell Street property apparently had no workshop suggests that it was built for sale rather than as a residence for Biddle or as a long-term investment. That said, it may have had a workshop that was disassembled before the house was advertised on the property market.


104. Aurora General Advertiser, 23 Sept. 1805.

105. Wills 1806: No. 50, “An Inventory of the Personal Estate of Owen Biddle, June 20, 1806,” Register of Wills, City Hall, Philadelphia. Biddle's workshop was valued at less than 2.5 percent of the house, which sold for $2,750 in 1811.

106. In 1798, valuations of carpenters' shops in the Northern Liberties neighborhood of Philadelphia, including workbenches and tools, ranged from $300 to $500. Valuations of tool chests ranged from $15 to $50. Rilling, Making Houses, 41–42. A comparison with the estate of William Williams (ca. 1749–94), one of the leading master builders in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, is revealing: Williams's “Sundry Carpenters' Tools &c.,” at $12, was the most valuable item recorded in his estate appraisal in 1794. Administration Records, 1794, No. 237, William Williams, City Hall, Philadelphia.

107. A number of the plates in Biddle's book are directly plagiarized from Pain and Nicholson. This somewhat undermines Biddle's claim to independence from “foreign authors” and contradicts Boyd's statement that Biddle's designs represented “a striking divergence from this tradition.” Boyd, Adam Style in America, 139. Lewis is unequivocal that “the vast bulk of Biddle's book ... is derivative.” Lewis, “Owen Biddle and The Young Carpenter's Assistant,” 156. More generally, Hitchcock admits that American authors “remained colonial in their dependence on English architectural sources” into the mid-nineteenth century. Hitchcock, American Architectural Books, iii. The suggestion that more significant architectural volumes constituted the remainder of Biddle's library is raised, but not substantiated, in Lewis, “Owen Biddle and The Young Carpenter's Assistant,” 155. There is an unfortunate tendency in the literature on American architectural books to conflate English builders' manuals with English architectural books. For example, see Charles E. Peterson, introduction to the facsimile reprint of The Carpenters' Company 1786 Rule Book (Princeton, N.J.: Pyne Press, 1992), where expensive folio volumes aimed at the connoisseur (by Campbell, Chambers, and Gibs) are grouped with inexpensive builders' octavos and duodecinos (by Halfpenny and Pain) under the misleading umbrella title of “pattern books.”


110. Deeds I.C./20/210. This transaction records that $1,000 was paid in cash and the remainder was secured as a mortgage on the property.

111. Wills 1806: No. 50, “Settlement of the Estate of Owen Biddle.” Various payments to Evans “for lumber” in the period 1806–9 also suggest the completion of projects. Equally tantalizing, if inconclusive, are payments to, among others, Joseph Jordan, plasterer, in 1807; George Lybrand, brick maker, in 1808; and Timothy Desmond, painter and glazier, in 1809.

112. Deeds E.F./28/498; Wills 1806: No. 50, “An Inventory of the Personal Estate of Owen Biddle.”


116. Wills 1806: No. 50, “Settlement of the Estate of Owen Biddle.” This document records that on 31 October 1808, Mordecai Churchman paid $378.69 for “Rent of dwelling house in Spruce Street.” This was followed by rental payments from three different individuals in 1809, by another named person in 1810, and by a further individual in 1811. As to the health of Biddle's personal estate: there is no mention of any members of the Carpenters' Company calling on his widow to “inquire into her situation,” a customary affair that constituted the offer of financial assistance and, more pressing, a request for the return of the company's price book. Unlike many other widows, Elizabeth Biddle did not apply for relief from the company; she married again in January 1812.

117. On Philadelphia, see Rilling, Making Houses, 5; on London, see Peter Guillery, The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 286; on New York, see Elizabeth Blackmar, Manhattan for Rent, 1783–1850 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 186. Cowigg appears only once as a grantor in the deeds records, when he sold his Powell Street house to a William Corbit, gentleman, in March 1802. Deeds I.C./9/42. This sale may have related directly to his departure for Dover.

118. For example, Summers borrowed $600 from the Carpenters' Company on a mortgage of a property in Fifth Street in 1800. Carpenters' Company, Managing Committee Minutes, 1795–1801, 134–36, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

119. Mortgages E.F./2/85 (Powell Street, 1800) and E.F./8/418 (Spruce Street, 1804), Philadelphia City Archives. Similar payments to a Moses
Bartram and, later, his widow, Rebecca, remain inconclusive: there is no record of Biddle having held a mortgage from Bartram during his lifetime.

120. Mortgages M/18/166, Philadelphia City Archives. This transaction recites that in June 1799, Cowgill, to better secure the reimbursement of a loan of $1,000, mortgaged his house in Powell Street to Ann Emlen, widow.

121. Second Census, 1800 Population, vol. 5, Philadelphia City, Pennsylvania, M32, Roll 43, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The makeup of this household is unclear. Biddle was twenty-six years old in April 1800. His eldest son, John, born in February 1799, was the single child under ten years of age recorded here.


123. Administration Records, 1794, no. 237, William Williams, City Hall, Philadelphia.

124. United States Direct Tax of 1798: Tax Lists for the State of Pennsylvania, M372, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Biddle’s and Cowgill’s property assessments appear in the “Particular List B” category, referring to “all lands, lots, buildings and wharves … excepting only such dwelling houses as with the outhouses appurtenant thereto.” In addition to his Powell Street property, Biddle is described as the owner of a lot on “Clover Alley next to Rigbees Stable,” valued at $100. This property remains enigmatic but is clearly related to Powell Street, as Cowgill and Thornton are also described as owners of vacant lots here, all valued at the same amount. In The Philadelphia Directory for 1801, Clover Alley is described as “leading from S. Fifth street between 60 & 64” and boasting four discrete tenants (a gentlewoman, a boardinghouse, a bank clerk, and a house carpenter); the edition for 1802 notes that Clover Alley ran “from 90 South Fifth, to 125 Sixth streets.”

125. The figures cited in this paragraph are from Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class, 42–47, Table 2.3, “Median floor space in dwelling by occupational category and zone of residence, Philadelphia, 1798.”


127. Wills 1806: No. 50, “An Inventory of the Personal Estate of Owen Biddle.” Estate inventories are notoriously problematic as evidence. That said, Biddle’s estate amounted to the not inconsiderable sum of $729.18 and included mahogany furniture, looking glasses, china, plate, carpets, and “pictures.” Record of Interments in Friends Burial Ground on Fourth and Mulberry Streets for the Southern District Phila., pp. 44–45, Record of Births and Interments, 1734–1806, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania. Biddle was buried in the “Eastern Ground” (at Fourth and Arch, formerly Mulberry, Streets) deeded to the Quakers as a burial site by William Penn in 1701. It is also the site of Biddle’s Arch Street Meeting House (begun 1803).

128. Garrison, Two Carpenters, 17.