

Robert Coit

Houses and Public Buildings in an Age of Suburban Growth

Ellen Spencer

In 1890 Winchester resident Robert Coit opened an architectural office in Boston. His career would span more than forty years, during which time he would design both small-scale public buildings and many residences in the area. In Winchester, Coit (figure 1) is best known as the architect of the Winchester Boat Club, the 1926 addition to the First Congregational Church, the Winchester Public Library, and several mansions on Myopia Hill. According to Coit's obituary, he designed at least fifty residences in the town, but that number appears to be significantly higher.¹ Most of his buildings were erected between 1895 and 1915 when Winchester experienced its greatest growth as a commuter suburb. By fortunate coincidence of timing and talent, Coit was positioned to become one of the most important architects in Winchester's history, along with George Rand, Frank Patterson Smith, and the landscape architect Herbert Kellaway, whose many contributions remain visible to this day.²

Coit was born on June 29, 1861, in Brookfield, Massachusetts. His father, Joshua Coit, was a Congregational minister, Yale graduate, and member of a prominent Connecticut family. In 1860 Joshua married Mary Lyman Chandler of Concord, New Hampshire, and Robert was their first child. In 1872 Reverend Coit became pastor of the Lawrence Street Congregational Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where Robert attended Lawrence High School.³ From there, he went on to attend Harvard College as a member of the class of 1883. He then spent a year in Tehran as secretary to the United States minister to Persia, Samuel G. W. Benjamin, and traveled in Europe



FIGURE 1. Robert Coit. From *Pictorial History of Winchester*, 1914.

and England.⁴ When Coit returned to the United States, it was to Winchester, where his father had moved the family after accepting a position as treasurer of the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society.⁵ Robert subsequently enrolled in the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for one year, where he is listed as a member of the class of 1886.⁶

For the next four years, Coit was employed by two prominent Boston architectural firms, Hartwell and Richardson in 1886 and Longfellow, Alden and Harlow from 1887–90.⁷ Both offices were greatly influenced by H. H. Richardson, the most famous architect in the United States at

the time.⁸ After these formative experiences, Coit opened his own practice.⁹

In 1888 he married Eliza Richmond Atwood, and they had four children: Dorothy, Elisabeth, Mary, and Robert, Jr.¹⁰ In 1905, Eliza died, and ten years later, Coit married Lucetta Frances Abbott. For the greater part of his professional life, he resided at 15 Hillside Avenue in Winchester, moving into Boston in 1924.¹¹

Most of Coit's practice lay in residential design, while occasionally he worked on institutional and civic buildings. His approach was not innovative, but rather was consistent with the direction taken by his Boston colleagues. During the 1890s, Coit designed houses that were Queen Anne in style. By the turn of the century, he adopted the eclectic approach that was embraced throughout the region, favoring revival styles that were influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement. His buildings were Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, and simplified interpretations of historical styles, clad in shingles and stucco, that today are generally identified as Arts and Crafts. Coit's success developed from the quality, rather than the originality, of his designs, and they were selected on many occasions for publication in the architectural press.

The earliest documented residence by Coit in Winchester is 92 Church Street (figure 2), built for Phineas Nickerson in 1892 and prominently located at the corner of Church and Bacon Streets.¹² With its three-story tower and wrap-around porch, the house could be considered a paradigm of the Queen Anne style.¹³ As is typical of Queen Anne architecture, it



(Courtesy of Ellen Spencer)

FIGURE 2. House at 92 Church Street, built for Phineas Nickerson, 1892.

features elements that were carried into the revival designs at the turn of the twentieth century. The Palladian window on the third-story gable end is characteristic

of the emerging Colonial Revival style. More significantly, Coit included a series of substantial decorative brackets underneath the overhanging third story. These



(Courtesy of Historic New England)

FIGURE 3. Hermann Dudley Murphy house, 1903, designed with a separate studio for the artist. The buildings are located at 314–316 Highland Avenue.

brackets draw upon the English Arts and Crafts movement, which was beginning to influence Boston architects. In 1897 a Society of Arts and Crafts was organized in the city, and among its founders was Coit's former employer, Alexander Wadsworth Longfellow, Jr.¹⁴ Brackets, derived from medieval domestic architecture, are used in various ways on Coit's houses from 1900 on.

The house at 92 Church Street was one of many in the area built on land that Nickerson purchased and developed. Next door, the residence at 94 Church Street was also built on Nickerson land, and although undocumented, it appears to have been designed by Coit.¹⁵ Nickerson developed much of the land nearby along Everett Avenue, Sheffield Road, Sheffield West, and Stratford Road. Several houses on these streets are documented Coit houses, and more may be attributed to him based on stylistic affinities and their association with Nickerson.¹⁶ Moreover, Coit's obituary mentions his work on Stratford Road. Although the obituary does not identify the individual houses, it may be assumed that they were the ones developed by Nickerson in the mid-1890s.¹⁷

These and many other houses in Winchester have been described as "Blaikie/Nickerson" houses. Dexter Blaikie was a local builder who frequently worked for Nickerson, but this moniker has led to the erroneous assumption that Blaikie was an architect. In fact, Blaikie, the son of a builder, had two brothers who were architects, but he was not trained in the discipline himself. In all records including census reports, building permits, and his obituary, Blaikie is described as a "builder," "carpenter," or "mechanic."¹⁸

Coit has been credited with designing houses for one other developer besides Nickerson early in his career. Between 1896 and 1899, he is said to have been hired by William and Isabella Firth to design ten houses on Glengarry and Grassmere Roads and Dix Street.¹⁹ Although the lots are small, the houses on them are built with variety and appeal. If these houses were indeed Coit projects, they illustrate his skill in designing residences that were both modest and expansive.

In the early 1900s, Coit began to receive commissions for custom designs from specific clients, as opposed to

developers. On the east side of Winchester, Hermann Dudley Murphy, a well-known painter and Arts and Crafts frame-maker, hired Coit in 1903 to design a house and an adjoining studio at 314–316 Highland Avenue (figure 3).²⁰ At or around the same time, Coit designed large houses on Myopia Hill for two other prominent Winchester citizens, Samuel McCall and Samuel J. Elder. The McCall house (figure 4), built between 1902 and 1904, is located at 4 McCall Road, while the Elder house, called “Grey Rocks,” was located at 4 Fernway and built in 1905, subsequently destroyed by fire in 1978.²¹ McCall was a Boston lawyer and publisher, elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1887. He went on to serve ten terms in the United States Congress and three terms as governor of Massachusetts, from 1916 to 1918. Elder was an attorney who specialized in international law in Boston, and he was active in Winchester town affairs.²²

The three houses were sited imposingly on top of steep hills, affording their occupants pleasing views. The Murphy house overlooks the town of Winchester, and the McCall and Elder houses were built above the Mystic Lakes. For all three designs, Coit was influenced by both the English Tudor Revival and Arts and Crafts ideas. The houses were clad in stucco with large brick or stone porches along their fronts and sides. They also were designed with portions of their second stories overhanging the first. Coit incorporated half-timbering and wood trim to break up and define the large areas of stucco. Finer details include purlins that were chamfered to create pyramidal ends and fascia boards that rise to a gentle peak for emphasis. Coit’s frequent use of diamond-paned windows is also based on the English model.

Murphy, McCall, and Elder were not only Coit’s clients; they all moved in the same social circles in Winchester. In the late 1880s, Coit, Murphy, and several other residents formed the Shu-shu-ga Canoe Club, the better to enjoy their shared enthusiasm for boating on the Aberjona River and the Mystic Lakes.²³ By 1900 the group had renamed itself the Winchester Boat Club and bought land on Cambridge Street above Upper Mystic Lake. Coit then designed the clubhouse (figure 5). The Winchester Boat Club was



(Courtesy of the Winchester Archival Center)

FIGURE 4. Samuel McCall house, 1902–1904, located at 4 McCall Road.

dedicated and opened in May of 1901 and continues in existence today.²⁴

The clubhouse is modest in scale compared to the private residences Coit was

designing at the time, but like those houses, it was inspired by English architecture. The first story is clad in wood, whereas the second is clad in stucco and



(Courtesy of Historic New England)

FIGURE 5. The Winchester Boat Club, 1900–1901, located at 65 Cambridge Street, overlooking Upper Mystic Lake.



(Courtesy of the Pembroke Historical Society)

FIGURE 6. The Cobb Library, Pembroke, Mass., 1900.

overhangs the first. Seen from the lake, the building's façade is composed of a series of gables. Twin gables connected by a covered porch sit just below a larger third gable behind them. Coit would use twin gables repeatedly in his work, including the McCall mansion and other residences in town.²⁵ The Boat Club's gabled entrance porch, with its open-framed timbering and decorative brackets, referred to current English Arts and Crafts architecture, particularly the Tudor Revival. One feature of the clubhouse, however, is distinctly American. The large chimney is composed of pasture stone, a rustic alternative to cut stone or brick. This feature derives from the distinctly American Shingle Style of the 1880s and Richardson in particular. Richardson's Ames Gate Lodge of 1880–81 in North Easton, Massachusetts, built entirely of rough stone, was both highly original and greatly admired from the time of its construction.²⁶ The use of undressed stone intentionally evokes the idea of the "country," regardless of the building's actual site. To Coit, it must have seemed a natural choice for a structure devoted to pastoral pursuits.²⁷

Just as he was starting to work on the Winchester Boat Club, Coit completed the Cobb Library (figure 6) in Pembroke, Massachusetts. Similar in scale if not in purpose to the Boat Club, the library has

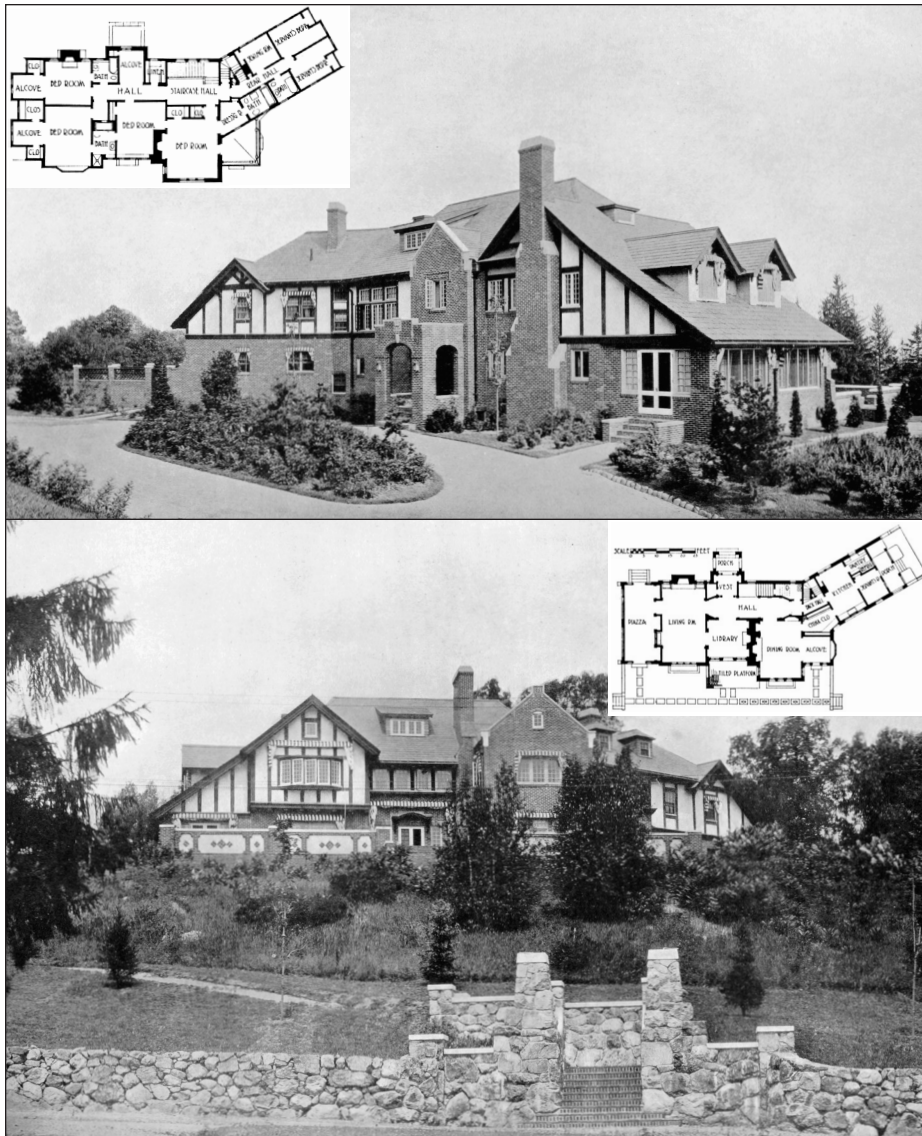
many corresponding features. Chief among them is the entrance porch; in both cases Coit designed the porches with open-framed gable timbering, chamfered purlin ends, and decorative brackets. For the library, Coit included additional detail in the form of decorative finials to mark the peaks of the front gables.²⁸ Funds to establish the library were given by life-long Pembroke resident Rozilla Cobb in memory of her late husband.²⁹ The library opened on December 15, 1900, and the ceremony was covered in the *Boston Sunday Herald* the next day.³⁰

Coit's interest in the English Arts and Crafts movement and the related Tudor Revival is consistent with the prevailing aesthetic interests of Boston architects at the turn of the twentieth century. As a Harvard undergraduate in the 1880s, Coit undoubtedly was aware of the popular lectures of Professor Charles Eliot Norton.³¹ Norton spoke passionately about the moral excellence of the middle ages, challenging his students to reject the excesses of the late Victorian era and to place renewed value on the aesthetics of craft. Boston interest in the English Arts and Crafts movement increased throughout the 1890s. The first major Arts and Crafts exhibition in the country was held in Boston in 1897, and the Society of Arts and Crafts was organized later that year.³²

Norton was the society's first president, and many founders had their Harvard education in common. In addition to Coit, other emerging architects in Boston such as Ralph Adams Cram were inspired by Norton's aesthetic philosophy. Cram, born two years after Coit, favored similar styles and design elements in his work.³³

In Winchester, Coit's most fully developed Tudor Revival residence is his last Myopia Hill mansion, located at 1 Arlington Street (figure 7). It was completed in 1914, considerably later than the McCall and Elder houses. The client was Jere Downs, a prominent businessman with the Boston investment firm of Hayden, Stone and Company.³⁴ The Downs house was one of the largest and most complex of Coit's designs, later augmented by additions at either end. Like an English estate house, the building spreads horizontally across its hilltop site. Most of the structure consists of two stories, with a third dormer level in selected areas. Multiple gables and several protruding and receding bays break up the façade, which includes a dramatic chimney wall on the driveway elevation. Alternating areas of brick and stucco with varying widths of half-timbering add to the complexity of the exterior. By contrast, Coit's earlier commissions from Murphy, McCall, and Elder were simpler designs in both massing and detail. Additionally, these houses had three full stories, making them more compact and less sprawling than the Downs residence.

The interior of the Downs house features a paneled hall with a shallow barrel-vaulted ceiling (figure 8). Occasionally Coit designed individual rooms with curved tray ceilings, most often for the library or study, while his halls generally combined wide, wood-trimmed doorways and untrimmed pointed archways. The hall of the Downs house represents a departure from the architect's usual repertoire, due to a generous budget. In other respects, the inside of the Downs house contains many details common to Coit's interiors, although on a grander scale. The dining room is paneled to three quarters the height of the walls, with an elaborate built-in sideboard and an impressive tiled fireplace and mantel. A large butler's pantry connects the room to the adjacent kitchen. The study, also paneled, has a simpler fireplace mantel and built-in bookshelves on either side. The front-to-back living room is more formal,



with a large fireplace but with only chair-rail paneling and without the built-ins of the other rooms. In selected locations of the house, Coit used leaded glass in decorative patterns, such as the window on the stairwell landing and the doors on the dining room sideboard.

While Coit was linked closely by education and practice to the Arts and Crafts movement in Boston, his designs for many Winchester residences also reflect his knowledge of the work of contemporary English architects. For example, the Edwin C. Starr house (figure 9), from 1907, located at 17 Everett Avenue, demonstrates Coit's familiarity with the work of English architect C. F. A. Voysey, who was about four years older than his Winchester counterpart.³⁵ It is possible that Coit saw Voysey's early work while traveling in England in 1884, although Voysey's most relevant designs were not produced until the next decade.³⁶ Coit certainly would have known of the work through architectural journals; Voysey's designs were well-published during his lifetime. In addition, the Boston Society of Architects had an exhibition of Voysey's work in 1891.³⁷ The Starr house is a twin-gabled, stucco-clad structure with horizontal massing and simplified exterior detail.³⁸ Voysey's numerous country houses share these characteristics, as well as the use of shallow arches. In Coit's work, these arches are most often found in doorways and porches. The arched opening at the front of 17 Everett Avenue is echoed by the curve of the front door. Starr, the original owner of the house, was the manager of a packing company in Somerville. Coit's houses, like Voysey's, were generally designed for the comfortably well-off members of the growing middle class in their respective countries.³⁹ Inside the Starr house, several details are characteristic of Coit. The dining room has a box bay window with a tiled sill that serves as a plant shelf. In the den, the brick fireplace is enlivened with

FIGURE 7. (top images) Jere Downs house, 1914, located at 1 Arlington Street. From the *Brickbuilder*, June 1916.

FIGURE 8. (bottom) Downs house hall and stairway. From the *Brickbuilder*.



(Courtesy of Ellen Spencer)

FIGURE 9. Edwin C. Starr house, 1907, located at 17 Everett Avenue.

Mercer tiles centered over the fireplace opening and below the wood mantel.

On several occasions Coit adapted another distinctive element from Voysey's repertoire: the use of battered stucco columns or buttresses. In houses such as Lowicks, in Frensham, Surrey, of 1894,

Voysey placed square, battered columns at the corners of the building. Combined with a deeply overhanging roof and decorative brackets, Lowicks appears strikingly modern. In Winchester, Coit's design for Phineas Nickerson at 3 Sheffield West, from 1914, uses similar columns as sup-



FIGURE 10. House at 3 Sheffield West, built for Phineas Nickerson, 1914. From the *American Architect and Building News*, April 22, 1914.

ports for its large front porch (figure 10). The unusual forms give the porch weight and prominence on a street of distinguished homes.⁴⁰ Coit experimented with this design element as early as 1902 when he began work on the McCall mansion. Supporting its entrance porch are massive square, battered columns, constructed in stone to correspond with the stone of the house's first story.

Three Sheffield West exhibits other Coit hallmarks such as the chamfered purlin ends on the central gable. Two unusual decorative details add to the house's distinctive exterior. Five matching tiles turned on the diagonal form a larger diagonal decorative element below the apex of the front gable. This applied detail is repeated on the driveway-side chimney wall. Also unusual for Coit, the design in the leaded glass sidelight windows around the front door is almost Art Deco in appearance, composed of thin vertical and chevron forms. More typical of Coit, the house follows a basic rectangular plan that is broken up by multiple protruding and receding sections, a combination of cross-gables, bays, and porches. The house was published in *American Architect and Building News* in April of 1914.⁴¹

The plans of Coit's houses further an understanding of his architecture.⁴² Plans for 3 Sheffield West, also published in the *American Architect* (figure 11), are representative of many of Coit's larger houses. There are essentially four rooms on each floor, not including hall and porch space. By the 1890s, the ubiquitous double parlor of the Victorian era had given way to a single, large living room, formal dining room, kitchen with pantries, and a den or study. This four-over-four plan owes a debt to the influence of the increasingly popular Colonial Revival style. Coit's houses virtually always include a den, often paneled. Another frequent feature in his plans is a first-floor lavatory tucked under the main stairway. The stairways themselves consist most often of two perpendicular or reverse parallel flights of steps with a landing between them. Upstairs at 3 Sheffield West, there are four bedrooms, the master bedroom situated over the living room below. The hall contains a built-in linen closet and a back stairwell to the kitchen. Coit seems to have anticipated modern hygiene requirements by including two full bathrooms on this floor.

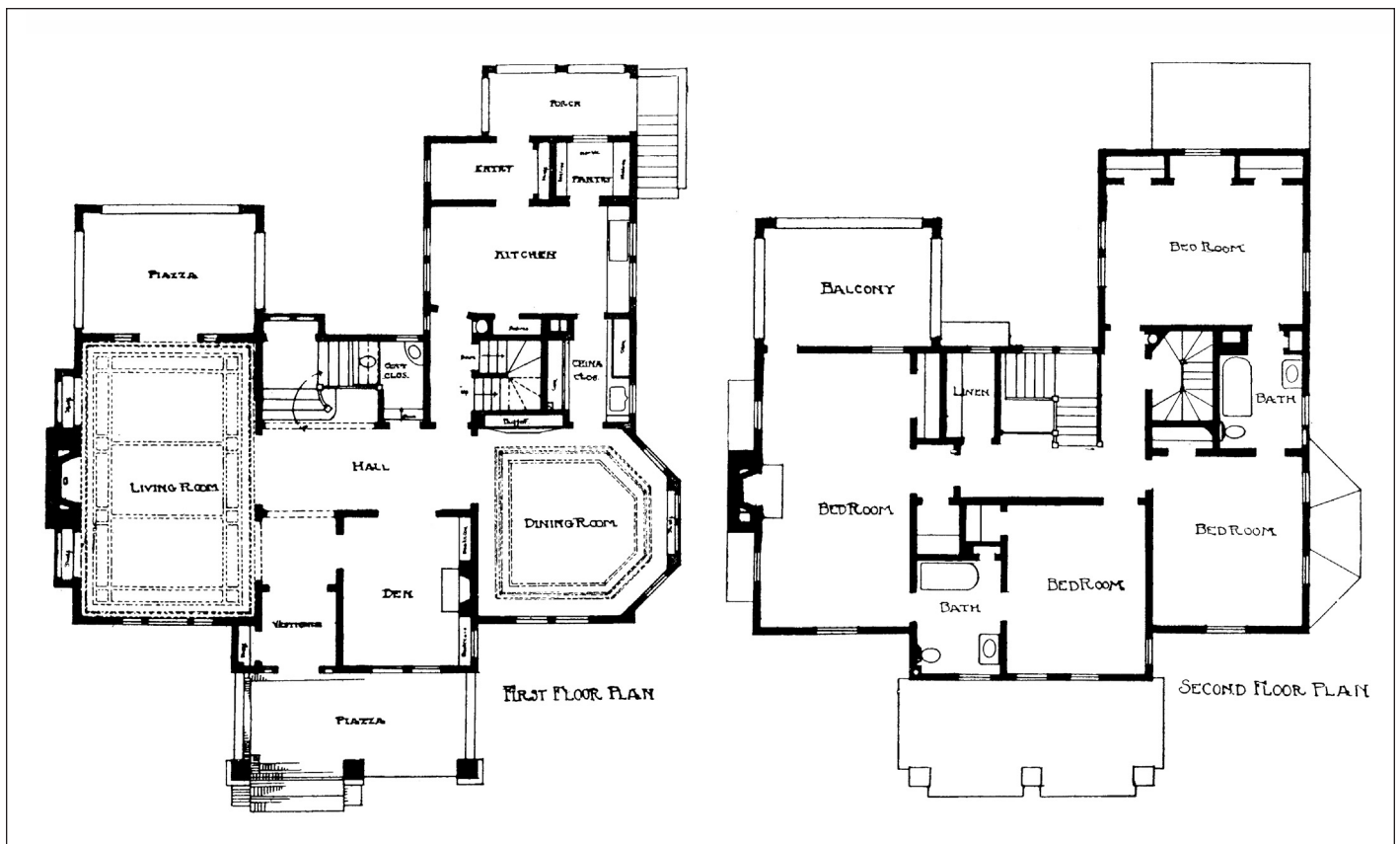


FIGURE 11. Plans of 3 Sheffield West. From the *American Architect and Building News*.

Coit's houses were built to accommodate domestic help as well as family living, as his architectural plans make clear. The houses always contain two staircases, with the front stairs intended for family use. Servants, whether live-in or day, were meant to use the back staircase exclusively. This stairwell typically ran from the third floor directly down to the kitchen, with a door to the second floor for linen closet and bedroom access. Servants were literally kept behind closed doors.

Other house plans show variations on the scheme that Coit used at 3 Sheffield West. Nearby, at the slightly smaller 7 Sheffield West, the den has been moved to the second floor. This house also was published in the *American Architect and Building News*.⁴³ Four other rooms complete the second floor, three of which are bedrooms and the fourth and smallest designated as a sewing room. One bathroom serves all inhabitants. At 19 Cabot Street, a small den is located on the first floor, while a sewing room is also included upstairs. A survey of Coit's interiors reveals that he was adept at rearranging types of rooms and plans.

By the turn of the century, Coit was well-established as an architect, yet he continued to design houses that were built on speculation by Winchester's developers. In addition to his work for Nickerson, Coit was hired by George Woods and George Whitehorne. Both men were involved in the Wedgemere Syndicate, which laid out land for development between Wildwood, Church, and Cambridge Streets from 1890 to 1916.⁴⁴ For Woods, Coit designed house numbers 11–19 on Cabot Street. His plans for 19 Cabot are extant, and the other addresses can be attributed to him on stylistic grounds. So too can attributions be made for the adjacent houses at 10 Warren Street and 6 and 8 Copley Street. A map of the neighborhood from circa 1902 shows that 11 Cabot and 15 Cabot were built first.⁴⁵ By 1906, numbers 13 and 19 had followed.⁴⁶ The remaining Coit houses were completed by 1910.⁴⁷ Although sited on adjacent lots of almost identical size, the exteriors of these eight houses present varied interpretations of the popular English Arts and Crafts and Colonial Revival styles and are clad in

different materials. Two houses are shingled, two are clapboard, one is entirely stucco, and three are a combination of shingle and stucco. Inside, all the houses have jigsaw-cut stairwell balusters, with no two designs alike. This group of houses demonstrates how creative Coit could be. Whitehorne also is listed as the first owner of many other houses in this area, and it seems likely that Coit designed them.⁴⁸

Across town, George Woods' wife Emma is listed in tax records as the original owner of houses on Wolcott Road and Wolcott Terrace. Complete architectural drawings and building specifications exist for 3 Wolcott Road, which identify Coit as the architect. Messrs. A. W. Starratt and G. A. Woods are named as the owners of the lot.⁴⁹ In his specifications, Coit frequently called for the use of "first" or "best" quality materials. Whether working for individual clients or developers, he sought to maintain high construction standards.

Coit's residential work often reflected an interest in the Colonial Revival. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the enthusiasm for colonial and federal



(Courtesy of Marvin and Elizabeth Gould)

FIGURE 12. Herman S. Underwood house, 1895, located at 289 Main Street.

architecture gained momentum in Boston, mainly in response to the English Arts and Crafts movement and the ideas of the author John Ruskin. The American theorists shared the English interest in the architecture and craftsmanship of the middle ages, and they found New England's architecture and craft products of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries similarly appealing.⁵⁰ By the turn of the century, the Colonial Revival, the medieval revival including the Tudor Revival, and the Arts and Crafts movement all were intertwined in terms of theory. As for the related building designs, they were sometimes academic and relatively pure in style and sometimes entirely original amalgamations of these favored historical sources.

Coit's design for the Herman S. Underwood house (figure 12), located at 289 Main Street and dating from around 1895, was built only a few years after the house at 92 Church Street and represents a shift away from Queen Anne design to the Colonial Revival.⁵¹ The main elevation features a center entrance surrounded by symmetrically placed windows and a gambrel roof. Originally sided in clapboard, the house has a prominent semi-circular entrance porch that is supported by Tus-

can columns. Further details such as the crown molding on the tops of most of the windows and the dentils underneath the crown molding of the porch allude to eighteenth-century sources. It is interesting to note that Coit added one feature to the façade that is something of an anomaly to the prevailing aesthetic. Short, densely packed brackets also run the length of the house's front. These brackets look like over-sized dentils from the street; a side view, however, reveals them to have a distinctly Arts and Crafts-inspired profile.

Other houses designed by Coit display a more conventional Colonial Revival look. They are basically rectangular and clad in clapboard that was probably painted white. Examples include the William F. Smith house at 161 Clinton Road, Brookline, from 1913,⁵² and the John R. Foster house in Winchester, 1915, illustrated in the *American Architect and Building News*.⁵³ On both houses, however, Coit included Arts and Crafts brackets and an Arts and Crafts style covered front porch — a modified version of the triangular, open-timbered porches of the Winchester Boat Club and the Cobb Library. As was common for the period, Coit synthesized the prevailing architectural styles of the time.

After 1915 Coit increasingly produced Colonial Revival designs that drew on Georgian models. For the most part, the houses of this type that have been identified are located in Brookline and Newton.⁵⁴ They are predominantly brick with details such as entrance porches with broken pediments and dentil moldings instead of brackets. Yet the architect never completely abandoned his interest in Arts and Crafts designs.

The years between 1915 and 1923 continued to be busy for Coit. Tax records from this period show that he was the owner of many building lots in Winchester.⁵⁵ Most of these are on Lakeview Road, but Coit was also the owner of lots on Lakeview Terrace, Sheffield West, Mystic Valley Parkway, and Highland Avenue. One may assume that he purchased these lots to develop himself or with partners. The lots did not remain in Coit's possession for more than a few years, which supports this view. Other owners of adjacent lots on Lakeview Road included Dexter Blaikie, Edwin and William Blaikie, and Louisville Niles. Besides Coit, only Edwin and William Blaikie were architects. The roles of developer, architect and builder become almost indistinguishable in this development, with participants involved in several phases of work. It is noteworthy also that by 1915, Coit was in a financial position to take on the role of developer.

While Coit was mainly a residential architect, from time to time he was hired for non-domestic projects, in addition to the Cobb Library and the Winchester Boat Club.⁵⁶ In 1915 he designed a town hall in Burlington, Massachusetts, and in 1925 he designed the Atlantic Heights Elementary School in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.⁵⁷ Late in his career, Coit was involved in two important non-residential projects in Winchester — one for the First Congregational Church and the second for a new library.

The Congregational Church commission came in 1925 (figure 13), its scope including the construction of a new chancel and the building of a parish house. Coit, a long-time member of the congregation, was the appointed architect in collaboration with Allen and Collens, associated architects.⁵⁸ The plans for these structures bear Coit's name and office address in Boston, indicating that he was the lead architect on the project.⁵⁹

The church Building Committee gave top priority to the chancel alterations, which were necessary to house a new organ.⁶⁰ The arch over the pulpit was widened to accommodate the organ that would be installed at the right of the chancel and a minister's room at the left. This work proceeded according to plan, but funds were insufficient for the construction of the parish house. The church issued bonds to raise the needed revenue, and by 1926 the entire project was completed. The parish house, which connects to the church, was designed to complement the existing architecture, its walls clad in stucco and rusticated stone. The small-paned windows and the pointed arch of the main door hew closely to the English church model. Half-timbering in selected areas further emphasizes the English tradition.

The remodeled chancel interior is a mixture of features borrowed from both Romanesque architecture and English Gothic sources. To harmonize with the existing Romanesque Revival nave, Coit designed the chancel with a barrel vault and rounded stained glass windows, while the reredos and two symmetrically-placed clergy seats are topped with Gothic tracery of carved oak. Each rib of the vault is carried by a carved and polychromed angel, Gothic in inspiration. The chancel walls are covered in oak paneling approximately ten feet high, with sanded and painted stucco above, and the floor tiles are by the Mercer Tile Company. Oak choir stalls line the sides of the chancel, and both pulpit and lectern are of oak as well.⁶¹ The altar is a simple rectangular block made of cast stone with inset panels of marble veneer.⁶²

The interior of the parish house contains a number of architectural details that by this time were recognizable features of Coit's canon. The two principal stairways both have jigsaw-cut balusters whose profiles do not match but rather complement each other. They are united, however, by the use of the same newel post finials for both stairs. All doors are trimmed with fascia boards that rise to a gentle peak, a feature seen primarily on Coit's exteriors. What is now the Clara H. Palmer room is a larger version of Coit's residential living rooms. A large fireplace and mantelpiece form a focal point on the wall opposite the entrance. The window spanning the rear end of the room contains a built-in window seat that is set within a



(Courtesy of the First Congregational Church)

FIGURE 13. First Congregational Church, parish house and new chancel, 1925–1926, located at 21 Church Street.

large arch whose shape appears throughout the building. Coit used the same arch profile frequently in his residential interiors, although on a smaller scale. The room also has substantial crown molding, which includes a series of closely spaced forms that can best be described as bracket-dentils. Purely decorative, they are an amalgam of these two architectural elements and recall the dentils Coit used on the Herman S. Underwood house many years earlier.

By the late 1920s, the Town of Winchester decided the time had come to give the public library its own building (figure 14). Since the 1880s, the library had occupied space in Town Hall. In 1929 Town Meeting voted to establish a Library Plan Committee that would undertake the task of hiring an architect to produce preliminary plans and a cost estimate.⁶³ The committee sought advice on the selection of an architect from William Emerson, professor of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who recommended the firm of Kilham, Hopkins and Greeley for their experience in designing libraries.⁶⁴ The committee followed Emerson's advice but added Coit's name to the project. In addition to being highly regarded locally, Coit had served as a trustee of the library from 1902–22. Conveniently, both firms had their offices

at 9 Park Street, Boston, where subsequent planning sessions took place. Meeting minutes from these sessions show that both Coit and Walter Kilham submitted plans, which were revised at least once. The entire process was completed in about six weeks, with final plans and a perspective drawing submitted on January 13, 1930. The specific contributions of the two architects to the ultimate design of the library are unclear, but one may surmise that Coit took the lead on the building's design and Kilham focused on library functions in the plan.⁶⁵

Despite its late date, the exterior of the Winchester Public Library owes much to the English architectural tradition. Its horizontal massing and double-height bay windows are reminiscent of Voysey's work in England from the turn of the century. So too is the placement of a single curvilinear element on the façade in the form of an arch over the entrance. The outside walls of the building are West Townsend, Massachusetts, granite, with white, sand-lime brick backing supplied by the Winchester Brick Company.⁶⁶ The rough-hewn surface of the granite exterior owes something to both English church architecture and the work of H. H. Richardson and his successors.⁶⁷

Inside, the library spaces naturally had



(Courtesy of the Winchester Archival Center)

FIGURE 14. The Winchester Public Library, 1929–1931, located at 80 Washington Street.

to address a number of functional requirements. Perhaps for this reason, the interior did not particularly reflect Coit's architectural interests. What was typical for Coit, however, was the specification of high quality finishes and furniture.⁶⁸ The firm of W. C. Vaughn provided hardware, including andirons. Lighting came from Bigelow and Kennard, another well-known Boston manufacturer. Furniture was purchased from a variety of suppliers, but the greatest cash outlay went to the Francis H. Bacon Company. Bacon had an important design career with the Boston firm of A. H. Davenport before establishing his own firm.⁶⁹

By 1930, Coit was entering the fourth decade of his practice, and his output slowed considerably. Most of his projects were small, as he was hired to erect garages and make alterations to existing properties. His last known dated project is from 1934 and consists of an addition to 21 Sheffield West for Clifford Roberts.⁷⁰ Coit continued to be listed as an architect in Boston through 1940, just two years before he died.⁷¹

While Coit designed buildings throughout the Boston area, most of his work is found in Winchester. In 1890, the year Coit opened his solo practice, the population of

Winchester was 4,861.⁷² By 1910 the number had almost doubled, reaching 9,309. This rapid growth was found in many suburbs of Boston during these years, a time when the idea of the country house was adapted for suburban living.⁷³ Not surprisingly, as the demand for these houses soared, so too did the demand for architects to design them. Unlike architects of a generation before him, Coit was able to support himself mainly with residential design in one town. There was business to spare; in 1919 Winchester was home to sixteen architects.⁷⁴ Although none of these men had a client base in the community that was equal to that of Coit, there was clearly much work available in the Greater Boston area. Coit had the good fortune to open his practice near the beginning of a lengthy period of residential expansion and to be easing towards retirement by the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s. For his prolific work in Winchester, Coit deserves to be recognized as a major contributor to the town's architectural heritage.

(Ellen Spencer has a master's degree in art history from Brown University and is a past chairman of the Winchester Historical Commission.)

NOTES

1. Robert Coit obituary, *Winchester Star*, Aug. 14, 1942. For the first comprehensive study of Coit, see Shantia Anderheggen, "Robert Coit: Colonial Revival Architect of Winchester, Massachusetts," M.A. Thesis, Boston University, 1993. A copy of the thesis is available at the Winchester Archival Center, Winchester Town Hall.

2. For more information on Rand, see Maureen Meister, "George Rand's Winchester," a series of articles in the *Winchester Star*, May–Oct. 1991. On Smith, see Meister, "Patterson Smith's Winchester," a series of articles in the *Winchester Star*, May–Sept. 1994. On Kellaway, see Julie Khuen, "Herbert J. Kellaway," *The Architects of Winchester, Massachusetts*, ed. Maureen Meister, Winchester Historical Society, no. 2, 1995.

3. *Winchester Star*, Dec. 20, 1907

4. Harvard College, Class of 1883, Secretary's Report, no. 3, July 1890, Harvard Archives.

5. Coit obituary, *Winchester Star*.

6. Registrar's Records, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

7. Harvard College, Records of the Class, 1883–1908, Harvard Archives.

8. See Susan Maycock Vogel, "Hartwell and Richardson: An Introduction to Their Work," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 32, no. 2 (May 1973), pp. 132–146, and Margaret Henderson Floyd, *Architecture After Richardson: Regionalism Before Modernism — Longfellow, Alden and Harlow in Boston and Pittsburgh*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

9. No evidence exists to indicate which projects Coit worked on during these years. Among the buildings completed during his tenure at Longfellow, Alden and Harlow were the Edwin H. Abbot house (now the Longy School of Music) in Cambridge, 1888, and Cambridge City Hall, 1888. The firm also worked on many residential projects. See Floyd, pp. 61–125.

10. Elisabeth Coit (1892–1987) became an architect. Like her father, she was educated at Harvard (Radcliffe) and MIT, as well as at the Sorbonne in Paris. She practiced in New York City, specializing in low-cost housing. See *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, ed. Adolf K. Placzek, New York: The Free Press, 1982. Elisabeth Coit's papers are housed in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

11. The Winchester Directory of 1925 lists Coit's address as 22 Temple Street, Boston.

12. The owners have the original plans. According to Coit's descendants, the houses at 15 and 19

Hillside Ave., which date from 1889 and 1890 respectively, were designed by him as well. Various members of the Coit family were the first owners, and in his Harvard College class report of 1890, Coit states that he built a house for himself in Winchester. Coit would have designed these houses while still working at Longfellow, Alden and Harlow.

13. It is interesting to compare the Nickerson house with Hartwell and Richardson's Yerxa house of 1887–88 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Twin circular turrets bookend the façade of the Yerxa house, which otherwise is composed primarily of Shingle Style elements. On the interior, the hall and stairway areas of both houses show remarkable similarities, with their variety of richly applied paneling, beamed ceilings and two-story stairwells which contain large stained glass windows beginning on the landings and continuing up to the full height of the second story.

14. Floyd, p. 64.

15. Coit almost certainly was the architect for Nickerson's own house across the street at 93 Church St. Built in 1904, it is relatively large in scale but consistent with Coit's Tudor Revival designs.

16. Coit's buildings are documented in a variety of ways — by surviving architectural plans, building permits, and publication.

17. The houses are most likely numbers 3, 5, 6, and 7 Stratford Road. Winchester tax records indicate that Nickerson purchased lots on Stratford Road, among other locations. For example, see Winchester Annual Report for 1896, Winchester Archival Center.

18. The Winchester Directory for 1897, 1899, and 1901 (one bound volume) lists Dexter Blaikie as a carpenter and builder, while his brother Edwin is listed as an architect. Dexter Blaikie is listed as a "mechanic" on building permits for 5 and 23 Sheffield West, Building Department, Winchester Town Hall. See also Dexter Blaikie obituary, *Winchester Star*, Aug. 19, 1932.

19. See *Winchester, Massachusetts: The Architectural Heritage of a Victorian Town*, Winchester, Mass.: Winchester Historical Society, 1988, pp. 63–65. The Massachusetts Historical Commission survey forms of the late 1970s list Coit as the architect. Several of the houses are indeed compatible with Coit's known work; however, there is no documentation available that confirms this claim.

20. The studio was illustrated and described in the *Boston Globe*, May 5, 1909. See also Murphy's obituary in the *Winchester Star*, Apr. 20, 1945.

21. The Elder house is illustrated in *Lilacs in the Wood*, a book of poetry by Lilla T. Elder, located in the Winchester Archival Center. In Coit's obituary, the Elder house is also mentioned.

22. For Elder, see the *Winchester Star*, Jan. 25, 1918. For McCall, see the *Winchester Star*, Nov. 19, 1923.

23. See the papers of the Shu-shu-ga Canoe Club and the Winchester Boat Club, Winchester Archival Center.

24. *Winchester Star*, May 31, 1901.

25. For example, see 15 Cabot St. and 17 Everett Ave.

26. See Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style*, New Haven and London: Yale UP, rev. ed., 1971 (orig. pub. 1955), Chapter Six.

27. Gustav Stickley continued the pursuit of the rustic with his Craftsman houses and furniture a decade or so later. His philosophy of architecture specified the use of natural materials, preferably indigenous to the site. His 1912 clubhouse at Craftsman Farms in Parsippany, N.J., sports two massive rough stone chimneys. See Mark Alan Hewitt, *Gustav Stickley's Craftsman Farms: The Quest for an Arts and Crafts Utopia*, Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1991.

28. See also the porch of 566 South Border Road. Now a residence, the structure was built as a fish hatchery, c. 1897, on the instruction of Edward Brackett. Brackett, a well-known local artist, was also the Fish Commissioner of Winchester. According to Brackett's obituary in the *Winchester Star*, March 20, 1908, the commission was reorganized in 1894, in the middle of Brackett's long chairmanship. The Fish Hatchery was likely built shortly thereafter. There is no architect of record for this property, but it appears to have been designed by Coit.

29. Ed Quill, *Pembroke 2000*, Pembroke, Mass.: Pembroke Historical Society, 2000, pp. 4–5. Mrs. Cobb also donated one thousand books from her personal library and included a fund for the library's upkeep in her will.

30. *Boston Sunday Herald*, Dec. 16, 1900.

31. Undergraduate course records in the Harvard Archives do not indicate that Coit took Norton's Fine Arts course.

32. Coit's office address in Boston was 113 Devonshire St. until 1905 and 85 Water St. from 1905–1915. Both locations were very near 9 Park St., the home of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston. Although Coit was never a member of the Society of Arts and Crafts, he moved his office to 9 Park St. in 1926. See the architect's file on Coit in the Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library. The information was gathered from the Boston City Directories.

33. Cram was born in 1863 and died in 1942. To better understand how Coit's work was typical, one may compare it with buildings designed by Cram, Wentworth and Goodhue, such as All

Saints Church and Rectory, Brookline, 1894. Both Coit and Cram favored the Tudor or Gothic Revival version of the Arts and Crafts movement, with its use of half-timbering, oriel windows, and pointed arches. Both men also employed decorative details such as brackets, finials, and shield shapes.

34. Jere Downs obituary, *Winchester Star*, Jan. 3, 1936. Downs' house in Winchester was published in the *Brickbuilder*, June 1916.

35. Voysey was born in 1857 and died just a year before Coit, in 1941. See Stuart Durant, *C.F.A. Voysey*, Architectural Monographs, No. 19, London: Academy, 1992.

36. For Coit's travels after leaving Harvard, see the Harvard College, Class of 1883, Secretary's Report, no. 3, July 1890.

37. See David Gebhard, "C.F.A. Voysey — To and From America," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1971), pp. 304–12, n. 2.

38. The owners have the original floor plans and elevation drawings for the house.

39. Names and often the professions of home owners are listed in the Town of Winchester's Annual Reports. Coit's clients identified themselves as businessmen, inventors, manufactory owners, merchants, publishers, and civil engineers.

40. Two other houses, 5 and 7 Sheffield West, are documented Coit designs. See *American Architect and Building News*, Apr. 22, 1914. Many more houses on this street and Sheffield Road appear to have been designed by Coit, based on exterior and interior stylistic affinities. This area, just around the corner from Church Street, was also developed by Phineas Nickerson.

41. *American Architect and Building News*, Apr. 22, 1914.

42. In addition to several published floor plans, a number of original plans still exist. Remarkably, they have stayed with the houses through many changes of ownership.

43. *American Architect and Building News*, Jan. 27, 1915.

44. *Winchester, Massachusetts: The Architectural Heritage of a Victorian Town*, p. 63.

45. Plans and maps show the order of street layout and development from around 1902 to 1910. See the *Plan Book, Index of Streets* (no date), Winchester Archival Center.

46. *Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, vol. 2, 1906, Winchester Archival Center.

47. *Insurance Maps of Winchester, Massachusetts*, Sanborn Map Company, New York, 1910, Winchester Archival Center.

48. See Town of Winchester Annual Report, 1909, p. 109, and Annual Report, 1915, p. 96, for property taxes paid by Whitehorne. Houses that were built by Whitehorne and appear to be by Coit include 7 Wedgemere Ave., 111 Cambridge St., and 12 Foxcroft Road.

49. Although undocumented, 1 Wolcott Road almost certainly was designed by Coit as well. The tax records in the Winchester Annual Report of 1907 list Emma Woods as the owner of 5 Wolcott Terrace. It seems likely that Coit was also the architect for this house. Exterior and interior elements are all consistent with known Coit designs.

50. For example, see Maureen Meister, *Architecture and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Boston: Harvard's H. Langford Warren*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2003, pp. 10, 48–52, and 118–20.

51. The owners of the house own the original plans, signed by Coit. His design clearly was inspired by the Thorp house, 1886–87, by A. W. Longfellow, on Brattle Street, Cambridge.

52. See *American Architect and Building News*, Apr. 23, 1912.

53. *American Architect and Building News*, Jan. 27, 1915. In addition to the unknown location of this house, there is no listing of John R. Foster in the tax records or lists of residents of Winchester in the Town Reports, 1905–1915. A John R. Foster is listed in the Town of Arlington census reports of 1910 and 1920.

54. Four of these brick colonials are close to each other at 295, 311, 319, and 327 Clinton Road in Brookline. They were all built between 1919 and 1921.

55. See the Report of the Assessors, *Town of Winchester Annual Reports*, 1915–1923.

56. The Winchester Town Stable on Linden Street (now part of the Department of Public Works), has been attributed to Coit, but no documentation currently exists. See Henry Simonds' typed history of the building, attached to the survey form on the stable in the Winchester Archival Center.

57. Burlington Image Collection, Burlington Municipal Archives and Record Center, Town Hall, Burlington, Massachusetts. The building was torn down in 1969. Richard M. Candee, *Atlantic Heights*, Portsmouth, N.H.: Portsmouth Marine Society, 1985, p. 108. Coit is named as the architect in the Annual Reports of Portsmouth, N.H., of 1925 and 1926. See Candee, Chapter 3, footnote 42. The school was part of a larger project called Atlantic Heights, a shipbuilder's housing development for the Atlantic Corporation of Portsmouth, N.H. This industrial community was largely designed by Walter Kilham, who worked with Coit again on the Winchester Public Library.

58. "Reports of the Finance Committee of the Parish House and of the Building Committee," Apr. 15, 1925, Library, First Congregational Church, Winchester.

59. Plans are also located in the library of the First Congregational Church.

60. "Report of the Building Committee," Apr. 1925, p. 3. This document is a typed report in a three-ring binder labeled "Parish Hse (sic) and Chancel Building Committee Records, (1922–26)," located in the library of the First Congregational Church.

61. Interestingly, arched openings on both the pulpit and lectern are rounded, not pointed, perhaps to complement the shapes of the windows.

62. Some individual suppliers are listed in a memo from Coit to the Building Committee itemizing costs. The chancel rail, reredos, lectern, pulpit, and choir stalls were provided by Henderson and Nolan. Alexander Thomson supplied the altar. Hardware, which could have included lighting, came from the well-known Boston firm of W. C. Vaughn Company.

63. "Report of the Library Plan Committee," *Town of Winchester Annual Report*, 1929, pp. 280–85, Winchester Archival Center.

64. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Library Plan Committee," Oct. 16, 1929. The minutes are preserved in a bound notebook with an unmarked cover that is located in the Winchester Room of the Winchester Public Library. Previously Kilham had been consulted by the committee about the procedures to follow should the project be put out to bid. Shortly thereafter, Kilham and Coit sent a joint letter to the committee requesting to be considered for the project.

65. The only mention of a specific contribution by either architect is found in the "Report of the Public Library Building Committee," *Town of Winchester Annual Report*, 1931, p. 283, Winchester Archival Center. The custom-made chairs in the Reading Room were designed with especially high backs "according to a suggestion by Mr. Coit."

66. "Report of the Building Committee," *Town of Winchester Annual Report*, 1931, p. 277. See also Cora A. Quimby, "The New Winchester Library," *The Library Journal*, July 1932, pp. 616–19.

67. For a possible source for the colorful geometric tiles that line the entrance arch, see Susan Keats' article "In Search of Robert Coit," *Winchester Star*, Apr. 29, 1993. Keats suggests that the tile designs are based on examples that Coit had seen during his time in Persia many years before. Family members report that Coit brought back tiles from Persia.

68. See the *Town of Winchester Annual Report*, 1931, p. 270, for an itemized list of suppliers.

69. A. H. Davenport was a major producer of Colonial Revival furniture. The firm received commissions from many prominent architects of the day, including H. H. Richardson and McKim, Mead and White.

70. Town of Winchester Building Permit, Building Department, Winchester Town Hall.

71. Boston City Directories list Coit as an architect in the city between 1892 and 1940. See Nancy Schrock, *Architectural Records in Boston: A Guide to Architectural Research in Boston, Cambridge and Vicinity*, Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, New York: Garland Publishing, 1983.

72. Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester, Massachusetts*, vol. 1, Winchester, Mass.: Town of Winchester, 1975, p. 297.

73. Mark Alan Hewitt, *The Architect and the American Country House*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1990, pp. 261–62. Many architects of Coit's time were interested in exploring the idea of the country house. Cram published his *American Country Houses of Today* in 1913. Also, the popularity and proliferation of house and garden magazines from the 1890s on meant that there was a large forum for articles on the subject.

74. Town of Winchester Assessment of a Poll Tax as of Apr. 1, 1919, Winchester Archival Center. This observation was made by Anderheggen. The architects are: Allen E. Boone, Robert C. Boone, Robert Coit, Richard B. Derby, Charles H. Eastwick, Arthur E. French, George H. Gerrish, Harry Haven, Edward E. Murphy, F. Patterson Smith, Philip T. Redfern, George M. Stone, Edward A. Tucker, Ralph S. Vinal, Edward R. Waite, and Clinton J. Warren.

Number 8, 2007

THE ARCHITECTS OF WINCHESTER,
MASSACHUSETTS

Published by the



WINCHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

15 High Street
P.O. Box 127
Winchester, MA 01890

www.winchesterhistoricalsociety.org

EDITOR
Maureen Meister

GRAPHICS
LMY Studio, Inc.