

## Pioneer Woman Architect Still Active at Age of 75

By Helen E. Scheehle

Half a century ago, when women in business and in the professions were still rarities, when "career women" was unheard of, there lived in Philadelphia one of two licensed women architects in this country.

She was Miss Minerva Parker, architect of the New Century Club, 124 S. 12th st., which was formally opened on Jan. 1, 1892, and is thought to be the oldest women's clubhouse in the United States.

Last week a woman of 75, came in one hand and smart airplane traveling bag in the other, stood on the platform of North Philadelphia station talking with a reporter while she waited for the New York train.

She was Mrs. William I. Nichols, the former Minerva Parker—just as a matter-of-fact and just as unimpressed with herself as when she was that Miss Parker to whom it never seemed strange that, in a day when it was still a man's world, she should have gained for herself a place in the front ranks of a man's profession.

**FOUND NO OPPOSITION**

"I had no idea that what I was doing was unusual," Mrs. Nichols said, "and I don't remember that other people thought it was unusual. I found not the slightest opposition. No one had thought of a woman being named a member of the Architectural League, but I was offered positions in architectural offices and allowed to enter competitions, some of which I even won."

"I had an office at 14 Penn Square, which I opened after I had been connected with other architectural firms in the city. I came by my interest in architecture perhaps through my grandfather, Seth Doane, who was an architect and shipbuilder in Boston, coming to Plymouth in 1632. My family came to Philadelphia in 1876 for the Centennial and stayed till 1895."

Miss Parker was graduated from the Philadelphia Normal School, then from the School of Design, where she later taught History of Architecture under Miss Emily Sartain. She received her architect's certificate from Franklin Institute. Women were not admitted to the universities in that day.

**NEW CENTURY CLUB'S CHOICE**

Mrs. Nichols came here last month from her home in Westport, Conn., where she is living now, to visit her son-in-law, Dr. Herbert L. Fisher, 3420 Warden dr., Germantown, and to be on hand for her young granddaughter's birthday. While she was in town she visited again the New Century Club, one of her first commissions in this city.

It was natural that the New Century Club, organized as an outgrowth of the Women's Committee of the Centennial Exhibition, should, in seeking an architect for its clubhouse, choose Miss Parker, who was quietly but very certainly earning a reputation for her work.

This clubhouse, with its cheerful, wide-windowed dining room, its charming, very liveable drawing rooms, wide halls and high-vaulted and buttressed auditorium, is eloquent testimony to the skill with which Miss Parker fulfilled her commission.

**HONEYMOON POSTPONED**

The days when the clubhouse was being completed were busy ones for Miss Parker. In between conferences with the builder and with Mrs. Henry Townsend, chairman of the building committee of the club, and the general responsibilities of supervising, Miss Parker, soon to become Mrs. William I. Nichols, was trying to select her trousseau.

It was on Forefathers' Day, shortly before the club was completed, that Miss Parker became the bride of William I. Nichols, minister of the Spring Garden St. Unitarian Church. Because the honeymoon had to be postponed.

In 1893 Mrs. Nichols drew the plans for the New Century Club in Wilmington. In 1895 she and her husband moved to New York City, where he was for 16 years head of the Bureau of Charities. It was then that Mrs. Nichols began to evolve some ideas about slum clearance and better housing. Slum clearance, she feels strongly, is a matter of foremost importance in the modern city.

In recent years Mrs. Nichols has been interested largely in residences. She did a house as lately as last year.

For the first time in her life she finds herself living in one of her own houses, designed 13 years ago for one of her daughters. Mrs. Nichols describes this house as "early American and miner camp"—the daughter's husband was a mining engineer and Mrs. Nichols feels that people should live in houses that are distinctly part of them.

**"MAKE ARCHITECTURE ALIVE"**

"I have a feeling," Mrs. Nichols said, "that architecture ought to be given as much time in education as music and literature because it affects all lives. Children should be taken on architectural pilgrimages. Architecture should be brought alive to them."

Mrs. Nichols believes in "purely functional houses, built to live in," but she regards "extreme modernism" as being "as freakish as the over-ornamentation of the hideous architecture of the Gay Nineties."

There is enormous need for simplification, as she sees it, and she looks for a frank revival of the simple Georgian and Colonial.

Mrs. Nichols would have modern architects take what is good out of every period, "letting fitness for use rule choice," never copying slavishly, yet holding always a measure of reverence for the traditions of by-gone centuries. She believes women have a special talent for architecture.

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