

Lois Lilly Howe, 1864 -1964

Anne Krantz, Historian

Our narthex staircase was designed by 'America's first woman architect,' Lois Lilly Howe in 1931. It is a classic colonial restoration project, her signature work. The invoice pictured in the *August Spire* shows that it was built in 1931-32 for \$742.50, plus \$132.00 for design work. It was paid for by Mrs. Carruth of Cambridge, who summered in the Pierce house across the common from the church. Howe apparently knew her from Cambridge.

While refinishing the stairs in July, I had a bucket of water, and so washed the three front doors. I discovered that the center door that does not open because of the staircase, is much, much older than the doors on either side, indicating that the basic stair design is much older than these two doors. Unfortunately we do not have any annual reports or documents before the 50s, so I don't know when the double staircase was built. I assume that Howe designed and rebuilt what was there; the banisters, railings, treads and risers.

Howe earned a BS in architecture 1890 from MIT, the only woman in a class of 66 men. MIT was a Land-Grant college, a federal program enabled by the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862 to fund institutions "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes." The industrial classes did not exclude women. MIT was the first university in the nation to have a curriculum in architecture -1865. MIT's first building was finished in 1866 in Boston's new Back Bay, and the school was known as "Boston Tech" until the campus moved across the Charles River to Cambridge in 1916. So Lois commuted from Oxford Street in Cambridge, where she lived with her family. She had already completed a four-year degree at the Museum of Fine Arts School where she studied from 1882-1886.

Lois showed an early interest in interior design. After her father's death in 1887 the family house was sold and the new owner's brother, an architect, was impressed with her alteration of a *stairway*. He became her mentor, encouraging her to pursue a career in architecture.

Howe opened her own architecture office in 1894. At first, her projects consisted of new or remodeled houses for friends and acquaintances, but her efforts soon began to pay off in more commissions. By 1900, she had enough work to set up an office in downtown Boston. She had a passion for history and architecture details, which emerged not only in her work, but also in a book she published in 1913 with Constance Fuller, another MIT graduate, entitled *Details of Old New England Houses*. [Wikipedia] This exquisite book of 50 plates of scale drawing of interior architectural details shows why her business prospered; she was a talented artist and designer.

Also In 1913, she partnered with Eleanor Manning, and in 1926 Mary Almy joined them, which then became 'Howe, Manning & Almy, Inc.,' Boston's first all-women architectural firm. 'The firm completed over 426 commissions, 500 projects (most of which are still in existence) over 43 years of practice. Lasting designs, careful craftsmanship, first-rate materials, and desirable locations have made their houses some of the most comfortable and attractive dwellings, as well as some of the most exceptional investments, in these geographic areas today.' [Wikipedia]

How amazing it is that this now respected woman architect found her way to Amherst to design our classic and sturdy staircase that continues to serve us now and into the future.

Sources: Wikipedia, Cambridge Women's Heritage Project Database: http://www2.cambridgema.gov/Historic/CWHP/bios_h.html#HoweLL

Lois Lilley Howe's papers reside in the collection for Howe, Manning, and Almy at MIT. The Lois Lilley Howe photographic collection is housed at the Cambridge Historical Society. [\[1\]](#)

