

Indiana's Girl Architects

By Angie Quinn

Fort Wayne's Joel Roberts Ninde and Grace E. Crosby were among the earliest women to work as architects in Indiana, beginning their careers at a time when few women nationally had entered the field.

A timeline about women in architecture in the United States has been developed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and notes that the first woman to graduate with an architecture degree in the United States was Mary Page in 1873. The first woman to work professionally as an architect was 1888, when Louise Blanchard Bethune began her career. In 1890 Sophia Hayden became the first graduate of MIT's architecture program, followed by Marion Mahony Griffin in 1894. In 1898 American Julia Morgan was enrolled as the first woman to the Ecole des Beaux Arts architecture program. The timeline also showed that by 1900 only thirty-nine women in the United States had graduated from a formal 4-year architecture program.

Marion Mahony Griffin and Isabel Roberts (who studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts from 1899-1901) worked in the offices of Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago, and have been credited with the design for the Gerald Mahony House in Elkhart, 1907 (by Griffin), and the DeRhodes House in South Bend(by Roberts).

The apprentice system for training architects was still being used during this time, and it was very common for architects in the United States to have entered the profession through this method. Grace E. Crosby, a native of Fort Wayne and a graduate of Fort Wayne High School, received her training as an architect by apprenticing with several firms in Fort Wayne. As early as 1894 she was listed in city directories as a

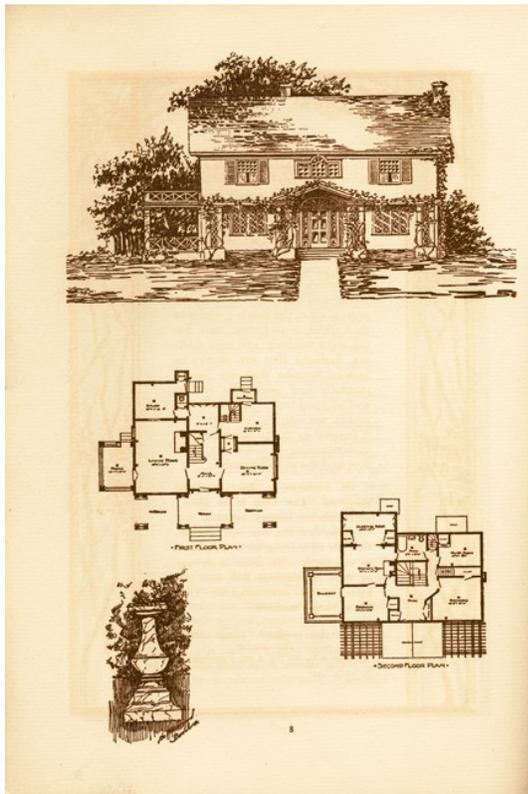


“tracer” of architectural plans, and by 1900 she was associated with the architectural firm of Alfred Grindle, serving as a “draughtswoman.” Alfred Grindle had himself been trained through the apprentice system, learning his profession as a draftsman in the offices of Wing and Mahurin. Grace Crosby worked for Grindle's firm until 1910.

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Joel (pronounced Jo-Ell) Roberts Ninde, a native of Alabama, moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1900 after her marriage to city native Lee J. Ninde. Shortly after her arrival she designed a home for herself and her husband in the Craftsman style. Joel did not have formal training in architecture either through apprenticeship or schooling, but carefully studied the popular styles of the day as she developed her own unique perspective. Her design was widely admired, and the home was soon purchased, prompting her to design another house. By 1909 she had designed several homes around the city for friends and family members, and the Nindes formally organized the Wildwood Builders, a company to design and build houses and residential developments.



Grace E. Crosby joined the Wildwood Builders at its organization, and Crosby and Joel Roberts Ninde worked in partnership as the design department for the company. During 1911 and part of 1912, they were joined by another woman architect, Louise Josephine Pellens, who had been raised in Fort Wayne, and was a 1909 graduate from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in architecture. Pellens remained with the firm until 1912 when she went to work as a draftsman in the office of Walter Burley Griffin in Chicago.

Several of the house designs of Ninde and Crosby (and possibly Pellens) were published in the *Wildwood Magazine*, nationally distributed. Wildwood Builders also published a book of house plans by Ninde and Crosby, *Wildwood Homes: Being a Collection of Houses and Details with Suggestions for the Home Builder*, in 1912.

By 1914 the success of Wildwood Builders was due, in large part, to the designs by the pair. A newspaper article in August, 1914 noted that the Ninde and Crosby were opening their own firm, which would include architecture and interior design, in addition to their continuing work at Wildwood Builders.

Although no other women architectural firms are known in Indiana during that era, a small number of firms existed in other parts of the country. One firm located in New York City was highlighted (incorrectly) as the first woman-owned architectural firm on the eastern seaboard. On March 8, 1914, the *New York Times* reported that "Enthusiasm for the rights of women had led two young feminists to establish the first firm of its kind in existence." Anna Pendleton Schenck and Marcia Mead established Schenck & Mead in New York City. Anna Schenck had received

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her diploma from Columbia University, and studied in Paris, before forming their firm. Schenck died unexpectedly in 1915, and the firm closed. Other early firms jointly owned by women architects in the United States at the time of the Ninde and Crosby collaborations include:

In Indiana, the partnership of Grace Crosby and Joel Roberts Ninde also ended abruptly when Joel Roberts Ninde died from a stroke in 1916 at age 42. Grace Crosby continued to work as the architect for Wildwood Builders, and then briefly had her own firm in 1917. During the next decade she continued to work in Fort Wayne, as a draftsman for the S.F. Bowser Company designing gasoline pumps and filling stations, and as an architect for Griffith and Goodrich. Her final employer was Leroy Bradley, and the firm Bradley and Babcock, where she worked as an architect until her retirement in 1930. Crosby lived until 1962, and her obituary noted that she had worked over 35 years in the architectural field.

Louise Josephine Pellens left the offices of Walter Burly Griffin in 1912, and found work as a Mechanical Drawing teacher in the Rockford, Illinois school system. She continued to teach mechanical drawing for many years, and later became an art teacher in Rockford. It is not known if she ever worked as an architect again.

Indiana began to license architects following enactment of legislation in 1929, just as Grace Crosby was retiring from her 35-year career. It would be decade before Juliet Peddle became the first woman in Indiana to be licensed as an architect, in 1939. One of Peddle's earliest Indiana commissions was the Mary Phillips House in Terre Haute, designed in 1939. Since 1999, AIA Indiana annually awards a Juliet Peddle Award for "an individual architect for their strong willingness to pioneer, being successful in breaking new ground, strong devotion and commitment to architecture, display of professionalism and perseverance, and having a kind spirit."

Allaback, Sarah. *The First American Women Architects*. University of Illinois Press, 2008. Pp. 204-205.

Grace E. Crosby House, 413 West DeWald Street, City of Fort Wayne Historic Preservation Commission Staff Review, July 23, 2007.

Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, "Ft. Wayne Women Form New Architect Firm." August 30, 1914.

Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, "Grace E. Crosby." May 18, 1962.

Indianapolis Star, "Mrs. Joel Roberts Ninde of Ft. Wayne Broadened Her Womanly Sphere By Becoming an Architect and the Creator of Fair 'Honeymoon Row'." November 7, 1914.

Isabel Roberts, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K._C._DeRhodes_House

Marion Mahony Griffin, <http://web.mit.edu/museum/chicago/griffin.html> accessed August 11, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marion_Mahony_Griffin accessed August 11, 2009.

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New York Times, "Girl Architects Organize a Firm." March 8, 1914.

New York Times, "Miss Anna P. Schenck, Architect, Dies." April 30, 1915.

Sheila Snider, email correspondence received May 5, 2009, regarding architecture licensing in Indiana and Juliet Peddle.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Women In Architecture Timeline:

<http://www2.arch.uiuc.edu/organizations/wia/timeline.html> accessed August 11, 2009.