

Richard C. Watkins, Utah's Architect, by Michael Liechfield

“Utah’s Architect” may seem a bold title for Richard Watkins. Certainly, Utah has produced architects of greater renown. None of Watkins’ works match the iconic status of Truman O. Angell’s design for the Salt Lake L.D.S. Temple. The buildings of his colleague and mentor, Richard Kletting, especially the Utah State Capitol and Saltair, enjoy wider public recognition than any of Watkins’ works. Yet, step outside of Salt Lake City and explore communities scattered the length and breadth of the state, and the legacy of Richard Watkins comes vividly to life.

Perhaps no other architect in the history of the state helped to define the character of more Utah cities. His work dominates Provo and Payson, gives shape to Ephraim and Eureka, and is a source of pride to Panguitch and Price. In places like Spring City, Fairview, and Junction, his work remains at the very heart of the communities. Richard Watkins, or R. C. Watkins as he was often called, designed over 300 public buildings throughout Utah including courthouses for Uintah, Piute, Garfield, and Carbon counties; churches in Provo, Richfield, Mt. Pleasant, Spring City, Gunnison, and elsewhere; a jail in Helper; an amusement hall in Heber City; an armory in Nephi; a bank in Midvale; academies in Emery and Sanpete counties; libraries in Cedar City, Garland, Richmond, Eureka, Ephraim, Provo, Richfield, and Manti; a tabernacle in Sevier County; a new tower for the tabernacle in Manti; improvements to the Star Pavilion resort in Richfield; a theatre in Ephraim and a hotel in Price; and prominent business blocks and buildings in places such as Salt Lake, Provo, Heber City, Price, Eureka, and Richfield—not to mention hundreds of public schools in every corner of the state.

Ask a resident of Spring City about their elegant chapel or intricate school or inquire in Payson what Peteheet means to their city, and the impact of Richard Watkins becomes clear. For generations, communities throughout the state have adopted his work as a statement of their very identity. Provo’s landmark commission currently uses the Knight Block tower as its logo. Although much of Watkins’ work has fallen victim to a prosaic form of progress, various examples have endured, some for over a century. Others, now gone, are remembered with fondness and even longing, even as the man who designed them has faded into obscurity.

A professional biography from 1902 gives rare insight into the background and early life of R. C. Watkins and was written only a third of the way through his illustrious career:

RICHARD C. WATKINS, one of the most successful architects south of Salt Lake City, was born in Bristol, England, August 22, 1858, and is the son of Charles F. And Elizabeth M. (Selway) Watkins, natives of that country. They were both converted to the teachings and doctrines of the Mormon Church in England, and the father was baptized at the age of eighteen, and thereafter became an active worker in Church circles. Upon reaching Utah, in 1872, the family settled at Ogden, where the father engaged in his trade of shoemaker, and he and his wife are still living there, at the ages of seventy and seventy-three, respectively. Our subject is the oldest of a family of eleven children, of whom six are now living—R. C., Mary Ann, at Ogden; Charles, in Provo; Ruth, Edward, John and William L., all living in Ogden.

Our subject was fourteen years of age when he crossed the plains and came to Utah, and after settling in Ogden, attended the schools at that place. He showed a natural aptitude for drawing, and while still a young boy learned the carpenter trade and started in the contracting business on his own account, drawing his own plans of the buildings to be erected, and by degrees came to devote his entire time and attention to this phase of the business. He also

became draughtsman for some of the well-known architects of Ogden and Salt Lake City, and in 1890 came to Provo to superintend the construction of the State Insane asylum for Richard Kletting of Salt Lake City. He remained in the office of Mr. Kletting for three years, and in 1893 opened an office for himself in Provo, making a specialty of school buildings, and since then has made the plans for and superintended the erection of nearly all the schools erected south of Salt Lake, about fifty in number, and also planned all of the best business blocks in Provo City; also the recent additions to the Brigham Young Academy have been constructed by him and he has built up a large and financially successful business in this line.

Mr. Watkins was married in 1880, to Miss Lucy Greenwell, of Ogden. Mrs. Watkins died January 19, 1886, leaving a family of three children—Gerrude, now the wife of John W. Young; Bertha, and Frederick C. The present Mrs. Watkins bore the maiden name of Emma M. Wold, and is the daughter of Ole Wold, of Peterson, Morgan county. [They were married on August 17, 1889, in Ogden.] She is the mother of five children—Ellen Mariah, Emma M., Ruth Elizabeth, Richard C. Jr., and Walter W. [In the years that followed, she would bear five more children: Edna, Ethel, George, Mary, and John.]

Our subject was born and reared in the Mormon faith, and although he is a member of the church has never held office, being content to work as a lay member. He has by the exercise of his own native ability worked his way up to his present high position, having but few of the aids usually given to boys of his turn of mind, and a perusal of his career should prove an inspiration and help to every poor and ambitious youth, showing that where there is a will there must always be a way, and that lack of advantages need discourage none. In private life Mr. Watkins stands high in the esteem of all who know him.

Richard Watkins came from roots in southwestern England. His paternal grandparents, Richard Watkins and Ruth Hamblin, were natives of Somersetshire. His maternal grandparents, William Loud and Mary Selway, were from Devonshire. Surely, R. C.'s English ancestry and upbringing influenced him in his chosen vocation.

Apparently his architectural aptitude was not the only talent he demonstrated in his youth. Years later, during a visit to Ogden, the local paper wrote of R. C. that “[h]e and his brother Charley were members of one of the first bands organized in this city and Mr. Watkins (“Dick”) is very proud of the distinction.”

But architecture was his great passion, and he was highly prolific. In 1899 and 1900, he “designed sixteen school buildings in this State, awarded in competition drawings. An during the past year alone [1900] he has designed buildings for Provo to the amount of over \$100,000, and which are either completed or nearly so” according to the *Deseret News*.

He was continually seeking inspiration and improvements. In late 1902, in conjunction with his work for the state hospital in Provo, he took a month-long trip to visit leading asylums in Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, and other large eastern cities to analyze improvements and architectural innovations to incorporate in Utah. During a visit to Moab to inspect local schools, R. C. Watkins “had a number of criticisms to make in regard to the high school building, notwithstanding the fact that he was the architect who drew the plans for the building,” reported the *Grand Valley Times* under the headline “Criticizes Own Work.” R. C. stated that “the facilities for natural lighting in the high school are inadequate and the rooms are entirely too large. The humidity in the rooms is too low, and the temperature too high.” He suggested frosting the top windows, placing blinds on the lower ones, but abolishing the Venetian blinds.

Watkins designed buildings in a wide array of architectural styles ranging from Victorian gothic to Victorian romantic to Spanish renaissance to neoclassical. Many incorporated unique touches—bits of whimsy that were uniquely Watkins.

While several of his architectural works are known for those flights of fancy, such as the Peteecheet tower or the Knight-Allen house, Richard Watkins had a life painfully grounded in reality. His first wife died at age 27 after a lingering illness, leaving him a widower with three children. At the end of 1901, his brother-in-law was arrested and charged with murder. Richard was called as a witness for the prosecution in the sensational trial that followed and was vilified by the attorneys for the defense for taking the stand. Richard shared in a portion of the tremendous burden of notoriety thrust upon his sister Ruth.

In 1912, after placing behind Kletting in the design competition for the Utah State Capitol, he was robbed at gunpoint on State Street. That same year, his youngest son, John, died at nearly two-years of age of pneumonia. In 1914, he was involved in a fatal motor vehicle accident. While passing a wagon, he collided with a motorcycle, which had been traveling northbound in the southbound lane. The accident led to a lawsuit against Watkins, and it was not until 1917 that the Utah Supreme Court held that he was without fault in the crash. Also in 1917, his oldest son, Frederick died at age 31 of heart valve defect. Ellen, his oldest daughter with Emma, died in 1935 at age 44 as the result of a car accident.

Professionally, he had his challenges as well. Perhaps his most ambitious architectural work, the Sevier Stake Tabernacle, was destroyed not once but twice in his own lifetime. It was burned in 1898 by an arsonist as it neared completion, was rebuilt, and then in 1901, an earthquake struck central Utah. The *Salt Lake Herald* reported that “[i]n Richfield the greatest damages was done to the large tabernacle. It is badly shaken and cracked.” Eventually, the building was condemned and in shambles. By 1921 the *Richfield Reaper* was referring to the tabernacle ruins as the “long-complained of eye-sore.”

Yet no amount of adversity appeared to limit Watkins’ architectural output. His life and identity were defined by the term “architect,” and he was referred to as such in nearly every news story. When his mother died in 1912, the headline described her as “Pioneer & Mother of Well Known Salt Lake Architect.” Likewise, Provo’s *Daily Enquirer* recorded on July 18, 1893, that “A NINE-pound girl arrived yesterday at the home of Architect Watkins.” On August 13, 1897, the same paper stated, “Architect Watkins, formerly of this city, but now a resident of Ogden, is contemplating moving back to Provo. He is preparing plans for several buildings in the city, among them, plans of the proposed addition to the B. Y. Academy.”

He served as Brigham Young Academy architect for several years. He was State Architect of Schools and had his own office (room 116) at the Capitol. His services were sought by some of the most prominent men of central Utah, such as Jesse Knight, C. E. Loose, John E. Dooly, R. Spencer Hines, Thomas Taylor, William H. Ray and others.

Not only was R. C. Watkins interested in beautiful and compelling facades, but in the form and function of the interiors. Sadly, less evidence of the inner designs of his works remains, but newspaper accounts record his meticulous attention to lighting, temperature, and utility. He patented his own heating and ventilating apparatus. His home in Provo, which he designed, had “a hot water system of heating, plumbing, electrical wiring, etc.”

Additionally, Watkins’ work was not limited to the grand and elaborate. He was not above designing annexes and additions to other architects’ structures. He also submitted plans for buildings of a highly practical nature. For instance, in 1908, he designed a boiler house and

toilet building in Salina.

A momentous change to his career was the entry into his long and fruitful partnership with John S. Birch in 1907. The first work of their collaboration, according to a report in the *Eastern Utah Advocate*, was the magnificent Carbon County Courthouse. John S. Birch, like Watkins, was a native of England. According to a statement by the widow of architect C. M. Neuhausen in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Birch was Neuhausen's principal draughtsman for the Cathedral of the Madeleine and after Neuhausen's death, "Architects Watkins and Birch were instructed to prepare the drawings for the principal entrances throughout the cathedral." Mrs. Neuhausen also described Birch as "a specialist on church architecture, having received European training."

Watkins & Birch together designed all manner of public buildings. They were highly active in pursuing contracts across the state for Carnegie Libraries. As work progressed, Watkins & Birch opened an office in Salt Lake City in addition to their Provo office. Eventually, R. C. permanently moved his family from Provo to Salt Lake. While the move was a natural outgrowth of his ever rising prominence on a statewide scale, the timing may have been helped along by a very public dispute with A. M. Holdaway, Provo's superintendent of sewers.

Newspapers throughout the state attest to the wide scope of work performed by Watkins & Birch. Not always were their bids successful, but very often they were. Their work took them to every corner of the state and even beyond. The *Salt Lake Telegram* reported on August 20, 1910, that "Watkins & Birch have just completed some office buildings for Idaho Falls which will be erected in the near future."

In 1912 Watkins, Birch & Kent partnered with another firm, Eldredge & Chesebro to enter the competition to design the new state capitol building in Salt Lake City. While Richard Kletting's design ultimately prevailed in the competition, Watkins & Birch were awarded \$500 for their design.

Richard Watkins was appointed by Governor William Spry to a newly formed state school commission along with Superintendent A. C. Nelson and Dr. T. B. Beatty of the state board of health. He continued to work regularly well beyond Kletting, who went into semi-retirement following the construction of the Utah State Capitol.

Richard Watkins died in his sleep April 9, 1941, at his home at 1137 Herbert Avenue, Salt Lake City, Utah, likely due to myocardial degeneration. His funeral was held at the Garden Park LDS Ward. His obituary stated that he had designed more than 300 school buildings in the intermountain area.

Richard Watkins' architectural legacy endures and adds richness to cities throughout the state. An article from Provo's *Daily Enquirer* from 1893, near the beginning of his career, announcing his offices in the new Eldredge Block, could have summed up his work. It states that "[t]here is no one in this part of the territory who is more proficient in the architectural art than R. C. Watkins. We feel assured that he is competent to conduct work in this line in a first class manner. He makes plans and specifications for any description of private or public building, and ranks for fair and honorable business transactions among the first men in the country. He is a thoroughly experienced and practical man, in his profession, having made it his life study and occupation, and nature gifted him with a taste for this work." Please enjoy this taste of the architectural works of Richard C. Watkins—Utah's Architect.