

**THE ARCHITECT AND MONETARIAN:  
A BRIEF MEMOIR OF THOMAS  
ALEXANDER TEFFT, INCLUDING HIS  
LABORS IN EUROPE TO ESTABLISH A  
UNIVERSAL CURRENCY**

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The Architect and Monetarian: A Brief Memoir of Thomas Alexander Tefft, Including His  
Labors in Europe to Establish a Universal currency by Edwin Martin Stone

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## MEMOIR.

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IN the summer of 1845, a young man, apparently about nine-  
teen or twenty years of age, came to Providence from the  
country to acquire a knowledge of Architecture, and thus fit  
himself for a business that Tallman, Bucklin, Warren and  
others had gradually worked up into a distinct profession in  
Rhode Island. He was slender in form and of medium height.  
His oval face and naturally fair complexion were bronzed by  
successive years of exposure in the toils of the farm. His hair,  
a light brown, approaching to flaxen, was brushed back from a  
forehead of medium height. His slightly compressed lips gave to  
a mouth not over large, an expression of firmness, and his dark  
grey eyes, quick and penetrating, evidently permitted nothing  
worthy of notice to escape observation. His manner was  
marked by a certain degree of independence, and his whole bear-  
ing was of one who, self-conscious of native power, had made up  
his mind to succeed in whatever he undertook.\* This young

\* As an illustration of this trait, the following incident is related: In his  
early residence in Providence he wore for a guard to his watch, with some  
apparent complacency, a piece of common flaxen cord. When proffered a  
more becoming article, he respectfully but decidedly declined it, considering  
the cord thus utilized more appropriate to his circumstances. In later years,  
under a favorable change in pecuniary ability, he procured a valuable chain  
made to order in London, in accordance with his taste. To the common  
observer, this seemed a whim — a mere out-cropping of oddity; while to him  
it was a matter of principle. In the first instance, he remembered that he  
was a student with stinted means — in the second, a peer with the gifted  
minds of a realm.

man was THOMAS ALEXANDER TEFFT, son of William C. and Sarah Tefft, and was born in Richmond, R. I., August 3, 1826.

The house of his birth, located near "Wilbur Hill," was of a style common during the latter part of the last century, and now occasionally seen as a relic of the olden time. The back roof extended to within six or eight feet of the ground, affording space in the rear of the main rooms to be used for dairy room, wash room and other purposes. At one end of the house was the well, whose refreshing water was drawn with a primitive pole and hook, and at the other the gate entrance to the garden. The scenery viewed from the front door was quiet and soothing, with just enough of the picturesque to awaken in a young mind a sense of the beautiful. For this place Mr. Tefft cherished a strong attachment, both from the tender memories of childhood, and from the fact that it was a family inheritance that could be traced back in ancestral line to an original Indian grant. A pencil sketch of the Old Homestead, made by him, is still extant, underneath which he wrote the following lines :

Is there one who loves not to linger where  
His early days were passed without a care?  
To trace the long dim vista of the past,  
And live again the scenes so quickly lost?

In childhood Mr. Tefft's bodily health was feeble, and gave no promise of the physical energy and power of endurance displayed in subsequent years. For the sports common to boy-life he seemed to care but little. In books he found a greater charm than in the bat and ball, and he was never happier than when engaged in mastering the contents of an instructive volume or in constructing miniature machinery, for which his skill was remarkable. At about the age of ten years he entered a school kept by Mr. Elisha L. Baggs, with whom he remained two and a half years, making rapid progress in the several studies pursued, and evincing a thoroughness in the preparation of his lessons that foreshadowed the habits of his maturer years. For penmanship and drawing he displayed a decided taste, and with the aid afforded him by his instructor made commendable proficiency in these

arts. Specimens of his ornamental writing are yet preserved, that for beauty of finish would be creditable to an accomplished teacher. Music also enlisted his interest, and many of his evening hours were enlivened with the flute, of which he had made himself master. While yet a student, one of the occupations of leisure moments was the cutting upon wood of a set of music type, with which he printed neatly and accurately a favorite tune to be sung in the following words, expressive of feeling and thought that often at that period possessed him :

"Shed not a tear o'er your friend's early bier,  
When I am gone;  
Smile if the slow tolling bell you should hear,  
When I am gone.  
Weep not for me when you stand round my grave,  
Think who has died his beloved to save,  
When I am gone.  
  
Plant ye a tree which may wave over me,  
When I am gone;  
Sing me a song if my grave you should see,  
When I am gone.  
Come at the close of a bright summer's day,  
Come when the sun sheds his last ling'ring ray,  
Come and rejoice that I thus past away,  
When I am gone."

At the age of seventeen years Mr. Tefft took charge of a school at the Four Corners, in his native town. To this new and responsible occupation he brought the forces of an ardent nature and a determination to achieve success, the effects of which were soon apparent in the order, industry and improvement of his pupils.

While thus employed, our young pedagogue was made sensible that a higher culture than he had yet received would be a powerful auxiliary to his wider usefulness as a teacher, as it would be an invaluable help in whatever other pursuit he might engage. This he resolved to possess. Having closed his stipulated term of service, he returned to his old instructor, and applied himself diligently to a course of advanced studies, defraying his expenses with the money he had earned by teaching. It

was about this time that he attracted the attention of Hon. Henry Barnard, then State School Commissioner for Rhode Island, who was at once impressed with his energy, intelligence and power as a teacher, his love of the beautiful in nature and art, and his taste and skill in drawing. He said to him in substance, "You must not bury yourself here in obscurity. Go to Providence and study architecture. Make that your profession, and let our State have the benefit of your acquirements in a department whose esthetic claims have too long been neglected." The counsel found a ready response in a mind panting for wider scope than farm life or a rural district school could promise. Visions consonant with his higher aspirations now broke upon his view, and the outlines of a bright future seemed clearly defined. Abandoning the thought of school keeping, he went to Providence, and after settling preliminaries entered the office of Messrs. Tallman and Bucklin, where his opportunities for study and practice were ample. In the family of the latter he found a home ever after cherished with filial tenderness.

In this new pursuit young Tefft engaged with ardor and singleness of purpose, but in every step of his progress he felt how important a help a still more extended and thorough intellectual culture might be made to his chosen profession. Again advised by his friendly mentor, he entered Brown University and pursued the prescribed course of studies there without relinquishing those in which he was already engaged as a student of architecture — his industry as a draughtsman enabling him to defray his college expenses.

As a student, Mr. Tefft was noted for persistent faithfulness rather than for brilliancy. "In his studies," writes President Caswell, then his college Professor, "his aim seemed to be to master the subject — to work out the problem or the argument in all its bearings, without any reference to the best mode of presenting it to the minds of others. In the scientific studies pursued under my direction, with very fair abilities to acquire anything which was presented in the lecture or the text-books, he was hardly satisfied with following the beaten track. His



mind was constantly suggesting and devising methods of his own; looking at a question from different stand-points, and seeking a solution by different modes of approach. This was, I think, a characteristic of his mind. He had to a larger extent than most young men the power and habit of original investigation. His suggestions were often untenable, but that he would himself discover as he penetrated farther and farther into the logical relations of the subject. He was constitutionally self-reliant, and showed very little disposition to abandon his opinions upon mere advice.\*

At the outset of his college life, his recitations were embarrassed by an apparent inability to readily command language to express his ideas even where his knowledge was full and exact. How he struggled to overcome this difficulty, and how he triumphed in the effort, the following account by Professor George W. Greene, his tutor in French, will show. He says:

“My first sight of Tefft was in my class room, at Brown University. I was struck from the first with the earnestness of his face and the undivided attention with which he followed the recitation. It was something I had never met with before in that form: an eagerness to learn and understand which seemed to master his physical as well as his intellectual nature and held him in a tension of both that was almost painful to look upon. In a day or two I called upon him to translate a paragraph from the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*. And here the tension became a struggle—the struggle of an indomitable will against an almost insuperable obstacle. He had no command of language. Every word that he uttered cost him a severe effort. Even the organs of his mouth seemed to oppose as obstinate a resistance to his will as the organs of thought. And the harder the effort the firmer did he plant his feet on the floor and more iron-like grew the rigidity of his face. The words came—slowly—reluctantly—one by one, with a struggle for each, dragged out as unwilling boys are dragged to school. But they came—the right words and the right rendering. It was evident that he understood both his lesson and himself.

“I quickly became much interested in him, had him often at my room, talked with him about artists and art, and as I watched his

\* Letter to the author.

progress was more and more convinced that he would succeed. He aimed high — very high — worked constantly with a definite purpose and a lofty ideal. I could see, too, that this ideal was constantly growing and expanding with every new step forward: but that he was not afraid of the labor which his growth imposed, nor discouraged when the result of that labor fell below his conception. He was resolved to be an architect cost what it might, and he was convinced that the true architect is a benefactor of society.

“Like most men who begin their studies late, he was tenacious of his opinion; and if he had ever ceased to grow, would have stiffened into a rigid conservatism. But progress was an essential element of his intellectual nature, and his prejudices seemed to drop from him one by one, leaving him still eager for improvement, and still confident that it was within his reach. In time he overcame the difficulty of speech, and obtained a satisfactory command of language. It was one of the most remarkable triumphs of a strong will, well directed, that I ever knew.”\*

It was while yet a student, that Mr. Tefft designed the neat and unique school building on Benefit street, Providence, erected and occupied by Hon. John Kingsbury during the later years of his celebrated School for Young Ladies, and now occupied for a similar purpose by Rev. Dr. Stockbridge. The circumstances of its inception and construction as related by Mr. Kingsbury, are as follow:

“In the year 1848 I decided to erect, for the use of a Young Ladies' School, a building which should, so far as a wise economy would allow, unite utility and architectural beauty. In the furtherance of this design, I made application to James C. Bucklin, Esq., of this city. After presenting to him my object, he turned to a young man in his office whom he called Thomas, and introduced him in the following words: ‘Here is a young man who can accomplish what you want better than I can.’ Looking upon Mr. Bucklin as the head of his profession, I was much surprised; and my surprise was not diminished by the extremely youthful and somewhat diminutive appearance of Mr. Tefft. He showed me plans of several small churches and other buildings which he had designed chiefly in the Gothic style,

\* Letter to the author.

which, in general features, he thought, would meet my wishes. To these designs I made objections. The Gothic style was too sombre for a school room; an open roof would make the building difficult to be warmed; stained glass windows would furnish a bad light and would not allow of sufficient ventilation. In reply he said, let the style be Romanesque, which is both cheerful and beautiful: let the ceiling be paneled and show only the lower part of the truss-work: and let the stained glass be frosted to prevent any color from passing through it, and set in frames which can be opened like doors. Thus my objections one by one were removed; and I was forcibly struck with the versatility and readiness with which it was done. Had he lived many years and had much experience it could not have been done more successfully. As he was born and bred in the most rural part of this State, where he had no opportunity to become acquainted with architecture; and as he had been in the office of Messrs. Tallman & Bucklin but a short period of time, it seemed to me then, and it is my opinion now, that he possessed a remarkable degree of what is so rare in this world — real genius.

In short he was engaged to furnish plans of a building and to superintend its erection. He was limited by the size and shape of the lot; by the height of the building, it being within the fire limits of the city; and by the amount of money to be expended. When the building was completed, it was visited by a distinguished architect from Boston, who, on being told of the circumstances, made this remarkable assertion: "He has done all that mortal man could do." It is now more than twenty years since this building was erected. Though the exterior is not striking yet the interior stands to-day, so far as I know, without a rival in American architecture. Its perfect adaptation to its intended use; its symmetry, beauty and harmony combined to make it a part and parcel of the education which is received within its walls. It is as beautiful to-day as when the last finishing touch was put upon it.

A remarkable trait of Mr. Tefft's character was pertinacity in maintaining and defending his opinions. This sometimes brought upon him the censure of builders and even that of his patrons. The following may serve as an illustration in connection with this sketch. He had given the painter a color for the walls and ceiling. The paint was accordingly prepared. Before it was applied, Mr. Tefft required that some of it should be put upon a board, and held