

The Architects of the Devon Inns

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Nearly a century after its destruction by fire, the silhouette of the second Devon Inn is still iconic. Looking south from today's Lancaster Avenue, it spanned the width of nearly an entire block of Coffin and Altemus's original Devon subdivision. The enduring memory of the great hotel is driven by its striking architecture, a relic of the 1880s that stood the test of time through many later uses.

The town of Devon was inspired by all things English, from its street names to the architecture of its first buildings. Among those structures was the original Devon Inn, envisioned by developers Lemuel Coffin and Joseph B. Altemus as a stylistic interpretation of English lodgings from its architecture down to its furniture and utensils. "The inn," one newspaper article explained, "is copied in its outlines and interior and furnishing after the rambling old inns so often encountered and such a pleasure to the traveler in England." The writer then compared the inn and its surroundings to the Bryn Mawr Hotel, built a decade earlier and six miles to the east by the Pennsylvania Railroad to similarly kickstart the development of the land surrounding it. The Bryn Mawr Hotel's bulky stone and mansard-roofed form was starkly different from the Devon Inn's multitude of gables and variety of exterior materials including pebble-dash stucco, red tiling, and rough-hewn stone.

It would be several years before Tudor Revival became one of the most popular styles in American architecture. The English-inspired half-timbering found in the gables of the first Devon Inn was an early example of this treatment in the United States. Projecting gables and shed dormers defined the roofline of the building's front elevation overtop a gambrel roof extending its full width. Oval and half-round windows in the gable and dormer peaks added some decidedly Victorian flourishes.

Details about the enigmatic first Inn are hazy, but the most likely designer of the building was James Peacock Sims, a young Philadelphia architect who was best known for designing churches in the city. Sims died suddenly in his office at the age of 33 in May, 1882, a little less than three months before his Devon Inn opened for business.

Sims's creative partner was another promising young architect (a full decade his junior), Wilson Eyre. Years after his takeover of Sims's practice, Eyre's name would become one of the most famous in Philadelphia architecture. Eyre was best known for his country homes on the Main Line and beyond, including "Low Walls" in Villanova and "Allgates" in Haverford. His favored architectural styles changed with the times and his own interests, but an English influence ran throughout his career.

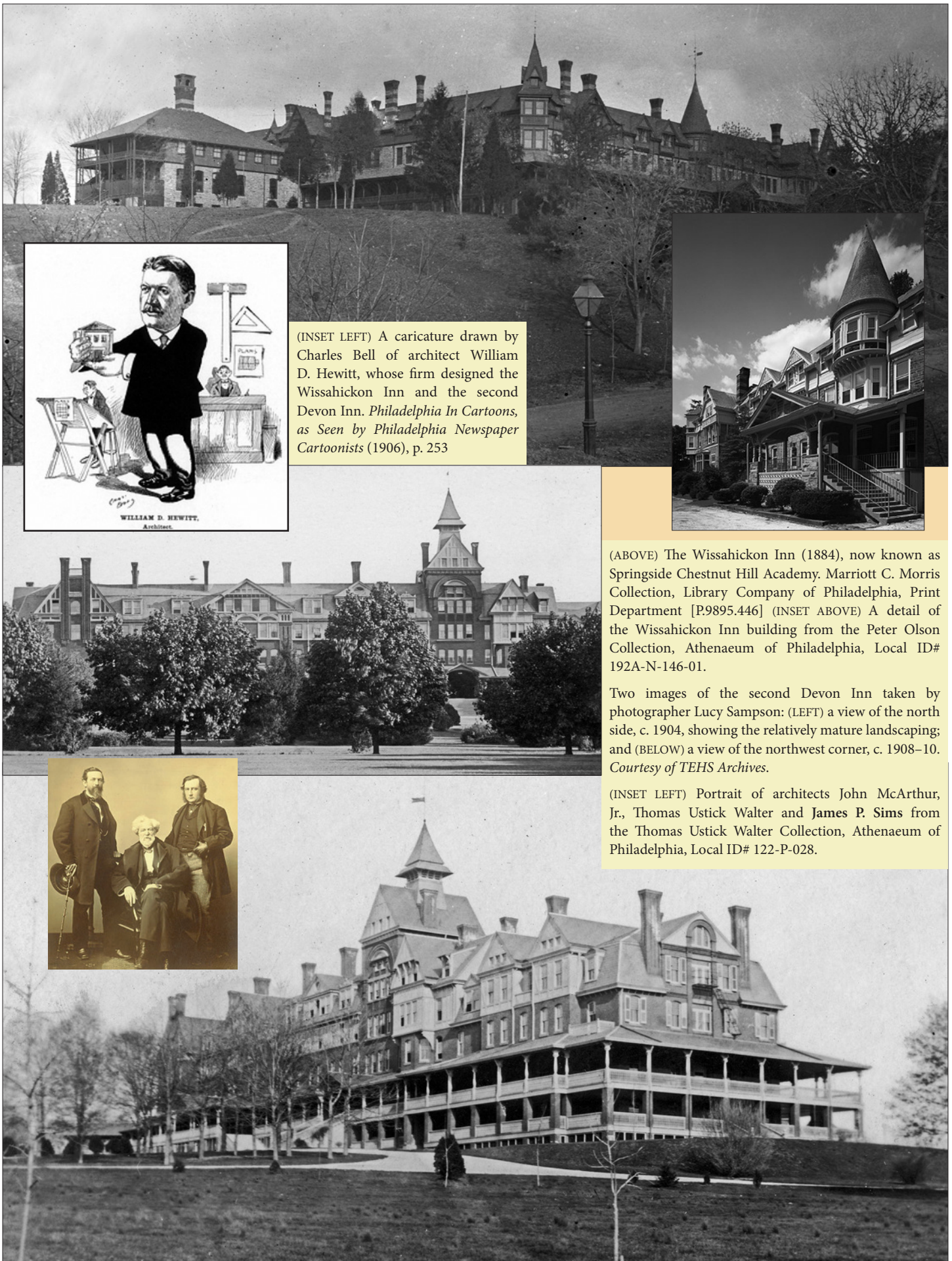
It seems possible, if not likely, that Eyre either had a strong influence on the first Inn's design or was in fact its primary designer. If that is the case, the Inn was among his earliest works. Local architectural historians have noted that stylistically it appears quite similar to other early Eyre designs. One example, the Overbrook residence "Farwood" built between 1884–85, exhibited similarities to the Inn's gambrel and twinned gable roof forms as well as its half-timbered facade.

It is worth noting that the carpenter hired to build the first Devon Inn was William H. Bilyeu. In November 1882, a few months after the Inn's completion, Bilyeu was contracted by the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) to build new stations at both Devon and Wayne. It seems that the Pennsylvania Railroad was not opposed to adopting Coffin and Altemus's English aesthetic, perhaps because the developers contributed \$10,000 toward the construction of the station. PRR architect W. Bleddyn Powell created a suitable architectural complement to the first Inn that later proved to be a worthy companion to the second Inn. The station and Inn were evidently intentionally built on an axis directly aligned with each other, though early maps surprisingly reveal that it was not until well into the second Inn's life that Devon Boulevard was constructed to provide a visual link and wide pedestrian promenade to connect them.

The first Devon Inn met its untimely fate just shy of a year after its construction, and work to build its replacement began almost immediately. The firm chosen to build the new, (more) fireproof hotel was that of brothers G.W. and W.D. Hewitt. One of the two Hewitt brothers, George, had previously partnered with notable Philadelphia architects Frank Furness and John Fraser.

Construction of the second Inn was timed for a May, 1884 opening. Under construction concurrently in Chestnut Hill was another Hewitt-designed hotel, the Wissahickon Inn. The influence of the Hewitts was vast in that growing suburb (within the city limits) in residential and public buildings, yet the firm also contributed to the Main Line with large residences such as "Briar Crest" in Villanova and the Henry Gibson estate, "Maybrook," in Wynnewood.

Interestingly, the grounds adjacent to the Wissahickon Inn hosted the Philadelphia Horse Show for several years, just as the Devon Inn was backdrop to the Devon Horse Show. Unlike the Devon Inn, the Wissahickon Inn survives in its original form and today serves as the centerpiece of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy. In Center City another famous Hewitt-designed hotel can still be visited: the Bellevue-Stratford, designed and built almost two decades after the firm's two "country" resorts of 1883–84.



(INSET LEFT) A caricature drawn by Charles Bell of architect William D. Hewitt, whose firm designed the Wissahickon Inn and the second Devon Inn. *Philadelphia In Cartoons, as Seen by Philadelphia Newspaper Cartoonists* (1906), p. 253

(ABOVE) The Wissahickon Inn (1884), now known as Springside Chestnut Hill Academy. Marriott C. Morris Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia, Print Department [P9895.446] (INSET ABOVE) A detail of the Wissahickon Inn building from the Peter Olson Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Local ID# 192A-N-146-01.

Two images of the second Devon Inn taken by photographer Lucy Sampson: (LEFT) a view of the north side, c. 1904, showing the relatively mature landscaping; and (BELOW) a view of the northwest corner, c. 1908–10. *Courtesy of TEHS Archives.*

(INSET LEFT) Portrait of architects John McArthur, Jr., Thomas Ustick Walter and James P. Sims from the Thomas Ustick Walter Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Local ID# 122-P-028.