

Briggs and Other New England Architects

While Warren R. Briggs might well be considered a Regional American Architect, working primarily in Fairfield County, Connecticut, his work was prolific. In addition to the State Normal School in New Britain, the National Register of Historic Places lists his Fairfield County Courthouses in both Bridgeport and Danbury, Locust Avenue School in Danbury, Seaside Institute in Bridgeport, and the Myrtle Avenue School in the Barnum-Palliser Development Historic District in Bridgeport, this last being his first work so listed. The New Britain State Normal School is his second work so listed.

Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886), Amos P. Cutting (1841-1896), and Warren R. Briggs (1850-1933) were three outstanding New England architects at a time when, after the Civil War, trained architects were few. They were close personally as well as professionally. Also, all three were friends and collaborators with Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), landscape architect and designer of Walnut Hill Park, New Britain (1871).

Richardson, educated at Harvard and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, developed an architectural style that became known as Richardson Romanesque and stimulated a host of followers who built in the style from coast to coast and throughout Europe. He, along with Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) and Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), are considered to be the “holy trinity” of American architecture. Richardson’s best known and most loved building is Trinity Church (1872-1877) on Copley Square, Boston, although it is not his most characteristic. In Connecticut, much more characteristic are his widely admired Cheney Building (1875-1876) in Hartford and the Union Station (1885-1887) in New London.

Cutting built many churches in the Richardson Romanesque style in New England, including Trinity United Methodist Church (1889-1891) in New Britain, at Main and Chestnut. This building consists of a tall, sturdy tower straddled by two unequal bowed wings, with exterior walls of rough-cut grey granite.

Warren R. Briggs (1850-1933), architect of the State Normal School in New Britain (1882), on Richardson’s recommendation, followed him to Paris and the Ecole des Beaux Arts. On returning to Connecticut, he was greatly influenced by Richardson Romanesque, but he also worked in Beaux Arts and Queen Anne styles. He designed many important buildings in Connecticut, especially in Fairfield County. He also designed the Connecticut Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (Chicago World’s Fair). Briggs wrote *Modern American School Buildings—Being a treatise upon and designs for the construction of school buildings* (New York, 1899, 1906) and *Suburban school-houses* (Concord, N.H., 1882).

Many of Briggs’s buildings are recognized by the “National Register of Historic Places.” From my research, it seems that his second building to be so designated is his work, in 1882, the Normal School in New Britain. He was age 32 when it was completed. The design for the first normal school and the first kindergarten in Connecticut was a remarkable commission to receive from the State at his age. Connecticut took a risk. Briggs produced a beautiful building.