

Ames Monument

May 3rd.

The storm broke up our picnic at Veedauwoo, so we hauled in our gear and head back to Laramie. Several miles west on Route 80 a highway sign read "Ames Monument". "Would you like to take a look at it?," John asked me, partly, I think to make up for the terminated picnic and partly because in any case he wanted to give us the red carpet tour of his city. The storm turned to rain and sleet and the wind whipped across the plateau. I had never heard of the Ames Monument; it is not what one would call a major tourist attraction. The prospects for great pleasure seemed dim. Yet, something must have responded to the name, a premonitory intuition, so I answered "Yes" and as Ernie was game, we set off for it.

Veering to the left across Route 80, we drove over open range through driving sleet. When the sleet let up

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there were no obstructions to the view. To the north and east, miles away, were the mountains of the Medicine Bow range; to the west, the Snowys. We approached the town of Sherman, Wyoming, long dead, and identifiable only by a bit of archeological rubble. Located on an abandoned portion of what was one^{ce} the main line of the Union Pacific Railroad, it might have been the ruins of Carthage plowed over and salted by the Romans.

Theⁿ, about a quarter of a mile off, at the highest point of the range, we could see a substantial monolith in the form of a truncated pyramid. There was a sad grandeur about it, and its existence on this naked, windswept upland accentuated the emptiness of the landscape. A monument in the middle of an open range? To what? To whom?

We drove closer, and I could see that the monument was made of massive pieces of dark red sandstone. They were cut, John said, from a nearby outcropping. There was something elusively familiar about it. Where had I seen something like it?

The tablet at the base resolved everything. The East and its memories were suddenly transported to this unlikely place and I was electrified by a sense of recognition and even of affinity which John and his family

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could not then share. It was snowing as we got out of the car to pay our respects and I quickly told my hosts what I knew and promised to tell them more at leisure.

The Ames Monument is dedicated to the memory of two brothers, Oakes Ames and Oliver Ames. The monument was designed by Henry Hobson Richardson. It bears bas-reliefs of the brothers sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. It was erected in 1880 by the stockholders of the Union Pacific Railroad on the highest point (8200 feet) of the railroad line and honors the role of the two brothers in pushing through the construction of the line. The stone was cut and the monument was constructed by eighty-five masons and quarrymen imported to Sherman from Massachusetts.

I have seen the graves of the brothers in North Easton, Massachusetts, about a half-hour drive from my house in Providence. I have seen Saint-Gauden's studio in Cornish, New Hampshire. I learned all the college mathematics I know in a building designed by Richardson and I currently practise my trade in a building that was designed in obvious imitation of Richardson.

The Ames family is an old and prominent one in

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in Massachusetts with many branches. As a boy, I lived near Ames Street (there must be many such in the state) and I went to school with several descendants. However, the confluence of the four men of the monument, within my own experience, was due to a chance occurrence. About ten years ago, my wife took a Master's Degree in American History. For her thesis, she studied a number of New England town histories written in the 1800's and drew inferences from the stylistic differences between those written in the earlier part of the century and those written later on. As part of her studies, she came across a history of the town of North Easton, Massachusetts which she thought was unusually interesting. North Easton is a small town about half way between Providence and Boston and ten miles east of Route 95. She told me that there were a couple of buildings in North Easton designed by Richardson, and since she knew I admired him, suggested that we might go up there and take a look around. It seemed strange to me that such a small town would have two buildings by a man who in his day was one of the most lionized of American architects, and this added zest to our expedition.

We found the two Richardsons; the first, a beautiful little railroad depot on a now abandoned line, and

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the second, a rather large public building, a Memorial Hall so called, sited commandingly at the crest of a hill. The depot no longer functions as a depot but as some sort of a community arts center. The Memorial Hall seemed to me to be the worse for the years and would have benefited from a bit of restoration. It was a Sunday when we went up there; no one was around so we couldn't make any inquiries. We just poked around, thinking that we might discover something.

We found a factory bearing the name of Ames. The factory made shovels. Then we found an Ames this and an Ames that. Wandering into a cemetery, (it is hard to miss) we found a large Ames family plot. I recall a stone memorializing a young man who was an aviator in World War I. The stone carried the relief of a biplane. From all this it became clear to us that the Ames Family was the First Family of North Easton, and we supposed that Richardson had been commissioned by them to do the buildings. The deeper connection escaped me until my discovery in Laramie and I was moved to look a bit more into the family history.

The father of the Ames brothers was also an Oliver Ames (1779-1863). His father, John Ames, was a blacksmith and had been a manufacturer of guns and shovels

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for the Revolutionary Army. Oliver himself was an inventor and perfected a lighter and cheaper shovel that became deservedly famous. West of the Mississippi, it functioned as hard cash.

Oliver Ames had a number of sons and daughters of whom we are concerned only with Oakes (1804-1873) and Oliver (1807-1877). These two brothers went into their father's shovel business, learning it from the ground up. In 1844, their father turned the business over to them. They were skillful managers and sharp business men. In 1855, they brought a branch railroad line into North Easton. At this point, their careers diverged a bit. Oakes ran for Congress in 1862 and was elected. He would be reelected four times. The Civil War brought in contracts to the Ames factory for shovels and swords. Oakes' presence in Congress did not hurt the business. They made a fortune.

This fortune whetted their appetite for bigger game and placed them in a position to find it. The game was railroading and the Union Pacific Railroad was just then in its early planning stages. Alongside the Union Pacific, a company was set up to finance the construction of the railroad. This was the Credit Mobilier of America.

In the first stages, the difficulties of simultaneously financing, constructing and running a railroad

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John

1738-1803

Oliver

1779 - 1863

Oakes

1804-1873

Oliver

1807-1877

Two Daughters
Four Sons

Oliver

1831-1895

Ames Family Tree

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were severe, and after a few years, the presidency of the Union Pacific fell into the competent hands of Oliver Ames who held it from 1866 to 1868 and thereafter was a Director for the rest of his life. Oakes Ames took over the work of the Credit Mobilier. There seems to have been some hanky-panky with stock issues. I, not being experienced financially, cannot get it straight in my own mind, let alone explain it. Statutes required that Union Pacific stock be paid for in cash. Oakes Ames and other men got it for thirty cents on the dollar. Congress sought to regulate freight rates on the Union Pacific. Oakes Ames sought to ward off this regulation by selling Credit Mobilier stock to certain members of Congress for less than its true value.

A disgruntled associate who thought he was slighted in the pickings threatened Oakes Ames with blackmail, and the scandal of the Credit Mobilier broke upon the nation.

Congress set up a Committee to investigate charges of bribery. The Committee brought in a resolution that Oakes Ames ought to be expelled from the House of Representatives. The mood of the House was against expulsion. It was moved that the resolution offered by the Committee be changed to read as follows:

"Resolved, That the House absolutely condemns the



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conduct of Oakes Ames, a member of this House from Massachusetts, in seeking to procure Congressional attention to the affairs of a corporation in which he was interested, and whose interests directly depended upon the legislation of Congress, by inducing members of Congress to invest in the stocks of said corporation."

The yeas and nays were called on the motion to substitute: Yeas, 182, nays, 36; not voting, 22. After the vote was announced, Congressmen gathered around the stunned man and told him that they knew he was innocent, but their constituents required the condemnation. Two months later, Oakes Ames was dead. The Memorial Hall in North Easton was put up by his relatives.

Turn to a different time, a different land, and a different issue. In 1592, Giordano Bruno was brought before the Holy Inquisition. One of the charges laid against him was that he taught that there were an infinity of universes. In what Church today would this be an issue; what theologian would declare its relevance? Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy. At every moment of time, new behavior and new morality are being created, and there is no doubt that one can get caught on either side of the change. Yesterday, Sweden drove on the left side of the road; today, it drives on the right. Yesterday, abortion is murder; today it is State-sponsored. Are there no principles which are absolute? Is life merely

a formal game played according to arbitrary rules?

How was it then with Oakes Ames? Was he guilty of bribery? Of buying votes? Of gross corruption? Or was he merely a sharp business man using the well established methods of the day to bring about his ends? Is the business world any different a hundred years later? ^{It} There are

the inquisitors and there are the vindicators. Direct descendent Charles Edgar Ames, writing in his fascinating "Pioneering the Union Pacific", a blend of finance, politics, engineering, geography, and military operations, finds a different story: reason displaced by political passions. Let us put forward an intermediate position; that while Oakes Ames had acted improperly, he was not consciously corrupt; that he was a risk taker who operated at the razor's edge of morality . He knew what the game was and he risked the consequences.

It remains for me to tell about the architect and the sculptor of the Ames Monument. Henry Hobson Richardson, the architect, was born in 1838 on a plantation in Louisiana. He was descended from a long line of Bermuda colonials. Richardson developed a highly personal modification of French and Spanish Romanesque. He was a portly, jovial, hard living man, who liked food and company, and in a way, his designs are as solid as the man. He did churches, railroad stations, classrooms, banks, libraries, jails, state houses, department stores, private homes. Throughout New England there are many buildings that are Richardson-

esque--I work in one-- but my first acquaintance with the real thing was Sever Hall, one of the large classrooms at Harvard. When I first attended class there, I thought to myself , "What an ugly jail". I came to like it, even to love it, particularly the treatment of the surfaces; eventually I found in Richardson a humorous quality that lightened his medieval solidity.

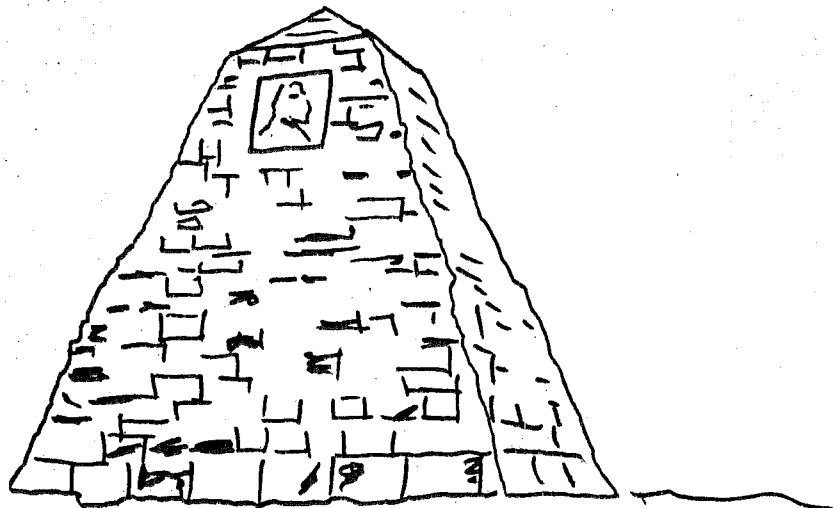
Richardson's masterpiece is Trinity Church in Copley Square, Boston, now completely overwhelmed by the glass of the adjacent John Hancock Building. The Ames Monument is certainly the most trivial of his commissions and the least complicated of his designs. "Did they need an architect to put this up," John asked, "why, any bunch of masons could have thrown the rocks together." Nonetheless, it fits in well with the nearby mountains, and is entirely recognizable as coming from the hands of the master. In view of Richardson's great talent in the employment of medieval motifs, it is surprising that the monument is undecorated, without a flourish, really, save only the surfacing of the stone and the reliefs of Saint Gaudens.

Augustus Saint Gaudens (1848-1907) was the son of a French shoemaker married to an Irish girl. His parents emigrated to the United States when he was an infant. He studied drawing at Cooper Union in New York City and became a skillful cutter of cameos. Enlarging his field to sculpture, he had one success after another and was a classic in his own day. He did "Victory Leading General Sherman". He did the Shaw Monument memorializing a young man who fell while

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leading a black Civil War regiment. He did portrait-reliefs that were all the rage. He did U.S. coins. His work became an artistic parallel of a popular view of what United States history was all about. As long as Saint-Gaudens was around to capture it and celebrate it, American history was "coming out right". Despite his great reputation, and for all the delicacy and charm in his pieces, it strikes me that Saint-Gaudens was never able to build up any degree of artistic fury. It is almost as though he could not transcend the narrow oval that limits the cameo cutter's art.

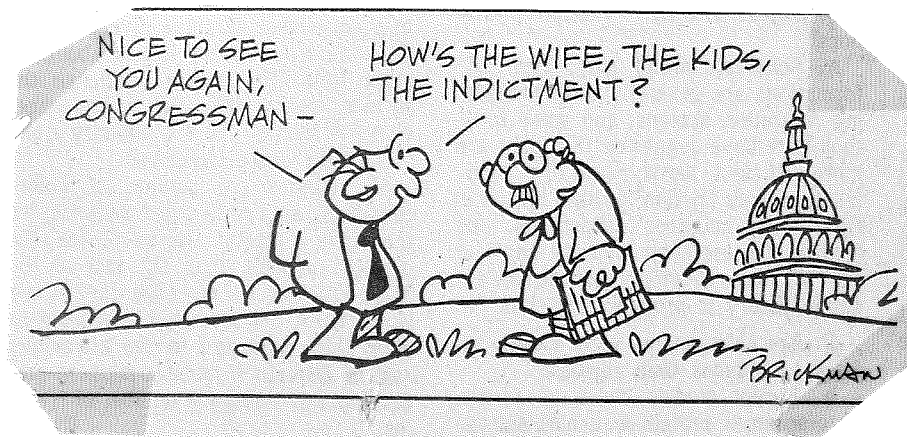
These four men, the two Ames, Richardson, and Saint-Gaudens were part of a capitalistic-industrialistic--
artistic elite; they were the brightest and the best that the country could then offer.



AMES
MONUMENT

A good monument is one that reveals the past and troubles the present. For all that the Ames Monument was erected by the shocked and pious Members of the Board of the Union Pacific asserting clean hands all around and that "the name of Oakes Ames will stand pure as the driven snow that circles round the base", it is a good monument. It celebrates two clever Yankee capitalists, one too clever by halves. Its design is the restrained expression of an exhuberant man whose talent expressed the optimism and the individuality of The Gilded Age. Its ornamentation is by a sensitive sculptor whose masterpiece is now held to be a stoical response to the knowledge of personal tragedy.

If you allow it to, the Ames Monument asks questions.



Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose