

William LeBaron Jenney

Extrait du site : <http://www.lib.colum.edu/archhistory/lejenney.htm>

Architect William LeBaron Jenney (1832-1907) was born in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, the son of an affluent whaling ship owner. He came to age in an environment where practicality was admired, and at a time when new inventions like the textile mill, steam engine, and truss bridge brought new solutions to engineering problems. He attended the elite Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and, while still in his teens, sailed around South America to California, Hawaii and the Philippines. While in the Philippines, he saw and was impressed by the indigenous method of constructing light-weight bamboo frames in buildings that needed to withstand the impact of tropical storms. This was a technique he never forgot and that influenced his later career when he worked with iron and, eventually, steel.

He entered Harvard University in 1850 to study engineering in its Lawrence Scientific School, however he left, disappointed with its program. He decided to study in Europe, because the best civil engineering schools at the time were in France. In 1853 he enrolled in the Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures in Paris, the alma mater of structural engineer Gustav Eiffel. His courses focused on applied engineering and included introductory classes in architecture.

Jenney's upbringing was a good preparation for the program at the Ecole Centrale. "He absorbed a philosophy which first of all advocated economy, simplicity, and structural awareness and theorized that aesthetic beauty would naturally result once practical considerations were rationally satisfied. More importantly, Jenney learned a working methodology to implement and realize this outlook." (Commission on Chicago Landmarks. Preliminary Summary of Information on the Ludington Building, p. 2.)

Jenney graduated with honors in 1856, and took his first job as a structural engineer with a railroad in Mexico. He returned home at the outbreak of the Civil War, joining the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. During the war he served in Tennessee and Mississippi under Grant and Sherman, attaining the rank of major. In 1867 he moved to Chicago, opening an architecture office the next year and gaining his first important commission, the design of the West Parks system, in 1869. As the West Parks Commission chief engineer, he designed Humboldt, Garfield and Douglas parks and the boulevard system that connects them. Greatly influenced by the construction of the boulevard system of Paris which he saw as a student, Jenney used the French designs as his model for the parks and boulevards in Chicago, anticipating Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago of 1909 by some 40 years. He was also supervising engineer for Frederick Law Olmsted's landscape design of the Chicago suburb of Riverside, Illinois, the only entire town in the United States listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The year 1869 was also the year Jenney co-authored, with his then-partner Sanford E. Loring, the influential *The Principles and Practice of Architecture*. The book marked his professional transition from civil engineer to architect, and brought him to the attention of the business community as a designer of large commercial buildings.

In 1878 and '79 Jenney designed the First Leiter Building (1879-1981), a department store for Levi Z. Leiter, at Washington and Wells streets in Chicago. This was a building that marked a significant milestone in architectural engineering: it combined, for the first time, all four essential elements of a modern skyscraper in one building. These were: its great height (First Leiter was originally five stories tall, and shortly after expanded to a then unheard-of seven stories); an iron skeletal frame; terra cotta fireproofing materials on all of its structural members; and, vertical transportation via elevators. Although the city building department required him to build one exterior party wall as a traditional masonry loadbearing structure, and the floors were of heavy timber construction, the rest of the building was a truly modern innovation.

Two years later he began work on the Home Insurance Building (1883-1931), located at Adams and LaSalle streets. This building was, in its original 10-story entirety, an iron- and steel-framed highrise with fireproof terra cotta forming the floors and protecting the structure, making it widely recognized as the world's first true skyscraper: "many architectural historians give William LeBaron Jenney credit for designing the first fireproof, iron-frame skyscrapers." (Saliga, Pauline, ed. *The Sky's the Limit: A Century of Chicago Skyscrapers*, p. 7.) The First Leiter and Home Insurance buildings were the first of many tall commercial buildings Jenney would design over a decade and a half, making him a leader in the field and lending him the nick-name "Father of the Skyscraper."

In addition to his groundbreaking experimentation with metal frame skyscrapers, Jenney was also influential as a writer, lecturer and mentor. His one year hiatus from architectural practice in 1876 was spent teaching at the University of Michigan; he wrote regularly for the architectural press; and, most importantly, he trained many young architects in the techniques he was refining, among whom were the most important younger architects of the Chicago Commercial school: William Holabird, Martin Roche, Daniel Burnham, John W. Root, and Louis Sullivan.

By the time he designed the Ludington Building in 1890-91, Jenney was at the apex of his creative life. He was the most experienced architect in the world working with the materials, concepts and practical solutions to the tall building problem, yet he was still experimenting with and perfecting the design. The Ludington Building was the first to have a structural frame entirely made of steel, rather than being a combination of iron and steel, and it was the first to be clad entirely in terra cotta.

More Information about Jenney

Chicago Landmarks: William LeBaron Jenney
<http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Landmarks/Architects/Jenney.html>

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