Influences of Youth

Born in Philadelphia on December 26, 1880, Hart Wood was the son of Thomas Hart Benton Wood, the nephew of Louis M. H. Wood, and the grandson of Samuel Wood. The Woods were all active artisans in the building trades of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. By 1850, Samuel Wood (b. 1817, Virginia), a Scotch-Irishman descended from Quakers, had established himself as a carpenter in the southwestern corner of Pennsylvania. There, in the Bridgeport Borough of Fayette near Brownsville, he was to own and operate a substantial sawing and planing mill. Louis M. H. Wood, his third son, attended Waynesburg College in adjacent Greene County for two years and, in 1869, entered Cornell. At Cornell, he completed a second two years of study related to architecture. His education was through the civil engineering and mechanical arts programs of the college, in a gathering together of courses that immediately preceded the founding of Cornell’s formal School of Architecture in June 1873. During his second year at Cornell, Louis Wood became the chief groundskeeper at the university and was placed in charge of the upkeep and repair of the five buildings that comprised the campus. Louis’ elder brother, Thomas, did not partake of the new training but rather learned the skills of sign painting, interior wall papering, wood graining, and
glazing in the accepted generational tradition of father-to-son. Both men, his uncle Louis and his father Thomas, would be of significance in Hart Wood’s early professional career.4

By autumn of 1871, after finishing at Cornell, Louis Wood began a westward migration that would be emulated by his brother Thomas. Like many, if not most, inexperienced architects coming out of the centuries-old farmer-carpenter social class, Louis sought opportunity—typically provided by either physical urban disaster or the exaggerated economics of boom times. The rebuilding of Chicago after the fire of 1871 drew Louis to that city. He stayed one year and moved again to Lawrence, Kansas. It is not known who he worked for as a draftsman in Chicago or why and how he sought and achieved employment in Lawrence.5 World economic conditions, including those of the settled eastern United States, worsened dramatically in the early 1870s. Perhaps in anticipation of a depression that would ripple west, Louis Wood again followed some particular frontier opportunity. By 1873, he was working for John G. Haskell, an architect who by that year was the preeminent builder and designer for eastern Kansas and the Oklahoma Territory.6

In 1875, Louis Wood became Haskell’s partner in the firm of Haskell and Wood (figs. 1–2). The partnership lasted about twelve years, until 1887. Haskell handled the business negotiations and supervised construction, while Wood took over the chief responsibilities of drafting and office routine. Among the significant commissions undertaken by the firm were the Kansas State Capitol (Topeka), 1866–1874, 1885, 1891–1893; the Chase County Courthouse (Cottonwood Falls, Kansas), 1871–1873; a number of buildings for Kansas University (Lawrence), Washburn University (Topeka), and the Haskell Institute (Lawrence); miscellaneous large-scale public buildings from Salina east to Kansas City and south to the Oklahoma border; and a group of federal agency schools
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for the Cherokee and Chilocco tribes in the Oklahoma Territory. These years, 1872–1887, epitomized the experience of frontier opportunity sought by young architects such as Louis Wood. Such successes inspired others, and in about 1882 or 1883 Thomas Hart Benton Wood, Louis’ brother, also went west to Kansas with his British wife Maggie and their young son Hart.

Precisely why the second Wood family left the East remains unknown. Difficult work conditions in Philadelphia or perhaps letters of stability and continued good fortune from a brother two years junior may have stimulated the move. The Thomas H. B. Wood family likely stopped in Lawrence en route, staying with the Louis Wood family before going farther west to the frontier town of Hays, near the border of Kansas and Colorado. At about age two, then, Hart Wood made the journey from a large coastal city in the Northeast to the sparsely settled high plains. By mid-May 1884, the Thomas H. B. Wood family had established themselves in Hays (fig. 3). Severe drought conditions had prevailed for the first years of the 1880s on the high plains, but by about 1884–1885 the climate again became more amenable to hopeful newcomers, and inexpensive rail fares enticed immigrants west. Thomas Wood went to Hays as the pastor for the Methodist Episcopal Church. The church had a small congregation of sixty-nine members in 1884–1885. By early 1886, he had become the pastor of the Lutheran Church in Hays, a church with a similar membership size during these years. In 1887, Thomas Wood advertised himself as a house-and-sign painter and paper hanger, with his own shop in town. He expanded his business into graining and glazing by 1889. “Sign painting” during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was a catchall term for a profession that included not only painting but all types of interior design. A sign painter often was versed in the crafts of graining, glazing, murals, and fresco. His pattern of mal-

FIGURE 2. Louis M. H. Wood, ca. 1890. (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.)
leable employment reflected the harsh boom-and-bust cycles of 1880s western Kansas. Survival in an extremely uneven economy demanded that Thomas Wood use as many of his skills as possible.

The Thomas Wood family spent about six years in Hays. The town was the seat of government for Ellis County, a thirty-square-mile area that included five Russian-German settlements founded in 1876–1877 (Catherine, just south of Hays, and Herzog, Munjor, Pfeifer, and Schoenchen). These communities maintained a focus on religious life—both Catholic and Lutheran—and sought out German-speaking priests and pastors. As for business, the years 1883–1886 were rainy ones on the high plains and thus were good years for the fragile land-based economy. However, by 1887 the economy had begun to falter, with the “great bust of 1888” only an opener to a period of very difficult years. Everything failed. Drought came, deepening in the 1890s. Hot, dry, windy summers stimulated articles in Harper’s Monthly on the Great American Desert. Snow, more wind, and cold temperatures arrived with winter’s vengeance.
Agriculture and ranching collapsed. People left the area. The total population in Kansas west of the 100th meridian was 81,279 in 1889; by 1895, only 49,850 people remained. By the autumn of 1890, the Thomas H. B. Wood family joined the exodus, moving farther west to Denver.

Two conditions appear to have influenced the Denver move, each reinforcing the negative circumstances present in western Kansas. The first condition affected many people who were looking for new opportunities: Denver was in the midst of a silver-based boom that had begun in 1888. The second condition, however, was particular to the Wood family dynamics. Louis Wood had left Haskell and Wood in 1887 for Topeka and by 1889 had set up practice in Denver. Once more, Thomas Wood followed his younger brother west. In December 1890, Hart Wood turned ten. He had gone west as a very young child and had, in all probability, spent some time in the household of his architect-uncle Louis as a toddler and during visits of 1884–1890. Of equal note, Hart had survived the harsh years in Hays while of an age to remember them. As a complement to the severity of life on the high plains, he had also experienced firsthand the fragile, presettlement ecosystem of the region: unbroken sod, waving high grasses, wildflowers in profusion, abundant and varied fauna. Western Kansas should have had an unforgettable impact, particularly with respect to nature, land forms, climate, and the balance of built environment with virgin landscape. Pristine qualities of color, line, and texture must have dominated rural Kansans’ life as well.

Paralleling the move from Philadelphia to Kansas, the move from Kansas to Denver presented another radical life change for the boy Hart Wood. Denver supported continuous construction between 1888 and 1894, with a dynamic Richardsonian Romanesque defining the downtown (fig. 4). During the winter of 1895–1896, the regional mining town of Leadville became the location of a five-acre ice palace that showcased
the products of Colorado in a tradition derived from Russia (and con-
tinued in the 1880s and 1890s in Montreal, Quebec, Ottawa, and Saint
Paul) (fig. 5).18 The preteen and early teen years were traditionally ones
of apprenticeship for the building trades. Hart Wood likely received some
familial training from his uncle Louis and his father Thomas. Architec-
tural office skills learned from Louis Wood during his formative years
were doubtless significant, yet not more so than the painting, graining,
and glazing crafts mastered through his father's tutelage at home. From
1889 through 1894, Louis Wood was one of thirty-one architects in
Denver. Thomas Wood worked in the city during these same years as a
"sign writer."19 Throughout this period, the spirit of what architecture
could become in a fresh western city enlivened Denver's community of
hopeful—and highly successful—architects and draftsmen.

In early 1889, J. B. Dorman, a Denver journalist, founded *Western
Architect and Building News* and called for the formation of a more tightly
organized local art and architectural society. By the journal's second issue,
the Denver Architectural Sketch Club had debuted. Denver's alliance of
artists focused on architects, but it also included a broad cross-spectrum
of thinking citizens that ranged from the oft-disregarded engineers to the
world of writers and politicians.20 The Denver Architectural Sketch Club
was one of the earlier such art clubs in the United States. The club began
shortly after the civic art movement was given official notice in 1886
through the Architectural League of New York. A hallmark of the newly
organizing American municipal art scene was its bringing together of archi-
tects, sculptors, and painters for public art. An annual exhibition through
the joint efforts of club members was another noteworthy feature.21

In Denver, as was true across the nation, the most active members of
the Architectural Sketch Club were not the established senior architects but
rather the draftsmen who worked (sometimes as chief designers) for these
FIGURE 4. Denver, ca. 1890s. (Colorado Historical Society, Denver.)

architects. A key element of *Western Architect and Building News* became Denver’s buildings, almost always presented through the draftsmen’s drawings for them. A wide variety of articles on elements of public art also marked the journal, from discussions of landscape to building materials. The Denver Architectural Sketch Club, in combination with *Western Architect and Building News*, was the regional educational vehicle for young architects and architects-to-be during 1889–1891.22 When the journal ceased publication in August 1891 due to funding problems, the architectural community took yet another organizational step. In December 1891, the Colorado Association of Architects met, voted for application as a chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), and was granted such status in spring 1892. A sequential development following the city’s Architectural Sketch Club and journal, the AIA chapter carried forward vibrant, nonacademic education among Denver’s architects. The city’s building ordinance and lien law were uppermost concerns in the 1890s.23

Hart Wood came of age in Denver during the 1890s. In addition to the intense atmosphere of the building boom and the educational values of the sketch club and its journal, Denver also offered an art school and the Artists’ Club. The latter, run by Henry Read (1851–1935), intermingled with the Denver Architectural Sketch Club, as evidenced by its inclusion of architectural photographs and drawings at club exhibitions and meetings.24 During 1894–1895, the Artists’ Club showcased the work of Willis Adams Marean, an architect with whom Hart Wood would become employed. The Artists’ Club also garnered subscriptions to multiple influential art journals through its members, journals including the *London Daily Graphic, Art Amateur* (New York), *Sun and Shade: An Artistic Periodical* (New York), *The London Studio*, the *Quarterly Illustrator* (New York), and the *Magazine of Art* (London and New York).25

Certainly, Hart Wood must have benefited from the many levels of
artistic activity in Denver during these years. The supportive art community became especially significant after 1895, when the regional silver economy went bust. At this time, Hart’s immediate family environment changed yet again. His uncle Louis Wood left Denver, returning to Topeka where he would practice for the duration of his career. His father Thomas Wood ceased listing himself as a sign writer in the Denver directories in 1894. From this year forward, Thomas Wood worked as a janitor in Denver—first at Central School and then at Franklin School.26 In 1898, Hart Wood lived at Franklin School (fig. 6) with his father, working for the Denver architects Marean and Norton. Other Wood family members continued to reside at Franklin School into the early twentieth century.27