

## **An Architect's Legacy**

From Diane McClure Holsenbeck



WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF THE OCTAGONAL IRVINE AUDITORIUM AT 34<sup>th</sup> & SPRUCE?

- Did you hear rumors about the architect as I did?
- Did you attend concerts e.g. by Peter, Paul, & Mary or Joan Baez Freshman year? Did you hear Goldwater speak there?
- Did you experience athletic awards announced there?
- Or did you slip into Irvine when it was packed with school children at a regional spelling bee?

WHY DID WE NOT KNOW THE NAME OF THE ARCHITECT AS WE DID KNOW THE NAMES FRANK FURNESS AND LOUIS KAHN?

CLUES:

- The architect was a native Philadelphian with a French name born in 1881.
- He earned his BA in architecture from Penn in 1902 and died 15 years prior to our graduation.
- He was president of the student architecture society one of his brothers was an engineer.
- Another brother was at the top of his medical school class and paid for Julian's tuition for his architecture degree. Yet another brother was a colleague of Sam Yellin.

## FINAL QUESTION:

### HOW DO I KNOW THE NAME OF THE ARCHITECT OF IRVINE AUDITORIUM?

I was always curious as an undergraduate about who designed Irvine, but it was not until preparing for our 55th Reunion that I happened to spot brief mention in a university publication of Trumbauer being the architect and his being African American.

That prompted me to call classmate Audrey Moody with whom I had been working on Heritage West. She conducted an investigation and learned from a photograph of Trumbauer that he was white. Further research by us led to learning about JULIAN FRANCIS ABELE who was hired by Horace Trumbauer in 1906 after Abele returned from Paris with a diploma from L'École des Beaux Arts and also after moving his sister, Elizabeth Abele Cook, with her family back to Philadelphia from Spokane, Washington where he had designed a home for them.

We all should know that in 1902 Julian Francis Abele was the first African American to be awarded a B.A. degree from the School of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania.

As a student Julian worked for the firm of Louis Hickman all four years. But he loved football and did not work on Saturdays when there was a home game. He and a fellow student, Louis Magaziner, who was likewise an outstanding student of architecture at Penn, attended the games together and became lifetime friends. They stood out as the sole black man and the only immigrant Jew enrolled at the School at the turn of the century. Both of them refused to seek admission into the AIA (American Institute of Architects) due to it being well known for racial prejudice and anti-semitism. Louis waited until very late in his career when the AIA invited him to apply. Indeed, Louis Magaziner who lived in Powelton Village hired another Beau Arts trained architecture graduate of Penn who was Jewish, the professor well known to our class, Louis Kahn., Class of 1924. Julien was eventually endorsed by the Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Before being hired by Trumbauer, Adele designed The White Training House/Dunning Coaches Center at Penn in 1905. As lead designer at the prestigious firm of Horace Trumbauer, Julian was heavily occupied at work and did not marry until he was 44 years old. It was said that "JULIAN ABELE WAS EVERYWHERE BUT NO ONE KNEW HIM." Penn Professor David Brownlee added that Philadelphia was an exception because "he (Adele) did not have to be hidden in Philadelphia," The list of his projects included Chateau Crillon, Hotel Adelphi, The Ritz-Carlon, The Philadelphia Hotel, Benjamin Franklin Hotel, the main building of Hahnemann and Thomas Jefferson Hospitals, Equitable Trust, Widener, Public Ledger, and the Stock Exchange Office Building in Center City. But the owners of the mansions he designed in Newport, Rhode Island and New York City were oblivious.

While it is quite usual for built projects to be attributed to the firm rather than to the architect who was the principal designer, it is highly unusual for any architect to come close to having 400 design projects actually built as Julian Abele did in his 68 years of life. Fortunately, his brilliance was recognized by the architects at Trumbauer and was the highest paid. When Trumbauer died in 1938 he had turned over the firm to Abele and it was thereafter that Abele, a very modest man, started signing his designs cautiously. Why was this?

I called the Alumni Office and asked Charles Marsh if he would be willing to go over to Irvine to find out in person if there was a plaque of attribution to Julian Francis Abele, perhaps placed when The Venturi Scott & Brown firm restored and renovated Irvine in 1997-2000. Charles found the doors all locked. I should have expected that since The Curtis Organ dwells therein despite the University's plans to dispose of it back in 1984 until protests by alumni and citizens prevented a Penn Station kind of tragedy. (The Curtis, a 162-rank organ with over 10,000 pipes, the tallest being 36 feet & only a few of which needed repair, was built in 1926 for the Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia to commemorate the 150th signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Cyrus Curtis, publisher of The Saturday Evening Post which had the highest circulation of any weekly magazine in the world, bought the organ in 1927 and donated it to Penn when he learned of the construction of Irvine Auditorium which opened in 1928.)

On the Penn campus Julian Abele also designed the private mansion, Eisenlohr, that became the President's house on Walnut Street, which Sheldon Hackney moved back into after renovation for that purpose and where he conducted a freshman course about the 1960's. In Philadelphia Abele should have been recognized as the Chief architect of The Free Library of Philadelphia on Logan Square and of the PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART. Those so-called "Rocky Stairs" should be called "THE ABELE STAIRS." (BTW Abele is pronounced ABLE.) The drawings initialed with JFA for both the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the main library at Harvard (Widener) show the striking line for which Julian's work could be identified. (See the photos of the stairs leading to each.)



Philadelphia Museum of Art



Widener Library at Harvard

David Brownlee, Professor of Art History at Penn for over forty years, has researched Julian Francis Abele for over thirty of those years. He recently was elated when a hunch he had held for decades that Abele was the architect of Eisenlohr was confirmed by the Curator of Penn's Architectural Archives, William Whittaker, when he turned up "...two previously uncatalogued drawings. "Eisenlohr was built in 1911-1912" at a time when Black people were regarded as intellectually inferior and while white supremacy was protected by law. "Indeed, because as Brownlee writes about the frustration of a "...maddening lack of documentation" it was exciting for me when I learned that the Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art has honored Julian Francis Abele.

Among Abele's over 400 projects worldwide there is one in this country that deserves special commendation. From 1924-1950 Abele designed Duke University's entire Neo-Gothic West Campus which is the Main campus with its quadrangle and includes the famous Duke Chapel for which Abele was actually willing to take credit. East campus, the original Trinity College which became Duke, was partially remodeled in Georgian style by Abele also and became the residential campus for women. Julian also designed Cameron Indoor Stadium where the Blue Devils of Duke University continue to play Basketball!



Duke University West Campus



Duke Chapel

Julian Abele was finally celebrated during Richard Brodhead's Presidency of Duke (2004-2017). It was Julian's sister Elizabeth Cook's great granddaughter who was enrolled at Duke who brought it to the attention of the university that her great grandfather was the architect. The main campus now holds the name Julian Francis Abele and a portrait of him sits in the President's Office. It was said that no matter which direction one looks one sees one of the 40 buildings designed by Julian Francis Abele for Duke University even though he would not have been permitted to be a student there and was refused a room in the hotel in Durham because of segregation while an associate who was white was permitted lodging. Indeed, the construction workers following Abele's blueprints were hostile towards what they called "uppity Negroes." It was the time of Jim Crow in the 1920's when lynchings were common and voting rights did not exist. We are among many who have not known Julian Francis Abele because of the color of his skin.

I was told last Spring that the University of Pennsylvania plans to celebrate Julian Francis Abele. The events on October 7th in the Mideast redirected the world's attention from Ukraine and elsewhere. But there have been small steps made in recognition of Philadelphia's native son. At Penn Black Penn Day in 1982 along with Du Bois College House initiated a School of Design Fellowship in Abele's name as part of an effort to address diversity, equality, and inclusion. There is also mention of one of many design competitions Julian won as a student at Penn. Among them is The Pretty Memorial Alumni Award, a commendation tablet that hangs in the First Floor of Van Pelt Library.





One author, Amy Cohen, trying to unravel the mystery and myths of Architect Abele interviewed a descendent who said she did not believe Irvine was designed by Julian because of his clear preference for limestone over brick. However, there may have been a consideration of the University Museum sitting diagonally across from Irvine being of brick construction as well as that of Franklin Field Stadium. It is true that Abele designed Eisenlohr of limestone but it was originally commissioned as a privately owned mansion. A 1974 graduate from Penn Architecture wrote me that she read that Abele was one of several designers on the Irvine project which is typical.

On the last day of February in this Leap Year, I finally received a "Print To Order" copy of the only known biography of Julian Francis Abele, subtitled "Minority Architects." At least one researcher stated that Julian lived in obscurity except in his home with his many siblings. He did not think about himself as black or white but as an ARCHITECT.

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More information about Julian Abele, including photos of some of his buildings, can be found [here](#).