

Architect: Meem, John Gaw
Birth/Death Dates: 1894 - 1983
Practice Dates: 1924 - 1959

Biographical Information

John Gaw Meem, whose office logs record 654 commissions during his career from 1924 through 1959, designed a range of residences, churches, government offices and university buildings. He worked primarily in New Mexico with only a handful of commissions in Colorado. One of the Southwest's leading architects, he developed and refined the typical "Santa Fe" style, derived from Pueblo and Spanish Colonial architecture. "Honors came to him consistently...He had a penchant for winning commissions in tough competitions...Universities gave him honorary degrees...The governor of New Mexico declared a special John Gaw Meem day."

The building's design, which earned for Meem the Silver Medal in 1940 at the Fifth Pan American Congress of Architecture in Uruguay, was the most modern design he was ever to create. It represented a pivotal point in his career -- the successful combination of the regional style, for which he was already well known, and modernism. In recognizing the innate compatibility of the two, he skillfully integrated tradition, technical expertise and functionalism.

[From the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center N.R. nomination form]

John Gaw Meem was born in southern Brazil of missionary parents in 1894. He was forced to relocate from the East Coast of the United States to New Mexico as a young man to recuperate from tuberculosis. He soon became interested in architecture and studied under famed architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp. The Rapp firm in Santa Fe supported a conviction to maintain the Santa Fe, Spanish, or Pueblo style of architecture. A fine example of this philosophy is the famous La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe. Meem was involved in its design and later designed additions. Meem later created his own successful architectural firm.

The Meem firm had a spectacular history, spanning a period of 35 years and prolifically dealing with some 650 projects. While many architectural firms failed in the 1930s, Meem's was an exception. Part of his success had to do with the wealthy patronage he enjoyed. One such patron was Alice Bemis Taylor...The Bemis Taylor Chapel was Meem's first attempt at the traditional church form. It was not, however his last. Similar to the Taylor Chapel but on a grander scale is the Alumni Memorial Chapel at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Other local examples of this style of Meem's work are three buildings at Fountain Valley School in Colorado Springs.

Meem was again employed by Taylor to design the Fine Arts Center, which is an interesting contrast to the very traditional Taylor Chapel. In 1933, Meem married Faith Bemis, Taylor's niece, who herself was trained as an architect and collaborated with Meem on several Santa Fe restoration projects. Meem is considered one of the most original Southwestern architects. Meem was a founding father of the Committee for the Preservation and Restoration of the New Mexican Mission Churches to which Alice Bemis Taylor was a heavy contributor. The Bemis Taylor Chapel has special significance as one of Meem's early works and his first essay into the traditional church form. The Bemis Taylor Chapel is an accurate reinterpretation of the family chapel which was prevalent in the Southwest over two centuries ago.

[From Site Form 5EP1297, Bemis Taylor Chapel]

Credited Buildings

Building Name	Location	Site No.	Date	Assessment
Taylor Memorial Chapel	6145 Shoup Rd., Colorado Springs vicinity	5EP1297	1929	National Register
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center	30 W. Dale St., Colorado Springs	5EP622	1936	National Register
Fountain Valley School	Colorado Springs			

Information Sources

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center National Register Nomination, 5EP622, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

Site Form 5EP1297, Bemis Taylor Chapel, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

Other sources to consult:

Bunting, Bainbridge. *John Gaw Meem: Southwest Architect*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983.

Chauvenet, Beatrice. *John Gaw Meem: Pioneer in Historic Preservation*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

Sheppard, Carl D. *Creator of the Santa Fe Style: Isaac Hamilton Rapp, Architect*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988.

Whiffen, Marcus and Carla Breeze. *Pueblo Deco: The Art Deco Architecture of the Southwest*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

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