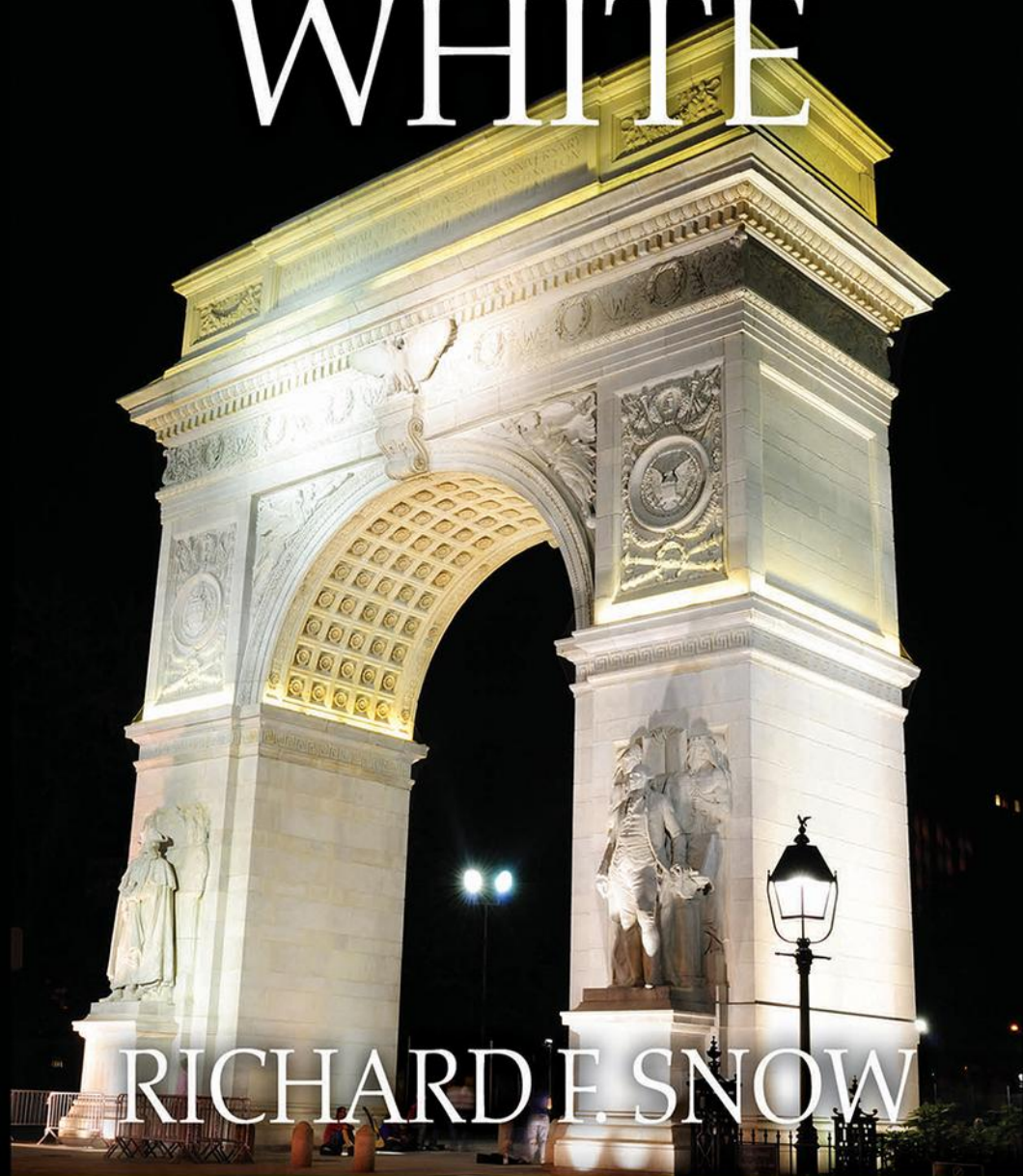


THE ARCHITECTS

# STANFORD WHITE



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One day shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, a young draftsman named William Kendall, recently hired by the New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, stood on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Second Street chatting with a Mrs. Garnett. "What sort of a person," she wanted to know, "is this Stanford White of yours?" Kendall thought for a moment, then said, "I'll tell you." He pointed to a powerful-looking man who was making his way toward them. "You see that tall, red-haired man hurrying up the street. Well, that's Stanford White. He's ubiquitous."

He still is.

At one time or another, every elaborate building erected between the Civil War and the Great Depression - be it a house or an office or a church, in Manhattan or elsewhere - has probably been attributed to him. With the exception of Frank Lloyd Wright, Stanford White is America's best-known architect.

His scandalous demise had a good deal to do with this widespread recognition, of course, but his life had more. Stanford White was that rare and happy man completely in step with the age in which he lived. With his energy, his enthusiasm, his appetites and, above all, his architectural vision, he personified an entire era.

His father was not as fortunate. Richard Grant White spent a good deal of time telling about his great-grandfather John, who had arrived in Boston aboard the *Lyon* in 1632. Richard, a lifelong Anglophile, was not particularly happy that his ancestor had made the voyage in the first place. He studied music and dabbled in journalism until the loss of the family's fortune forced him to turn to criticism - of music and literature - for a living. While the new fortunes his son would help spend were being made all around him, the constant threat of poverty made him haughty, arrogant, brittle, and foppish. Nevertheless, he was a fine Shakespearean scholar and, in the London *Spectator's* generous appraisal, "not at all our idea of a Yankee."

His wife, Alexina, was a gentle, affectionate woman, so modest that when her hair failed to turn gray with age, she donned a silvery wig lest people suspect her of dying it. She gave birth to Richard Jr. in 1851 and to Stanford two years later.

A cheerful, lively child, Stannie was the favorite of the family. During summers spent at his aunt's house on the Hudson, he began sketching and painting and early showed considerable promise. He wanted to become an artist, but this career was too much of a luxury for a family that had to survive on a critic's earnings. When Stanford sought John La Farge's advice, the painter told him to forget it: The chances of gaining recognition were dim, those of making money, even dimmer. So, at nineteen, White reluctantly apprenticed himself as a draftsman to a local architectural firm.

Considering the ignominy of the profession in the early 1870s, he could hardly have found a better opportunity than in the office of Henry Hobson Richardson. Well on his way to elevating architecture from trade to art, the extravagant, energetic Richardson proved a fine teacher. White worked hard in Richardson's office - as apprentices would later work hard in his - and not long after he joined the firm, he was writing his mother about it in breezy letters, half-ebullient, half-whining. "I begin to think that it is my fate to have neither peace of mind nor quiet of body; & both are, I believe, quite necessary to man's happiness. . . . Of course, this may be the pessimism of a fevered imagination - probably is; for (thanks to Richardson and his committees) I feel as if I had been standing on my head all week." While helping supervise the construction of the New York State Capitol, he wrote, "Misery, wretchedness, ennui and the devil - I've got to spend another evening in Albany. Of all miserable, wretched, second-class, one-horse towns, this is the most miserable - not even a church fair, a dance or a saloon to go to."

But for all his griping, he liked the life and he liked Richardson. While he learned the nuts and bolts of his calling - how brick is laid, how to handle contractors, how to flatter one member of a building committee without making the others mad, what he called the "small hell" of talking with a client about closet space - he learned from his boss the important things: that architecture was truly one of the fine arts, that color could mean as much to a building as to a painting, and that practitioners could borrow from the past.

Also working for the "Great Mogul" - as White christened his magnanimous employer - was a young Harvard graduate

named Charles Follen McKim, who for a salary of \$8 a week took charge of the drawings. The two men became friends, and in 1877, they set off on a walking tour of New England, in search of the native American architecture which, in the wake of the Centennial, was just beginning to be studied and restored. Also in their party was a quiet young architect named William Rutherford Mead, who helped with McKim's free-lance commissions. Rambling and sketching their way through Portsmouth, Marblehead, Newburyport, and Salem, the three became increasingly struck by the work of Charles Bulfinch and by the idea of architecture based on classical forms.

Back in New York, White put in a restless year with Richardson and then, having suppressed his extravagant impulses enough to set aside some money, headed for Europe. "The passengers," he told his mother in a typically bombastic letter, "are, briefly, McKim and myself. The rest don't matter . . . McKim, by the way, is a low brute. He engages in conversation and leaves me to starve because I dare not ask for anything in bad French - and not a damn waiter understands English. *Tiens* - the laugh will come on him as soon as we strike rough weather." Sure enough, their ship ran into a storm, McKim got ill, and White tended to him, full of the jovial concern that seasickness inspires in those not prone to it.

McKim recovered as soon as they landed at Le Havre, and by the time they got to Paris, they both were ready to devour the city. White eventually landed on the doorstep of his friend Augustus Saint-Gaudens, whom he had met in New York three years earlier. "White lived with us," wrote the sculptor, "our home serving as his headquarters, whence he darted off in extraordinarily vigorous excursions to the towns surrounding Paris that contain those marvels of Gothic architecture of which he was an adorer."

A month after arriving in Paris, McKim and White burst into Saint-Gaudens's studio demanding he accompany them on a trip to the south of France. The sculptor, having just heard a committee issue its condemnation of his monument to Admiral David Farragut, was receptive: "Come on," he said, smashing all but the head of his sculpture, "I'll go to Hades with you fellows now."