

# Robert Wakeman Hill

1828-1909

---

*“Several of the most important public buildings of Waterbury, New Haven, Hartford, and of other large cities of the State of Connecticut are monuments to his genius as an architect.”*

*-New England Families*

Robert Wakeman Hill was a leading architect in Waterbury and in Connecticut during the 19th century and was the official state architect under Governors Bigelow, Waller, Harrison and Lounsbury.

Considered the dean of Waterbury architects, he was born on September 20, 1828, in Waterbury, the son of Samuel and Polly Brackett Hill. His father was a carpenter, school teacher and poet.

Young Hill received his early education in Waterbury's public schools while also training as a carpenter. He studied architectural drawing at the Young Men's Institute in New Haven where he stood high in his class and later taught.

He learned the basics of his profession working for noted architect Henry Austin in New Haven. One of Hill's earliest projects was the remodeling of the "Old Stone Meetinghouse" in East Haven in 1850. Not yet a professional architect, he worked as a carpenter on the job, which was overseen by architect Sidney M. Stone. Hill returned in 1874 to design the Centennial Chapel next to it.

During the mid-1850s, he moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he went into business with Albert C. Nash, who had also studied with Austin.

Hill returned to Connecticut in 1858, living with his brother and his family in Naugatuck. In 1863, he established his architectural practice on Bank Street in Waterbury when there was only one other architect in town.

In the early 1880s, Hill served as the architect for armories in Waterbury, New Haven, Bridgeport, Norwalk and New London.

Robert Hill's architectural designs are typically a blend of Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles, although his earlier work showed the Italianate influence of Henry Austin. In Waterbury, Hill's work includes the Rectory Building (1886) on Church Street, Riverside Cemetery's Hall Memorial Chapel (1885), the Griggs Building (1884) on Bank Street, eight public school buildings including the Welton Street School (1883), St. Margaret's School (1865) on Grove Street, factories for Smith & Griggs (1885) and Steele & Johnson (1888), the Connecticut Electric Company (1888), a state armory building (1883) at the corner of Phoenix and Abbott avenues, and the City Hall (1889) across from the Green, which burned down in 1912.

Hill also contributed the names for Ferncliff Avenue and Woodlawn Terrace when they were being laid out.

Other works include the Thomaston Opera House and City Hall (1885), the former DeForest Public Library (1883) in Watertown, the Bronson B. Tuttle home (1881), now the offices of the Naugatuck Board of Education; Chapin Park (1871), now a bed & breakfast in New Hartford; the Opera House block (1870) in Ansonia, the New Britain armory



(1886), the Litchfield County Courthouse (1889), now the Litchfield Judicial District Courthouse; and the Litchfield Fire House (1894), now a commercial building.

Hill also designed Civil War monuments in Woodbury (1871) and Winsted (1890).

Several prominent architects got their starts with Hill including Joseph A. Jackson who later designed numerous Roman Catholic churches, including Our Lady of Lourdes in Waterbury. Wilfred E. Griggs who joined Hill's practice in 1891 as his successor and gradually took over the business as Hill prepared to retire, was the architect of numerous downtown Waterbury buildings as well as private homes, factories and public schools throughout the state. Theodore B. Peck, working at the same time as Griggs, was also an important architect for downtown Waterbury.

Later in life, Robert Wakeman Hill wrote and presented papers on earlier architects, including "Architects of the Colonial Period in Connecticut" and "Incidents in the Lives of Some of the Early Architects and Builders in Connecticut". He also became involved in banking and was a director and vice-president of the Waterbury Manufacturers' National Bank.

Hill was one of the founders of the Waterbury Club and the Mattatuck Historical Society. He was an active communicant of St. John's Episcopal Church, a charter member of the Masonic Continental Lodge No. 76, board member of the Masonic Temple Association and a Sir Knight of the Mason Clark Commandery, Knights Templar.

He died July 16, 1909.