John Chislett, Architect

I have been speaking to John Chislett this week about Pittsburgh architecture. Not the architect of the second Allegheny County Courthouse and first superintendent of Allegheny Cemetery; that Chislett died in 1869. Rather, it was his great-great-grandson, whom I met by coincidence in Louisville, Kentucky, when he was my parents’ neighbor. I called the present-day John Chislett to verify his relationship to the deceased John Chislett (1800-1869).

Chislett was born July 26, 1800, in England, and lived in Beaminster, Dorset, where he learned to paint, sculpt, and play the organ; he advertised himself in the local *Pigot’s Directory* as “Sculptor and Professor of Music.” He apprenticed with a builder named Walter Harris, who worked with architects in Bath over 50 miles northeast of Beaminster. This Renaissance man married Sarah Chaffey in 1825 and they had four children in England before setting sail for the United States in 1832, arriving in Pittsburgh a month later.

Chislett founded a marble works with fellow Englishman Edmund Wilkins, advertised in *Harris’ General Business Directory* of 1841 as “John Chislett, Architect and Marble Works, Federal Street.” But Chislett was hired almost immediately to design the church for his congregation, the Third Presbyterian, located then at Third and Ferry (later Stanwix) streets (1833-1834). The church’s minutes also note that in 1840 John Chislett was hired as its first organist. He designed interiors as shown by his commission for two marble mantels in 1843 for William Barclay Foster. Author Roger G. Kennedy credits Chislett with the fancy interior of William Croghan, Jr.’s, house, “Picnic,” (1835) part of which is on display in the Cathedral of Learning’s Nationality Rooms at the University of Pittsburgh. As the 1837 *City of Allegheny Directory* records, John Chislett was also a “Fancy Painter” and his self-portrait is still on display in Allegheny Cemetery’s Temple of Memories Mausoleum.

We know of 13 documented architectural works but only three exist today. His greatest work was the second Allegheny County Courthouse (1834-1841), which dominated its site at the crest of Grant’s Hill in downtown and was nationally published in *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* in 1857. During this time Chislett was hired to design two banks and two office structures along Fourth Avenue. In *Harris’ General Business Directory* of 1841 (p. 100), the editors list a dozen “splendid” Pittsburgh buildings, six of which were designed by Chislett. Unfortunately, three of the four Fourth Avenue buildings were destroyed in the great fire of 1845, leaving us only one, the Burke’s Building at 209 Fourth Avenue. Commissioned by Irish-born lawyers Robert and Andrew Burke, the simpler and straightforward sandstone building has seen a variety of uses since its completion in 1836 and is presently for sale. The Burke’s Building and an even simper version of the Greek Revival crafted in brick, the Protestant Orphan Asylum (1838), show how he used Classicism in a variety of ways. Chislett, by this time the father of five, donated his design of the Orphan Asylum. The city wanted sophisticated Greek Revival buildings in the 1830s and ’40s, but Gothic Revival was becoming popular for more than just churches, and Chislett rose to the challenge.

Chislett, Dr. J. R. Speer, and Stephen Colwell had been lobbying for a garden cemetery outside of downtown Pittsburgh. Chislett’s interest in landscape design subsumed his architectural work and led to his superintendency of Allegheny Cemetery in 1844. He consulted on the design of other garden cemeteries from West Virginia to Indiana. Each followed the picturesque English style with winding roads, gentle hills, and natural ravines. He and his family members ran Allegheny Cemetery for nearly 60 years, from 1844 until his nephew John Perring retired in 1903. John Chislett used skills as both an architect and landscape
The Allegheny Cemetery entrance and gatehouse, Lawrenceville.
Thomas Henry Burrowes noted that the “general plan and arrangement nearly resemble those of the First and Third Ward Schools in the city of Pittsburg [sic].” This ambiguous statement leaves it to future researchers to pinpoint whether the Pittsburgh schools were Chislett designs or he used them as models for his Washington school, a possibility that could bring the list of known Chislett designs to 15. But whether we can track down his authorship of two schools or not, the design of the courthouse alone makes John Chislett one of our most interesting early-19th-century architects and the first resident architect of note in the growing city, a legacy his great-great-grandson is proud to acknowledge.

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1 The Pigot ads date from 1823 to 1830. I am grateful to John Leader Chislett; Douglas Camp Chaffey (local family genealogist); and David Vater (local architect and talented researcher) for family details included here. Any errors are mine, of course. The lineage is as follows: John Chislett (1800-1869); Frederick William Chislett (1827-1899); Richard Edwards Chislett (1854-1938); John Renshaw Chislett (1885-1950); and John Leader Chislett (B. 1925).

2 Sarah Chaffey Chislett (1803-1870) bore in England: Sarah (1826-1885); Frederick William (1827-1899); Ellen (1829-1900) and John, Jr. (1831-1878). Three more children were born in Pittsburgh: Susan (1835-1857); Eliza (1839-1874); and Arthur W. (1843-1902).

3 Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette March 20, 1883, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the church. Chislett is credited with a tower at the First United Presbyterian Church (1836) in Wheeling, West Virginia (demolished); and the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley (1840) 101 Beaver Street (demolished 1883).

4 Bank of Pittsburgh (1834-1835); Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Bank of Pittsburgh (1834); and Philo Hall (c. 1836).

5 With documented cemetery work in West Virginia and Indiana, it is likely that Chislett may also have worked in Ohio, but any documentation in this area has eluded local researchers. There are seven documented Chislett-designed cemeteries: Allegheny (1845); Washington, Pa. (1853); St. Clair Cemetery, Greensburg, Pa. (1855); Brooke Cemetery, Wellsburg, West Virginia (1857); Lindenwood Cemetery, Fort Wayne, Indiana (1859-1860); Monongahela Cemetery, Monongahela, Pa. (1863); Crown Hill Cemetery, Indianapolis, Indiana (c. 1863) run by his eldest son and grandson from 1863 to c. 1919.

A detail of Burke’s Building, 209 Fourth Avenue.