

## Ruth Maxon Adams (1883–1970)

### Early Life and Education

Born in Beloit, Wisconsin, Adams was the daughter of George Burton Adams (1851–1925), a professor of English medieval history at Yale University, and Ida Clarke Adams (1867–1938), a homemaker. Adams grew up on Edgehill Road in New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar College in 1904, and then worked as her father's secretary.<sup>2</sup> While still at home, she took up weaving on a "large sized Swedish hand loom... which I produced on my return from a visit last fall."<sup>3</sup> In January 1910 she enrolled in the New York School of Applied Design for Women writing to her classmates: "I suppose it may be said that I have become one of those emancipated females who have deserted their families and are congregating in such numbers in large cities." And she concluded that she and a classmate had set up housekeeping together "are enjoying being emancipated exceedingly."<sup>4</sup> So far as we know she never received an architectural license. In a 1912 class bulletin she reported that she was "doing interior decoration" in the office of a Smith College graduate, Amy Ferris, in New York.<sup>5</sup> In November 1913, she opened her first office "for house furnishing and interior decoration."<sup>6</sup>

### Career

She received her first architectural commission in Poughkeepsie through her connections to Vassar. In 1911–12, she designed a house—reputedly her senior thesis from the School of Applied Design—for Winifred Smith, her college classmate and a professor in Vassar's English department.<sup>7</sup> Smith was an ardent campaigner for women's voting rights and engaged in the study of advanced techniques of education. Like Adams, she remained unmarried. Located in Poughkeepsie, it is a relatively simple two-story clapboard house with a combined pitched and gambrel roof.<sup>8</sup> Then, in 1914, Adams remodeled a guest room and bathroom in Main Building for use by Vassar alumnae, a gift of her college class.<sup>9</sup> These works launched her career at Vassar. In 1916 she advertised an "office for interior decorating" at 19 East 57<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City: "Architectural Designs// Wall Papers and Furniture// Chintzes, Block Printed Linens, Rugs// Lamps and Shades."<sup>10</sup>

Much of her work for the College involved remodeling public rooms in many of the dormitories (e.g., Main, 1915; Lathrop, 1916).<sup>11</sup> In 1938, Adams published an article entitled “Decorating Vassar,” in which she looked back on almost a quarter of a century of work for the College.<sup>12</sup> There she conflated her many tasks over the years into a few short sentences: “dormitory parlors, and rooms, changing from message centers to card rooms, to smoking rooms and back to reception rooms. I furnished the Counsel Room in [the] Students [Building], the Men’s Reception Room in Main [Building], the Minister’s study in the Chapel Tower and other things I hardly remember.”<sup>13</sup> One special undertaking was the decorative program for Alumnae House. Designed by Hunt & Hunt, this half-timbered Elizabethan-style building provided the dominant architectural character for the neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Adams reports that she was “absorbed” in these plans for a year around 1920.<sup>15</sup> She left New York City and moved back to New Haven in 1928 possibly to care for her mother following the death of her father in 1925.<sup>16</sup> Her letterhead from New Haven specifies her business as “Interior Furnishings.”<sup>17</sup>

From 1932 to 1942 Adams served Vassar College as “consulting interior designer,” with a \$200 annual retainer fee plus a 10% commission on purchases. She continued working on the renovation of public rooms in the dormitories.<sup>18</sup> The largest and most significant project in this period involved remodeling the old gymnasium in Ely Hall to make the Aula, a social and workspace for the faculty (1937).<sup>19</sup> Photographs show groupings of informal and formal furniture: upright chairs, desks, tables, and sofas. She lengthened the windows to bring more light into the room. Brick walls and exposed wooden truss work in the ceiling gave a modernized monastic quality to the space. Venetian blinds and coarse meshed Indian onion bagging screened strong sun or closed off the windows at night.

Adams reported some of the particular difficulties of working in a woman’s college. In her early years there, she was required to provide sofas with extra shallow seats “so that the students should have no temptation ‘to loll’ in the parlors.” Rooms also had to be arranged “so no student should be able to find a seat in a secluded corner with her guest.” Later, funds would not stretch to provide seating for students in public spaces. Adams’s solution was wall-to-wall carpeting. “Those of you who have seen these rooms after dinner when coffee is being served know how well this plan has worked,” she wrote. A contemporary cartoon shows “the entire floor space ... covered with girls with their coffee cups and ash trays.”<sup>20</sup> By the end of the 1930s

Adams felt her compensation insufficient.<sup>21</sup> She protested in letters to the president in October 1940 and in April 1942, and the College terminated her contract pleading wartime economy.

Adams's most substantial architectural work was in Arlington. In 1915–16, Vassar professors Edith Fahnestock and Rose Jeffries Peebles commissioned a Tudor-style house from Adams on a rocky outcrop on the north side of College Avenue. The two-story house (dormers at the upper story) employs half-timbering, small paned windows and an unfolding plan with room and space added associatively that gives views out over the street. The dominant materials are wood half-timbering and stucco—the timbering is wide, giving the house, though relatively small, a striking monumentality.

A few years later, in 1922, Adams designed a house for Violet Barbour (1884–1968). It is a relatively conventional two-story shingle house though the shingles have been painted white falsely giving the house a somewhat neo-colonial character. At one time there were wood shingle roofs. There are three porches, one at the side entrance, and two at the rear, one at ground level and the other at the second story.

In 1931 Adams undertook the design of a house for the dean of the College, Mildred Thompson, that became the College dean's official residence.<sup>22</sup> The brick two story Georgian house is set away from the road backing onto the old Arboretum and a small lake.<sup>23</sup> A wood overdoor and pediment defines the entrance; the pediment provides a somewhat surprising element of grandeur to what is a rather small house. The interior combines public and private functions—with a bookcase-lined study and large reception parlor.<sup>24</sup>

President Henry Noble MacCracken must have been pleased with Adams's work for the College and may have heard reports of her abilities from his faculty. In 1918 he proposed that she become “executive agent for Red Cross House Furnishings,” and she provided “furnishing for over sixty Red Cross Houses for Convalescents and forty Rest Home for Nurses, besides several odd Guest Houses.”<sup>25</sup> In 1921 MacCracken probably recommended her to a group of New York-area intellectuals for the construction of a private summer colony called Yelping Hill, in Cornwall CT of which he was also a member. Of the nine houses she designed in the area seven survive more or less intact; typically, Adams served as construction foreperson working closely with her clients and overseeing the contractors from moment to moment, causing some friction.<sup>26</sup>

Founded by Henry Seidel Canby (editor of the *Saturday Review*), the Yelping Hill community included the playwright Lee Wilson Dodd, the scientist, Beverly Kunkel, the musician and composer David Smith, corporate lawyer Mason Trowbridge, the president and future governor of the state of Connecticut, James L. McConaughy, and MacCracken. Adams herself was a member of the community. Adams helped select sites (each house was to be invisible from its neighbors) and remodeled a pre-existing barn at the entrance to the community to create guest quarters and a kitchen and dining area where the group had their meals together.<sup>27</sup> A library and a communal living room that doubled as a lecture room compensated for the small size of the houses. The houses were not winterized and had small (or non-existent) kitchens. Typically, the houses had nearby writing huts for the men.<sup>28</sup> Though community events took place in the barn, the provision of hall-like living rooms with low stair approaches from doors and corridors in some of the houses (MacCracken, Smith) suggest stage-like areas for private performances. Some of the houses were built from stone (for example, the MacCracken House), most employed a mixture of wood, stone, and stucco. McConaughy's house (burned) was a log cabin. Overall, the houses have an improvised handmade Arts and Crafts character; details are often unrefined. House profiles are often vertical like Alpine cottages with steep "fairy tale" roofs or, as the comparison is often made, "Ginger Bread" houses (notably the Trowbridge House). Tile decorations on the floor of the MacCracken house are reminiscent of those from the Moravian pottery in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Many of the houses have been renovated, winterized, or extended for modern comfort. The practice of communal dining died out during World War II.<sup>29</sup>

Many of Adams's houses at Yelping Hill have eccentric characteristics. It is not just their fairy-tale look, but spatial organization is occasionally peculiar with short stair flights to create an interior topography (see Barbour, Peebles-Fahnestock, Trowbridge). The MacCracken house has two bedrooms at the end of a ground floor corridor: to provide light (and air) Adams split the bedroom block, like the tail feathers of a bird. An upstairs bedroom barely has room for a bed. There were, according to current residents, plans to put in a full second story that MacCracken decided against at the last minute leaving the underside of the roof exposed. Adams's first house, Cliff House (or Rocky Cliffe House), required her to go outside to the front door in order to reach the second floor. Details, too, are often peculiar: windows or fireplaces abut walls awkwardly or windows that have been truncated unexpectedly: it is consciously rustic

architecture without the self-consciousness of the Picturesque. Some eccentricities may have been caused by imprecision. At one point the contractors at the Dean's House complained of elevations and ground plans not coinciding—revealing a missing four inches—for which she had to take responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

Possibly the most successful of the Connecticut houses is Treetop (1928) built for the Scoville family. While the houses on Yelping Hill glory in their improvised quality, Treetop has generous interior spaces and an inviting view over Cream Lake is organized effectively. Though she seems not to have visited Scandinavia, the placement of the house on a rock outcropping overlooking the lake recalls Swedish architecture of a similar period and function. (The Trowbridge house has a comparably arranged view over the fields.) Adams was also able to use a variety of woods on Treetop: birch, pine, and oak—even so, the uninsulated interior walls were originally faced with unpainted brown fiberboard. Adams's last house in Poughkeepsie, built for Barbara Swain in Vassar's English Department, after World War II, is still evocative of the Arts and Crafts. The single-story house with second story dormers, is on a hilly site and with striking slate shingles.

Of Adams's architectural taste there can be little doubt of the source: she was raised and lived much of her life on Edgehill Road in New Haven, what is today part of the Prospect Hill Historic District. Its Arts and Crafts houses built around 1900 provided the elements for her own taste. Her dedication to craftwork and her oversight of construction further confirms her broad affection for the Arts and Crafts.<sup>31</sup> Her one known planning proposal was for a group of homes for “elderly alumnae and retired members of the faculty, or for alumnae who wish to stay at Vassar longer than the Alumnae House can accommodate them.” She conceived of the design (1928) as “a street, with rows of houses on either side” patterned after Bishop's Close at Wells Cathedral.<sup>32</sup>

Though interior decoration was a more accepted profession for women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adams's transition into independently designing her own buildings makes her a rarity for her time. It was Vassar College that provided the opportunity for her to develop a modest but distinctive practice.<sup>33</sup> Her patrons apparently felt at ease with a woman architect and that enabled her career to flourish. At Yelping Hill, she offered close construction oversight for a summer colony of intellectuals focused on the simple pleasures of rural isolation. In a note to her

Vassar class in 1928, she wrote: “I am still crazy about furnishing houses, but I like to plan and build them even better.”<sup>34</sup>

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#### Bibliography:

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Allaback, Sarah. *The First Women Architects* (Urbana, University of Illinois, 2016).

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Hayden, Dolores, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1981)

“The New Faculty Aula,” *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, 23, no. 2 (December 1937), 17.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Ann Trowbridge, granddaughter of one of the founders of Yelping Hill for a rich and well-structured tour of the houses. She introduced me to other residents of Yelping Hill, notably Jeremy Brecher, who were helpful. Roxana Robinson generously discussed Adams’s career with me at Treetop.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the United States Federal Census (1910) she was born in Beloit, Wisconsin, like her mother. Ida perhaps returned to her own mother for the birth. According to an emergency passport application (made in 1914 in Venice, Italy) she was 5’ 4” tall and with blue eyes.

<sup>2</sup> As she wrote to her classmates: “I am living quietly at home adjusting myself to domestic pursuits and some society. As for a more formal ‘occupation,’ I am acting as my father’s secretary, which means

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typewriting . . . reading proof, and anything else that turns up.” She mentions aspirations for social work and volunteer work in the library of a settlement house. Quoted in Phyllis Halpern, “Ruth Adams ’04 Architect Rediscovered,” *Vassar Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (Fall 1977), 17. Original source is *Vassar, 1904 Class Bulletin*, March 1905, 3. The Class Bulletins (they go by various names) are held in Special Collections, Vassar College.

17. At Vassar she was a member of the Current Topics Club, the Committee on General Philanthropic Work (part of the Christian Association), *Vassar Miscellany*, 39, no. 6 (1 March 1910), 390.

<sup>3</sup> *Fifth Bulletin of the Class of 1904 at Vassar College*, June 1910, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Fourth Bulletin of the Class of 1904 at Vassar College*, May 1908, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Vassar Miscellany*, 42, no. 4 (1 February 1913), 307. The office was in Ferris’s name. See also *Bulletin of the Class of 1904 at Vassar College*, December 1912, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Vassar Miscellany*, 43, no. 1 (1 November 1913), 35. The office was located at 131 East 31<sup>st</sup> Street.

<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Smith Robertson, letter to the editor, *Vassar Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (January 1978), 2.

<sup>8</sup> A one-story addition to the north with corner pilasters appears to have been added later. Adams would sometimes stay with Smith on her visits to Poughkeepsie. See letters to MacCracken, 5 May 1935 and 3 November 1935, Vassar College, Special Collections, MacCracken Papers, Box 16, folder 45

<sup>9</sup> See the file on the room in Vassar College Special Collection, Class Box 1904, box 2, folder, “1904’s Guest Room.”

<sup>10</sup> *Vassar Quarterly*, 1, no. 1 (1 February 1916), 75. Later she moved to 131 East 51<sup>st</sup> Street.

<sup>11</sup> *Vassar Miscellany Weekly*, 1 October 1915, 6; *Vassar Quarterly*, 2, no. 2 (1 February 1917), 124.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Adams, “Decorating Vassar,” *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, 24, no. 2 (December 1938), 12–13.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, “Decorating Vassar,” 12. Keeping of an inventory of the furniture was a critical part of her work, suggesting that the permanent buildings staff had yet to take on this task. She “tried to keep track of it all—a real feat in permutations and combinations, with blue, rust, green and taupe rugs, chairs, and different sofas and daybeds and ever changing personalities.” Adams, “Decorating Vassar,” 12. None of these decorative projects survive.

<sup>14</sup> “Who First Furnished Alumnae House?” *Vassar Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (December 1937), 32. Adams was involved in helping her class design activities for the new alumnae association, see *Vassar 1904, Twelfth Class Bulletin*, April 1917, 11–13.

<sup>15</sup> Adams, “Decorating Vassar,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Vassar Quarterly*, 12, no. 1 (December 1926), 60. As it was she reports spending Monday through Thursday in New York; and the remainder of the week in New Haven. Adams to MacCracken, 5 January 1928. MacCracken Papers, Box 16, folder 45. Her letterhead address changes from New York to New Haven after 1928.

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<sup>17</sup> See her letterhead in MacCracken Papers, Box 16, folder 45.

<sup>18</sup> “Corridors and Parlor of Main Redone During Summer,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, 2 October 1935, 1, 8. She was also responsible for rooms in the Student Center (now Gordon Commons), a men’s reception room in Main Building, the minister’s study in the Chapel tower (dates unknown). She also oversaw the decoration of rooms around the Office of Admissions. At one point she was asked to teach interior decoration along with John McAndrew who taught architectural design and was grateful not to have to take on that responsibility, letter from Adams to MacCracken, 13 March 1932. MacCracken Papers, Box 16, folder 45.

<sup>19</sup> “The New Faculty Aula,” *Vassar Quarterly*, 23 (December 1937), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Adams, “Decorating Vassar,” 13.

<sup>21</sup> In 1932, while completing work on the dean’s house she had badly sprained her ankle and been on crutches and, in the same year, had been thrown from a horse and badly broken her ankle. *Vassar Quarterly*, 17, no. 4 (November 1932), 402.

<sup>22</sup> Noted in *NYT*, 25 October 1931, N4.

<sup>23</sup> Later additions nearby are tragically ordinary and the landscaping by Norman Newton has been effaced.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Swain, “164 College Avenue,” *Vassar Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (July 1933), 224–26.

<sup>25</sup> *Vassar 1904, Thirteenth Class Bulletin*, April 1919, 7.

<sup>26</sup> This friction is recalled by current residents of Yelping Hill and noted by Halpern, “Ruth Adams,” 20.

<sup>27</sup> Undergraduates spent the summer at Yelping Hill working as waiters.

<sup>28</sup> On Yelping Hill, see Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MIT Press), 261–63.

<sup>29</sup> Kitchens have been significantly expanded and modernized.

<sup>30</sup> Dean’s House 17:19, Ruth Adams to Buildings & Grounds, 21 April 1932.

<sup>31</sup> According Halpern, “Ruth Adams,” 20. Late in life, Adams was noted for Beowulf, a horse she rode around Yelping Hill.

<sup>32</sup> *Vassar Quarterly*, 13, no. 3 (July 1928), 196. At an Alumnae Council Meeting in 1929 the proposal for a “Vassar Close” was put on hold, due to difficulties, “financial and otherwise.” *Vassar Quarterly*, 14, no. 2 (May 1929), 107. Adams traveled to Europe. Her reference to travel to Sweden, see above n. 3, is undocumented elsewhere. She apparently spent 1914–15 in England and Italy is recorded on ships returning to the United States from England, in April 1915 and June 1927. On both occasions she traveled with her mother. She spent the summer of 1919 in Wyoming and Colorado. *Vassar Quarterly*, 5, no. 1, (November 1919), 75. It is not clear when she gave up her New York office. In 1920 she is recorded as offering to let “one room in a studio apartment” at 19 East 57<sup>th</sup> Street. *Vassar Miscellany News*, 4, no. 57

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(17 June 1920), 11. Board of Trustees votes: Dean's House corner of College and Raymond "Georgian in style" *Vassar Quarterly*, 16, no. 4 (November 1931), 312

<sup>33</sup> "I have searched and found no symptoms of regret that matrimony has become a possibility of the past, and that I am not responsible for the production of my husband's 'favorite dish.'" In the same letter class letter she informed her classmates that she expected to vote for Herbert Hoover "or to vote for the Socialist ticket in protest against the action of the legislature in Albany." *1904 Class Bulletin, A Year Book of the Class of 1904 at Vassar College*, June 1920, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Halpern, "Ruth Adams," 17.