

An English Architect in Kendall County

Alfred Giles, Architect (1853-1920) Part I

By Myrna Flach Langford

By appearance and reputation it would seem, at first glance anyway, that it was an easy life for architect Alfred Giles. Should you meet him in late 1800s perhaps on a street in Comfort near the Faltin building or in Boerne near the old Kendall County Courthouse, where he would later oversee its new façade design and expansion, he would seem a privileged gentleman of means and talent. You most certainly would have heard of his reputation for the fine architecture of countless Texas courthouses, military facilities, and San Antonio's King William area mansions, as well as his large homestead, Hillingdon Ranch in Kendall County.

An easy life? Discounting of course, the unease of leaving his saddened relatives in England, the heartbreaking experiences of losing three of his children to the ravages of the times, and the office fire destroying his papers. Of course too there was the harrowing stagecoach robbery, the turmoil of legal proceedings against him in El Paso, the frequent trips to building sites with inadequate communication and new workers and materials to oversee... were surely a hassle.



Architect Alfred Giles

Our visit to Hillingdon, England with our daughter and two grandchildren in 2015 revealed it is now a small village clinging for its survival at the very edge of Heathrow Airport runways. St. John's Church and Red Lion Inn are the few remaining historical buildings, and there's only a remnant left of the homestead The Laurels - a stone fence. The town has a strong heritage group, Hillingdon Family History Society, with monthly speakers and researchers who have generously added to our Giles family information. We presented this interesting group with our book on the Hillingdon Ranch, and they were astounded to learn of the Texas connection.
—Author

Also there was the unfruitful, wasted time involved with unused drawings of the Alamo cenotaphs and others (See Spring 2020 Echoes, *Kendall County Connection to Alamo Plaza - Alfred Giles' Vision for Early Revitalization Efforts*). A bit of strife for certain; frustrations that required the persistent tenacity and even nature of this creative man.

Early Life

Alfred Giles was born in 1853 in Lambeth Borough of London on the Thames River within the sound of the church bell of St. Mary-le-Bow, which designates a true Londoner. His father Thomas Giles was a coach harness maker, an esteemed profession in those days, and was likely required to be a member of the guild Worshipful Company of Coachmakers and Coach Harness Makers. Census records vary on places of residence for the Giles family, which is explained by Alfred Giles in his notes. His father and young siblings sometimes lived in the urban Lambeth, possibly for the schooling and business, and sometimes lived in the main homestead in rural Hillingdon Middlesex where his mother stayed as "London climate did not agree with her." Census of 1871 finds the family listing Laurel Lodge in Hillingdon Heath while Alfred's listing is in Lambeth with occupation given as "Articled pupil to an Architect." This was shortly before Giles' voyage to America.

As a child, Alfred Giles overcame a severe case of rheumatic fever requiring of him a supreme patience. Following Proprietary schooling beginning with "old Cathrow" off Kensington Rd, whom he said "ruled with a whipping cane," he chose to learn a profession by apprenticeship to an architectural firm in London paid for by his father, which was traditional in those days. He added to his schedule night classes at Kings College with an Arts of Construction course.

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His Architectural Work

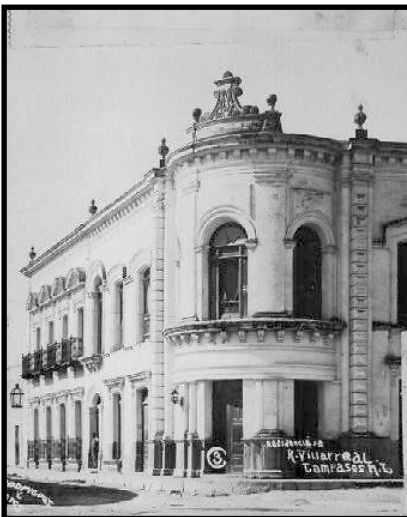
In 1873 Giles, along with a dentist friend, traveled to the United States where he decided to stay and begin an architectural career. His father died in this time frame. Giles' location of Texas was chosen for the hot dry climate which would hopefully help him to regain his ongoing fragile health. In San Antonio he obtained employment with John H. Kampmann, an established contractor in San Antonio. There he learned to work with the area's building materials, especially the limestone from the Hill Country. Shortly after in 1876, he established his own firm and by the late 1870s, according to biographers, he had become San Antonio's leading architect. His was the first generation of architect educated thinkers, as separated from the previous hands-on-builders in American tradition. The buildings he planned were magnificent. Most were built with a Victorian influence, and later in late 1890s with specific round-arched Romanesque Revival, and still later in the early 1900s in Beaux-Arts Classicism. Possibly with his clients in mind, he consistently practiced restraint in his designs and acquired a loyalty among many of San Antonio's pioneer families. His buildings included homes, courthouses and other public buildings in San Antonio, Comfort, Boerne, Fredericksburg and other towns in Texas, as well as in Mexico.

Perhaps one of the first building jobs established his reputation. Giles and Kampmann joined their talents in drawing and constructing the Edward Steves' home at 509 King William St. in San Antonio. It was described by Eugene George in *Alfred Giles: An English Architect in Texas and Mexico* as "the most famous landmark of the Victorian period in San Antonio and the jewel of King William St." The house is presently owned and operated as a house museum by the San Antonio Conservation Society. George states "The quality of a Giles-designed building is derived from his control of every step of construction."

A most useful evidence of the extent and scope of his work, which is remarkable in one lifetime, is a list of 135 Texas buildings and 23 Mexico buildings with owners and dates in the George book. In comparison, for Frank Lloyd Wright the greatest architect this country has produced, only about 500 of the designs were built of the twice as many designs. Leading one to wonder if there were many more designs that did not leave Giles' drafting table, as example, the two cenotaphs planned for the Alamo.



*Edward Steves Home, 509 King William Street, San Antonio
One of Alfred Giles's First Designs in 1876.
(Photo by E. Eugene George)*



Casa de la Cultura de Lampazos de Naranjo Mexico, Built in 1906

We have a friend whose family owned two Giles homes in Mexico, one is now the Casa de la Cultura de Lampazos de Naranjo (see picture left), neither are included in published lists. Attesting that a correct total number of his designs is not known and according to George, the information on his buildings is a work in progress.

The Alfred Giles Company employed up to six employees, several of them born in England, and also included his trained sons, Geoffrey and Palmer. Giles' career gave him an opportunity to be active in professional organizations. He was a founder and president of the Texas State Association of Architects. During his tenure in 1908, there are indications he was quite a forward thinker. He urged the necessity of a law licensing the architect profession, he advocated more care in making buildings fire-proof (his own offices and files burned in 1892, sadly for archivists), he supported more sidewalks, and he condemned the placing of signs along railroads and highways obstructing the beautiful natural scenery. In 1911 his rendering was published showing how the San Antonio River could be enhanced with rowboats and pedestrians.

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Alfred Giles Company, Circa 1910
Alfred Giles (sitting in front) & son, Geoffrey Giles (behind him).

Area buildings designed by Giles:

Bandera: Bandera Jail (1881)

Boerne: Kendall County Courthouse Addition (1909-10), Boerne Public School (1910), also Giles, while part of a syndicate owning Boerne's Ye Kendall Inn, in 1914 devised plans never realized for of an addition of cottage accommodations for the historic inn.

Center Point: High School (1911)

Comfort: Faltin General Store (1879), Addition to Faltin Store (1907), Ingenhuett General Store (1880), Addition to Ingenhuett Store (1900), Ingenhuett-Faust Hotel (1880-81), Addition to Hotel (1894), Ingenhuett Opera Halle (1882), Ingenhuett Saloon (1891), Ingenhuett Residence(1897), Comfort Post Office (1908-10)

Fredericksburg: Gillespie County Courthouse (1881), Bierschwale Residence (1888), Bank of Fredericksburg (1898), Morris Ranch School (1892), Morris Ranch Jockey House (1893)

Kerrville: Schreiner Bank and Store (1882-93), St Charles Hotel (1884) remodeled (1909) (razed1936), Kerr County Courthouse (1885) (razed 1926), Masonic Building (1890), Schreiner Residence (1895)



San Antonio Light Ad – March 25, 1884

Next Edition: *An English Architect in Kendall County, Alfred Giles, Architect (1853-1920) Part II*
Learn about his marriage, family, Kendall County ranch and tales from his travels.