

Town, Ithiel ^[1]

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by Caroline Holmes Bivins, 1996

3 Oct. 1784–13 June 1844

Ithiel Town, architect, was born in Thompson, Conn., to Archelaus and Martha Johnson Town. An ancestor was William Towne, who was in Salem, Mass., as early as 1640. Archelaus, a farmer, died when Ithiel was only eight and the lad, as soon as possible, went to work as a house carpenter and school-teacher. Going to Boston, he attended a school conducted by Asher Benjamin, an architect and writer of books on the subject, thus receiving as good training as was available in the country at that time.

His career began with the construction of Center Church on the New Haven, Conn., green, a project in which he showed ability as a designer and engineer and familiarity with classical architectural designs. In 1814 he was commissioned to design and build Trinity Church on the same green, and this work established his reputation. On 28 Jan. 1820 he received a patent for a new system of constructing wooden bridges, known as the Town Lattice Truss, and during this period he was busy not only in working on public buildings and residences but also in supervising the construction of bridges. Among others, he built a bridge across the James River near Richmond, Va., and one in North Carolina. From this time on he apparently had ample means. In 1827–28 he was a partner of Martin E. Thompson in New York.

Town was one of the great leaders of Greek Revival architecture in the United States. According to the diary of [Alexander Jackson Davis](#) ^[2], he designed the Greek Revival asylum building on the grounds on which the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York was later built. He assisted William P. Elliot in designing the first wing, facing F Street, of the Patent Office in Washington, D.C., now the home of the [National Portrait Gallery](#) ^[3] and the [National Collection of Fine Arts of the Smithsonian Institution](#) ^[4]. It has been called "one of the noblest examples of the Greek mode in the Classical Revival style of architecture to appear in this country."

In 1829 Town formed a partnership with Alexander Jackson Davis, with offices in New York. The firm of Town and Davis became one of the best as well as the best known in the country. Some of its important works were the City Hall in Hartford, Conn., and the state capitols of Connecticut, Indiana, and North Carolina. In August 1833 Town and Davis were engaged to work on the capitol at [Raleigh](#) ^[5]. "They modified and greatly improved the earlier design, giving the Capitol essentially its present appearance and plan." They established the form of rooms in the building and clarified "the discipline of architectural style." During the building of the capitol there were thirteen commissioners and five directly responsible architects, so many must be credited with its completion. In the state archives at Raleigh are receipts for "architectural services rendered the Board of Commissioners for rebuilding the Capitol of North Carolina." These were signed by Ithiel Town in 1834. The legislature that convened at the end of 1834 criticized the expenditures of the board, and the new board severed connections with the firm of Town and Davis to effect economies, leaving work on the capitol to David Paton, an architect who had recently arrived from Scotland, and whom Town and Davis had chosen as their representative in work on the capitol.

Town traveled in Europe in 1829–30 with Samuel F. B. Morse, who selected him as one of the two representatives of architecture in the founding of the [National Academy of Design](#) ^[6] in New York City. A portrait of him, painted by Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796–1881) between 1830 and 1840, is in the academy's possession. The dimensions are thirty-six inches by twenty-nine inches, and the subject is seated, head to the left, with both hands showing. It was a gift to the academy in 1941 of George Dudley Seymour of New Haven, Conn.

Town published *The Outlines of a Plan for Establishing in New York an Academy of the Fine Arts* ^[7] (1835) and *A Detail of Some Particular Services Performed in America . . . 1776–1779: From a Journal Kept on Board H.M.S. Rainbow, by Commodore Sir George Collier* ^[8] (1835). The latter was based on material he bought in England. He had an immense library of 11,000 volumes plus thousands of loose engravings, medieval manuscripts, incunabula, objects d'art, and 170 pictures. For many years this was the finest collection relating to architecture and the fine arts in the United States. Five catalogues were issued for the sale after his death. Part of the collection went to [Yale University](#) ^[9].

Town never married but had a daughter, Etha (1809–71), who bore his name and lived with him. Her mother was also named Etha. The daughter married Dr. William T. Peters in 1826, and they had eight children. Town died in New Haven, where he always maintained his home, although he was associated with New York both professionally and socially. He was buried in Grove Street Cemetery, the grave being marked by a simple marble headstone.

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

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1 January 1996 | Bivins, Caroline Holmes

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