

ARCHITECTS of Influence

BY R. BROOKS JEFFERY

Arizona, more than most states, has been blessed with a legacy of exceptional female architects. Among these are Mary Colter, who designed early landmark buildings at the Grand Canyon, Judith Chafee, a Tucson modernist (see *Tucson Home Magazine* spring 2008), and perhaps one of the most under-recognized architects of her time, Annie Graham Rockfellow.



BILL TIMMERMAN

Technology. After practicing as an architect in Rochester for eight years, she traveled to Southern Arizona to visit her brother John Rockfellow, who owned the Stronghold Ranch in the Dragoon Mountains. Liking Arizona, she accepted a position at The University of Arizona teaching English and drawing, but after two years quit her job, traveled throughout Europe, and returned to Rochester to open her own architectural practice.

She attended the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego (at today's Balboa Park), where the romanticized styles of the Spanish Colonial Revival, California Mission Revival, and Pueblo Revival were promoted as appropriate architectural language for the Southwest. Fully enamored with this new expression, she returned to Tucson in 1916 and, at the age of 50 with 29 years of architectural and building experience, joined the well-established architectural firm of Henry O. Jaastad. Although

ANNIE GRAHAM ROCKFELLOW

Safford Magnet Middle School. Detail of the school is below.



BILL TIMMERMAN

I am an admirer of what I term the Tucson-Mexican style of architecture for this part of the country—the early thick-walled adobe one-story buildings showing the influence of Mexico and seeming to “belong” in this topography and climate.

~Annie Rockfellow in a 1933 KVOA radio address

Rockfellow was born in 1866 in Mount Morris, New York, in the western region of the state that was home to pioneering feminists Susan B. Anthony and Louise Bethune (who in 1881 became the first female professional architect). In 1887, Rockfellow was only the second woman to graduate from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of

a prolific and well-connected architect and builder in a rapidly growing Tucson, Jaastad was not a formally trained architect. Rockfellow's arrival in 1916 marked a dramatic shift in the firm's design competence from plain, utilitarian expressions to those representing current academic and regional revival styles.

At a time when few women ventured into the field of architecture, Rockfellow made a name for herself as the first registered female architect in Arizona. She was responsible for some of Tucson's prominent public buildings, including Plaza School (1918, now Safford Magnet Middle School), Christian Science Church (1922), Desert Sanatorium (1926, now Tucson Medical Center), the Historic YWCA (1929), and various buildings for The University of Arizona



The El Conquistador Hotel.

Campbell Avenue Farm (1935, now The University of Arizona Campus Agricultural Center). Her work in Arizona towns outside of Tucson was equally prolific.

One of the most significant Tucson examples of the religiously inspired California Mission Revival style was her most prominent commission—the El Conquistador Hotel located on the current site of El Con Mall. This sprawling luxury tourist hotel, built at the suburban edge of the desert, was completed in 1928 to lure affluent tourists and potential homebuyers to the growing desert community. In addition to the arcaded facades, clay-tile roofs, and four-story tower that characterized the style, the building exuded the confident opulence of the time. Terra-cotta ornamentation incorporating Arizona cacti, as well as spiraling columns with prickly pear capitals, decorated ceilings, and a 300-seat dining room with an orchestra balcony, chandeliers, and other features made this a beloved Tucson venue for proms, weddings, and other social galas. Rockfellow considered this her finest design, but the landmark hotel was tragically demolished in 1968.

Although preferring public buildings, Rockfellow designed a handful of large

residences for some of Tucson's elite newcomers, including a residence for the former governor of New Hampshire, Robert Bass (1932). For most of these residences, Rockfellow incorporated what she called the "Hopi," or Pueblo Revival, style she felt was appropriate to this region and climate.

A significant example of the California Mission Revival style was her most prominent commission—the El Conquistador Hotel.



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This style included the use of a central courtyard oriented appropriately to the south to capture the warm sun, thick adobe walls, exposed vigas, small window openings, massive fireplaces, porches, and winding stairways leading to roof decks with mountain views.

Jaastad and Rockfellow's good working relationship lasted 22 years, during which she took part in all aspects of the office's projects, though her primary role was chief designer. Her competence became a valuable asset as Jaastad launched a political career that began as a Tucson city council member in 1924 and continued through his tenure as mayor from 1933 to 1947.

Rockfellow was an avid traveler and documented the architecture of Mesa Verde and other ancient sites in the Southwest. Perhaps more than most Tucson architects of her era, Rockfellow wrote meticulously in her diary and pho-

tographed her buildings, leaving a record of her work that has allowed researchers to finally assign credit to her architectural contributions. In addition to an active professional life, Rockfellow also wrote articles about architecture and, in 1933, presented radio monologues about architecture. In 1938, at the age of 71, she retired from Jaastad's office and moved to Santa Barbara, California, where she died in 1954.

Annie Graham Rockfellow's obituary described her as "a leader in the ideas embodying the historic and scenic feeling of Arizona architecture." She was responsible for transporting the regional revival styles gaining popularity elsewhere and incorporating them into some of Tucson's most prominent public and private buildings. The lasting imprint of her career, however, lies in her pioneering contribution to the legacy of Arizona's designing women.

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SEE FOR YOURSELF

Check out some of the buildings crafted by Annie Graham Rockfellow.

The Historic YWCA (1929)

525 N. Bonita Ave., at the southeast corner of Grande Avenue and St. Mary's Road.

Safford Magnet Middle School (1918)

200 E. 13th St., between 6th and 4th Avenues

The University of Arizona Campus Agricultural Center (1935)

4101 N. Campbell Ave., just north of Roger Road. 🏠



The Robert Bass House