

Baird, Alfred Sherman DePuy (1864–1918)

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Alfred Sherman DePuy Baird was an architect who supervised construction of buildings for denominational institutions in Michigan and Washington, D.C.

Early Life (1864-1885)

Alfred Sherman DePuy Baird was born on June 6, 1864, to John J. Baird and Elizabeth Piper in Johnstown, Cambria County, Pennsylvania.¹ John J. Baird, was commissioned captain of Company G, 76th Pennsylvania Infantry during the Civil War. He was wounded at the Second Battle of Drewry's Bluff in May 1864 and was hospitalized in Point of Rocks, Virginia. He did not recover from his head injury and contracted a bad case of diarrhea. As a result, he was discharged in July 1864, and returned to his family shortly after the birth of his third child, Alfred. Captain Baird remained in poor health for four years. He witnessed the birth of two more sons, but passed away on November 18, 1868, less than two months after his last child, John J. Baird, Jr., was born²

Alfred Baird was surrounded by death at an early age. His only sister, Gertrude, died shortly before he was born, which was followed by the death of his father when he was four, and the death of his younger brother, George Bennett Baird, less than a year later on September 30, 1869.³

As a young widow, Elizabeth Baird struggled to raise her three growing boys. Though Elizabeth received a military pension, during the first three years after her husband's death she had to liquidate his estate piecemeal



Grave of Alfred S. Baird.

Photo courtesy of Ray Gurganus. Source: *Find a Grave*,

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/166220307/alfred-s-baird>

in order to survive. After the last of the estate was sold in public auction in April 1871, she moved her three children to Fayette County, Iowa.⁴ At the time of her second marriage on December 29, 1873, Elizabeth's total assets included three carpets, one stove, a set of dishes, a \$72 check on the New York Bank, and four cows, totaling \$178. She was hopeful that her marriage to William C. Downing would ameliorate her financial affairs, but Downing proved to be abusive and neglectful. On October 5, 1876, Elizabeth gave birth to twin boys; the next day, October 6, Downing severely beat his wife and then locked her in the house for two weeks and refused her medical attention. In spite of such treatment, Elizabeth Downing raised a total of six children—five boys and one girl—in that home. After moving to Holt County, Nebraska, in the early 1880s, she finally divorced Downing on October 3, 1883.⁵

Alfred S. D. Baird was deeply impacted by his home environment and took his first job when he was 11 years old, learning “the carpenter’s trade to support [his mother] and the other children.”⁶ When he was about 17, he worked for the Central Pacific Railroad (formerly Western Pacific Railroad), which had joined with the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 to form the First Transcontinental Railroad in North America. In the early 1880s Baird traveled back to his home state to study drafting and general architecture at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.⁷

An Architect in Iowa and Nebraska (1885-1898)

In about 1885, Baird received his first building contract. After drafting the plans, Baird supervised its construction and continued in this profession until 1899. During these years he organized work crews and built numerous “magnificent structures,” including courthouses and grain elevators. Around 1888-1889 Baird became a Christian, perhaps through the influence of Helen L. Lebert. On January 6, 1889, Baird and Lebert were married in Burwell, Garfield County, Nebraska. Though Baird may have accepted the Adventist faith as early as 1888-1889, he was certainly an Adventist by the late 1890s.⁸ Unable to bear children of their own, the Bairds became involved with foster care and legally adopted one young girl named Marguerite Dobson between 1900 and 1910.⁹

Service for the Nebraska Conference (1899-1901)

In early 1898, the Nebraska Conference established the Christian Help Mission in Omaha, Nebraska. Many Americans suffered during the financial depression that began in 1893 and the Omaha Mission sought to help underprivileged men and women with free lodging, clothing, food, and health care. Baird was familiar with these hardships and retired from his architectural work to minister to the needy. His brother-in-law, Harry Alfred (H. A.) Fulton, was also partially responsible for Baird's career change. Fulton started his career as a physician at the Mission when it opened in 1898.

In June 1899, Baird became business manager of the Omaha Mission under superintendent James A. (J. A.) Skinner. In September, Baird was elected to the Nebraska Conference executive committee, and in about the summer of 1900 he became the superintendent of the Omaha Mission, serving in that capacity until the early spring of 1902.¹⁰

Denominational Builder (1902-1913)

In 1901, Battle Creek College was renamed Emmanuel Missionary College and moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan. There were no buildings, however, and the students utilized the former Berrien County courthouse during the inaugural year. Before the school year ended, Baird was asked to move to Michigan and build the new college campus with student labor. Though somewhat hesitant, he accepted the offer and began the project in the spring of 1902.¹¹

With the help of twenty to thirty inexperienced students, Baird began to build the faculty cottages. Over the next two years, Baird moved on to build the rest of the main campus buildings, including the two-story Advocate Hall, the manual arts building, a three-story domestic arts building, and the study hall, which was the main campus building. The study hall was the most memorable, and the unique Russian-style onion-like dome that protruded above the front entrance remained the most notable college landmark for nearly fifty years.¹²

In August 1903, the General Conference headquarters and the Review and Herald Publishing Association moved from Battle Creek to Washington, D.C. Initially housed in a rented building, the General Conference Committee requested that Baird come and build two permanent office buildings as well as Washington Training College (later Washington Adventist University) and the Washington Sanitarium (later Adventist HealthCare Washington Adventist Hospital). Baird moved to Washington in the spring of 1904 to build the new denominational headquarters.

Baird built numerous Adventist buildings in and around Washington, D.C., between 1904 and 1913. He first built a campus for Washington Training College, which opened its doors in November 1904. By the summer of 1905 two dormitories and a dining hall were constructed, but the main college building was postponed. In the late summer, Baird moved on to build the new office buildings for the General Conference and the Review and Herald Publishing Association. The former was completed in December 1905 and the latter in May 1906. Though additions were added in time, both buildings remained in use until the 1980s.¹³

After completing these projects, Baird began to build the Washington Sanitarium, completing the main building in time for it to be dedicated on June 12, 1907. Baird then resumed his work on the college, beginning the main building in 1907. It was dedicated on May 19, 1908. Baird also built other structures, including a two-story elementary school building and several homes for denominational leaders.¹⁴

Baird was an inventor as well as an architect, and received a patent for a device that could cut crooked screw threads on May 11, 1909. Shortly afterward, in June 1910, more than three years before the assembly line reduced prices, Baird purchased an automobile.¹⁵

Later Career (1913-1918)

In the early months of 1913, Arthur C. Moses organized the A. C. Moses Construction Company in Washington, D.C. and Baird became his architect and superintendent. During the next five years, Baird built over 150 homes in and around the nation's capital.

In 1917, Baird also acquired two building contracts for the United States government: a field house in Potomac Park and a brass foundry for the Navy. Baird did not live to see either structure completed, however. On April 27, 1918, Baird suffered from a heart attack while cranking his car and died the next day. His funeral took place on April 30 and he was buried in the Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C.¹⁶

Contribution

Alfred Baird faced numerous challenges as a child. He learned from these experiences, however, and developed a strong character and work ethic. These early years informed Baird's service for the Adventist Church, first as the manager of the Omaha Mission and later as a denominational builder. In only a decade he planned and built two college campuses, a sanitarium, office buildings for the General Conference and Review and Herald Publishing Association, and scores of private dwellings. Several of these structures still stand, including numerous homes, such as the row of concrete houses in Washington, D.C. on Randolph Street between 4th and 5th Streets, and one of the field houses in Potomac Park, which Baird designed but failed to complete. More importantly, Baird impacted the lives of those he served and employed. He held daily devotional services before construction began and was an excellent manager and mentor. Throughout his life he deeply impacted many underprivileged persons, students, employees, and colleagues.

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