

# the Muskingum County (Ohio) Courthouse Floors

A Case Study of England's Role in the  
Genesis of America's Tile Industry

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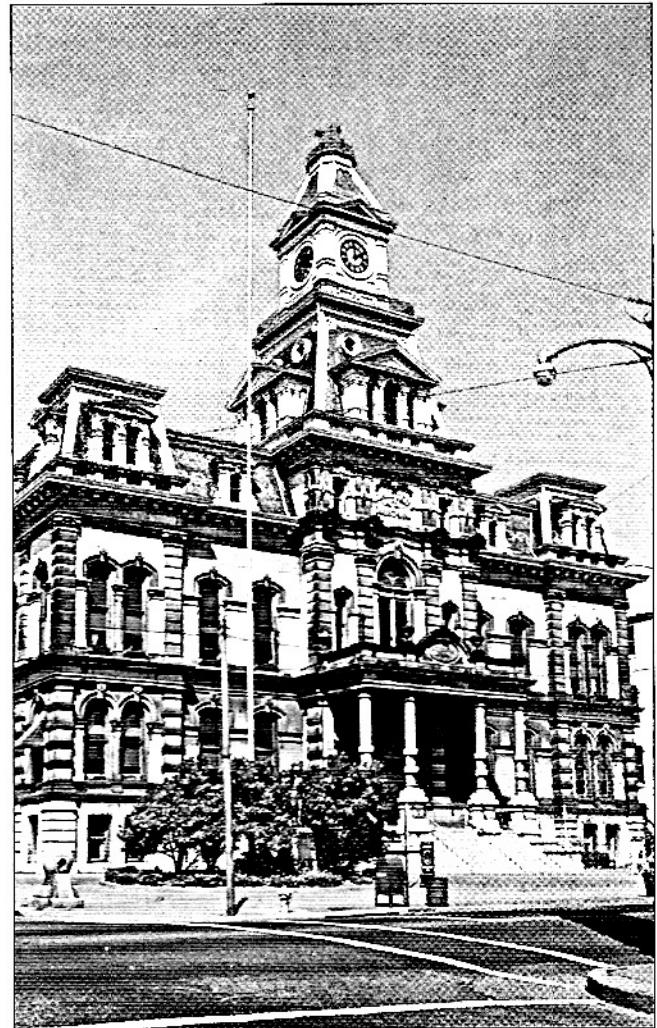
Efforts to establish the manufacture of encaustic and other tiles in the United States began in the early 1850s, but no significant technical or commercial success was achieved until the late 1870s. This would appear to be an unusual turn of events in nineteenth century America, for it was a time of spectacular developments in manufacturing due in part to an influx of technology and skilled labour from England, the birthplace of the Victorian tile industry. What happened was that tile-making ventures did not at first attract nearly the amount of capital and patronage as did, for example, textile and pottery manufacturing ventures. Thus, would-be pioneers of an American tile industry were likely to be individuals struggling to master the complex technical art of making encaustic tiles in small, rudely equipped local potteries while perhaps contending with meagre resources or pressure from an impatient backer expecting a quick return on his investment. Two ventures that managed to meet with success in the 1870s, the American Encaustic Tiling Company of Zanesville, Ohio, and the United States Encaustic Tile Company of Indianapolis, Indiana, did so by enlisting the services of English tile operatives. Most of those workers were skilled encaustic tile makers who decided to emigrate to America to work for higher wages and the opportunity for advancement. A few, like Gilbert Elliott, who managed American Encaustic's operations from 1876 to 1879, were given supervisory positions.<sup>1</sup> Elliott is the most notable of the English tile workers who emigrated to America in that he was the first of the group to do so and the one having the greatest personal impact on the development of America's tile industry.

In the winter of 1869 an overheated stovepipe kindled a fire in the Muskingum County courthouse in Zanesville, Ohio. The fire was small and caused little damage, but it was the "last straw." The dilapidated sixty-year-old structure wasn't worth repairing before the fire, let alone after it. Consequently, over the course of the next two years the county's commissioners approved a special levy to finance the construction of a new courthouse, hired Cleveland, Ohio architect

Harry Edward Myer to design the structure, and awarded the contract for building it to Zanesville contractor T.B. Townsend for his bid of \$221,657.<sup>2</sup>

Almost everything about the new courthouse was controversial except that it was needed, and the controversy raged throughout most of its two-and-a-half year construction period. One especially contentious issue was addressed in the following excerpt

Figure 1 *The Muskingum County courthouse in Zanesville, Ohio.*



from a letter to the editor of the *Zanesville Daily Courier* penned by "Reason" and published in the newspaper's March 10, 1875, edition:

You talk about Zanesville men to build the Court House. How many Zanesville men have anything to do with the building of the Court House? How much Zanesville material goes into the Court House outside of the brick and the limestone? Where do the men come from that cut the stone for the Court House? Only about a half dozen from Zanesville out of the fifty or sixty the builder has here. The sandstone trimmings for the Court House come from Amherst, Lorain Co., O. The iron from Pittsburgh, the tile from Europe, the lumber from Michigan. A Cincinnati man does the galvanised iron work and roofing. A Pittsburgh man the iron work. A Columbus man the painting and glass, and by a stroke of luck or close calculation, a Zanesville man happens to get the whole contract by the small sum of about \$3000.00 less than any other man.

Reason's comment about the tile for the courthouse is interesting. Myer had specified that tile was to be used as the flooring material of the first and second floor hallways. Apparently, Townsend, who was to furnish all the materials and labour used in building the edifice, intended to obtain it from a foreign manufacturer. That he should have done so was not unusual or callous. It was due to the fact that when he began the construction of the courthouse in 1874 America did not have a tile industry, and the demand for tiles in the United States was met almost entirely

Figure 2 *A view of the ground floor tile installation, taken from the stairway leading to the first floor, reveals how the layout of the courthouse influenced Elliott's designs. The courthouse is a square building whose ground floor is divided into equal sized quarters by two corridors that cross one another at its centre. Elliott filled the large empty central area with an elaborate centrepiece and tied the centrepiece to the corridors by repeating its corner panels along the centreline of each corridor.*

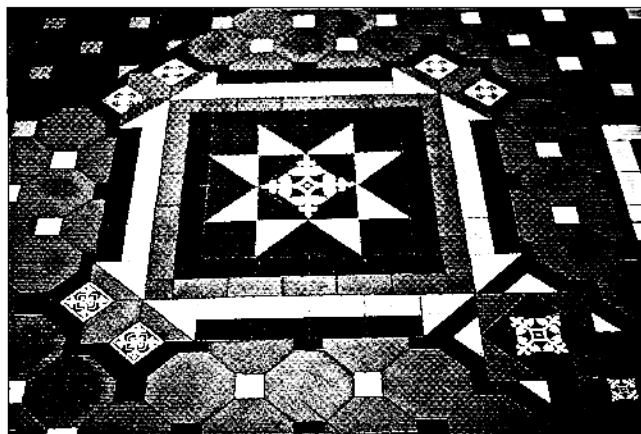
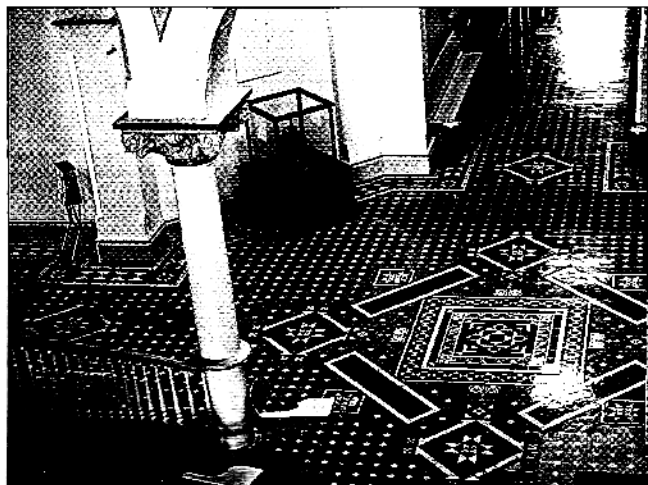


Figure 3 *The tile panel that forms the north-facing corner of the centrepiece. Identical panels occur at the other three corners of the centrepiece and at intervals along the centrelines of the corridors. The encaustic tile (an English design) in the centre of the panel measures 6 inches by 6 inches.*

by English imports.<sup>3</sup> When Reason submitted his letter to the *Courier's* editor was he aware of the fact that tile manufacturing experiments were then being conducted in Zanesville? Was he trying to promote the local venture?

Frederick H. Hall, backed by wealthy coffee and spice merchant Benedict Fischer of New York, had begun tile manufacturing experiments in an old pottery in Zanesville in the fall of 1874. Hall's goal was to establish a "permanent business" and market flooring tiles whose quality matched or exceeded that of European imports. But for nearly two years "kiln after kiln of fresh burned tiles were pronounced failures," and most of what he produced was used only for road metal or landfill material.<sup>4</sup> The problem was finally resolved in late 1875 or early 1876 by George A. Stanbery, a gifted mechanic hired by Benedict Fischer to act as Hall's "mechanical expert." Stanbery

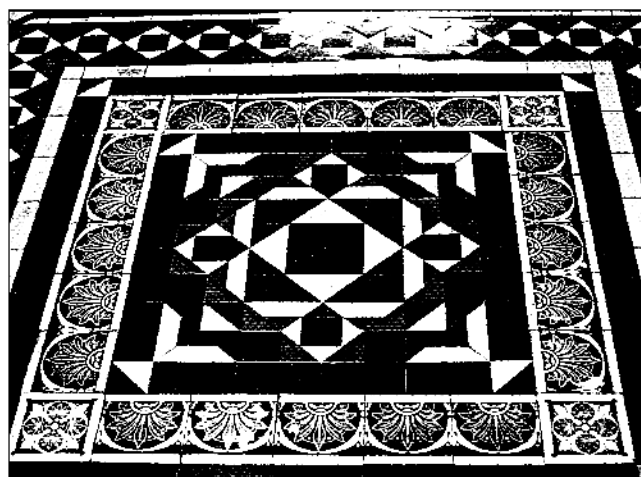


Figure 4 *The heart of the groundfloor centrepiece. The square dust-pressed geometric tile at the very centre measures 6 inches by 6 inches, as do the plastic clay encaustic tiles that surround the*



Figure 5 *The encaustic tiles that surround the geometric tiles at the heart of the centrepiece on the ground floor.*

observed almost at once that the flaws in Hall's tiles were caused by air that had become trapped within them as they were being pressed. Stanbery's remedy was a belt-driven mechanical press of his own invention which could expel the air as it automatically, rapidly, and efficiently mass-produced flawless dust-pressed floor tiles. He then turned his attention to revamping other mechanical aspects of Hall's operations. Hall, for reasons unknown today, then either quit the venture on his own accord or was forced out of it.

Benedict Fischer had meanwhile gone into partnership with another wealthy New York entrepreneur, George Lansing, and named the venture after the two of them. He had also come to the conclusion that while Stanbery and Hall had proven it was possible to produce marketable tiles from Zanesville's clays, his fledgling tile company probably faced ultimate failure because it lacked the services of someone who had any practical knowledge of the business. Such an employee was unavailable in the United States, so Fischer advertised in England for a "tile expert" who would come to America and assume control of the venture's operations. That individual turned out to be Gilbert Elliott.



Figure 6 *Some of the encaustic tiles that form part of the centrepiece on the ground floor. The largest ones measure 6 inches by 6 inches*

Why Gilbert Elliott? What motivated him to emigrate to America and work for Benedict Fischer? What made him a tile expert? Unfortunately, these and other pertinent questions about Mr. Elliott cannot be addressed due to the total lack of information regarding his personal life and career in the English tile industry in the sources presently available to the author.<sup>5</sup>

Elliott's mandate was to turn Fischer's faltering venture into a business capable of making profitable inroads into his native country's domination of the market for tiles in America. Presumably, he had been fully apprised of the fact that tile-making operations in Zanesville were rudimentary at best, and understood the challenge awaiting him. No one at the Fischer and Lansing works, for example, was skilled at designing appealing patterns of geometric tiles created for specific floor plans and installing them properly. Most if not all output was limited to buff, black, red, drab, and chocolate dust-pressed geometric tiles produced in a few basic shapes and sizes. Some relatively simple two-colour dust-pressed encaustic tiles may have been part of the output, but plastic clay encaustics, any kind of art tiles, and glazed tiles were not.

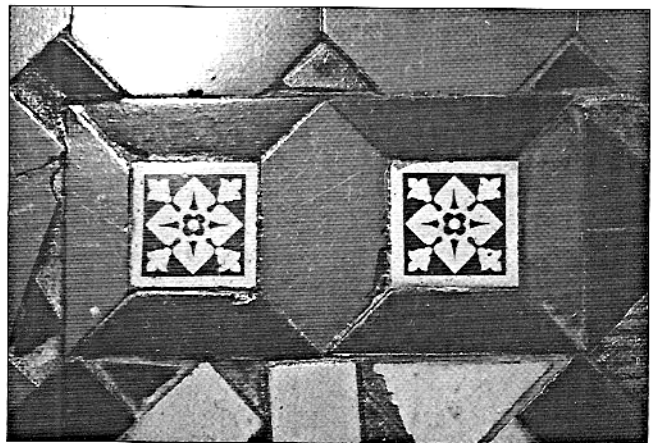


Figure 7 *Two encaustic tiles of the centrepiece on the ground floor measuring 3 inches by 3 inches.*

Thus, expanding the scope of the company's products was likely to have been Elliott's first priority. He could put off starting the production of art tiles for awhile because the demand for tiles in America at the time was primarily for floor tiles. Providing for a greater variety of shapes and sizes of the firm's geometric tiles was simply a matter of directing Stanbery to make the appropriate dies. Increasing the number of colours they were produced in, though, was another matter. Frederick H. Hall had already gotten the local clays to burn to all the colours they could be made to produce, so Elliott was forced to implement a search for a source of clays which could be made to burn to such colours as blue and green and white. At some point he initiated the manufacture of plastic clay encaustic tiles, reportedly by exactly the same method as that employed by Minton's. Elliott decided to retain the firm's use of a method of producing dust-pressed

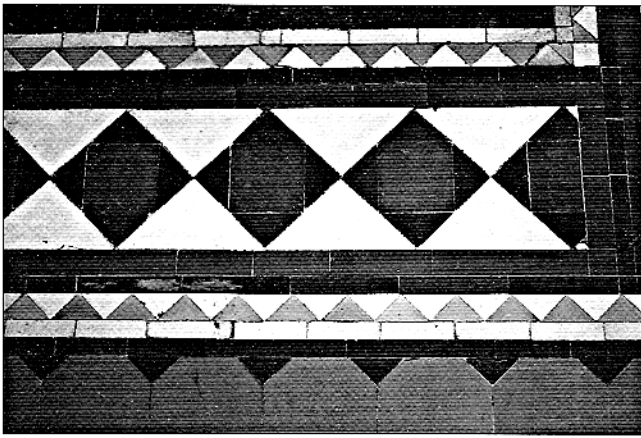


Figure 8 *The border of the ground floor installation. It contains blue dust-pressed triangles made by the English manufacturer T & R Boote.*

encaustic tiles which had been developed by Hall in 1874 or 1875, probably because it was a relatively simple technique that used modified regular press dies instead of the expensive templates required by the labour-intensive Boulton-Worthington process favoured by English tile manufacturers.<sup>6</sup> Elliott had hardly begun to effect the needed refinements when what can only be described as a “golden opportunity” arose.

In 1876 Townsend solicited bids for the job of supplying and installing 3,120 square feet of tile flooring in the nearly completed courthouse. He received two. One, for \$3900, (\$1.25 per square foot) was from the agent of an English tile manufacturer. The other was from Gilbert Elliott, who bid \$3,120 (\$1.00 per square foot) on the behalf of Fischer and Lansing.<sup>7</sup> Many American contractors of that time would probably have assumed the English tiles were superior to any made in the United States and would thus have used them despite their higher cost. But Townsend did not hesitate to award the contract to Fischer and Lansing. He said later of his decision:

I accepted the bid of the home company because they furnished the best tile and at a lower price.<sup>8</sup>

If Elliott encountered any problems while designing the courthouse installations they would most probably have revolved around the limited colour range of the company’s geometric tiles. No matter how talented he might have been at assembling them into attractive patterns, it is likely the overall effect of the completed designs would not have been as colourful and lively as he desired if buff, black, red, chocolate, and drab were the only colours he had to work with. Elliott cleverly circumvented the problem by obtaining some blue and white tiles made by an English manufacturer, T & R Boote, to use in the installations.<sup>9</sup> The encaustic tiles Elliott used in the courthouse floors might also be of English manufacture. Most of them resemble English designs, and one appears to match a known Maw design. Moreover, given the rudimentary state of the Fischer and Lansing works at the time, the most expedient way for Elliott to incorporate some encaustics in the floors

would have been for him to use imported ones. On the other hand, overlap in English and American encaustic tile designs appears to have been common enough that the tiles might just as easily be Elliott’s copies of designs he had worked with in England. Thus, the only sure way of determining the origin of the courthouse encaustics would be to examine their backs for trademarks.<sup>10</sup>

On Monday, January 8, 1877, Elliott and a small crew of workmen arrived at the courthouse with the first of many wagonloads of tile and began laying the floors. A little over five weeks later, on the evening of Wednesday, February 14, 1877, they finished the job. Once the floors had been installed it took Townsend about twelve more weeks to finish off the building’s interior and exterior details. The county officials occupied their offices in April, and the Muskingum County Bar Association conducted a dedication ceremony on May 1, 1877. Muskingum County’s citizens beamed with pride as they toured their new courthouse. It was large and imposing and its Second Empire style was the height of architectural fashion. The floors, they said, were a triumph of ceramic art.<sup>11</sup>

Elliott’s success with the courthouse floors signalled Fischer and Lansing’s ability to secure and execute contracts, but its operations were not yet on a par with those of its English rivals. Efforts to expand the scope of the company’s products had hardly begun. The firm lacked a sales and distribution network. Moreover, the company would not be truly competitive in the lucrative east coast tile markets until it had devised a strategy for overcoming the scepticism many American consumers held regarding the quality of American-made tiles and the ability of American workmen to install them properly. But Fischer, Stanbery, and Elliott did not consider these shortcomings to be insurmountable. One of their first acts was to institute the policy of installing the tiles they sold

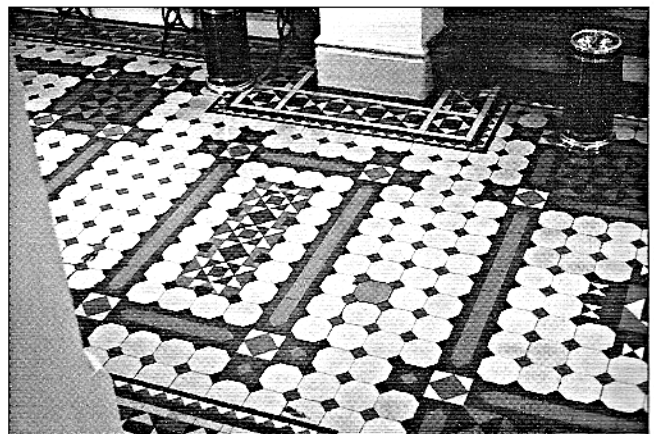


Figure 9 *The first floor of the courthouse has a single corridor that runs from one side of the building to the other. This general view of a portion of the first floor tile installation, taken from a stairway leading to the courthouse attic, shows some of the many decorative geometric tile panels Elliott incorporated into its design.*

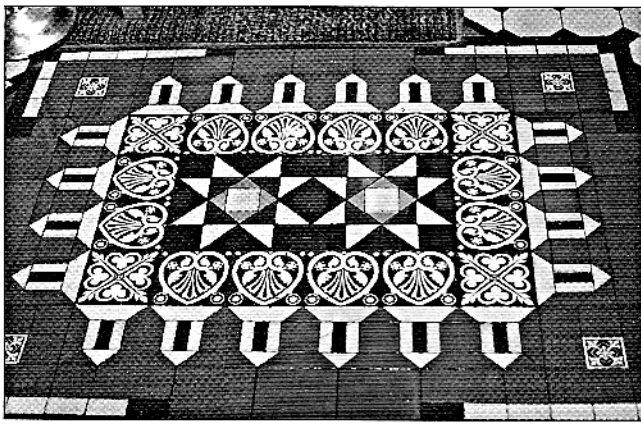


Figure 10 *The centrepiece of the first floor tile installation. The large encaustic tiles measure 6 inches by 6 inches. The corner tiles match a known Maw design.*

and guaranteeing the work, thus allaying any concerns potential customers might have about the relative merits of Fischer and Lansing products. Fischer established a network of sales agents in metropolitan areas of the eastern and midwestern sections of the country and advertised in England for encaustic tile makers who would come to Zanesville and work for the company. Stanbery devised whatever machines and appliances the works needed to operate more efficiently and turn out a greater variety of tiles. Befitting his status as the company's tile expert and general manager, Elliott designed installations, oversaw its business affairs and manufacturing plant, and promoted the firm's tiles and solicited orders during extended business trips.<sup>12</sup>

The result of those concerted efforts was that during 1877 and 1878 the firm blossomed into the "permanent business" originally envisioned by Frederick H. Hall.<sup>13</sup> Business grew to the point that orders for the company's tiles began to overwhelm its modest production capacity, so a new purpose-built factory was erected in 1878-1879.<sup>14</sup> Its six kilns made it the largest tile works in America and the equal of many in England. The increased business also made it clear to its proprietors that the company had outgrown whatever advantages there were to be gained from operating it as a partnership. Consequently, on March 20, 1878, Fischer and Lansing were reorganised under the laws of the state of New York as a limited liability stock company named the American Encaustic Tiling Company.

Gilbert Elliott served as American Encaustic's general manager until March 1, 1879, when Martin Lipe succeeded him and George Stanbery assumed the job of plant superintendent. Elliott then disappeared from local records and presumably played no further part in the development of the tile industry in the United States. But he had left his mark on America's tile heritage by playing an instrumental role in the establishment of one of America's largest and most distinguished tile companies and, in the process, designing and installing what became the oldest surviving American-made tile floors in the nation.

## Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the Muskingum County Commissioners for their cooperation in the preparation of this article, and to Michael Kline and Alta Sims for reviewing the manuscript.

## Notes and References

- 1 Robert Minton Taylor was the United States Encaustic Tile Company's plant superintendent from 1881 to 1883. Henry Bagley ran the "manufacturing department" of the Ohio Encaustic Tile Company of Zanesville, Ohio, from the fall of 1883 to the middle of February, 1885.
- 2 The courthouse with the historic tile floors is the third in the county's history. Muskingum County's first courthouse was a two-storey hewn-log building raised in 1808, four years after the county was established and the town of Zanesville designated the county seat. One year later another courthouse, constructed of brick and designed to resemble Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was erected. It was built not because the log courthouse needed replacing, but as a ploy by local politicians to induce the state legislature to make Zanesville the state capital. The scheme succeeded and the "courthouse" served as Ohio's statehouse from 1810 to 1812. When the legislature made the town of Chillicothe the capital in 1812 the former statehouse became Muskingum County's courthouse. "Old 1809", as the structure came to be called, served in that capacity until its deteriorated condition prompted the construction of a replacement.
- 3 Unknown, probably, to "Reason" and Townsend was the fact that floor tiles were being produced on a small scale in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia at the time.
- 4 Goodspeed Publishing Company, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Muskingum County, Ohio* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1892).
- 5 The author would very much appreciate receiving any information about Mr. Elliott which readers might be able to provide.
- 6 Hall's process was similar to one patented (No. 1537) by Frederick George Sanders in England in 1856, and was described in 1884 by Edwin Orton, Jr. in the "Clays of Ohio and the Industries Established upon them" section of the "Report of the Geological Survey of Ohio, Vol. V, Economic Geology": "Next comes those tiles made of two coloured clays; the first stamping makes the body but leaves indentations in its surface, into which the second clay is put, and this is pressed into place; the tile is then scraped to get a cleanly drawn line of both colours and again stamped with a flat die."
- 7 The English tiles per se may in fact have been cheaper, but the agent had to factor a 35 per cent (ad valorem) duty as well as shipping charges

into his bid. Considering the relatively lavish use of encaustic and imported geometric tiles in the courthouse floors, it is entirely possible that Mr. Fischer accepted a loss on the work for the sake of landing the job.

- 8 *Zanesville Daily Courier* (Zanesville, Ohio: October 29, 1888).
- 9 This the author learned when he had the opportunity to examine the backs of some temporarily dislodged border tiles. Most of the T & R Boote tiles are blue, and altogether the T & R Boote geometrics constitute at most only one per cent of the tiles making up the courthouse floors.
- 10 The overlap in English and American encaustic tile designs is currently being investigated by the author.
- 11 After one hundred and twenty five years of continuous use the floors are in only relatively fair condition today. Since their installation predates sustained commercial production by contemporary American tile manufacturers by at least five months, the Muskingum County courthouse floors are probably the oldest surviving American-made tile floors in the nation. Of course, other floors may have survived which are older. Possibilities include floors made by American Encaustic, floors made by the Philadelphia potters John Hyzer and James Lewellen, floors made by Samuel Keys and/or David Hutchinson of Pittsburgh, and floors made by unknown firms and individuals whose stories have been obscured by time. But the author has so far been unable to learn of any such floors.
- 12 It was noted in the November 9, 1878, edition of the *Zanesville Daily Courier*, for example, that "Mr. Gilbert Elliott, General Manager of the Works of the American Encaustic Tile Company in this city, returned from a very successful business trip of three weeks, last night."
- 13 In 1877 and 1878 the company installed floors in Pope's Theatre in St. Louis; the Appraiser's Office in San Francisco; the Produce Exchange in Toledo, Ohio; both the Exchange Club and Produce Exchange in Cleveland, Ohio; the Huntington Bank in Columbus, Ohio; Schultz's Opera House in Zanesville; the Marion County Courthouse in Indianapolis, Indiana; as well as banks, hospitals, theatres, businesses, and private residences throughout New York City. Elliott probably designed all of them.
- 14 Elliott's expertise in the manufacture of tile undoubtedly played a major role in the designing of the plant's layout.

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