



Ramsey County Historical Society  
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Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.  
St. Paul, MN 55102

# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

City Hall-  
County  
Courthouse  
50th Anniversary  
Issue

Volume 17  
Number 1



# Ramsey County History

Published by the  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

*This special anniversary issue of Ramsey County History has been made possible through grants from Ellerbe Associates, Inc., and West Publishing Company of St. Paul.*

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*CORRECTION* George Mitsch, Sr., mentioned in the story on St. Paul's early breweries in Volume 16, Number 2, of *Ramsey County History* was born in 1825. His son, George Mitsch, Jr., was born in 1854. Also, it was John Seegar who was president of Bonn Refrigeration.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted 1981 by the Ramsey County Historical Society, Landmark Center, 75 West Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55102. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to *Ramsey County History*. Single issues sell for \$3. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published, if accepted as space permits.

*ON THE COVER:* The St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Courthouse is a new addition to the city's skyline in this photograph taken during the middle 1930s. Kellogg Boulevard has obliterated the buildings that once lined the river side of old Third Street, but along the boulevard on the right can still be seen the remnants of 19th century St. Paul.

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:* Photographs on the cover and on page 15 are from the Ramsey County Historical Society's collection. Photographs on pages 4, 6, 9, 10, and 21, are from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. Photographs on pages 3, 12, 13, 17, and 18 are from Ellerbe Associates, Inc.



Construction is underway in this 1931 photograph which also shows the recently-razed county jail.

## The City Hall-County Courthouse And Its First Fifty Years

BY DANE SMITH

As in most other American cities, St. Paul's burghers have found it important to house their local government in structures that were a bit more grand, a little more special, than those around them.

The deeply ingrained respect for law and duly constituted government, an Anglo-Saxon tradition, may explain the feeling that the buildings in which such lofty affairs as the administration of justice and the conduct of democratic rule are carried out should inspire some respect, elicit some feeling of awe. At the same time, modern government has grown in scope and complexity, and its buildings have to work. Some deference must be made to utility, efficiency, and economy.

This year, as the city and county mark the fiftieth anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of the St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Courthouse, the building not only still fulfills those needs, but it also is a stunning example of innovative public architecture

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from the Depression era. Its functionally graceful exterior, its dark and sumptuous interiors, and the uncommon good sense of its engineering and layout already have made it the longest-lived center for local government in Ramsey County's history.

Recognized today as one of the most outstanding examples of the skyscraper or American Perpendicular style of art deco architecture in the country, the courthouse is particularly significant because of its incredibly intact interior—and at a time when the interiors of most art deco skyscrapers which are still standing have been altered almost beyond recognition. Holabird and Root, the Chicago firm that designed the building, were among the foremost architects in the United States of this style of building, which was considered futuristic in the 1920s and 1930s. Well-known for rebuilding much of Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871, they also designed Chicago's Board of Trade and the Rand Tower in Minneapolis, a fine example of classic art deco.

But beyond its architecture, the longevity of the Ramsey County courthouse also is without precedence in St. Paul. Other governmental structures built throughout the city's



St. Paul's first city hall, above, built in 1857 on the site today of Landmark Center. At right, Ramsey County's first courthouse, built in 1851.



140-odd years went up with much hoopla and hyperbole. Praised as the finest in the region, they were condemned a few decades later as inefficient eyesores.

THE EARLIEST of these was Ramsey County's first courthouse, erected in 1851 on the square bounded by Wabasha and Cedar, Fourth and Fifth streets. The land was donated by one of St. Paul's earliest settlers, Vetal Guerin. Until then the administration of justice was haphazard. In summarizing the region's earliest attempts at jurisprudence, Judge Charles E. Flandrau recalled in 1889 that the first effort to hold court was in 1842 when a "Judge Erwin came up from Prairie du Chien . . . found no court and got lost."<sup>1</sup> In 1847 a "Judge Dunn" held court at Stillwater\* at the trial of an Indian named "Wind," who had been accused of murder but was acquitted. Flandrau also recalled that the first indictment in the territory, again issued at Stillwater, was against a lawyer, William D. Phillips, who had been accused of "assault with intent to maim." The prosecution claimed that Phillips had pulled a loaded revolver and the defense claimed that the gun was not loaded. Phillips was found guilty and fined \$25 when the complainant testified that he could see the load in the gun as he stared down the barrel.

Plans for the first Ramsey County courthouse were drawn up by Dr. David Day, a pioneer physician who was serving as county clerk. He charged \$10 for his architectural

services. More than thirty-four years later, at cornerstone-laying ceremonies for the combined city hall-county courthouse built in 1885 on the same site as the first county courthouse, Dr. Day told a festive crowd what the mood was like back in 1851:

"The little village of St. Paul had at that time certainly not over 500 inhabitants, exclusive of Indians. Those who came were of a hopeful and sanguine temperament, much like the class of men who went to California that year, or such as now go to Alaska. There never was a time from that time to this when every one of these old settlers did not actually believe and proclaim it upon the house-tops in season and out of season that the weird little Indian village, amid 'old Indian graves,' would grow to be a great city set upon a hill. Their every action since shows this to be true."<sup>2</sup>

THE EDIFICE designed by Day, with "print paper and pencil and carpenter's square," was characteristic of the period. A Greek Revival design with the classical portico of a Doric temple, it had four large Tuscan columns which supported an octagonal cupola. Behind the courthouse was a log building that served as the county jail. About 1872 an adjoining building was erected on the square to accommodate the rapidly growing caseload at the courthouse.

Built of bricks, the courthouse cost \$9,000, \$5,000 of which was provided from the sale of bonds. But, as Dr. Day noted, the commissioners reversed the "modern order of things" by drawing plans before they had the financing. "Taxes and treasuries had not so far had

\*Until 1849, the Ramsey county area was part of the territory of Wisconsin and Stillwater was the county seat.

an existence. There was nothing to tax," he said. "We could issue bonds but who would buy?"

The commissioners eventually had to resort to guile to sell the bonds to a Boston financier. They lacked even a county seal, so an enterprising early resident named George W. Moore fabricated a makeshift seal by bending a printer's rule into a two-inch circle that enclosed some type and the crude seal "passed the inspection of the money lenders of Boston."

Failing to pass inspection, however, were the signatures of two county commissioners, Louis Robert and Benjamin Gervais, who each affixed an "X" to the paper. Day said the document was "ignominiously kicked out of the Boston money market," and returned for proper signature. William Pitt Murray then taught Gervais and Robert "in a single night" how to sign their names, and the bonds eventually were approved. Day observed with pride that the interest and principal were "promptly paid at maturity."

Construction began in November, 1850, and the courthouse was finished the following August. With a wood-burning furnace that could accommodate sticks six or eight feet long, the courthouse "... was the pride of the city, all important meetings and many theatrical performances being held there," according to a flyer distributed when the present courthouse opened in 1932. When the 1851 courthouse was razed, the *Pioneer Press* added up the legal activities that had taken place there over thirty-five years, and found that they included 40,295 criminal cases, 475,000 records filed for real estate, and 35,000 marriage license applications.<sup>3</sup>

In 1857, the year before Minnesota became a state, a city hall was built where Landmark Center now stands. Until then the burgeoning little river town (the population had grown to about 6,000) had conducted city government by "holding its meetings and transacting business in primitive houses and offices and the needs of the rapidly growing town demanded a municipal building." After "unlimited discussion," a newly-organized council of nine members "took decisive action" on August 12, 1856, when it ordered the purchase of a lot from "Rice and Irvine's addition" for \$1,500.<sup>4</sup>

A CONTRACT for a \$6,500 building was signed with contractors Alpheus G. Fuller and George Scott, and a completion date of May, 1857, was set. Built of stone hauled by a laborer named "Old Dave Hoar," and plastered by a former city marshal, John W.

Crosby, the two-story city hall was a "great advance for the hitherto obscure hamlet ... But the height of enthusiasm was reached when the tower welcomed the then gigantic timepiece with real moving hands, with a gong that unfailingly struck the hour." The clock, set into the clock tower underneath the cupola, was built by William Illingworth, a watchmaker whose place of business was at Fifth and Jackson streets. The bell on the cupola was manufactured and installed by McNeely & Co. of West Troy, N.Y., and "it did seem as though the people never would tire of its deep, musical voice," according to newspaper accounts.

The mayor elected that first spring of 1857 was John B. Brisbin. Other city officers whose names are prominent in St. Paul and Minnesota history were Norman W. Kittson, president of the city council, and A. L. Larpenteur, a councilman.<sup>5</sup> Orlando Simons was the city justice (an early type of municipal prosecutor and judge) who "eyed the prisoners brought before him ... and imposed the punishment the limited laws then required. To the council each week he submitted his statements of the disposition of cases and the list of arrests by the city marshal and his efficient corps of four."<sup>6</sup>

There was little for the early council members to do, and their deliberations often were refreshingly brief. The minutes of one of the first council meetings reveal that the meeting was convened, that the bonds of city officers were set at the same level as the previous year, that four city officials were sworn in, and that the meeting was adjourned.

Almost immediately, however, partisan strife entered the hall. A political transformation was in progress, with the new Republican Party challenging decades of Democratic domination. During the summer of 1857, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln's legendary foe and chairman of the senate's committee on territories, came to St. Paul for a pleasure trip. Two days after his arrival, Democratic members of the city council introduced a set of eulogistic resolutions in Douglas' honor and invited the "Little Giant" to a public dinner. One of the resolutions praised Douglas as "first among the peers," a designation that raised the dander of three Republican aldermen. One of them, L. Marvin, declared that he considered Douglas "more notorious than distinguished" and a furious debate ensued.

The Democrats retorted warmly, and there



was a scene of wild confusion. "Twelve different motions to adjourn were lost and as many to lay on the table. Both sides used every hook and crook to accomplish their object and finally the resolutions were passed by a vote of 5 to 3."<sup>7</sup>

THE BROUHAHA was widely discussed around town and Douglas, wisely sensing that his welcome was not unanimous, turned down the public dinner invitation, alleging that his visit was strictly private. He went about his business of touring the territory, stopping at Minneapolis, Stillwater, and Taylor's Falls, and left quietly. At Douglas' death, the council appropriated \$100 for defraying his memorial services.

The first city hall was the scene of some memorable events during the Civil War. Under its roof the council authorized a bounty to be paid to every Civil War volunteer, it issued congratulatory proclamations on Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and it arranged local memorial services after the assassination of Lincoln in 1865.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1870s city and county officials

**Construction began in 1885 on the combined city hall-county courthouse that replaced the 1851 structure on courthouse square between Fourth and Fifth, Wabasha and Cedar.**

began to realize they needed a new building to replace the 1851 courthouse at Fourth and Wabasha. The state legislature authorized a five-member commission consisting of Dr. Day, George W. Armstrong, William Dawson, C. D. Gilfillan, and W. G. Hendrickson. Their mission was to arrange a bond issue for a \$300,000 courthouse that would be submitted to the voters. Dr. Day toured Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, Boston, Springfield, New Haven, New York City, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati gathering information on their public buildings.

The plan was submitted to the voters in 1873, but a Depression was on and the electorate rejected the project. In 1881 the legislature authorized another try at a bond issue, and it was successful. This time, however, the project was delayed because the economy was booming. Prices were high, and

labor and materials were hard to come by. Thus, construction did not get underway until 1885.

BY THIS TIME, St. Paul was bursting at the seams and everybody wanted to make sure the new courthouse would not become obsolete in a few years. There was overwhelming sentiment to splurge, to build an imposing palace that would combine both city and county government. Deep into the plans, courthouse commission members realized that \$300,000 would not be enough. They had underestimated what "imposing" would cost so the Ramsey County legislative delegation secured an additional \$300,000 from the legislature to make certain the job could be done right. Up to that time in St. Paul's history, local architects always had been chosen for public building projects, and this was no exception. The commission chose Edward P. Bassford, a pioneer St. Paulite who was born in Maine in 1837.

Bassford also designed the McColl Building, built in 1890 at Fourth and Jackson streets; the Quinlan House on Fifth street; the Walsh building at Temperance and Eighth street; the Germania Life Insurance Company building (later the Guardian building, and now razed) at Fourth and Minnesota; and (probably) the Louise Block, on W. Seventh street (Fort Road). As was evident in the Germania and McColl buildings, Bassford was influenced by the Richardsonian Romanesque style of architecture, which during the 1880s and 1890s was considered innovative. He used it also for the Ramsey County courthouse and, had the building survived, it quite likely would be under restoration today.

At the laying of the cornerstone on October 13, 1885, the main orator, General J. H. Baker, delivered an interminable speech extolling the building's virtues. With typical Victorian flourishes, he compared it to architectural styles it did not really resemble. A minor excerpt: "But the old must give way to the new. A grand and impressive edifice is here to arise, larger, loftier, nobler; its walls of native pink-tinted stone, with its girdle of granite and aspiring pinnacle, will lift themselves in solid and stately beauty. Proportion and symmetry will capture the admiring gaze. This structure is to be of the Renaissance, a style of architecture which originated in Italy in the Fifteenth Century, and which followed the Gothic in Europe, and was a return from the latter to something of classical ideas . . ."

THE NEW COURTHOUSE, which covered an area of 260 feet by 163 feet and featured a main tower rising 218 feet, was a massive structure. Its load-bearing outer walls of Kasota stone were four feet thick, and they diminished only six inches in width with each successive story. Brick and blue limestone were used for the inside walls.

The cornerstone-laying was one of St. Paul's most extravagant ceremonies, and far more elaborate than the festivities surrounding similar ceremonies for the present courthouse. Most city and county offices and many private businesses closed for the day. Some 1,000 Masons from almost every Masonic lodge in the state had been designated the main participants in the ceremony and they gathered at Rice Park about noon for a parade that wound around the downtown and assembled on the Wabasha street side of the site.

The participation of the Masons brought protests from Catholic leaders who objected to the ceremonies being conducted in accordance with Masonic rites. A letter to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* argued that, "The courthouse and city hall, for which all citizens are taxed, is not the property of any society or sect, but belongs to the people . . . We protest against it as Catholics, because the use of the Masonic ritual on such public occasions is known to be extremely offensive to the whole Catholic body."

The protest failed, but the newspapers reported that the antagonism prevented a large number of people from attending the ceremonies. Forty-seven years later, Archbishop John Gregory Murray offered the benediction at the cornerstone-laying of the present courthouse, and there were no Masonic ceremonies.

General Baker explained why the Masons were there. The "brotherhood" of Masons, he said, descended from "ancestral corporations of architects, protected alike by clerical and secular power, that erected those gigantic monuments of Gothic architecture all over Europe."

AMONG THE OBJECTS placed in the cornerstone in 1885 were Protestant and Catholic versions of the Bible, an 1885 St. Paul city directory, post office records, newspapers (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *St. Paul Globe*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *Farmers Advocate*, *American Israelite* and *Daily Minnehaha*, a German paper), paintings of the old and new courthouses, a compilation of the tenth census, an 1884 legislative manual, and various other documents and coins. When the court-

house was torn down in 1934, the time capsule's contents were transferred to the keystone of an archway at Como Park.<sup>10</sup>

Construction was to have been finished in early 1888, but it was not until May 6, 1889, that the judges and city and county officials were able to move in. There followed more speeches, more processions and at least one pronouncement that the new civic monument would last for centuries. Yet, three-and-a-half decades later, in January, 1925, the headlines read, "Court House Called Barn by Grand Jury." The Ramsey County grand jury had characterized the building as "antiquated, inconvenient, and an architectural mistake."

The jury, following a thorough inspection, observed that the building had been built when the county's population was about 100,000, and the increasing court load and creation of new public departments far outstripped the capacity of the building. The county surveyor, the child welfare board, the civil service department, the water and police departments already had been moved out of the courthouse, and the public works department was about to move, also. Courtrooms were condemned as noisy, poorly ventilated, and badly lighted, and the basement was considered an outright safety hazard.

"We, therefore, unanimously recommend a new municipal building designed to house adequately the activities of the city and county and recommend the abandonment for all time of the old type of courthouse and city hall and the substitution and construction of a modern up-to-date structure of office building type to house properly all the activities of the city and county that can be put in one building," the jury report stated. "It is our opinion that any private enterprise carried on under conditions which exist in this building would be subject to prosecution by the fire and health departments and the labor commission."<sup>11</sup>

THE GRAND JURY'S denunciation of the old building brought a hot retort from at least one Edward P. Bassford fan, K. F. Lott, who wrote a letter to the editor of the *Pioneer Press* blasting the jury report as an "uncalled for slam." The writer contended that Bassford was one of St. Paul's "most highly respected citizens who died twelve years ago and therefore cannot defend himself."

"At the time the courthouse and city hall were built it was considered a handsome building and was pointed to with pride and the papers of the day praised it, for it was designed

according to the vogue of public buildings in that day," Lott continued. "Since then its interior has been butchered and re-arranged until it is a crazy patch." Even Lott conceded, however, that "the need for a new up-to-date building is unquestioned," but, he admonished, "let us get it without slandering the dead."

Within nine years from the date of the grand jury report, the old courthouse was rubble. The only interest the once magnificent structure could generate was a brief scramble for the fifty-three gargoyles that adorned its exterior. Some had been given names over the years—Susie the Sneerer, Herman the Horrible, Rufus the Rogue, Willie the Wow, Oscar the Odd. At least half were sold for \$10 apiece and some became driveway post decorations. Fifteen were to have been placed at a new memorial building at Acacia Park cemetery near Mendota. Also surviving the demolition were a few "ancient judge's benches" that were bought and converted into bars for drinking establishments and private homes.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the self-congratulation that attended its construction, the vacating of the 1885 county courthouse attracted little notice. A brief story in the *Pioneer Press* noted the adjournment of the last court term there in 1932, and the moving of 100,000 files, records and dockets:

"THE WEATHERED WALLS of the old building have harbored a growth in litigation comparable to the city and county's progress since the beginning of the century. Lawyers who later became famous as jurists or national officials and a governor have argued cases in its high-ceilinged courtrooms. Among these are Pierce Butler, Sr., now a justice of the United States Supreme Court; William D. Mitchell, now United States attorney general; Frank B. Kellogg, former secretary of state; John B. Sanborn, now a justice of the United States circuit court of appeals, and several others who became justices of the Minnesota Supreme Court. The governor is Floyd B. Olson, Minnesota's present chief executive, who delivered the argument in a case involving a state highway labor dispute."

The court bench at the time of the move was occupied by Hugo D. Hanft, senior judge, and Judges J. C. Michael, Carlton F. McNally, John W. Boerner, Richard D. O'Brien, Kenneth G. Brill, Gustavus Loevinger and Richard A. Walsh. But long before the grand jury report, farsighted civil leaders had been concerned about both the courthouse and the





general direction that development was taking in the city.

Unlike Salt Lake City and a few other fortunate American cities, St. Paul had not developed according to any master plan. Little thought was given to the overall system of streets, bridges, residential platting, and traffic patterns. Although the famous landscape architect, Horace W. S. Cleveland had developed a plan that included creation of the East and West River roads, it wasn't until 1912 that the first organized attempt was made at winning public support for long-term planning. That year a City Planning Conference was organized, composed of representatives from various civic clubs. The loosely-knit group failed from lack of leadership, according to George H. Herrold, a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers and managing director and engineer for the city's Planning Board. In a paper prepared for the *Civil Engineering Journal* for December, 1931, Herrold noted that the first Planning Board was not created until 1918, and it was another eight years before the board presented a definite long-term program for city improvements.

In 1927, a number of individual bond issues were submitted to the voters but soundly defeated. The St. Paul Association of Commerce led the opposition, arguing that the projects were not based on a comprehensive study of the city's needs. However, the business groups advocated defeat of the bond issues with the promise that they would study St. Paul's needs and report to the public.

THE PLEDGE WAS fulfilled with the creation of the United Improvement Council

**Site of the new courthouse, now Kellogg and Wabasha, in 1930 before demolition of the "conglomeration of rundown buildings" that once stood there.**

and the publication of the promised report in 1928.

At first the group estimated that costs would approach \$45 million for all the "desirable" projects it could envision. Reality soon prevailed, priorities were set, and the projects were trimmed to \$15 million. The plan called for widening of streets, construction of a downtown airport, new schools, a pioneering attempt at controlling the dumping of sewage into the Mississippi (in conjunction with other municipalities in the metropolitan area), and a new \$4 million city hall and county courthouse. The five-year plan passed by a wide margin.<sup>13</sup>

A key figure in the planning effort was Carl Herbert, director of the St. Paul Bureau of Municipal Research, an independent organization with chapters all over the United States. Herbert, now 87 years old, still lives in St. Paul. In an interview for this article, Herbert said that his agency was instrumental in getting the public improvement program off the ground. He recalled the defeat of the 1927 bonding issues and his opposition to them as a matter of "needing a larger program." The most important individual in that effort, Herbert believes, was William H. Oppenheimer, St. Paul attorney, president of the United Improvement Council, and later a member of the Advisory City Hall and Courthouse Commission.

AT EVERY STEP in the planning, both for the comprehensive building project and the courthouse, Oppenheimer's judgment and in-



fluence were felt and no important decisions were made without his approval, Herbert said. Herbert was secretary of the Advisory Courthouse Commission, which was appointed by the judges of the district court. The original nine-member commission consisted of the mayor, L. C. Hodgson; James Clancy, a city council member; county commissioners Arthur Stewart and Frank H. Gibbs; and four private citizens, Ralph Budd, president of the Great Northern Railway; C. W. Bunn, general counsel and vice-president of the Northern Pacific; Homer Clark, president of West Publishing; and Oppenheimer. Later replacements on the commission were Mayors Bundlic and William Mahoney for Hodgson; council member Irving Pearce for council member Clancy, and F. R. Bigelow for Budd, after the latter moved to Chicago. The most influential members of the commission, Herbert contends, were the private citizens—Oppenheimer, Bunn, Clark, and Budd.<sup>14</sup>

Their first task was selection of a site for the new courthouse. A statement Oppenheimer wrote when the courthouse was nearing completion, sheds no light on the reasons for their choice. He simply said: "After careful consideration the new location was decided upon as the most desirable." The lack of information is curious, because Oppenheimer goes into minute detail about every other aspect of the project. With the passage of years, the truth perhaps has emerged. Herbert maintains that one reason the Kellogg Boulevard block was selected was because of the lobbying of

**The old courthouse looms in the distance as its successor goes up. This picture is dated September 1, 1931.**

William Hamm and "real estate interests who didn't want the center of town disturbed." Hamm "owned a lot of property," Herbert said, "and no one really objected" to his demand that the new building be built within one block of the old courthouse. Kellogg Boulevard was known as Third Street then and there were buildings on both sides of the cobblestone throughfare, but in 1927 and 1928 the city had begun to widen and upgrade the street. The actual block on which the new city hall-county courthouse was to be built contained a "conglomeration of run-down buildings," Herbert said, most of them old brick commercial and warehouse structures. Also on the block, at Fourth and St. Peter, was the county jail, a well-built structure that was left standing because its incorporation into the courthouse would have been too expensive.

THE COMMISSION SPENT \$500,000 to acquire the block and raze the buildings on it. It negotiated the sale of the former courthouse block for \$700,000 and a guarantee that at least \$2 million in improvements would go up at that site. Oppenheimer proudly pointed out that the agreement the commission had worked out permitted the city to use the old courthouse until the new building was ready, thus saving rent. He also predicted that the sale and the proposed new development would bring in taxes and revenue that would more than offset the interest on the bonds for the

new courthouse.<sup>15</sup> However, the Depression prevented the purchaser of the old site from following through on his promise. Not until November of 1951 was the land sold; the east half of the old courthouse block to the Minnesota Mutual Life Insurance Co. for \$226,000, and the southwest quarter to William D. Clapp for \$152,000. Clapp made his purchase on behalf of several businessmen.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* recounted the history of the block throughout the twenty-two years from 1929 to 1951:

"The property was sold to the Morris T. Baker Co. of Minneapolis on a bid of \$700,000 plus certain other conditions. The latter included a guarantee that the company would put up at least \$2 million worth of buildings, that it would pay the cost of razing the old structure, and even that it would grant the city a 20-foot strip along Cedar for street widening, should that be decided upon.

"The Morris firm had one important reservation—it could sell immediately the quarter blocks at Wabasha and Fifth and Cedar and Fifth and get immediate title. The contract was signed November 5, 1929, when some financial clouds, looked upon merely as a 'minor recession,' had appeared in the sky. The northwest corner was quickly sold to the Northern States Power Co., the city and county were paid \$100,000 as part of the purchase price and delivered the deed for the quarter.

"Soon after, the Depression had whipped up full force and the whole program eventually fell apart. There were lawsuits, and the final outcome was that the city collected some additional money but got the remaining three quarters back on its hands again. For awhile after the old structure was torn down, the lot was an unkempt tract of dirt, mud, dust and weeds, depending on the weather. Businessmen in the vicinity finally tired of that and raised a fund with which the city planted grass and a hedge.

"FOR YEARS, no further effort was made to put the land to private use. It was utilized, however, to a considerable extent during World War II. A Red Cross hut was built there. It was at times a municipal gathering place. Carnival ice palaces and displays were there. And on one occasion scrap iron collected in a war scrap drive was piled there for several weeks as a patriotic object lesson—and the following spring there were no dandelions where the scrap had rested." (The square eventually came to be called Victory Square.)

Once the land for the new courthouse had been acquired, the commission's next task was to decide what kind of building they wanted. Dividing into three groups, commission members traveled around the country visiting cities of comparable size that had erected public buildings in recent years. Herbert recalls visiting Hartford and Chicago, and talking to the deans of the schools of architecture at Harvard and Yale. After looking around for a few months, a consensus began to emerge: St. Paul's newest city hall and county courthouse would be no cavernous mausoleum raised in tribute to ancient styles.

"The various groups returned unanimous on two points," Oppenheimer reported. "Namely: that the building to be constructed should be of a dignified office type, and second, should be planned from the inside out; that as a tailor makes a suit to fit the individual man, so a building should merely be the garment, as it were, covering and fitting the framework and needs of the governmental functions to be housed therein; that buildings not so planned, while beautiful to look upon, were all too frequently impractical, unsuited to carrying on of governmental functions efficiently and did not take proper cognizance of the future."<sup>16</sup>

WITH THOSE principles in mind, the commission began to cast about for an architect. They eventually decided to choose two architects who would work in combination, one national and one local, and to select them directly rather than through a design competition. National firms invited to appear before the commission were Harvey Corbett of New York, Paul P. Crey of Philadelphia, Cass Gilbert of New York, Holabird and Root of Chicago, James Gable Rogers of New York, Albert Randolph Ross of Milwaukee, and Eliel Saarinen of Detroit. Local architects who responded to the commission's invitation were Lambert Bassindale, Thomas Ellerbe and Company, C. A. Hausler, William Ingeman, Clarence H. Johnston, Edwin H. Lundie, Slifer and Abrahamson, A. H. Stem, Toltz, King, and Day, and Kenneth Worthen.

Holabird and Root was already Herbert's favorite. He had heard good things about the firm from the dean of Yale's architecture school. In keeping with the commission's criteria, many of the company's designs of this period were contemporary, which at that time meant art deco. Herbert's preference apparently influenced Oppenheimer and the rest of the commission. Oppenheimer later expressed

*(Continued on page 14)*

appreciation for Herbert's services in the selection of Holabird and Root and Thomas Ellerbe & Company.<sup>17</sup>

Ellerbe, however, had to resort to some maneuvering to land his own commission. His architectural firm is now one of the ten largest in the United States, but in 1930 it was not even one of the largest in St. Paul. Ellerbe had inherited a small architectural and engineering firm from his father and was just beginning to make a name for himself in Rochester, where he was designing buildings for the Mayo Clinic.

"There were a half-dozen big architects in St. Paul and we were not one of them," said the 88-year-old Ellerbe in a recent interview. "But we were up and coming and creating a lot of dust. I felt we were strong enough to do it." The rivalry locally was intense; the Depression was on its way and practically everybody needed the contract.

MEANWHILE, ELLERBE, who knew that the commission favored Holabird and Root, made it known that he favored working with that firm, also. Although work elsewhere was slowing down, he maintained a staff of about 100 draftsmen and designers, partly, he said, for humanitarian reasons and partly to demonstrate that he was big enough for the job. He sealed the contract, however, when he staged a lavish exhibition of his work, using half a floor of the Minnesota building. It was billed as a "one-firm-art-and-architecture show," a dramatic means of demonstrating the firm's ability.

According to the Fall, 1980, *Ellerbe Review*, a company publication, Ellerbe "selected stone carvings, bronze castings, stained glass, and textile samples, and placed them strategically around the room to add color and interest to the otherwise flat look of the prints, drawings, charts, and photographs that made up the bulk of the show.

"The next day the public arrived, along with newspaper reporters, who sensed the air of excitement. They wrote glowing stories for their papers on 'Ellerbe Architects at Work,' and more people came. The very community that had been largely unaware of Ellerbe as a valuable home town product, suddenly discovered it. Less than a month after its exhibition, (in February, 1930) Ellerbe was awarded the coveted commission." Said Herbert: "Oppenheimer swung it for Ellerbe. There was no division on the commission once the big four decided . . . Tom was a master salesman."

Today, Ellerbe still thinks the arty decor swung the vote.

Now the mission was to meet the commission's specifications for an efficient and practical structure. Working with the commission, the architects assessed the needs of county and city government and the courts through exhaustive surveys and questionnaires.

"Practically one year was spent in this planning," Oppenheimer wrote, and "not a contract . . . was let until not merely the floor plan of each department was laid out showing size, shape, and location, but there was located thereon every desk and the work to be performed therein clearly identified and laid out." Everything was to be planned so that space and design would be adequate fifty to seventy-five years in the future. Not even Oppenheimer could have guessed at the spectacular growth of government since then. City and county offices have spilled over into the City Hall Annex across Fourth Street and many welfare offices are now located in the American Center Building, but the dream is close to realization. It is not likely that the present building will be vacant in the foreseeable future, and a century's use is feasible.

OPPENHEIMER OBSERVED that in 1930, only 50 to 55 per cent of the space in most public buildings could be used for the functions of government. In the average private building, only 67 to 68 per cent of the space was usable. But in the new courthouse, 72.9 per cent of its space was usable. By contrast, the Minnesota state capitol is only about 25 per cent functional, Ellerbe said. The architects thoughtfully left the fifth and thirteenth floors unfinished to cope with future needs for space. The building was also designed with easily removed interior walls to provide flexibility if conditions changed.

But some concessions had to be made to grandeur. Oppenheimer reported that, "In its design and execution dignity and simplicity have been sought. The complete absence of 'frills' on the exterior and inside adds, it is believed, to its beauty as well as to the economy of construction and maintenance. The art or decorative work is confined to the carvings to be made by Lee Lawrie of New York on the exterior of the Third and Fourth Street entrances, the six elevator doors on the first floor by Albert Stewart of New York, depicting the history of this community, four murals by John Norton\* of Chicago in the

\*Norton also did murals for Purcell and Elmslie, and for Frank Lloyd Wright.

council chambers and the statue (the 44-foot high Indian 'God of Peace') by Carl Milles in the main concourse. All of these men are internationally known, their work will be a distinct contribution to the life of this city and the interesting fact is that while in most public buildings approximately 12 per cent of the costs, exclusive of furnishings, has been expended for work of this type, the expenditure in St. Paul will be less than 3 per cent, all devoted to a few outstanding works rather than to a large number of mediocre character."<sup>18</sup>

THE FOUR PANELS in the council chambers, which are currently undergoing a \$10,000 cleaning process, reach nearly the full height of the room. They depict St. Paul's evolution as a transportation center, "from canoe days to speeding railway trains," reported the *Pioneer Press* when the murals were unveiled in the mid-1930s.

"Dominating each painting is a single figure, of heroic size as compared with the details of background," continued writer Frances Boardman. "First is the pioneer, the voyageur with his canoe paddle; the steamship captain appears in the adjacent panel, both of these being against the east wall of the room. On the west face are the railroad surveyor of yesterday, and next to him the skilled controller of rail transportation today ... the paintings might be called conservative expressions of an art which is plainly awake to modern influences..."

Concessions to embellishment actually were many. The same Depression that delayed the sale of Victory Square proved a benevolent fluke for the courthouse commission. Plummeting prices for materials and labor meant that \$4 million would go a lot further than anyone dreamed. As a result, the commission was able to afford construction materials and decorative details of unparalleled opulence.

The imported and domestic woods used in the building were, as Oppenheimer put it at the time, "believed to be more beautiful than that to be found in any other building in this country." From Mexico, South and Central America came prima vera, Honduras mahogany, Mexican mahogany and amipera. English oak, French walnut, Pollard oak and Austrian oak came from Europe. Africa contributed avodire and African mahogany. Laurel, rosewood and teak were imported from India, Burma, and China. Blackwood and Tasmania oak were furnished by Australia. Domestic wood included red and white



Laying of the cornerstone for the new city hall/courthouse in 1931.

oak, walnut, birch, butternut and maple, and koa from the Hawaii. In short, all the continents except tree-less Antarctica are represented.

All the wood was cut and finished by St. Paul craftsmen. Each panel core was made of wood that had been seasoned outdoors for at least a year, and kiln-dried for at least six weeks.

While wood is used for walls on lobbies above the third floor, imported marbles were incorporated into the lobbies of the first three floors. The main lobby, Memorial Hall, is finished entirely in Blue Belge from Belgium and high-lighted by sixteen hollow bronze columns, eight on each side, slotted and lighted from within. Other marbles are Loreda Chiaro from Italy, Hauteville and Champville from France, and Tinos from Greece. Again, in keeping with the Depression-era pledge of the commissioners to employ only St. Paul labor, all marble was finished locally.<sup>19</sup>

According to Ellerbe, the commission was able to authorize wages 12.5 per cent higher than the going rate in those days, which gave the contractor, Foley Brothers of St. Paul, the opportunity to hire the best and the most skilled labor. But this was the Depression, and 12.5 per cent amounted to 45 cents an hour, rather than 40 cents.

At first, Holabird and Root dominated the planning. Ellerbe recalled that the Chicago firm was given the "basic planning," which entailed the general exterior design, and the fundamental concepts of the interior. "We

were office boys for the first few months," Ellerbe remembered. "and we did the nuts and bolts work. They had more people." As planning and construction progressed, however, Ellerbe's people became more involved, mainly because they were on site and Holabird and Root remained headquartered in Chicago. Both staffs exchanged personnel.

Ellerbe's strengths were in the area of detail design and engineering. The evidence can be seen in the way the art deco theme is used throughout the building, even down to such details as door handles, electrical receptacles, light fixtures, mailboxes, stair railings, washrooms, even departmental signs. Design innovations included what were considered the country's fastest and most modern elevators (they are now among the last to be run by operators rather than by automatic control). Concealed radiation and a thermostatic control system resulted in lower heating bills than those incurred at the old courthouse, despite the fact that the new building was three times larger.

OTHER INNOVATIONS included the control of all clocks from a master board in the "penthouse," which also contained a sixty-gallon soap dispenser that automatically filled all the dispensers in the restrooms. The building had its own well to provide cooled drinking-fountain water.<sup>20</sup> Two of those early features no longer exist. Clocks have been transistorized and the soap dispenser system has been abandoned. But the only major alteration in the building took place in 1978 when all the casement windows were replaced with modern thermal barrier types to stop water leakage and energy loss.

Despite labor-intensive work with luxurious materials and the time required for overseas transportation of woods and marbles, the courthouse was built in three years, from the time the architects were named to the dedication ceremonies on December 19, 1932. Ellerbe recalled only two major delays: the discovery of "voids" or small caves during the digging of the foundation, requiring some refiguring and extra expense, and occasional difficulty in getting steel, which was shipped up the Mississippi river.

Although the courthouse's structural integrity has never been seriously questioned, there were some problems involving leakage that set off the newspapers. Nothing makes better copy than the discovery of major flaws in an expensive public building. In February, 1939, water was found seeping into the building's roofs on the sixteenth and eighteenth floors, and over the council chamber

roofs. A general panic followed, and estimates were that it would cost \$2,000 to replace the entire roof. A few days later, city architect C. A. Bassford\* announced that the building's custodians had caused the leakage by attempting to remove snow and ice with picks and other sharp instruments. Bassford estimated repairs at \$384 and advised the mayor that the roof was of such advanced design that it required no snow removal. Chief custodian Scott Gipple promised that his men would stay off the roof.

Despite the building's elegance and splendor, the dedication ceremonies that December of 1932 were far more subdued than those for the courthouse it succeeded. Perhaps this was due to the closeness of Christmas and the fact that some offices already had moved in and were in operation. Maybe it was the deepening of the Depression and a general lack of enthusiasm for what seemed to be the official opening of another office building, albeit it a fine one.

The dedicatory address was delivered by United States Attorney General William D. Mitchell, a former St. Paul lawyer who had spent much of his career in the old courthouse.

As a crowning anticlimax, the next day's festivities were devoted to the newly completed municipal auditorium, where a hockey exhibition was held in the arena, followed by musical entertainment in the theater and dancing in Stem Hall. The celebration program for the two-day event provided little information about the courthouse, but emphasized the "unique features" of "our completed all-purpose auditorium."

#### ANNOTATIONS

1. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 2, 1889, pg. 1.
2. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 14, 1885, pg. 1.
3. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 7, 1889, pg. 1.
4. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 3, 1892, pg. 1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 14, 1885, pg. 2.
10. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 3, 1933.
11. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 29, 1925.
12. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, (no date)
13. Herrold, George H. "St. Paul Plans for the Future"; *Civil Engineering*, Dec., 1931, pg. 1332.
14. Herbert, Carl. Taped interview.
15. Program, brochure, published for courthouse dedication, Dec. 20, 1932.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Sept. 26, 1976, pg. 1, Family Life Section.

\*The son of Edward P. Bassford, who designed the 1885 courthouse.



Ramsey County History  
published semi-annually by  
the Ramsey County Historical Society  
Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
St. Paul, Minn. 55102

### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm house of the mid-nineteenth century period.*

The Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. Its chief function is to collect and preserve the history of the city and the county and share that history with the people who live here. The Society is the county's historian. It preserves those things from the past that are the community's treasures — its written records through the Society's library; its historic sites through establishment of the Irvine Park Historic District and its successful efforts to help prevent destruction of the Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. It shares these records through the publishing of its magazine, brochures, pamphlets, and prints; through conducting historic sites tours of the city, teaching classes, producing exhibits on the history of the city, and maintaining its museum on rural county history. The Gibbs Farm Museum, the oldest remaining farm home in Ramsey County, was acquired by the Society in 1949 and opened to the public in 1954 as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler. In 1966 the Society moved onto the property a one-room rural country schoolhouse dating from the 1870s. Now restored to the period of the late 1890s, the school is used for classes, meetings, and as the center for a summer schoolhouse program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains the center's only permanent exhibit, a history of the building during the seventy-five years it was the federal government's headquarters in St. Paul.

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