

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Ramsey County  
and Its Early  
Courthouses

*Page 19*

**Fall, 1993**

Volume 28, Number 3

**Newly Restored, Newly Renovated—  
The City Hall and County Courthouse**

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*Memorial Hall and the God of Peace, restored so that they shine once again in all their glory in the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.*



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 28, Number 3

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## An Award-winning Team



*Ramsey County History* has been awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the American Association for State and Local History. Above (from left) are some of the Editorial Board members who guide the publication process: Priscilla Farnham, executive director, Ramsey County Historical Society; Thomas C. Buckley; Virginia B. Kunz, the magazine's editor; John M. Lindley, Editorial Board chairman; Thomas H. Boyd; Arthur Mc Watt; and Thomas J. Kelley. Not pictured: Charlton Dietz, Laurie Murphy, and Dr. Thomas B. Mega. Photo by Richard Strom.



# A Short and Happy History of Ramsey County And Its Two Earlier Courthouses

*Dane Smith*

*Editor's Note: This short history of St. Paul's earlier city halls and of Ramsey County and its two earlier courthouses, as well as the article that follows on the creation of the God of Peace statue, are excerpted from earlier articles written by Dane Smith for Volume 17, Number 1, of Ramsey County History, published by the Ramsey County Historical Society in 1981, the fiftieth anniversary of the laying of the building's cornerstone. They are used here with the permission of the author.*

The longevity of the present city hall and Ramsey County courthouse is without precedence in St. Paul. Other governmental structures built throughout the city's history 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 Vetal Guerin, one of St. Paul's earliest settlers. 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."

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 region, again issued at Stillwater, was against a lawyer, William D. Phillips, who had been ac-

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



*The castle-like 1880s city hall-country courthouse around 1910. C. P. Gibson photo, Minnesota Historical Society.*

cused of "assault with intent to maim." The prosecution claimed that 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.

On March 3, 1849, the bill creating the Territory of Minnesota was approved by Congress. The following September, the first territorial legislature met and carved out nine counties, Ramsey County among them and named for Alexander Ramsey, the territory's first governor. The county's first officers were scarcely numerous. David Day, a pioneer physician, was named register of deeds; C. P. V. Lull, sheriff; Louis Robert and Andre Godfrey,

commissioners; and Henry A. Lambert, judge of probate.

At first Ramsey County's boundaries extended up the Mississippi almost to its source and included all of the territory east of the river, except for the valley of the St. Croix. Soon, however, as the territory filled up, the county shrank in size. In 1856, when St. Anthony was detached from Ramsey County and added to Hennepin County, Ramsey County's northern boundary extended only as far north as the Rum River at present-day Anoka. Finally, in 1874 West St. Paul was annexed to St. Paul and Ramsey County and the county's boundaries thereafter remained un-



changed.

Plans for the first Ramsey County courthouse were drawn up by Dr. Day. 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, among 'old Indian graves,' would grow to be a great city set upon a hill. Their every action since shows this to be true."

The edifice designed by Dr. 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 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 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 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 *St. Paul 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.

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.

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



*St. Paul's first city hall (above), built in 1857 on the site today of Landmark Center. Reproduced from an Edward A. Bromley postcard, Ramsey County Historical Society collections. Ramsey County's first courthouse (top) was built in 1851 on the square bounded by Fourth and Fifth, Wabasha and Cedar Streets. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

was reached when the town welcomed the then gigantic timepiece with real moving hands, [and] a gong that unflinchingly struck the hour."

The clock, set into the clock tower underneath the cupola, was built by William Illingworth, a watch-maker 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, New York, and "it did seem as though the people never would tire of its deep, musical voice," according to newspaper accounts.

The mayor elected that spring of 1857 was John B. Brisbin. Other city officers whose names are prominent in St. Paul and Minnesota history were Norman W. Kitt-

\*Actually, the 1850 census listed 1,294 residents.



son, president of the City Council, and A. L. Larpeur, a councilman. 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."

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's 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," the *Pioneer Press* reported.

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's death in 1861, 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.

In the early 1870s city and county officials began to realize they needed a new building to replace the 1851 county 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 legislature 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 West 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 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 in 1931. 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 par-



ticipants 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."

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 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.

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."

"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.

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.

*Dane Smith was a reporter covering city hall and the county courthouse for the St. Paul Pioneer Press when he wrote this and the God of Peace article for Ramsey County History in 1981. After three years with the Pioneer Press's Washington Bureau, he returned to the Twin Cities and joined the staff of the Star Tribune as political reporter.*

## Creation in Stone: Carl Milles's 'Finest': The God of Peace

From the beginning, something seemed to be missing in the plans for the main floor concourse of the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. The long, narrow, high-ceilinged hall itself was splendid. Although it was a concession to "public building grandeur," it served a legitimate function of accommodating spaciously the flow of pedestrian traffic from the main entrance on Fourth Street to the office space on both sides of the ground floor, to the six tower elevators near the exit to Kellogg Boulevard.

Looking back in 1981 at the age of eighty-eight, Thomas Ellerbe remembered his persistent feeling that "we architects had not taken advantage of what could be one of the most unusual and outstanding focal points in the structure, the place most visitors would have to pass." A piece of colossal art in the form of a sculptured human figure would be "the only solution in my mind," he said.

Holabird and Root agreed. However, it was William Oppenheimer, chairman of the City Hall and Courthouse Commission, who would eventually suggest that the sculpture be designated a war memorial as a means of placating a group of veterans who wanted two floors of the courthouse for meeting rooms.

The next task was to find a sculptor. On Ellerbe's next trip to Chicago, he lunched with associate John Root, who had just returned from Sweden. Root recommended Carl Milles, a Swedish artist whose work Root had liked. Root urged Ellerbe to study photographs of Milles's work and suggested that Ellerbe meet Milles, who had just been appointed "sculptor-in-residence" at Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

Ellerbe was excited by the photographs. Plans were made immediately for a trip to Cranbrook, and Carl Herbert,





*One of the six sculpted ground floor elevator doors, created by E. R. Stewart for the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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