RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Ramsey County and Its Early Courthouses

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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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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.*

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,

Carl Milles. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

secretary of the Courthouse Commission, was invited to go along. Ellerbe and Herbert were won over, both by the artist's personal philosophy and by his professional attitude. There was one small problem. Milles was a confirmed pacifist and he at first flatly refused to be associated with a war memorial.

Ellerbe and Herbert managed to convince Milles that they would be happy with a design celebrating peace, but a fine line would have to be trod. The commission was sensitive to growing public criticism of the $100,000 that had been budgeted for the project. This was the depression, many people in St. Paul were standing in bread lines, and the commission decided that no formal contract with Milles would be drawn until he presented an idea that would be acceptable to the public

Milles was born June 23, 1875, in Lagga, a tiny village near Uppsala, Sweden. His father had been an officer in the Franco-Prussian war, and he had adopted the surname Milles during his military service.

Young Milles was apprenticed to a Stockholm cabinetmaker. He supplemented carving lessons in the cabinetmaker's shop by night courses in drawing, modeling, and design in the Technical School in Stockholm. When he was seventeen, his father permitted him to study art. Five years later he won his first prize as a sculptor – about $50 in a minor exhibition. For the next twelve years he studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

In 1901 Milles participated in a competition which was to focus considerable attention on him. Sweden proposed to erect a statue commemorating Sten Sture, Sweden's fifteenth-century national hero. Milles was awarded fourth prize, but the students at the University of Uppsala, where the memorial was to be erected, attacked the jury's award with such vigor that Milles was asked to submit a second model. The commission was granted in 1912, and thirteen years later the Sture memorial was erected. It stands today as one of Sweden's most notable objects of art.

Milles received many commissions in Sweden, traveled in Italy and Germany and was internationally famous long before representatives from St. Paul approached him with the suggestion of a war memorial. He was by that time approaching sixty years of age, and his personal appearance must have attracted attention on St. Paul's streets. Ellerbe and Herbert remembered him as a "caricature" of the offbeat artist.

"He was a very heavy man and always wore black clothes and a pie-shaped hat," Ellerbe recalled in a 1981 interview. "He wore a loose coat and would always button only the top button, so the coat would splay out around him." He had, however, an "absolutely delightful" personality and a cheerful demeanor. He was gracious, possessed a wry humor, and was fond of children.

Milles's first three concepts, however, were turned down. The first, a representation of the Apostle Paul, was beautifully done, but Milles's sense of humor got the better of him, Ellerbe said.

"The statue looked more like a Don Quixote, but worse than that, the halo was cocked at an angle, giving the saint the appearance of being slightly inebriated, which would never pass in a religious community such as St. Paul." The commission also was not enthralled with a clearly clerical theme for a secular building. The issue of separation of church and state, as much as anything, doomed the first Milles idea.

The next submission was a figure, Mississippi the Father of Waters, a rugged male figure holding a fish on his left breast, with water surging from the fish over the statue and onto a pond at the bottom. It was suggested that the figure be made of cast glass, but no one could imagine a thirty-foot glass statue.

"Owens-Corning Glass of New York spent nearly a year experimenting with large glass blocks, which would have to be ground to precise shapes," Ellerbe remembered. "There didn't seem to be a way to cool huge blocks of glass without warping and excessive grinding, which made the undertaking prohibitive in cost.

"The third idea was to design a statue with a war theme, although everyone who knew Milles knew he would find a peaceful theme." Sure enough, he produced a three-foot-high plaster cast of a soldier, a stark nude figure, symbolizing return from war. He was crowned with a laurel wreath and held a sheaf of wheat and a sickle, symbolizing swords beaten into plowshares.

"The Courthouse Commission presented the model to a group of 100 mothers of veterans at the St. Paul Athletic Club. Milles uncovered the statue and began an impassioned explanation of its symbolism.

"The mothers listened to this beautiful, almost heart-rending speech, with ill-concealed distain," Ellerbe said. "Finally, one woman announced that the statue was a disgrace, that it was downgrading their sons. They wanted a real fighting man returning from the trenches with mud and blood, guns and bayonets, strong war heroes.

"Milles listened in consternation, then said in a quiet but agitated voice that he would not create any such thing. He thought we should honor peace rather than war. A violent discussion followed. Milles left the room. Outside, he said, 'Tom, I am going back to Sweden where people understand me. These Americans are terrible . . . They are warlike, and I will have nothing to do with them.' He left St. Paul and we did not hear from him for months."

When he returned, he had with him the design of the God of Peace. He explained later that the idea was based on his recollection of a scene in Oklahoma in 1929. He was invited by friends to witness an Indian ceremony celebrating the New Year.

"It was very inspiring to me," he said. "Before 3,000 Indians and we three whites, the oldest Indian spoke of peace in the world, a talk I will never forget. So beautiful with such a deep, masculine feeling of brotherhood and understanding between the different people and races."

His monument, he pointed out, shows five Indians sitting around a fire smoking their pipes of peace. Out of that smoke arises in their imaginations their god of peace, talking to them and to all the world. "I sincerely hope," he added, "that the symbolism will be understood and the monument appreciated."

The commission wholeheartedly approved of the God of Peace. The model was approved by city and county officials on June 23, 1933, Milles's birthday.

The only remaining obstacle was a decision on what material to use for the statue. The *Pioneer Press* reported that, "samples from the quarries of the world" were submitted and that finally, a piece of onyx from a quarry in Central Lower California seemed perfect. There was little hope, however, that enough could be furnished for a statue thirty-eight feet high and needing more than seventy-five tons. Then it was learned that the owner of the quarry had been preserving intact for years a thick ledge of the creamy onyx—"saving it for something, he did not know what," the newspaper reported.

The mineral shelf was perfect for Milles's purpose. More than 100 five-ton blocks were cut from the site and hauled fifty miles to a beach, loaded onto thirty-foot boats, transferred to a sea-going vessel and shipped to San Diego. There, St. Paul stone carver Giovanni Baptiste Garatti, one of the country's most skilled craftsmen, sorted out the best for shipment to St. Paul.

Meanwhile, Milles and a crew of assistants in Cranbrook worked on a full-scale model of the Indian. At the same time, the courthouse was being readied. Because the statue would weigh sixty tons, the floor at the end of the hall was reinforced by a three-foot-thick concrete slab, which was supported in turn by columns that descended to bedrock.

The plaster model was sawed into sections and shipped from Detroit to St. Paul as the onyx blocks were arriving. The contract for fabrication of the statue was let in September, 1934, to Osborne-Peterson, Inc., Brioschi Studios, and Garatti, all of St. Paul. It was Garatti and a crew of nineteen expert stonecarvers, and not Milles, who actually fashioned the statue. They began carving and assembling on May 1, 1935.

"Art experts expressed the view that much of the detail of the statue would be lost if it were set in a niche, as first contemplated," the *Pioneer Press* reported. The idea of a revolving base was suggested and found to be practical. The contract for the base, which can be turned forty-five degrees each way from the center, was let to the St. Paul Structural Steel Co. on October 2, 1935.

The model was reproduced in onyx by means of a pointing machine, which gave the stone workers precise measurements of every line and curve. The ninety-eight onyx sections were fastened to a steel I-beam, the Indian's spine, and further supported by three-quarter-inch bronze "ribs."

Joseph E. Osborne, secretary of the Osborne-Peterson firm, said at the time that twenty-five men worked on the statue in St. Paul, and they put in 12,800 hours of labor. Wages ranged from $2 an hour for skilled carvers to 55 cents an hour for laborers. The statue cost approximately $65,000—$39,500 for the fabrication, $4,190 for the turntable and $600 for lighting. Milles was paid a fee of $20,000, out of which he had to pay the salaries of eight assistants, buy materials for the plaster model, and cover incidental expenses.

Garatti was interviewed by the *Pioneer Press* after the statue was completed. The fifty-four-year-old craftsman was a native of Italy who had come to St. Paul in 1919. He had worked on the carving for St. Paul's Cathedral in New York City, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington, Virginia, the Manitoba Parliament building in Winnipeg, and the post office in Denver.

"I put in considerable time studying Mr. Milles's plaster model before I undertook the copying of it," Garatti said. "When I had the idea pretty well fixed in my mind, we started in by smoothing down the onyx blocks, and selecting them for various parts of the statue. After this we went to work with the pointing machines—the tools with which the features of the model were transferred to the onyx. This was difficult, exacting work. It had to be done right, for I wanted to please Mr. Milles and avoid spoilage of material."

Milles's scorned and rejected model of a soldier, symbolizing return from war. Photo from Ellerbe Becket files.

"When we erected the statue," Garatti said, "it fit almost perfectly." Then he offered his own critique of the monument: "I think Mr. Milles is the greatest living sculptor, although I do not understand all of his work. He is a modernist and I was raised in the classic school."

That understated ambivalence would manifest itself in more outspoken forms after the statue was unveiled on May 28, 1936. Milles was unable to attend the un-

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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.
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