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ON THE COVER: The Old Federal Courts Building, viewed from across Rice Park about 1905. With the park itself, and the Minneapolis Public Library directly across from it, the Old Federal Courts Building lends a sense of community to the area.

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Old Federal Courts Building-- Beautiful, Unique-- *Its Style*

Of Architecture Faces Extinction

By Eileen Michels

BUILT at a cost of nearly \$2,500,000 between 1892 and 1901, the United States Post Office, Court House and Customs House, known colloquially now as the Old Federal Courts Building, was the pride of downtown St. Paul at the turn of the century.

Between 1901 and 1967, all federal offices were located in this massive structure at West Fifth and Market Streets. Between 1902 and 1934 it served as St. Paul's main post office.¹ However, at the present time, with the federal offices and courts removed from it to the new Federal Building a few blocks away, the old courts building is largely unoccupied. Consequently, it exists today in a growing state of surface dereliction, although structurally it remains sound.

To the many people who have given generous amounts of time and effort to the still-unfinished task of trying to prevent its demolition, this worthy and restorable building also remains, beneath the encrustation of decay, an extremely beautiful building — in fact, one of the most impressively monumental buildings in the entire Twin Cities area.

TO THE architectural historian, it is also a unique local example of a style of architecture that is fast approaching extinction in the Midwest — indeed, in the entire country. While much has been written about the

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Courtrooms had fireplaces with carved mantels and white Georgian marble. Photos on this page from St. Paul Pioneer Press.

desirability of saving this fine structure, almost nothing, beyond general references to the picturesque character of its exterior or descriptions of the lavish materials of its interior, has been written about its specific style. Therefore, perhaps it would be germane at this point to consider the building in terms of its architectural characteristics.

The Old Federal Courts Building, after twice being enlarged during its construction, occupies an entire city block and is slightly trapezoidal in plan because of the irregular shape of its site. It is a five-storey structure with a relatively slender tower on the south

side rising to a height of 150 feet and a more massive, slightly lower tower, added in 1899 when the building was expanded, on the north side.

In terms of design, the exterior is clearly divided into three horizontal zones which is a traditional approach to architectural composition deriving from the three basic units of the classical orders: base, shaft or middle section, and entablature or top section. The building's base zone contains low-sprung round-arched entrances on the south, east and north facades. A broad continuous horizontal molding marks the top of the base area which is of beautiful ashlar or smoothly finished masonry.

THE NEXT two storeys are treated as a single entity with the windows of both storeys grouped vertically under tall arches. Again, a molding runs continuously around the building at the top of this area, but it is a more delicately scaled dentil course — that is, a series of small, square blocks, which is visually a less emphatic demarcation than the lower molding.

Below is Boston's Trinity Church, designed by Henry Hobson Richardson and built between 1873 and 1877. Picture is from *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, by Henry-Russell Hitchcock.



The view, above, reveals the slightly trapezoidal shape of the Old Federal Courts Building, a shape dictated by the irregular city block on which it stands. Picture is from *Minnesota Historical Society files*. Date is about 1902.



The top of the structure presents an exuberant and light array of parapets, conical and hipped roofs and towers. Viewed vertically, bottom to top, the building thus progresses sequentially and coherently from a solid, massive base to a less dense wall area and then to a light, comparatively open termination. The general visual result is a sense of stability and repose — just as it has been throughout history whenever this tripartite formula has been used well.

Because of its massiveness, its towers, its round arches, and its sculptural decoration, the style of the building usually is called "Richardsonian Romanesque" or, less commonly, "Romanesque Revival," or even "neo-Romanesque." While all of those features of the Old Federal Courts Building are indeed characteristics of the Richardsonian Romanesque, the building possesses an equal number of features which are not.

The Richardsonian Romanesque style derives its name from the work of Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886), an American architect who graduated from Harvard in 1859. Between then and 1865 he studied architecture at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. He also worked for Theodore Labrousse and, possibly, Jakob Hittorf before he returned to the United States.

DURING THE LATE 1860's and early 1870's he designed, among other projects, several small stone churches in and around Boston. Their design was a dignified and

The Crane Library, Quincy, Massachusetts. Photo from *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, by Henry-Russell Hitchcock.



sensitive Gothic Revival style then current, but it was only with his design for Boston's Trinity Church, built between 1873 and 1877, that he became a major architectural figure.

The tower of Trinity Church apparently was based on the lantern of the medieval Cathedral of Salamanca, Spain. The rest of the building was thought, somewhat erroneously at the time it was built, to have been based on southern French Romanesque sources; hence the contemporaneous designation, "Romanesque Revival." Trinity Church, with its rough-hewn or rubble stone masonry, its diaper-patterned and rosette-shaped polychrome stone insets, its round arches, and, most important, its crowning tower with corner turrets, proved to be extremely influential and important in the history of American architecture.

Between the date of its design and the date of Richardson's death in 1886, designs for a number of important buildings in this idiom — for example, the Crane Library, built between 1880 and 1883, in Quincy, Massachusetts — issued from his office. All of them are distinctively bold and simple in massing, fenestration or window pattern, and decoration. Most of them also have the rough-hewn masonry whose rich, bold scale and varying texture actually becomes an element in the decorative system.

BECAUSE THE STONEMWORK is visually so emphatic, other ornamentation is usually restricted to carving around doorways and windows. Usually this resembles the flattened abstract versions of classical motifs typical of fifth and sixth century Byzantine capitals.

All of these features became so closely associated with Richardson that, in the architectural profession of the day, the style quickly became known as "Richardsonian Romanesque."²

Most other architects, who in the mid-1880's rather belatedly took up his style, tended to introduce more complicated forms and decoration.

Perhaps, then, if followed to its logical conclusion, the term "Richardsonian Romanesque" could be restricted to the work of Richardson himself, or the rare designers like Harvey Ellis who also achieved the simplicity of style inherent in Richardson's work. The terms "Romanesque Revival" or "neo-Romanesque" could then be used to designate the entire body of work, including



Exterior of Austen Hall, above, at Harvard University shows ornamental stonework inspired by such Byzantine motifs as those on the capital, below, from Hagia, Sophia, Constantinople. Pictures from Van Rensselaer, Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works, and Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture.



the more complex versions of Richardson's style usually done by other architects.

In any case, by 1890 in the East and somewhat later in the rest of the country, the Romanesque Revival had been superseded in importance by two other architectural styles: one was a French classicism where symmetry of silhouette and facade, smooth walls, and classical orders and ornamentation were prominent; the other, a picturesque, eclectic revival of the sixteenth century French style of the era of Francis I, a revival which has been termed "Chateausque."³

The latter is a style of architecture particularly associated with Richard Morris Hunt (1827-1895) and Stanford White (1853-1906).

THE INGREDIENTS of the Chateausque are asymmetrical plans and forms, ashlar masonry, round turrets, or tourelles, corbelled out at second storey levels, conical and hipped roofs, fanciful gables, chimneys and dormers, and metal or stone railings at roof level.

Obviously, the ashlar masonry, the distribution of the parapets, and the corner tourelles of the Old Federal Courts Building are related to the Chateausque style. On the other hand, the south tower is obviously directly patterned after the tower of Trinity Church, while the triple-arched south entrance and single-arched north and east entrances resemble those found in Richardson's work, as does the decorative carving.

The building, then, seems to be a combination of Chateausque and Romanesque Revival elements — a combination which was, as a matter of fact, occurring rather frequently all over the country by the early 1890's.

The Borden House, Chicago, in 1880. An example of the "Chateausque" architectural style of Richard Morris Hunt. Picture from American Architecture Since 1780, by Marcus Whiffen.





The interior of the Old Federal Courts Building, which is now mostly inaccessible to the public, is particularly noted for its huge, three-storey open court, with its glass tile floor which forms the ceiling of what was once the main post office. There are patterned stone mosaic floors, marble dados, beautifully scaled dentil and egg-and-dart moldings and acanthus capitals, and an elegant metal elevator cage in the main floor hall.

Elsewhere in the upper corridors are panels of decorative carving. Lavish, carved cherrywood and marble are typical of the courtrooms. Even the offices, although less impressive than the public rooms, were once comfortably dignified. Sadly enough, the interior is now abandoned, except for a small postal station on the main floor. Decay

Huge, three-storey open court of Old Federal Courts Building. Picture from Minnesota Historical Society.

in the form of dirt, neglect, damage, deterioration, and inappropriate signs, fluorescent lights and paint is everywhere.

And yet the building is sound, restorable and usable, and its office space is needed in the downtown area.

Who designed the building? We do not know, although locally James Knox Taylor (1857-1929) has in recent years been credited with the design. Educated as a schoolboy in St. Paul, Taylor studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1877 to 1879. After working as a draftsman in the New York office of Bruce Price, he

returned to St. Paul and opened his own office in 1882.

In 1884 he and Cass Gilbert formed a partnership which lasted until 1892. Between 1892 and 1895, Taylor was in independent practice in Philadelphia. In 1895 he moved to Washington to become a draftsman in the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, a post equivalent in later years to chief government architect. In 1898 Taylor succeeded to the office of Supervising Architect of the Treasury and remained in that position until 1912.⁴

NO COMPLETE STUDY of the Supervising Architect's role has ever been done but, given the enormity of that job, it is not unreasonable to suppose that various draftsmen in this office might have assumed re-



Lavish carved cherrywood, above, is typical of courtrooms in Old Federal Courts Building. Detail from St. Paul Pioneer Press photograph. Below, a picture from Minnesota Historical Society files of one of the offices. Less lavish than the courtrooms, the offices, nevertheless, were comfortably dignified.



sponsibility for the actual design of some of the projects assigned to them. It also is not unreasonable to conclude that there might well have been stock plans, even stock facade designs, for federal buildings of rather standardized sizes intended for cities of certain classified sizes.

Note, for example, the close resemblance between St. Paul's Old Federal Courts Building and both the 1892 Federal Building in Milwaukee and the Post Office in Washington, D.C., a drawing of which was published in the March 12, 1892, issue of *American Architect and Building News*, the foremost professional architectural periodical of its time.

It would seem that all three designs must have stemmed from a common source. Was this source a design by Taylor? If ground was broken for the building in 1892, as one reference says,⁵ or in 1894, as another reference indicates,⁶ it would seem that Taylor could not have been involved with the design since he was in private practice in Philadelphia until 1895, although the building was of course under his general jurisdiction after he became Supervising Architect of the

This design for the United States Post Office, Washington, D.C., appeared in the American Architect and Building Review for March 12, 1892. Again, this is a building of the same date which resembles both the Milwaukee Federal Building and the St. Paul Old Federal Courts Building. Picture from Minnesota Historical Society.



The Federal Building in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, above, built in 1892, bears striking resemblance to St. Paul's Old Federal Courts Building of about the same date. Picture from *The Architecture of Wisconsin*, by Richard W. E. Perrin, published by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

Treasury in 1898. However, it is intriguing to note that 1892, the date assigned to St. Paul's Old Federal Courts Building, Milwaukee's Federal Building, and the Washington, D.C., Post Office was also the year Taylor suddenly and inexplicably left a successful practice in St. Paul for the East.

However, until further evidence is uncovered, it would seem best at this time merely to point out that A. J. Edbrooke was Supervising Architect of the Treasury in 1892 and give nominal credit to his office. Undoubtedly further investigation in various federal archives would reveal the name of a likely and, it should be said, obviously competent and skilled designer.

Footnotes

1. Georgia DeCoster, "Old Federal Courts Building Future 'Cloudy'", in *Action*, St. Paul Chamber of Commerce.
2. Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780, a Guide to the Styles*. The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1969, page 137.
3. Whiffen, *American Architecture*, page 142.
4. William Towner Morgan, *The Politics of Business in the Career of an American Architect: Cass Gilbert - 1878-1905*, unpublished doctor of philosophy dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1971, page 33.
5. Georgia DeCoster, "Old Federal Courts Building Future 'Cloudy'".
6. H. F. Koeper and Eugene Becker, *Historic St. Paul Buildings*. St. Paul City Planning Board, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1964, page 21.



THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.