

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Who Built the
Minnesota Capitol?*

John Rachač,
Master Carpernter

John Sielaff

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Summer 2012

Volume 47, Number 1

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Philanthropic Architecture in a Local Context

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St. Anthony Park Free Public Library, 1917



Riverview Free Public Library, 1917



Arlington Hills Free Public Library, 1917

Three public libraries in St. Paul; three façades; one gift of money from the Carnegie Foundation to build all three; one architect for all three buildings; and one approved set of architectural plans. What do these façades tell us? The top and bottom photos are from 2010. The middle photo is from 1994. Photos courtesy of the Saint Paul Public Library.

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The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program
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A Message from the Editorial Board

The thread running through the Spring issue of our magazine is buildings and builders. In the lead article, art historian Lauren Freese examines the facades of three Beaux-Arts style Carnegie Libraries in St. Paul. What makes her analysis so interesting is that all three public libraries were built by the same construction company using similar budgets and nearly identical architectural plans prepared by one architect. Yet the facades are not identical. Freese analyzes the neighborhood setting for each library to explain why. From libraries, the focus then turns to the construction of two other St. Paul landmarks: James J. Hill's mansion on Summit Avenue and the Minnesota Capitol. John Sielaff uses little-known records to tell us about one master carpenter, John Rachač, and how he used his skills in finishing the interior of the Hill family's residence and to build the seat of Minnesota's government.

This issue then turns to Kate Jaeger's history of a more recent building effort: the establishment of the Open Cities Health Center (OCHC), which is now in its 45th year. Since its founding, OCHC's mission has been to provide health care to economically disadvantaged residents of St. Paul, especially among people of color, recent immigrants, and those who lack health insurance. This is a remarkable story because it began as a grass-roots effort led by women from the neighborhood OCHC serves. Our final article is a short and poignant account of General John B. Sanborn's brief interview with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. This excerpt comes from Sanborn's privately printed *Speeches and Addresses*, which the Society has reprinted and will publish this summer.

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

Who Built the Minnesota Capitol?

John Rachač, Master Carpenter

John Sielaff

Among the many fine historic buildings in St. Paul two of my favorites are the State Capitol built between 1895 and 1905 and the James J. Hill mansion on Summit Avenue which was finished in 1891. The names of the architects of these buildings are well known and the craftsmanship of those who actually did the work is generally admired, but the names of the workers have been forgotten. Using hand tools with skills for the most part not practiced by today's construction trades workers, these structures were made by an anonymous, primarily immigrant, workforce. A Czech carpenter named John Rachač was one of these men at both the Hill house and the Capitol.

John Rachač, the second child of Jan and Mary Rachač, was born in Mazice, Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic) on April 19, 1848. John's parents and their seven children immigrated to America in 1863 during the American Civil War. Their ship, the *Australia*, landed in New York on July 1, 1863, and they immediately got on a train headed west.¹ Their trip, however, was halted for several days in the Philadelphia area due to the battle of Gettysburg as the rail lines were being used to shuttle troops and the wounded.

From Philadelphia the typical route would have been by rail to Chicago, then to Galena, Illinois, where one could catch a riverboat north to Red Wing or St. Paul.²

From there they would have had to travel by horse and buggy to Belle Plaine where the family found a friendly Czech community close to the town of New Prague. Son John was fourteen at the time and had already completed two years of his apprenticeship in carpentry back in Bohemia. He must have been a welcome addition to the community where everyone needed houses and farm buildings on their recently homesteaded land.³

John lived on the farm helping his parents until 1871 when he married Anna Shetka, a fellow Bohemian emigrant.⁴ Shortly thereafter, in 1873, at the age of

twenty-four, he decided to ply his carpentry skills and raise his family in the growing city of St. Paul.⁵ On the farm in Belle Plaine, John Rachač might have had to travel considerable distance to find carpentry work; not a big problem for a single man. In the city, conditions were different. Work would be more conveniently located and he could make it home for dinner after the work day.

St. Paul's Czech Community

The Rachačs were part of a large influx of Czech immigrants to St. Paul in the 1870s. So many had settled in the low lying area west of the Upper Levee that it came to be known as Bohemian Flats. As they got jobs, they moved up the hill out of the Mississippi flood plain and into the West End neighborhood establishing institutions that exist to this day.

St. Stanislav Kosta Church, a Catholic parish, was dedicated in 1872. More importantly for John Rachač was the founding of C.S.P.S. Lodge Cech No. 12, a branch of the Cesko-Slovansky Podporujici Spolek (Cech-Slovak Protective Society). The C.S.P.S. was a fraternal and beneficial society like many other similar ethnic organizations of that time. Free-thinking Czechs, however, thought of their organization also as an alternative to the religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, that they had left behind in the Old World.



John Rachač, date unknown. This photo is displayed at the C.S.P.S. Hall in St. Paul. Photo by Julia Kierstine. Photo courtesy of the Cech-Slovak Protective Society, St. Paul.

The St. Paul C.S.P.S. bought a lot on West Seventh Street right next to St. Stanislav and moved an old schoolhouse to the site for their meeting hall in 1879. After this building was destroyed by a fire in 1886, they immediately raised the money to build a brick structure on the same site. This building, with its large addition dating to 1917, is still the center of cultural activities for the Czech community and is the oldest building of its kind in the country.

The building housed a literary society and library, Czech singing and theatre groups, as well as the Czech gymnastic organization, Sokol, which still meets there.⁶ Rachač was an active member of the C.S.P.S. and his picture is included in pictures of the early members still displayed at the hall.⁷

During this period John and Anna Rachač rented living space on West Seventh Street until 1886 when John built the house that still stands at 309 Harrison Avenue, just a few blocks from the C.S.P.S. Hall.⁸ This is where they raised their nine children and many of the kids lived there

well into their twenties. The house became the center of activities for the extended family and stayed in the family until 1966. One son, William, also raised his family there while John, after Anna died in 1916, lived in an apartment upstairs.⁹

Rachač worked as an independent contractor for the first couple decades of his career in St. Paul. His name appears on building permits as the contractor for several buildings and additions in the West Seventh Street neighborhood and many of his clients were fellow members of the C.S.P.S.¹⁰ In addition to his own contracting business Rachač also hired on to other jobs. For example, payroll records from 1890 and 1891 for the construction of railroad baron James J. Hill's mansion on Summit Avenue list John among the carpenters who were employed there.

The Hill Mansion

Depending on the weather and the phase of the operation, the construction of the Hill mansion employed as few as two and as many as thirty-three carpenters while it was being built. This was the largest and most expensive home built in Minnesota up to the time and included all the latest innovations in technology.

For the design of the house, Hill avoided local architects and went with the Boston firm of Peabody and Stearns who had done work for his friends J.P. Morgan and the Vanderbilts. He soon fired Peabody and Stearns, however, paid them for the plans, and had his own man, James Brody, a local architect, manage the construction. He then hired a different Boston architect to do the home's interior design.¹¹

Rachač was first hired in June of 1890 to work on the mansion with a crew of eleven other carpenters and was employed off and on for five weeks that year. Because Hill was very concerned about fire prevention, he wanted the structure of the house to be steel and masonry. Most of the carpentry involved the lavish interior millwork and paneling and was done in 1891 when Rachač was there with about thirty other carpenters.¹²

One can easily imagine Hill wandering around the job site from time to time. Brody must have been pretty careful about



This photo from 2011 shows the home that John Rachač built in 1886 for his family at 309 Harrison Avenue in the West End neighborhood. This street was originally called Prairie Street, but it was changed to Harrison in 1889 to avoid duplication of another Prairie Street. Photo courtesy of John Sielaff.

who he had on the job. Although Rachač seems to be the only Czech name among the carpenters at the Hill house, there was a laborer who also worked sporadically on the job named Thomas Shetka. Shetka was Anna's brother, Rachač's brother-in-law, and was later hired as the "day fireman," that is, the person responsible for the heating plant during daylight hours. This was a steady job, unlike the construction work, and Shetka stayed on in this capacity for several years after the completion of the house.¹³

John Rachač was clearly proud of his carpentry at the Hill house. He did not work there during the early stages but was brought in for the finish phase of the project. His descendants knew that he had worked there and his great-granddaughter was able to tour the house with her mother and admire the fine carpentry of her great-grandfather.¹⁴

Based on the surviving records, we do not know whether Rachač considered the job at the Hill mansion very well paying. He, like most of the other carpenters on the job, was paid \$2.50 for a 10-hour day or 25 cents an hour for any fraction of that. Unskilled laborers like Shetka got \$1.75 a day. In 1890 a typical week for a carpenter was 6 days,

10 hours a day, but there were quite a few weeks that year when Rachač and many other carpenters who were on the payroll worked less than 60 hours. The differences may have resulted from poor weather, lack of carpentry work at that particular stage of the project, or maybe these men had other more lucrative jobs of their own to go to.¹⁵

The Carpentry Profession

In the 1890s John made the transition to work on larger construction projects. When he was building homes on his own, he could set his own wages and hours. Now he would be working for wages for a large contractor with many employees. As a rule, Rachač would give his profession as carpenter in the yearly St. Paul city directory but would name no employer.

In 1897, however, he listed Butler-Ryan as his employer. Unions were flourishing at this time as workers recognized the advantage of banding together to demand better wages and working conditions. Building Trades Unions were also concerned that industrialization was eroding standards of craftsmanship as contractors tended to try to get by with the cheapest help. The unions sought to control who could be hired as a journeyman carpenter and new applicants were subject to a vote of the membership.

An obituary in the *Minnesota Union Advocate* newspaper states that [Rachač] had been in the Carpenters' Union back in the 1880s; however his union book indicates that in October 1898 he joined Carpenters' Union Local 87. Possibly this was when he went to work on the construction of the new State Capitol building. He was a member in good standing for the remainder of his life, long after he had retired, indicating that his Union membership was important to him.¹⁶

The 1880s saw the first real surge in union organization in St. Paul. The St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly founded in 1882 encompassed "Trades" unions such as Bricklayers and Printers and "Labor" assemblies of the Knights of Labor. St Paul Local 87 of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners formally organized in January

of 1885 but grew out of an earlier Knights of Labor Assembly.

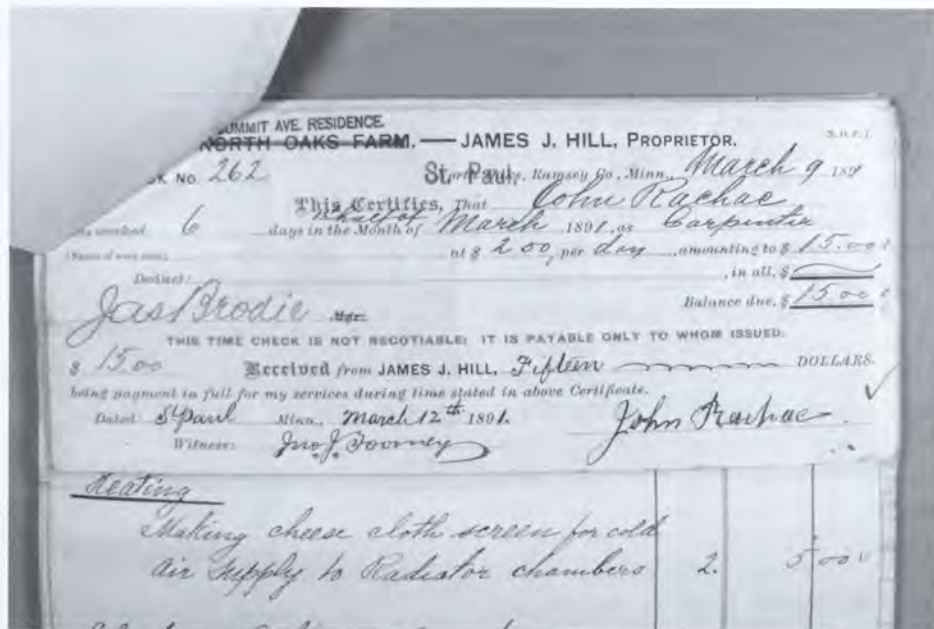
The Knights of Labor, a nationwide, all inclusive, progressive organization was popular in St. Paul in the 1880s. At one time, there were twenty-three different Assemblies, as the local chapters were called, active in St. Paul.¹⁷ Two of Workingman's Educational Assembly #2822's delegates to the St. Paul Trades and Labor were founding members of the Carpenters' Union in the city.¹⁸

Rachač, however, did not join Local 87 at this time. His membership in the C.S.P.S. probably afforded him the same type of sick and death benefits offered by the union.¹⁹ In addition, Local 87's meetings were conducted in English creating a barrier for Rachač and other non-English speakers. To remedy this situation, in December of 1885 they ordered 200 copies of the Brotherhood Constitution in German and by 1887, through their efforts, there were separate Locals for German, French, and Scandinavian speakers. The records of these ethnic Locals have been lost, but Rachač probably was a member of the German organization.

In June 1887 these carpenter Locals united to launch the largest strike St. Paul had seen up to this time, demanding a 9-hour day and recognition of the Union by the contractors. The strike got a lot of coverage in the local press and gained momentum as the better organized Bricklayers Union went out on strike in sympathy. Some of the smaller contractors quickly agreed to the demands, but the larger ones were adamantly opposed and the carpenters did not have the funds to conduct a prolonged strike. The Minnesota Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1888 that three fourths of St. Paul carpenters were still working 10-hour days.²⁰

In the 1890s, as the national economy contracted, membership dwindled and the ethnic locals were disbanded. By 1893, with the country in a severe economic downturn, the Carpenters' Union looked like a losing proposition and was down to only a couple dozen members in St. Paul.

When Rachač rejoined in 1898, the national economy was on the upswing. Construction was booming and, with the help of more militant carpenters



This pay receipt dated March 9, 1891, from James J. Hill to John Rachač, shows that John worked six days on Hill's Summit Avenue home at \$2.50 per day and received a total of \$15.00 for his labor. Photo by John Sielaff. Pay receipt courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

from Minneapolis, the St. Paul Union demanded and got their first contract with the employers.²¹ Between 1897 and 1902, membership had increased from 50 to over 850 members and in 1902 the carpenters, after a short strike, were able to negotiate a contract for an 8-hour day at 37½ cents per hour.²²

Working on the Capitol

Rachač's employer, Butler-Ryan, was the contractor for the superstructure and the interior of the Capitol. Construction took place between 1895 and 1905 and was prolonged in large part by the hesitancy of the Minnesota Legislature. Legislation was passed in 1893 for the governor to appoint a Commission to oversee the construction of a new Capitol, but there was no fixed idea of what the building should look like or cost and the funding, common in the nineteenth century, was at first done on a pay as you go system. George Grant Construction of St. Paul won the contract for the construction of the Capitol's foundation, which was finished and paid for in 1896. Then the Capitol Commission had to get the Legislature to appropriate new funds before they could even invite bids for the next phase of the project. The huge controversy

over whether the exterior of the building should feature Minnesota stone or use the "foreign-sourced" Georgia marble favored by the architect also caused more delay. Contractors were invited to submit bids using different types of stone, which produced a bewildering array of choices for the Commissioners.²³

During this time, Butler-Ryan partner, Mike Ryan, was intimidated by the complexity and bonding requirements of the project and withdrew from the firm even though Walter Butler and his brothers, William, Cooley, John, and Emmett, were anxious to get the job. The winning bid from Butler Brothers Company (the successor to Butler-Ryan) specified a combination of Minnesota granite on the lower part of the building and Georgia marble for the upper two floors and the dome. The Capitol Commission defended its decision to use the out-of-state stone by pointing out that using all granite would increase costs because granite is more difficult to work with than marble.²⁴

In reality, the low bid from Butler Brothers had been based on the estimate of a Georgia marble quarryman who had said he would supply marble for the project at 25 cents per cubic foot. Once construction began, the Butler Brothers soon realized that the price for

the marble would really be 40 cents per cubic foot. Consequently John Butler went to Georgia, leased a quarry, hired a local crew, and took over the extraction of the stone. Huge twenty-ton blocks were loaded onto flat cars and brought by rail to be cut and polished on site. Butler recruited several skilled Southern marble workers, some white, some African American, who came to St. Paul to work and train locals in finishing the stone.²⁵

Much of the work that Rachač was familiar with in residential construction would have been unneeded on the stone and steel structure. During the early stages of construction, the carpenters were employed building forms for the concrete footings, wooden false work used to support masonry arches, and the extensive scaffolding needed by the bricklayers and stonemasons.

Butler devised a system of huge wooden trestles for the movable cranes used to handle the stone and towers to support work on the domes. In March 1902 Butler Brothers got the contract for the interior finish work which included the installation of wood paneling and the interior doors and windows. At that time, much of the work on doors and windows was performed on site and many carpenters were employed for this job.

John Rachač Jr.'s Career

While John Rachač was working at the Capitol, his oldest son, John Jr., was also involved in the construction industry working as draftsman in the office of Cass Gilbert, the architect of the Capitol.²⁶ John Jr., who had won prizes in his last year at St. Paul High School (the predecessor of today's Central High School) for architectural drafting, had gone to work for the firm of Gilbert and Taylor in 1889 at the age of sixteen.²⁷ At the time, secondary education was not a necessary requirement for employment in the field. Gilbert himself had studied at M.I.T. for only nine months before beginning his apprenticeship in New York.

The 1880s were boom years for the firm of Gilbert and Taylor designing homes and churches in St. Paul. By 1889 the firm was working on its first big commercial contract, the Endicott Building, in the downtown business district. The eco-



John Rachač, standing in front of the Minnesota Capitol, which he helped to build, in an undated photo. Photo courtesy of Julia Kierstine.

nomie downturn of the 1890s, however, put a halt to the construction industry. Gilbert's partner, James Taylor, left town to find work elsewhere, and Gilbert carried on alone though on a smaller scale.

To build up a client base he joined the Minnesota Club, where he met James J. Hill. The same year Rachač Sr. was working on the Hill house, his son was working in Gilbert's office as the architect was designing the fence, gates, and powerhouse for the Hill mansion.²⁸ This assignment from Hill led to Gilbert's work on the new St. Paul Seminary for Archbishop John Ireland, which Hill financed. But Gilbert found Hill's imperious attitude demeaning. Once, when they were arguing about the budget for the Seminary job, Hill opened the vault in the new Summit Avenue home to show off a large cache of diamonds and jewels just to demonstrate who was calling the shots and why.²⁹ Young Rachač worked for Gilbert through all these years except in 1894 when he listed the Public Library as his employer.³⁰

During these slim years, Gilbert had his eyes on the Capitol job and was positioning himself knowing this could be

the turning point in his career. In 1891 he got on the national board of the American Institute of Architects and in 1894 became the president of the Minnesota chapter. In 1893 Minnesota Governor Knute Nelson appointed a Commission to oversee the construction of a new Capitol building and the chairman happened to be an old family friend of Gilbert's, Channing Seabury.

When the job was put out for bids in 1894, the Legislature imposed several restrictions: a budget cap of \$2 million and architect's fees of 2½ per cent. Gilbert had to meet with Seabury to explain that he and most other A.I.A. architects would be boycotting the competition. Although there were fifty-six entries, the Commission judged them all to be inadequate and a second round of bidding was held in 1895 using the recommendations of Gilbert and the A.I.A. which required a higher commission and complete oversight of the construction process by the architect. This time there were five finalists chosen by the Commission and Gilbert was the eventual victor.³¹ The final cost of the project was \$4.5 million.

John Rachač Jr. was present at the groundbreaking for the Minnesota Capitol in 1896 and in 1898, when the cornerstone was set, the Rachač family got a special invitation to the ceremony and John Jr.'s name was included in the list of Gilbert's



John Rachač's badge from his years working on the Minnesota Capitol, a key that belonged to him, and his union book. Photo courtesy of Julia Kierstine.

associates that was placed in the cornerstone box.³² Gilbert's office stationery from these years lists John Rachač as one of the three associates in the firm along with Thomas Holyoke and George Carsley.



This 1901 photograph shows the Minnesota Capitol under construction. In the foreground is the stone cutting shed on the northeast side. The photo is from the collection of Channing Seabury, who was the chairman of the Capitol Commission, which oversaw the building's construction. Photo courtesy of Tom Blanck.

In May 1900 the young architect, with financial aid and loans from Gilbert, traveled to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts.³³ After he got over his homesickness, he wrote to Gilbert that he really wanted to study there for two more years and get into the upper level classes “where the really big work and design commence.” Gilbert, who was financing the schooling and keeping Rachač’s job open in St. Paul, instead advised him to tour Italy where he could see firsthand the architecture Gilbert was trying to reproduce in America and come back home by July 1901.

Shortly after his return, Rachač demonstrated his proficiency by drawing the plans for the complicated cantilevered oval stairs in the northeast corner of the Capitol building. Gilbert had opened a New York office in 1899 and was spending most of his time there; so the responsibilities of those working in the St. Paul office increased. Rachač was kept busy

there as well as traveling to oversee work in St. Louis.³⁴

Toward the end of the Capitol project, he was working on plans that his father would soon execute in the new building.³⁵ This must have made for some interesting conversations around the Rachač dinner table. Maybe Gilbert was recalling this when, a few years later he decried new construction practices, “The [general contractors] have been able to force the sub-contractor to a lower price; consequently, they have introduced a lower grade of work, and have succeeded in keeping the architect at arm’s length from the man who does the work. . . . As a rule it should be the sentiment of the architects of the country *to deal with the men that do the work.*”³⁶

After the Capitol was completed, John Jr. moved from the family home on Harrison Avenue to New York, Americanized his name to John Rockart at

Gilbert’s insistence, and worked with Gilbert for twenty-five more years as the office manager of the firm.³⁷ Channing Seabury’s daughter, Edith, remembered Rockart in 1936 as “the man who probably knows more about the Capitol than anyone now living. . . . Mr. Gilbert many times said he never could have done what he did without Mr. Rockart.”³⁸

Rockart worked with Gilbert on many prominent projects including the Woolworth Building in New York, the Virginia State Capitol, and finally the U.S. Supreme Court building, which Rockart completed after Cass Gilbert’s death. The name that he insisted on having inscribed in the vestibule of that building is “John Rachac Rockart.”³⁹

Meanwhile, back in St. Paul, when the Capitol construction was finished, John Rachač Sr. was hired on as a full-time maintenance carpenter at the building and worked there until he

retired at the age of seventy-six in 1925. In 1915, when Rachač was sixty-six years old, he had been hit by an automobile and his leg was permanently injured. The accident, however, did not stop him from working at the Capitol for another ten years.

When he died in 1936 his obituary in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* emphasized the fact that he had been forced to retire from his job at the Capitol ten years earlier by the leg injury.⁴⁰ His working career had lasted some sixty-four years, from his apprenticeship at age twelve in Bohemia in 1861 to his retirement in 1925. Typical of a carpenter, he had

worked on jobs as small as a shed for his C.S.P.S. friend, Vaclav Picha, to one as large as the Capitol building and everything in between.⁴¹ Much of this work has been destroyed, but the Minnesota Capitol and the Hill mansion will last for many years to come as examples of the craftsmanship of John Rachač.

John Sielaff, a retired carpenter, along with Randy Croce, Dan Ganley, Dave Riehle, and Victoria Woodcock are researching the lives of Minnesota State Capitol construction workers. They are happy to share more details on the builders with descendants or anyone else. In addition,

they are creating a website and a video documentary to share their findings. This University of Minnesota Labor Education Service project is supported by the State of Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society, the Butler Family Foundation, Education Minnesota, and the Bricklayers, Operating Engineers, Sheet Metal Workers, Carpenters and Teamsters unions. Anyone who has information about people who worked on the initial construction of the Capitol or later restoration efforts is encouraged to contact John Sielaff at jacksielaff@gmail.com.

Endnotes

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24. *St. Paul Globe*, October 10, 1897, p. 10.
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26. *St. Paul City Directories 1889-1903*.
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28. Sharon Irish, "West Hails East: Cass Gilbert in Minnesota," *Minnesota History*, 53, no. 5 (Spring 1993): 200, 206.
29. Geoffrey Blodgett, *Cass Gilbert: The Early Years* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 108.
30. *St. Paul City Directories, 1888-1905*.
31. Blodgett, 13-22, 112, 104-21.
32. *St. Paul Globe*, July 28, 1898, p. 2 and an invitation in possession of the family.
33. Margaret Heibrun, ed., *Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7. Rachač's experience was not unique. Previously Gilbert had sent two of his other apprentices to study in Paris.
34. Letters from Rachač to Gilbert, December 7, 1900 and August 24, 1901, Cass Gilbert Collection, PR021, Department of Prints, Photographs, and Architectural Collections, New York Historical Society, New York, N.Y..
35. "John Rockart Dies: Noted Architect," *New York Times*, October 14, 1951, p. 88.
36. Heibrun, 24.
37. Antonin Raymond, *An Autobiography* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1973), 26-7, transcript of oral history interview with John Rannells, interview by Gail Galloway, 10-11.
38. Edith Seabury Nye, "The Men Who Built the Capitol," a talk delivered to the Century Club, manuscript in the Minnesota Historical Society.
39. Rannells interview, 10-11 and John Rockart obituary and Supreme Court inscription.
40. "John Rachac, 87, Dies At Home Here," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 28, 1936, and *St. Paul Appeal*, February 19, 1916, p. 11.
41. St. Paul Building Permit for 282 Forbes Ave., St. Paul Building Permit Collection, Ramsey County Historical Society, St. Paul.

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The CSPS Hall in St. Paul displays this photo of John Rachač, a master carpenter who helped to build the Summit Avenue mansion of James J. Hill and the Minnesota Capitol. For more on John Rachač, see page 13. Photo by Julia Kierstine. Photo courtesy of the Czech-Slovak Protective Society, St. Paul.