

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Essay by Richard Moe:
'Landmarks Reborn:
Channeling Past Into Present'

Page 4

Summer, 2001

Volume 36, Number 2

Can History Come Alive?

A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites

—Page 5



Watercolor "Landmark Center," painted by artist Lou Roman, formerly of St. Paul, in 1988 and reproduced with her permission.
See article beginning on page 5.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director
Priscilla Farnham
Editor
Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Howard M. Guthmann
Chair

James Russell
President

Marlene Marschall
First Vice President

Ronald J. Zweber
Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit
Secretary

Peter K. Butler
Treasurer

Charles L. Bathke, W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Norbert Cenemius, Anne Cowie, Charlotte H. Drake, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Rod Hill, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Marlene Marschall, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Richard Nicholson, Linda Owen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Glenn Wiessner, Laurie Zenner.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Henry Blodgett, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Mark Eisenschenk, Pat Hart, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Richard H. Nicholson, G. Richard Slade.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner Tony Bennett
Commissioner James McDonough
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt
Commissioner Janice Rettman
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2001, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 36, Number 2

Summer, 2001

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Landmarks Reborn: Channeling the Past Into the Present
Richard Moe,
President, The National Trust for Historic Preservation
- 5 Can History Come Alive?
A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites
Former Governor Elmer L. Andersen
- 10 St. Paul's Stately Old Buildings
—Going, Going, Almost Gone
Georgia Ray DeCoster
- 16 Old Federal Courts Building—Beautiful, Unique—
Its Style of Architecture Facing Extinction
Eileen Michels
- 21 Preservation Before the Preservationists
The Beginnings of Preservation in St. Paul
Charles W. Nelson
- 25 Books

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

In 2002 Landmark Center will be 100 years old. Because the Ramsey County Historical Society has been in the forefront of efforts to preserve historic sites in St. Paul and Ramsey County since the 1960s, the Editorial Board decided to honor Landmark Center by devoting this issue to the topic of historic preservation.

Your Society helped to establish St. Paul's Historic Preservation Commission in the 1970s and has been represented on the Commission since its inception. RCHS played a leading role in creating the Irvine Park Historic District and contributed to the work of many to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building, today's Landmark Center. Although the Ramsey County Historical Society was not alone in these efforts, few of us today understand or may remember how difficult it was to make a case for historic preservation in the face of the federal, state, and local governmental programs of the 1960s and '70s that supported a "tear-it-down" approach to urban renewal.

Richard Moe, a Minnesota native and president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has written a brief introduction that gives a national perspective to historic preservation. Moe's message—how far our nation has come since the 1960s in its acceptance of the goals of historic preservation—sets the tone for the four articles that follow, the first three of which were previously published in this magazine. Writing in 1965, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen sets out the local issues of historic preservation as he saw them then and the need for a "sense of urgency" in addressing them. In the next essay, Georgia Ray DeCoster stresses the importance of historic preservation in the revitalization of St. Paul and its economic value to the city. Eileen Michels follows with a specific example of how this might work in a 1972 article about the need to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building. Charles W. Nelson concludes the discussion with an account of his experiences in the early 1970s with the efforts to create the Irvine Park and Historic Summit Hill National Historic Districts.

The Editorial Board hopes that readers of our magazine will enjoy learning more about the work of the many people and organizations that have made historic preservation a vital and guiding part of civic planning in St. Paul and Ramsey County.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Old Federal Courts Building—Beautiful, Unique— Its Style Of Architecture Facing Extinction

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 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 slightly trapezoidal shape of the Old Federal Courts Building, as dictated by the irregularly-shaped city block on which it stands. This 1902 photo is from the Minnesota Historical Society archives.

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-story 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 stories are treated as a single entity with the windows of both stories 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.

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 Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He also worked for Theodore Labrouste and, possibly Jakob Hittorf before he returned to the United States.



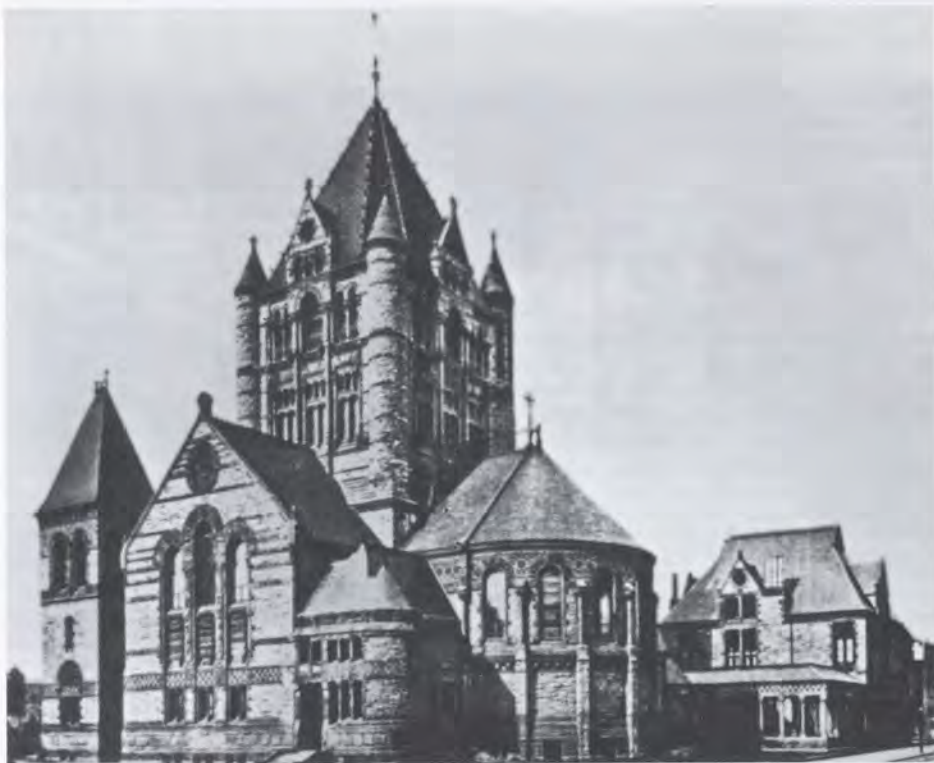
Landmark Center's magnificent open court. Minnesota Historical Society.

During the late 1860s and early 1870s he designed, among other projects, several small stone churches in and around Boston. Their design was a dignified and 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,



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

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 stonework 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.”²²

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

Perhaps then, if followed to its log-

ical 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 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.”²³

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



The Crane Library in Quincy, Massachusetts. From Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century by Henry Russell Hitchcock.



A carved white Georgian mantel in one of the building's courtrooms. St. Paul Pioneer Press photograph.

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



Exterior of Austen Hall at Harvard University, showing ornamental stonework with its Byzantine motifs. Photograph from Van Rensselaer, Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works.

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 caning

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 1890s.

The interior of the Old Federal Courts Building, which is now mostly inaccessible to the public is particularly noted for its huge, three-story open court with its glass tile floor which forms the ceiling of what was once the main post office. There are patterned stone mosaic doors, 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



Byzantine motifs on a capital from Hagia, Sophia, Constantinople. Photo from Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*.

are typical of the court rooms. 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 hall. Decay 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 vari-



Lavish carved cherrywood, typical of the building's courtrooms. Detail from St. Paul Pioneer Press photo.

ous draftsmen in this office might have assumed responsibility 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 court 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 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



A courtroom and library in the Old Federal Courts Building. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

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.

Eileen Michels was a consultant in architectural history for the Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul, when she wrote this article for Ramsey County History. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, where she received her master's and doctor's degrees in art history, she

taught architectural history at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, during the 1972-1973 academic year. She has published a number of articles in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians.

End Notes

1. Georgia DeCoster, "Old Federal Courts Building Future 'Cloudy,'" in *Action*, St. Paul Chamber of Commerce.
2. Marcos Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780, a Guide to Styles*. The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1969, page 137.
3. Whiffen, *American Architecture*, page 142.



Another building bearing a strong resemblance to the Old Federal Courts Building and built about the same time: the United States Post Office in Washington D. C. This design appeared in the *American Architect and Building Review* for March 12, 1892. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society.



The Federal Building in Milwaukee, constructed in 1882 and bearing a striking resemblance to St. Paul's Old Federal Courts Building, built about the same time. From *Architecture of Wisconsin* by Richard W. E. Perrin.

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 restored Irvine Park with its gazebo, as it looked about 1989. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 21.

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

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989