



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol Backgrounder

When Minnesota Territory was established in 1849, the Legislature held its first meetings in a log hotel in St. Paul. Not until five years later was the first Capitol building finished and ready to be occupied. In 1881, the building was destroyed by a fire that broke out during a session of the legislature. When a second Capitol was completed in 1883, it was already too small for the quickly growing state.

In 1893, a bill proposing a new statehouse was passed, and a commission appointed to undertake the project. In 1895, Cass Gilbert was selected as the architect after his design won a competition that included 40 entries.

The third – and present – Minnesota State Capitol was an ambitious undertaking for such a new state. Channing Seabury, chairman of the Capitol Commission, broke ground for the new building on May 6, 1896. The cornerstone was laid in 1898 by Alexander Ramsey, first territorial governor of Minnesota. After nine years and a cost of \$4.5 million, the building was opened to the public on Jan. 2, 1905, one day before the 34th legislature convened.

Classical in design, the third State Capitol reflected Gilbert's study of Italian Renaissance architecture, as well as the popularity of a ground-breaking exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. That unprecedented collaboration of architects, engineers, artists, sculptors, painters and landscape architects who joined forces to build a "White City" foreshadowed Gilbert's approach to the building of the State Capitol.

The stunning building quickly drew acclaim from around the country. Architects and artists praised its exterior, its huge marble dome, its self-supporting stairways and its magnificently decorated interior. Not only did Gilbert design the structure, he also supervised its construction and its decoration. "In the old days," he said, "the architect, the painter and the sculptor were frequently one and the same. There is no reason why they should not be so now."

Gilbert also commissioned the art to be placed throughout the building, including six

-more-

Minnesota State Capitol Background/2

large paintings depicting historical scenes in the Governor's Reception Room. One, "The Battle of Nashville," by Howard Pyle, is widely considered one of the best paintings of a battle ever rendered. The building's elaborate senate chambers feature two 32-foot murals that were created by renowned artist Edwin Blashfield. Other artists on Gilbert's team were Kenyon Cox, John La Farge and Elmer Garnsey, who was responsible for the overall interior decoration of the Capitol including the colorful Rathskeller Café. Featuring vaulted ceilings covered with grape vines, flowers, mythical birds and German mottos, the cafe, which was painted over during the First World War due to anti-German sentiment, has recently been restored to its original glory.

Among Gilbert's other well-known public buildings is the West Virginia state capitol, the United States Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Customs House Building in New York City (now NMAI). His design for the Woolworth Building in New York City popularized the skyscraper.

The Minnesota Historical Society by statute is responsible for the works of art in the State Capitol. The Society has operated the historic site program at the Capitol since 1969. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1972. Visitors can observe their government in action during hourly tours year round, special events and educational programs.

###



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol Timeline

1849: Minnesota's new Territorial Legislature authorizes building of capitol building.

1855: First state capitol building completed. It is destroyed by fire in 1881.

1882: Second capitol building is completed.

1893: Bill proposing new statehouse is passed by Minnesota Legislature.

1895: Cass Gilbert's design for capitol building is selected in a competition with 40 other entrants.

1898: Cornerstone for new capitol building is laid by 83-year-old Alexander Ramsey, the state's first territorial governor, second state governor and senator.

Jan. 2, 1905: New State Capitol opens to public; 34th legislative session is convened following day.

June 14, 1905: Aging Civil war veterans carry tattered Minnesota regimental flags from the old Capitol to the new Capitol building.

1906: Massive copper sculpture "Progress of the State," better know as the "Quadriga," is installed on the capitol roof at the base of the dome. Created by Daniel C. French, sculptor of the sitting Abraham Lincoln figure at the Lincoln Memorial, and Edward C. Potter, a noted sculptor of animals.

1917: Rathskeller Cafe in Capitol's basement, featuring fanciful murals and German mottos, is painted over due to anti-German sentiment sweeping state and country. The mottos were uncovered in 1930, only to be painted over again in 1937.

1944: Architect Clarence Johnston, building on plans drawn up by Cass Gilbert over several decades of the early 20th century, designs the Capitol Approach (Mall) anticipating the construction of the interstate freeway.

1949: The "Quadriga" statue atop is regilded 42 years after it is installed. It will be regilded and repaired once again in a massive project undertaken in 1994.

2000: The Rathskeller Café is once again restored to its original glory and opens to the public.

###



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol At-A-Glance

Location: 75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard
St. Paul, MN 55155

For General Information and Reservations:

Phone: 651-296-2881

Fax: 651-297-1502

Web site: www.mnhs/statecapitol

Media contact: Carolyn Kompelien

Contact number: 651-296-6808

- The current Minnesota State Capitol is the third structure to serve this purpose. The first, located at 10th and Wabasha in the heart of downtown St. Paul, was destroyed by fire in 1881. The second was rebuilt on the same site.

- The first memorial, in honor of John A. Johnson, the first governor of Minnesota to be born in the state, was placed on the Capitol Mall in 1912. There are now 15 memorials, including statues of Charles Lindbergh as a boy and a man, the Minnesota Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The latest to be added was the Woman's Suffrage Memorial Garden in 2000.

- Hourly tours are offered year-round at the State Capitol. Educational programs are offered for pre-school through 12th grade. Special interest tours on such topics as art, architecture, the Civil War and woman suffrage are offered on selected dates.

-more-

Minnesota State Capitol At-A-Glance/2

Related Readings and Publications

“Cass Gilbert: The Early Years”

Geoffrey Blodgett, Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, 2001

“North Star Statehouse”

Thomas O’Sullivan, Pogo Press, St. Paul, 1994

“Cass Gilbert, Life and Work: Architect of the Public Domain”

Barbara Christen and Steven Flanders, W.W. North & Co., New York, 2001

“Cass Gilbert, Architect: Modern Traditionalist”

Sharon Irish, Monachelli Press, 1999

“Minnesota’s State Capitol: The Art and Politics of a Public Building”

Neil B. Thompson, Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, 1974 (reprinted in 2004)

Cass Gilbert Papers

Minnesota Historical Society

Board of State Capitol Commissioners, Biennial Reports

Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Board of State Capitol Commissioners Papers

Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society

Web links:

collections.mnhs.org/visualresources

www.mnhs.org/library/search/index.html

www.mnhs.org/statecapitol

Site Amenities

- Guided tours
- Exhibits
- Handicapped Accessible (Quadriga is not accessible)
- Café

-more-

Minnesota State Capitol At-A-Glance/3

Area Attractions

- Minnesota History Center
- Fitzgerald Theater
- Science Museum of Minnesota
- Cathedral of St. Paul
- Children's Museum

Travel Information

www.exploreminnesota.com

www.stpaulcvb.org

www.stpaulchamber.com

###



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol Spokesperson

Carolyn Kompelien

Phone: 651-296-6808

E-mail: carolyn.kompelien@mnhs.org

Carolyn Kompelien, historic site manager since 1988, collaborates with other state agencies to restore the Minnesota State Capitol to its appearance in 1905, the date of the building's completion. She also directs programs that interpret Cass Gilbert's art and architecture and Minnesota's political history and government to 130,000 visitors annually.

###



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol Additional Background

The “Quadriga”

One of most enduring images of the Minnesota State Capitol and one that has come to symbolize St. Paul is the “Quadriga,” the golden horses and chariot that sit atop the roof at the base of the Capitol’s dome. The massive statue was the finishing touch to the building when it was installed in 1906.

The term quadriga refers to a chariot drawn by four horses. The actual name of the statue is “Progress of the State.” It was created by sculptor Daniel Chester French, in collaboration with noted equestrian sculptor Edward C. Potter. It features four figures – the male figure driving the chariot represents the state, two female figures portray Minnesota agriculture and industry and the four horses represent earth, fire, water and wind. The inspiration for the statue was the charioteer and four horses that French had modeled for the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

French had estimated in 1896 that he could create the statue for \$36,000, but action wasn’t taken on it until Gilbert received a \$1,500,000 appropriation for the decoration of the Capitol in 1903. The work is 21 feet wide at its base and 25 feet high. It was fabricated of hammered copper at the John Williams Foundry in New York in 1906. After its installation on the Capitol roof, it was gilded in 24-carat gold by the St. Paul firm of Bazille & Partridge.

While hundreds of sculptures and monuments were placed in city parks, on and around government buildings, in the city beautification period from 1890 to 1930, the “Quadriga” is one of less than 20 gilded monuments from the era. It was regilded in place in 1949, but in August 1994, the statue was removed for extensive repairs and restoration. Time and the elements had

-more-

Minnesota State Capitol Additional Background/2

eroded the interior supports and caused visible cracks and split seams. Much of the gold leaf had flaked off or become pitted. Using historical documents and samples of the original materials, conservators were able to recreate the original appearance of the sculpture as well as restore its structural integrity. The “Quadriga” was returned the next year to its place of prominence atop the Capitol roof with much fanfare on June 21. It was one of the largest renovation projects ever undertaken at the Capitol.

Every year, thousands of visitors tour the State Capitol. The work of the government as well as the Capitol’s architecture, art and historic collections are presented, but the one thing that just about everyone – from school children to senior citizens – wants to see is “the golden horses.” Sculptor French, who complained at the time that he hadn’t been paid enough, and State Capitol Commissioner Channing Seabury, who complained that the “bright gold of the [statue] stands out there so prominently...it makes the rest of the building look horrible,” would be proud that this crowning achievement still delights and inspires visitors a century later.

###



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Minnesota State Capitol Fun Facts

- Among the objects placed in a copper box sealed in the cornerstone of the of the State Capitol were a Bible, a United States flag, gold and silver coins from 1898, the original draft of the bill authorizing the construction of the building, and copper plates listing the names of the Capitol commissioners, architect and engravings of the state seal.
- Sculptor Daniel Chester French was paid \$35,000 to create the “Quadriga,” the golden horses atop the roof of the State Capitol in 1903. Cost to repair, restore and regild the statue in 1994-95 cost \$636,600.
- French was also responsible for arguably the most famous statue in the United States – the sitting figure of President Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial.
- The silver trowel Alexander Ramsey used to spread the mortar for the cornerstone of the State Capitol, which was laid on July 27, 1898, is now in the permanent collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.
- Alexander Ramsey founded the Minnesota Historical Society in 1849.
- State Capitol architect Cass Gilbert also designed the Woolworth Building in New York City, generally considered to be the first “skyscraper, and the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.
- “The Battle of Nashville” by Howard Pyle, which hangs in the Governor’s Reception Room is considered one of the greatest American war scenes ever painted on canvas. The painting’s recreation of the battle is so powerful that even the artist was moved. “When I was painting this picture of the battle,” he recalled later, “... I had occasionally to go to the door of the studio and breathe fresh air to clear my lungs of the powder and smoke.”
- Action movie star and later a governor in his own right, Arnold Schwarzenegger attended the inauguration of his friend Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota in January 1999.

###