

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING

For many years the work of the Minnesota Historical Society has been hampered by the inadequacy of its quarters in the basement of the Capitol. Thousands of books and numberless pictures and museum articles have had to be stored in boxes in the sub-basement or left in the Old Capitol where they are in constant danger of destruction by fire, while members of the staff have had to work in all sorts of cubby-holes and dark corners. Finally, after much earnest effort on the part of members of the society and of others who believe in the preservation of the materials for the history of the state, the legislature of 1913 passed an act appropriating five hundred thousand dollars for the construction by the state board of control of a building for the society and the supreme court. This act provided for the acceptance by the state of a donation of seventy-five thousand dollars from the private funds of the society to be used in purchasing a site for the building and in equipping the part of it to be occupied by the society. The site selected had to have the approval of both the society and the board of control. Many members of the society favored the so-called Lamprey site southeast of the Capitol on the corner of Cedar Street and Central Avenue, where the building would overlook the plaza in front of the Capitol and would fit in with the plans worked out by Cass Gilbert for the development of capitol approaches. The board of control, however, selected the Merriam site, a large tract located directly northeast of the Capitol, and the executive council of the society finally approved of the selection and paid over the money for its purchase.

In the meantime a still more serious difficulty arose. The architect selected, Mr. Clarence H. Johnston of St. Paul, together with members of the supreme court and the secretary

of the society, visited buildings of a similar character in the neighboring states for the purpose of ascertaining what was necessary in the construction of the proposed building. After this and other investigations, it was found, from estimates made by the architect, that a building suitable and adequate for both the society and the supreme court could not be constructed within the limits of the appropriation. The supreme court, in view of this situation and also of the protest of the state bar association against its removal from the Capitol, finally reached the conclusion that it preferred to remain in its present quarters, particularly if, by the removal of the historical society from the Capitol, it could secure added space there.

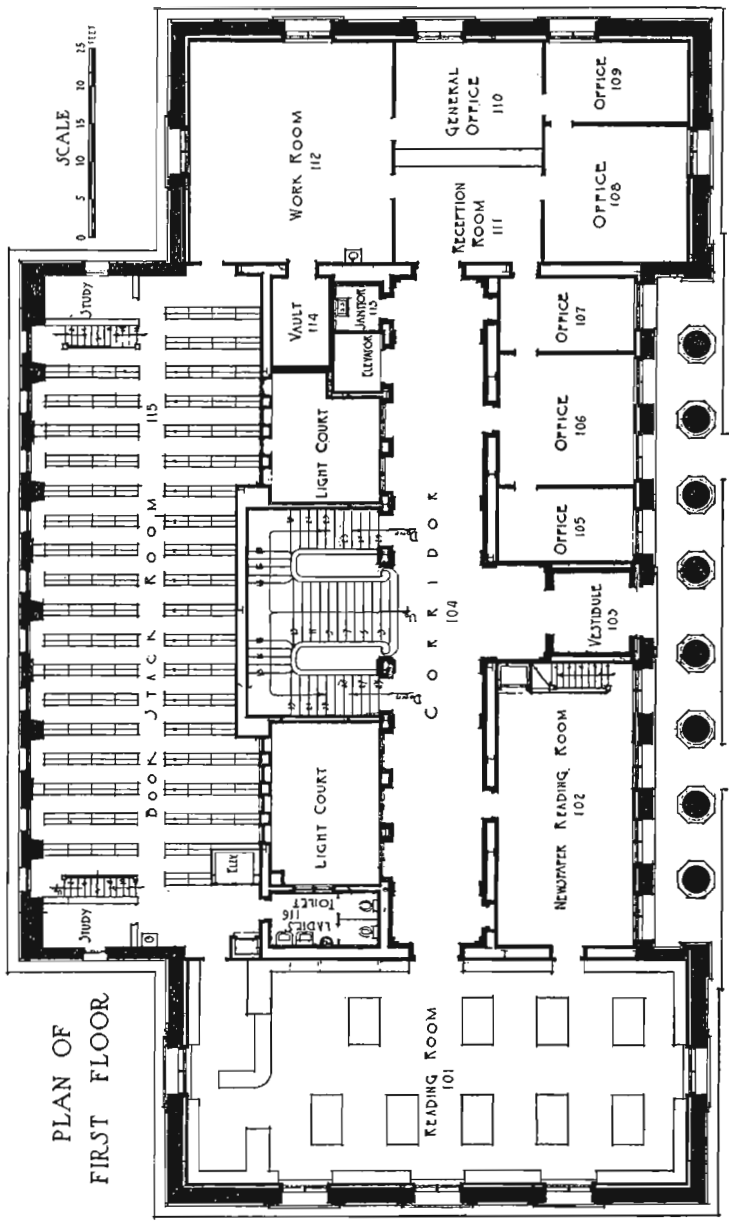
As a result of this situation application was made to the legislature of 1915 for an amendment to the act of 1913, eliminating the supreme court, providing for the care and preservation of the state archives in the proposed building, and stipulating that any part of the building not in use or actually needed for the purposes of the society, might be used for other state purposes under the direction of the governor. The amendment, which became a law, credited the society with the amount paid for the Merriam site as a part of its donation, but allowed it to select and purchase another site if it so desired and to receive credit for the amount so expended. As soon as possible after the passage of this amendment, the society purchased the Lamprey site and caused it to be conveyed to the state; and the architect, in consultation with the executive committee of the society, commenced work on the plans of the building. These as originally drawn made provision for housing the society, the state archives, and the public library commission. Later, however, in view of the crowded condition of the Capitol, it was decided to assign quarters temporarily to the department of education as well, and this necessitated a revision of the plans and a giving-up by the society of its auditorium and other rooms. It is believed that the state will, in the near future, construct an office building to care for its rapidly increasing activities, and when that time comes the space now assigned to

the department of education will probably be restored to the society and the state archives.

The site finally chosen for the new home of the society is ideal. Flanking the Capitol on the right, it occupies an important eminence, from which a commanding view may be obtained of the city and its environs. The building may be seen to best advantage by the visitor who approaches it from the capitol mall. The Roman Renaissance style has in this instance been reduced to its simplest elements. The strength of the principal façade, the west, resides in the simple, clear, and thoroughly monumental articulation of all its parts. The central motive, an Ionic colonnade, has a just degree of projection, and the recessed loggia with its entrance portals and windows has been so designed as to line and mass that, while sufficiently subordinated to the colonnade, it is also sufficiently emphasized for its own sake. So, likewise, the end pavilions with their breadth of unbroken stonework have the proper accent but do not unduly assert themselves. It might be called a long, low edifice, but the attic, looming up above the main cornice with just a suggestion of the variegated tile and immense skylight which roof the building, and the balustraded terraces flanking the main façade, provide the needed corrective. Outside the building as within, grave dignity rules, ornament being sparsely used, the little of it that is introduced being handled with severe taste. The warmth of the stone itself, the note of color delicately struck in the bronze doors of the main portal, in the window casings, and in the roof, and the vivid tints of nature in the foreground—all these will make more intimate, more humanly interesting the appeal of this imposing edifice.

The architect may indeed be congratulated upon the structure which is being wrought under his guidance. It will stand not alone as a monument to the pioneers of Minnesota and of the great Northwest and to its designer, but to the materials used in its construction. It is in truth a Minnesota building. The warm gray granite of which the exterior walls are being built is from large quarries at Sauk Rapids. The marble of the main

PLAN OF
FIRST FLOOR

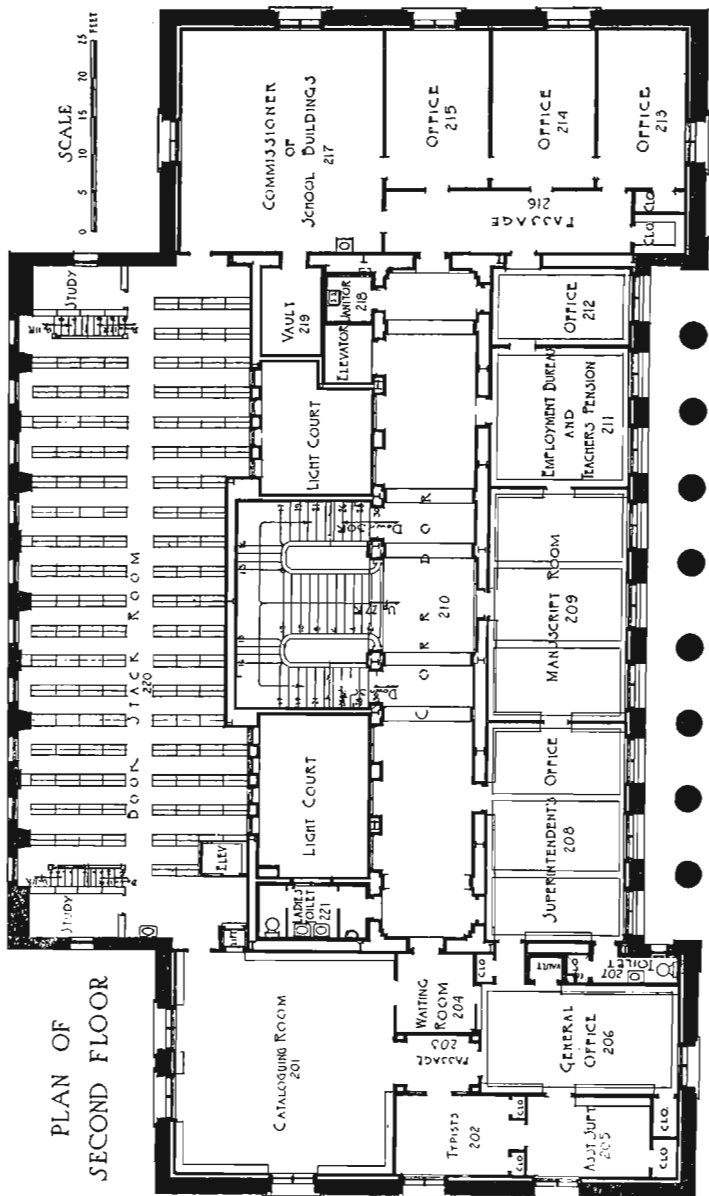


staircase and of the floors of the corridors and stack rooms is being quarried at Kasota. Brick and clay fireproofing tile are produced at Chaska and Minneapolis respectively. The stone for the walls of the vestibule and entrance hall on the first floor is being quarried from deposits at Frontenac.

An ideal plan is one in which utility and effect are both accounted for in such manner that the point at which the architect has changed his viewpoint from the one phase of his subject to the other is not apparent. It is on the virtue of such a scheme that the new home of the Minnesota Historical Society rests. This can be demonstrated in a few words. Let the layman who has little, if any, acquaintance with architectural plans as they are drawn upon paper imagine himself making a swift tour of the building from the entrance colonnade on Cedar Street to the galleries and museums which occupy the top floor. The portal itself with its colonnaded loggia is simple and stately and of majestic scale, but the actual entrance doorway is comparatively small. This central motive of the main façade is sufficiently emphasized with its simply carved stone doorway and beautifully modeled bronze doors, and a note of spaciousness, which would befit only some great exposition building or place of public entertainment, has been avoided. The entrance, in other words, is precisely the key to an institution of learning.

The quality of restraint thus encountered on the very threshold is felt throughout the building. Passing through the vestibule (103), we enter directly the vaulted entrance hall (104)—the main artery of the building. In the center, on the east side, a generous marble staircase, with a decorative bronze rail, gives access to the stories above and below. On either side of the stairway are large light courts which extend from the ground floor to the glass roof of the attic space, serving to light the interior rooms. The north doorway opens into the main reading room (101), a room depending largely upon carefully studied proportion and simple, unbroken wall spaces for its effectiveness. The monotony is relieved by bookshelves of oak which form a dado around the room, and by a splendid ceiling

PLAN OF
SECOND FLOOR



SCALE
0 5 10 15 20 25
FEET

CATALOGUING ROOM
201

WAITING ROOM
204

Typists
202

GENERAL OFFICE
206

ADJ. SUPT.
205

SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE
208

MANUSCRIPT ROOM
209

EMPLOYMENT BUREAU
AND
TEACHERS PENSION
211

OFFICE
212

OFFICE
215

OFFICE
214

OFFICE
213

COMMISSIONER
OF
SCHOOL BUILDINGS
217

VAULT
219

LIGHT COURT
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LIGHT COURT
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CORRIDOR
210

ELEVATOR
218

STUDY

STUDY

TRACK ROOM
220

DOWN

ELEV.

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221

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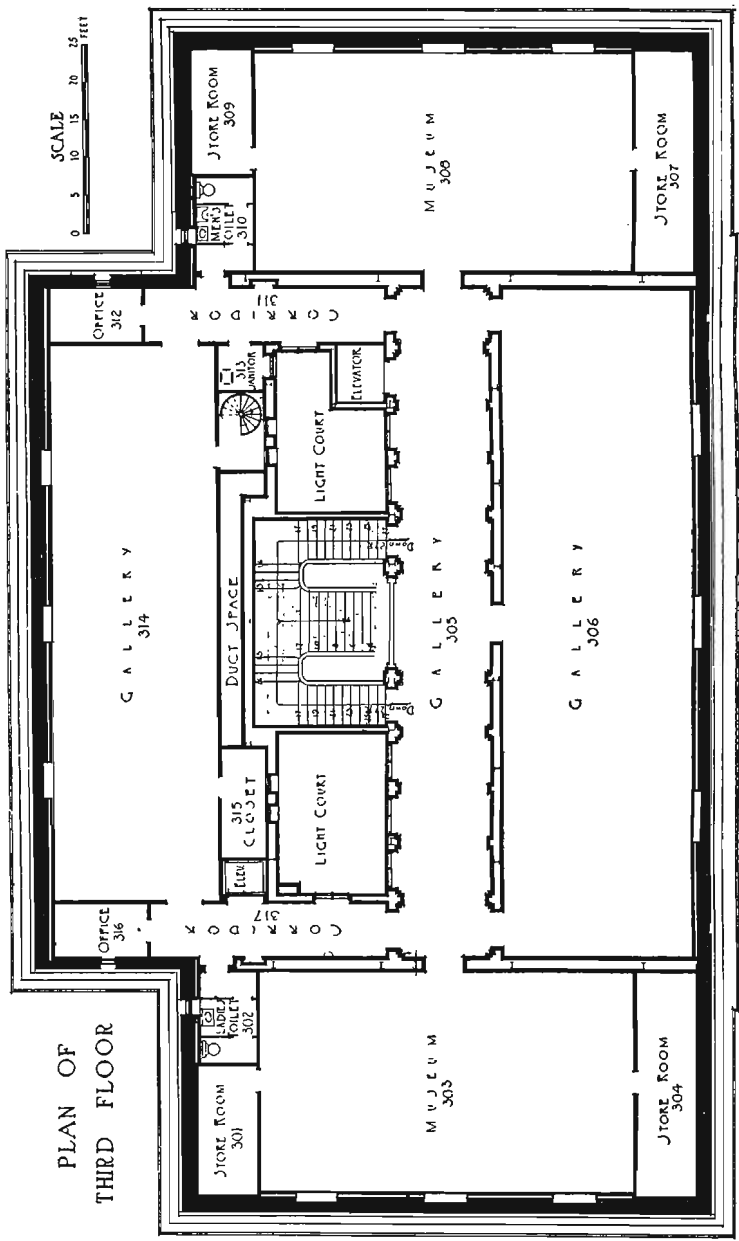
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of decorative plaster, in which color is so disposed as to give beautiful play of light and shade. The delivery desk and ample card cases for the card catalogue of the library occupy the east end of the room, convenient to readers and having direct communication with the bookstacks. The room is to be furnished with carefully designed, harmonious furniture. Cork flooring will minimize the noise of moving occupants. Adjoining the main reading room at the front of the building and accessible from it as well as from the corridor is the newspaper reading room (102), which is connected by a stairway and an automatic booklift with the newspaper stacks directly below. The south pavilion, in which the auditorium was to have been located, as well as the Cedar Street front at the left of the entrance, including rooms 105-112 and 114, is, for the present, assigned to the executive offices of the state board of education.

On the second floor in the center of the Cedar Street front is located the manuscript room (209). Adjacent to it is the superintendent's private office (208), which communicates directly with the general office (206). At the north end of the main corridor is a small waiting room (204) for those wishing to transact business with the administrative officers of the society. Another office adjoining the general office on the north will be available for an assistant superintendent or librarian and adjacent to it on the north front is a small room (202) given over to the use of typists employed in cataloguing work. The cataloguing room (201) occupies the northeast corner. It has direct access to the stacks and is connected with the shipping and receiving room on the ground floor by an automatic electric booklift. By the same means new books, after being catalogued and classified, may be conveyed to the proper stack floor. The cataloguing room is accessible from the main corridor through the waiting room and is directly connected with the general office and typists room through a passage (203). The south pavilion and several rooms on the front, including rooms 211-217 and 219, are given over to various bureaus affiliated with the state department of education.

PLAN OF
THIRD FLOOR



SCALE
0 5 10 15 20 25
FEET

Office
312

GALLERY
314

Office
316

STORE ROOM
309

MEN'S
TOILET
310

MUSEUM
300

STORE ROOM
307

315
CLOSET

LIGHT COURT

DUCT SPACE

LIGHT COURT

ELEVATOR

GALLERY
305

GALLERY
306

STORE ROOM
301

LADIES'
TOILET
302

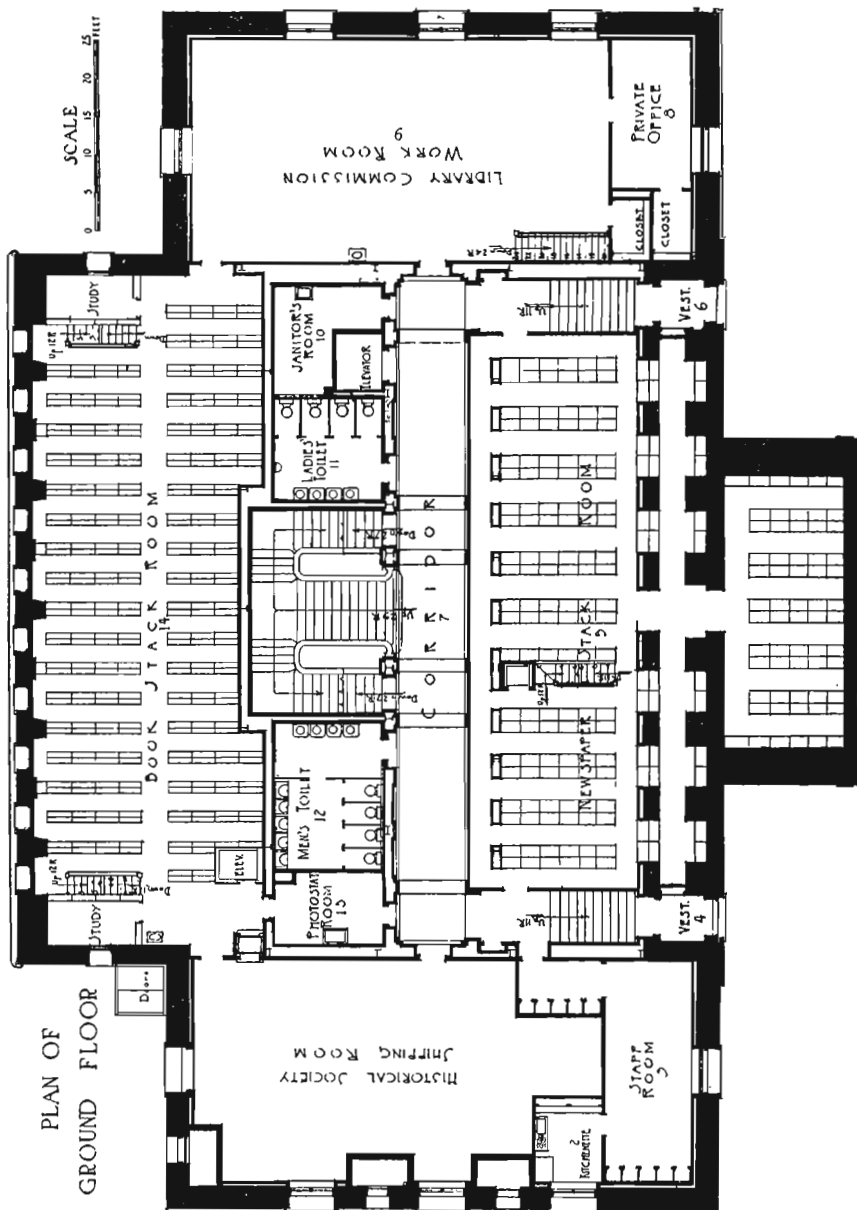
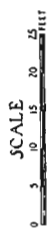
MUSEUM
303

STORE ROOM
304

The third floor will house the extensive historical and archeological museums of the society together with its large collection of portraits and paintings. As much of this material is not suitable for permanent exhibition, large storerooms are provided in which it can be so arranged as to be available for special exhibits and for examination at any time. The south museum room (308) will probably serve on occasion as an assembly room also until such time as space may be available for the installation of an assembly room on the main floor. The east room (314) will be used temporarily as a map room and a work room for the classification of the state archives, these departments having been crowded out of the second floor by the inclusion of the department of education. The small electric elevator in the corridor (317) gives direct communication to the stack room below, in which the archives are to be stored. The small offices (312, 316) flanking this gallery will be available for members of the staff. The rooms on this floor are lighted by the immense skylight which forms the upper half of the roof. Ceiling lights of syenite glass, particularly designed to diffuse light, will eliminate all glare and shadow on the gallery walls. The artificial illumination of the galleries and museums merited careful study, and so cleverly has the architect solved this problem that the visitor to the gallery in late afternoon will be unaware of the transition from natural to artificial light. Electric reflectors disposed in the attic space above the ceiling lights may be switched on in units as they are needed until full strength is reached.

The entire rear portion of the building is devoted to the main stack room, a space eighty-two feet by twenty-nine feet and extending through four full stories from basement floor to second-story ceiling, a total height of sixty-two feet. This immense room encloses an eight-tier, enameled steel, self-supporting bookstack which would hold, if the shelves were completely filled, 383,500 volumes. A part of this stack, however, will be used for the storage of archives. The shelving and

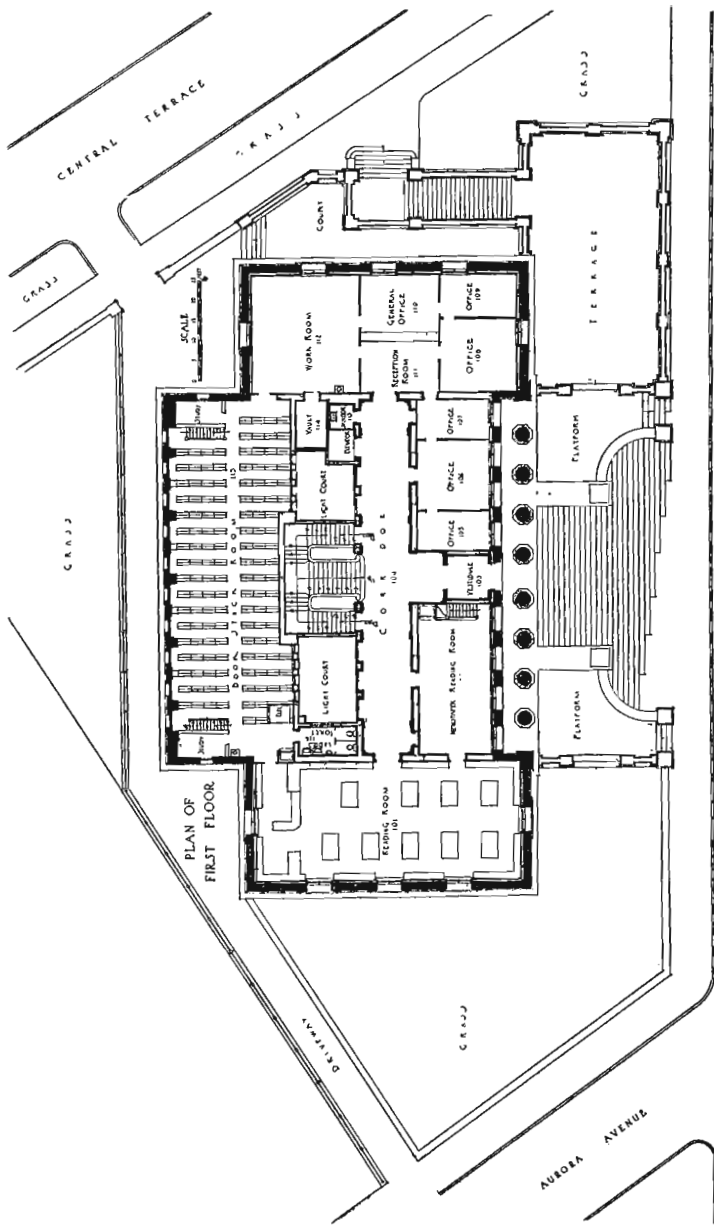
PLAN OF
GROUND FLOOR



floors for the lower four tiers are to be omitted under the present contract, the structural members, however, being placed so that shelving may be installed as needed. The stack as planned at present has a capacity of 192,000 volumes or approximately 48,000 volumes a floor. An automatic booklift stopping at each stack floor will minimize the labor incidental to the transfer of volumes from stacks to delivery desk, cataloguing room, or shipping room as the case may be. A small push-button elevator for the use of stack attendants and the library staff extends from the basement to the third floor, making the entire stack room readily accessible from any floor of the building. At either end of each stack floor are small studies where the research student or others using the library for extensive study may withdraw from the confusion attendant upon the routine stack work. Several small table tops hinged to the stack ends in the window bays on each stack floor form convenient spots for casual inspection of volumes.

The newspaper stack (5) occupies the central portion of the Cedar Street front in the basement and ground floors. It is similar in construction to the main bookstack, is four tiers in height, and has a capacity of 16,500 bound newspaper volumes. It is directly accessible from the newspaper reading room and from the basement and ground floor corridors.

The north pavilion of the ground floor is given over to the receiving and shipping room (1) of the historical society and a staff room (3) with kitchenette and locker rooms adjoining. In the south pavilion is the work room (9) of the Minnesota Public Library Commission with a small private office (8) for the secretary of the commission. On the east side of the corridor immediately below the light courts are the public toilets (11, 12), a small room for the use of janitors (10), and the photostat room (13), where direct photographic reproductions of manuscripts, pictures, and even rare printed material may be made. The small entrances to the right and left of the steps leading to the main entrance will be largely used by regular



PLAN OF FIRST FLOOR.

CEDAR STREET

AUBORA AVENUE

habitueés of the building, the elevator and main staircase being but a few steps distant from either entrance.

In the basement, immediately underneath the work room of the library commission and connected with it by stairway, is the shipping room of this department. A fortunate difference in the grades of Aurora Avenue and Central Boulevard enabled the architect so to design the service driveway in the rear of the building as to make the shipping rooms of the historical society and the library commission, though located on different floors, readily accessible for incoming or outgoing packages.

The building is connected with the power plant of the Capitol by a concrete tunnel extending under Aurora Avenue, through which heat, light, and power will be conducted to the mechanical equipment room in the basement and thence will be distributed to the various parts of the structure. Six large fans will furnish washed, fresh air to each room, being connected in such manner as to allow the various rooms to be heated to different temperatures as may be desired. The latest improvements in ingenious mechanical devices are provided for the convenience of the public and the staff. These include a complete system of private telephones affording communication between all departments of the society, automatic time clocks in the important rooms, and a powerful vacuum-cleaning plant to facilitate the work of the caretakers.

The plans having been accepted by all parties concerned, the architect advertised for bids, and on November 30, 1915, the general construction contract was awarded to the George J. Grant Construction Company of St. Paul. The letting of the contracts for mechanical equipment followed soon after, and on December 7 the wrecking of the house on the site and the work of excavation were begun. This work was completed and the tunnel to the heating plant constructed during the winter, and at the present writing the foundation is nearing completion. The contracts call for the completion of the building on or before October 1, 1917, and if no unexpected obstacles are

encountered, it may be finished several months before that date. Then for the first time the historical society will have a suitable home, adequate, for the present at least, for its library and other activities, and comparable to the buildings erected for similar purposes in the other states of the West.

STIRLING HORNER

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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