

# Notes and Documents

## THREE HISTORIC BUILDINGS<sup>1</sup>

*Ruth B. Bordin*

ON SUNDAY, May 19, at the St. Anthony Park Branch Library, the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association conducted a little ceremony in which three early buildings of the St. Anthony Park area—the Gibbs house, the Hunt house, and the Old Home Building on the University Farm campus—were designated historic monuments of the state of Minnesota. The citation prepared for each building and read on this occasion by Dr. Laurence Schmeckebier stated that “Upon the recommendation of the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association and the Minnesota Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings, this structure is hereby designated as a building of exceptional historic and artistic merit.” The ceremony had significance for the state as a whole, because by means of it, for the first time, a local historical society, in co-operation with the committee for the preservation of historic buildings of the Minnesota Historical Society, selected for official recognition some of the state’s early buildings. Thus the occasion probably marked the beginning of what promises to be an ambitious program.

The oldest of the three buildings selected was the Gibbs house, located on the northwest corner of Cleveland and Larpenteur avenues in St. Paul. It was there in 1849 that Mr. and Mrs. Heman Gibbs pre-empted land and built, half underground, a claim shanty of logs, the only reminder of which is a grassy depression in the lawn just beyond the southeast corner of the present porch. In 1854 the claim shanty was replaced by a small frame house. In time it was incorporated in the east end of the present structure, which was completed

<sup>1</sup> This is the second of a series of articles dealing with the activities of the Minnesota Historical Society’s committee for the preservation of historic buildings, under the chairmanship of Professor Laurence Schmeckebier. The first article in the series appears in the June number of this magazine, *ante*, p. 125–127. *Ed.*

## THE GIBBS HOUSE

Larpenteur and Cleveland Avenues, St. Paul

☛§ Upon the recommendation of the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association and the Minnesota Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings, this structure is hereby designated as a building of exceptional historic and artistic merit.

☛§ The original house was a claim shanty of logs, half underground, built by Heman Gibbs in 1849, shortly after his arrival as the first settler of this area. In 1854, a small wood house was built which became a part of the present structure when it was erected in 1867.

☛§ As a historic and artistic landmark, this building, which is unique in this area as a survival from frontier times, is typical of the rugged simplicity and strength of pioneer Minnesota.

May 19, 1946



Signed

Remond S. Bruel  
PRESIDENT, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Arthur J. Larsen  
SUPERINTENDENT, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE GIBBS HOUSE CERTIFICATE

about 1867. This charming Greek revival house, with columned porch, was modeled after one belonging to Mr. Gibbs' sister at Galena. The commemorative certificate states that "this building, which is unique in this area as a survival from frontier times, is typical of the rugged simplicity and strength of pioneer Minnesota."

The second building is the Hunt house, at 2748 Territorial Road in St. Paul. It was built about 1874 by Daniel H. Hunt to replace a much earlier structure, built in 1859 by his father-in-law, Norman Lockwood, and later destroyed by fire. Situated as it was on the old military road between St. Paul and St. Anthony, the house witnessed caravans of immigrants and Red River carts as they passed by its door. As one of the few structures of consequence on that part of the trail, it often proffered a welcome hospitality to the victims of unforeseen delays on the route.

The third building is a much later structure—the Old Home Building on the University of Minnesota Farm campus, built in 1888. But it is a pioneer in its own right, for it was the original home of the first vocational school of agriculture maintained by a university in the United States. The building sometimes is called by the name of the architect who planned it, LeRoy Buffington, later famous as a designer of skyscrapers. The Old Home Building was designed to serve all the needs of the school of agriculture, housing within its walls dormitories, classrooms, and living quarters for the principal and his wife.

By designating these three buildings historic monuments, the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association and the Minnesota Historical Society recognized the desirability of preserving them for coming generations and assumed some measure of responsibility for their future. When materials are available, each will be marked with a bronze plaque. The state has long been conscious of the need for preserving the records of its past, as the vast collections of newspapers, manuscripts, books, and museum objects in the Historical Building in St. Paul bear witness. But the state has been slow in establishing a program for the preservation of the architectural media which played a role in Minnesota's development. True enough, several important architectural remains have been consciously preserved,

largely through the personal efforts of isolated individuals and groups who could command in some cases a measure of public support. The Sibley House at Mendota, forgotten and almost in ruins a few years ago, was rescued and restored by the Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution. The American Legion maintains the old Mattocks School in St. Paul; the Minneapolis park commission, the Godfrey House; the firm of General Mills, the old Pillsbury A Mill. But many others have been torn down or neglected. For example, the house built by Joshua L. Taylor at Taylors Falls was wrecked in the spring of 1946; an interesting octagonal house at Afton was destroyed after it had been designated by the Historic American Buildings Survey as a structure of exceptional architectural and historic merit that was worthy of the most careful preservation; and the house of Daniel A. Robertson in St. Paul, though still standing, is badly in need of repair.

The first step in saving the best architecture of Minnesota's past is to ferret out the state's buildings of historic and artistic significance. In this work the committee for the preservation of historic buildings has made real progress. But there is still much work to be done—work that, in its early stages at least, can be done by members of local historical societies who know where the buildings are and what roles they played in the development of their communities. It was the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association which first recognized the merit of the Hunt and Gibbs houses and brought them to the attention of the state society. The Rice County Historical Society, after becoming alarmed about the neglect and decay of the old Alexander Faribault house, the first frame building erected in Rice County, arranged for its purchase and is now restoring it. In this work it receives the aid and encouragement of the state historical society. But responsibility rests first with the small communities, which in turn should be helped and encouraged by the state committee.

Only a few of Minnesota's historic buildings should be used as museums. A state dotted with hundreds of museums, dedicated solely to preserving the dead past, would be a sorry place indeed. Most old buildings, however, can function in other capacities and

can serve many other useful purposes. Many early houses should and do remain homes, like the W. H. C. Folsom house in Taylors Falls, which still is occupied by a grandson of the builder, or the Le Duc house in Hastings, now used as a combined home and antique shop. The Pillsbury A Mill, although the exterior is carefully preserved just as it was in the early period of Minneapolis flour milling, is now equipped with modern machinery and it still functions as a part of the General Mills plant. Churches that have been preserved or restored can easily serve their original purpose; in fact, scores of such buildings throughout the state still meet the religious needs of their communities. Sometimes, if they become too small, they are passed on to other congregations, or occasionally they are enlarged to incorporate the original structure into a new plan, as in the case of Trinity Episcopal Church at Excelsior. Some buildings might be used as libraries or community centers. The Old Home Building itself barely escaped the wrecker's hammer, but fortunately it was saved to play a useful role on the modern farm campus as a dormitory for veterans.

Minnesota's historic structures were useful in their youth, and many of them can still make useful contributions to society. A beautiful house, if well cared for, remains a beautiful house generations later—a place in which any family can take pride. In cities shifting property values and the marked deterioration of older areas often make the use of old houses as residences impractical, but they may help rehabilitate depressed areas if used as libraries or community centers. It is first necessary, however, to know where these buildings are, and the communities in which they are located must feel a desire and a need to rehabilitate them, in order that they may continue to contribute to the life of the locality.



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