

VISITORS line up  
to tour the house on  
September 7, 1958

## A HISTORIC MANSION

### *The William G. Le Duc House*

JEAN A. BROOKINS



ONE OF THE FINEST examples in the Midwest of the so-called Rhineland Gothic architecture is the William Gates Le Duc house at Hastings. The home, built by Le Duc nearly a century ago, is a three-story limestone mansion, divided by two-foot-thick stone walls into fifteen rooms. Typical of the style so popular along the Hudson River Valley during the mid-nineteenth century are its pointed arch windows, its high tower rising above the main entrance, and its carved wooden cornices decorating the gable ends of the roof. Set back from Vermillion Street, now a heavily traveled high-

way, the Le Duc house with its landscaped lawn and large trees stands quietly as a reminder of a bygone era of horse-drawn carriages and hoop skirts.<sup>1</sup>

There is little doubt that the house will stand for many years to come. Its preservation has been assured by Carroll B. Simmons, who, at a public ceremony on September 7, 1958, presented to the Minnesota Historical Society the deed to the property. It has long been the hope of both Mr. Simmons, who became the owner of the house in 1940, and the society that the Le Duc house can be restored to its original grandeur and be opened to the public as a

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of Gothic style homes, see Evadene Burris, "Building the Frontier Home," in *Minnesota History*, 15:54 (March, 1934); and John Drury, *Historic Midwest Houses*, 187 (Minneapolis, 1947).



REAR view of the century-old barn taken in 1959

historic site. To that end the society is mapping out such a project.<sup>2</sup>

When Le Duc began building the house, he had already lived in Minnesota more than a decade and was one of the new state's most active and respected citizens. Born in Wilkesville, Ohio, in 1823, he attended the public schools, Howe's Academy, and Kenyon College. After graduating, he read law with an attorney at Mount Vernon, Ohio, and was admitted to the bar in 1849. The following year he took a steamboat to St. Paul, where he arrived on July 5. Armed with a sharp intellect, a strong body, and a thorough education, he was well equipped to take advantage of the opportunities offered in the frontier settlement, and his success was immediate. In one year his law practice outgrew a small frame shack and he moved to larger quarters at Wabasha and Third streets, where in 1851 he opened St. Paul's first book and stationery store. The same year he returned to Mount Vernon to marry his fiancée, Mary Elizabeth Bronson, the daughter of the Reverend Charles P. Bronson and a graduate of Putnam Seminary for girls. Together the Le Duc's returned to St. Paul and took up their new life in the company of such friends as the Henry H.

Sibleys, the Alexander Ramseys, and the Edward D. Neills. Shortly after their homecoming, they moved into a two-story frame house adjoining the bookstore; this was their home until 1857.<sup>3</sup>

A long series of accomplishments established for Le Duc a reputation as a man of enterprising ideas and strong convictions. In just one year, 1853, he erected the first brick building on the south side of Third Street, was instrumental in forming a corporation that later built the Wabasha Street bridge, and helped secure the passage of acts to incorporate the first railroad companies in Minnesota Territory. During the same year

<sup>2</sup> See *Minnesota History*, 36:107 (June, 1958). In addition to the house, Mr. Simmons' gift included an octagonal icehouse and a barn, both built before the Civil War, and the lot upon which the buildings stand, measuring 185 feet wide and 265 feet deep. The society purchased additional footage, making the total lot 185 feet by 330 feet, or a little more than an acre.

<sup>3</sup> Gideon S. Ives, "William Gates Le Duc," in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 3: 57-59 (May, 1919); Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 222 (St. Paul, 1886); Mary W. Berthel, *Horns of Thunder*, 93, 252 (St. Paul, 1948); Bertha L. Heilbron, *The Thirty-second State: A Pictorial History of Minnesota*, 115 (St. Paul, 1958).

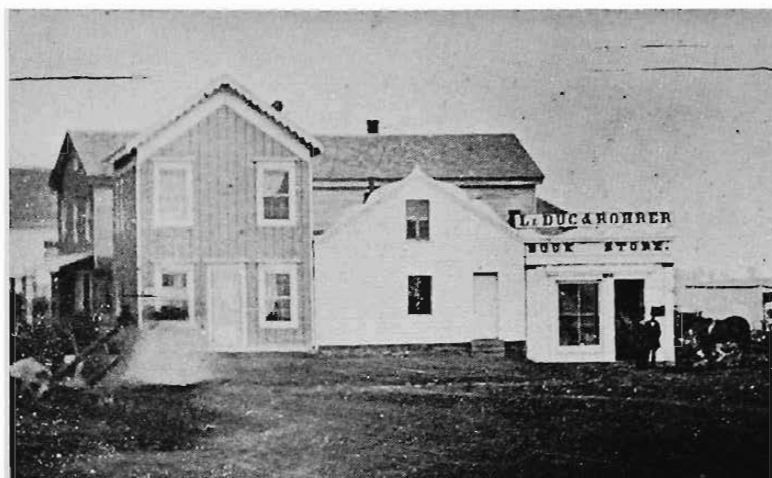
he was named to superintend Minnesota's exhibits at an international exposition held in New York City, where wild rice and an obstinate bull buffalo helped publicize the little-known territory. The native grain was highly favored by officials and guests at the fair's opening banquet; the buffalo, on the other hand, failed to gain entry as part of the Minnesota exhibit, but his wild antics while in New York attracted wide attention. Thus both products of the frontier territory served in their own way to make it better known. For three years, beginning in 1851, Le Duc authored and published the *Minnesota Year Book*, an annual chronicle of facts about and events in the territory. Later he organized the Hastings, Minnesota River, and Red River of the North Railroad, of which he was president until 1870. He was the owner and operator of a flour mill at Hastings, which is said to have produced and marketed the first flour made from Minnesota spring wheat. In 1862 he joined the Union army as a captain in the quartermaster department, and he served brilliantly under Generals McClellan, Hooker, and Sherman. Promoted to lieutenant colonel during the war, he was brevetted brigadier general at its close. After his return to Minnesota in 1865, Le Duc made unsuccessful attempts at railroading and mining, then turned for his major source of income to agriculture. In

1877 President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed him commissioner of agriculture, a post he held until 1881. On his retirement he was elected a member of the Agriculture Society of France in recognition of his services.<sup>4</sup>

IN AUGUST, 1854, Le Duc bought from Alexander Faribault a quarter interest in the townsite of Hastings. He made the purchase through his friend, Henry H. Sibley, who was co-owner of the townsite with Faribault and Alexis and H. G. Bailly. At first Le Duc regarded his four-thousand-dollar investment as highly speculative. Two years later, however, when circumstances led him to acquire a piece of land on the Vermillion River at Hastings, he reassessed his property holdings and realized their great value. Le Duc's own explanation of how he became owner of the river-front property appears in a history of Hastings published in 1868. "In 1853 or 1854," he wrote, "I went from St. Paul . . . fishing to Trout Brook, twelve miles below Hastings. On my return, while fording the Vermilion [*sic*], I was met by Harrison H. Graham, for whom I had some legal business in hand, and who informed me that he had made a claim of the quarter section embracing the Vermilion Falls, that there was a dispute in relation to the claim, and he wished me to defend his case. . . . I took the case . . . and succeeded in obtaining the patent for my client, Graham. He was poor, unable to pay the fees and had borrowed of me between one and two thousand dollars, and after entry was completed and patent issued, he offered me one half his claim in payment of indebtedness. Subsequently he borrowed more money . . . and became indebted to many other persons, and finally offered to sell me the remaining half interest if I would pay his debts, assume all joint debts on the property and give him \$7,000 cash, which offer I accepted." The property was transferred to Le Duc in January, 1856. He immediately examined his new holdings, and "found myself possessed of one of the most beautiful and desirable

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<sup>4</sup> Ives in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 3:58-65; Ben F. Rogers, "William Gates Le Duc, Commissioner of Agriculture," in *Minnesota History*, 34:287-295 (Autumn, 1955). For further biographical information see William G. Le Duc, "Recollections of a Quartermaster," a manuscript autobiography in the library of the United States department of agriculture at Washington. A restricted copy of this autobiography is among the Le Duc Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. For Le Duc's recollections of the New York exposition see his "Minnesota at the Crystal Palace Exhibition, New York, 1853," in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 1:351-368 (August, 1916); and for two incidents of his military career see William G. Le Duc, "The Little Steamboat that Opened the 'Cracker Line,'" in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 3:676-678 (New York, 1888); and Alice Sumner Le Duc, "The Man Who Rescued 'The Captain,'" in *Atlantic Monthly*, 180:80-86 (August, 1947).



LE DUC's house and  
bookstore in  
St. Paul, 1853

waterfalls in the world, with a little farm house of two rooms, and a clumsy back woods mill," which Graham had constructed a few years before.<sup>5</sup>

By 1857 Le Duc found himself conducting more of his business at Hastings than at St. Paul. Consequently, he and his wife decided to sell the bookstore and their St. Paul residence and move into a newly built dwelling near Vermillion Falls. Chartering a small steamboat, they transported their household goods and two dogs down the river to Hastings, a town of about two thousand persons. There they found only a few close friends; among them were Le Duc's brother, Charles, a Presbyterian minister, and William K. Rogers, a former Ohioan. For years their nearest neighbor lived about a half mile away. It may have been a lonely time for them, but it is likely that Le Duc welcomed the opportunities for fishing and gardening, his two favorite pastimes, and that Mrs. Le Duc was kept well occupied caring for their two daughters and the newest child, William Bronson, born shortly after they moved to Hastings. It is almost certain, too, that they had already begun to plan for their future mansion.<sup>6</sup>

AS MINNESOTA ENTERED statehood, the "striking want of taste" in local architecture, lamented by a St. Anthony editor of 1855, was becoming less prevalent. Minne-

sotans, especially those in St. Paul and St. Anthony, were offered the services of architects, whose inspirations were often executed in limestone from nearby quarries and featured such conveniences as piped-in water and gas and central heating. By 1860 local designers had come under the influence of Andrew J. Downing, an eminent rural architect and landscape artist in New York, who was the nation's leading exponent of the neo-Gothic style. Called Rhineland Gothic, Downing's homes featured spacious bay windows, tall towers, pointed arches above doors and windows, dormers, and fancy scrollwork trim. His designs were especially popular among builders in the Hudson River Valley, an area often compared with the Rhine Valley of Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Le Duc may have first noticed Rhineland Gothic homes while on occasional trips East to buy bookstore supplies; in any case it is

<sup>5</sup> W. H. Mitchell, *Dakota County: Its Past and Present*, 128 (Minneapolis, 1868); "Book B" of deeds, 45, in office of the register of deeds, Dakota County Courthouse, Hastings.

<sup>6</sup> Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties, Minnesota*, 245 (Chicago, 1910); *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 21, 1930; interview with Mr. Augustine V. Gardner, Jr., of St. Paul, a grandson of Le Duc, on February 20, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> *St. Anthony Express*, November 24, 1855; Heilbron, *Thirty-second State*, 107. For biographical information on Downing, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, 5:417 (1930); and Drury, *Historic Midwest Houses*, 188.

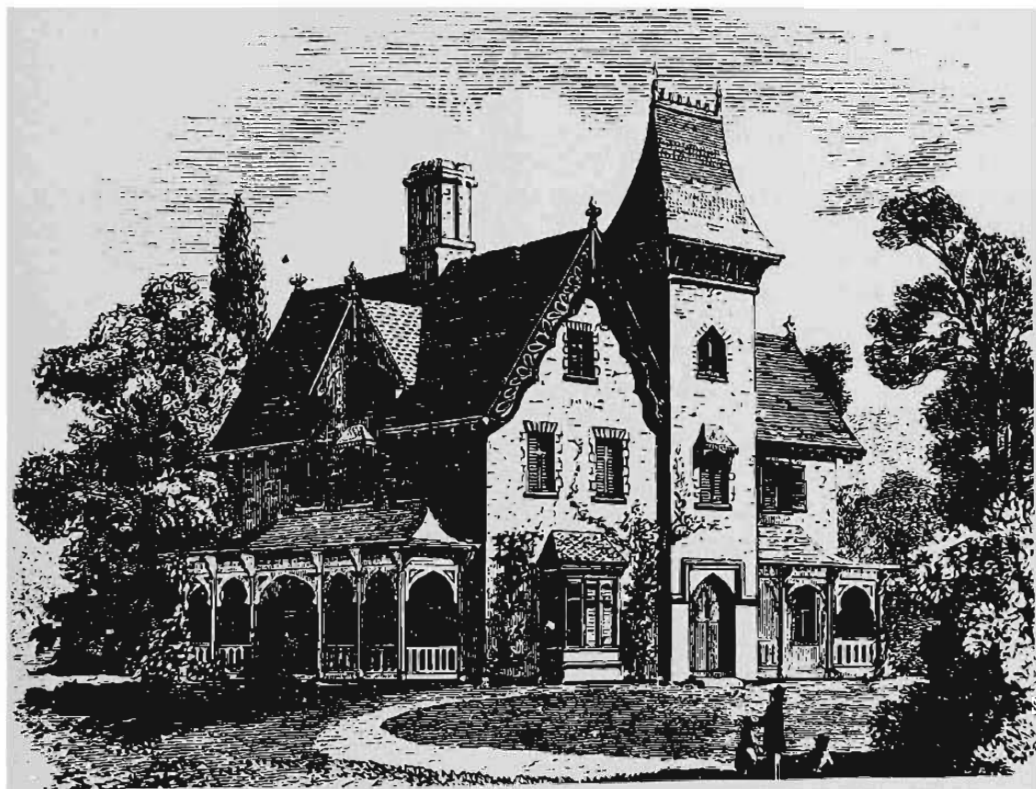
known that he admired Downing's work and owned at least one of the architect's several books. In fact, it was in the 1853 edition of Downing's *Cottage Residences* that Le Duc and his wife found the house they wanted. The book's frontispiece was a drawing of a home built at Newburgh, New York; the floor plan was included. The plan was ideal, except for one thing — Mrs. Le Duc wanted the arrangement of the rooms reversed so that the library and dining room would be on the south side of the home. She tackled the problem herself, and solved it by tracing the plan on paper, placing it against a win-

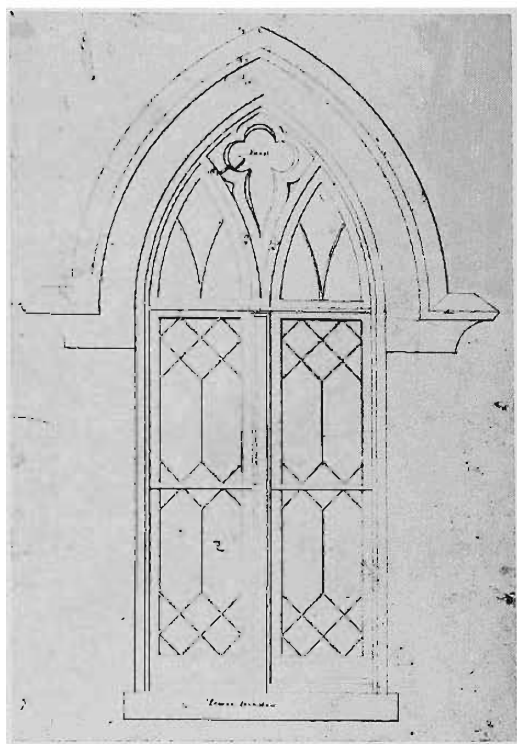
dow, and redrawing the lines on the back side of the paper. She and her husband gave the drawings to Augustus F. Knight, St. Paul's first architect, with instructions to adapt the plan to their needs. By the time Knight had finished the job and the Le Ducs were ready to begin construction, news of the outbreak of the Civil War reached Hastings, and personal plans were set aside in the face of a national crisis. The war proved to be only the first in a series of obstacles that delayed completion of the house.<sup>8</sup>

Le Duc went to Washington in March, 1862, to seek appointment as an officer in the Union army. His success assured, he returned to Hastings to prepare for the long absence. Arrangements were made for his family to live for the duration of the war with Mrs. Le Duc's relatives in Ohio; he sold his mill property, hired Moses Truax to

<sup>8</sup> Donald R. Torbert, *A Century of Art and Architecture in Minnesota*, 48 (Minneapolis, 1958). The Le Ducs' copy of Downing's book, *Cottage Residences*, is among the Le Duc papers. In it can be seen Mrs. Le Duc's pencilled drawing. The story of how she reversed the plans was told to the author by Miss Alice Le Duc of Minneapolis in an interview on November 21, 1960.

*THE Downing house after which the Le Duc home was patterned*





KNIGHT's drawing of the tower window

work his farmlands, and stored his household goods in the carriage barn already built at the site of the new house. Before departing for the East in late spring, he also contracted for the construction of the home.<sup>9</sup>

Eri Cogshall, a young master carpenter and well-established citizen of Hastings, was engaged to supervise the undertaking, which the *Hastings Independent* on May 8, 1862, predicted would result in "the finest house ever erected in this city." The building contract went to Fitzjohn and Melaney of Hastings. Work on the foundation began in 1862, with Cogshall keeping in as close touch with Le Duc as the irregular mails would allow. Although he was a professional builder, Cogshall found the problems he met throughout the course of construction unusually difficult, and he later admitted that he had "never had as unplesent a job in my life."<sup>10</sup>

Before the actual building could proceed far, Cogshall had to cope with a basic problem — the house plans. On April 4, 1863, he

wrote Le Duc that Knight's plans were, in many instances, impossible to follow. Not long after Le Duc left for the East a second architect, Abraham M. Radcliff of Minneapolis, had been called in to check the drawings with Cogshall. "He agreed with me," wrote Cogshall after their meeting, "that no mechanic could build from them unless he went . . . upon his own judgement." The plans lacked necessary details, and "a man building from them would be liable to make mistakes that would cost more to rectify than it would to have the plans finished in the first place." Cogshall had given Radcliff the plans to correct, and the architect had drawn in a stairway to the attic and tower, redrawn plans for the back stairs to provide more headroom, altered the chimneys, relocated two partitions that previously had run into windows, and moved the windows up about fifteen inches from the floor, where Knight had placed them. For his services, Radcliff charged twenty dollars.<sup>11</sup>

After the changes were made, Cogshall began to feel more optimistic about the project. "I felt last summer as though the house would not be built," he wrote Le Duc on May 3, 1863, "and that it would not suit you if it had been built and the way it went it perplexed and bothered me a good deal but this summer I think it will." By that time the carpenter had put men to work in the quarries, hired teams to haul rock, built a little house for the lime supply, prepared some of the lumber, primed the frames and cut them to size, and made hods and handbarrows.

Le Duc had instructed Cogshall to build as well as possible without unnecessary expense. Cogshall agreed with the principle, but often reminded Le Duc that the cheapest plan was not always the most expedient.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Gardner.

<sup>10</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, November 8, 1863. All correspondence between Cogshall and Le Duc cited in this article was loaned to the author by Miss Alice Le Duc.

<sup>11</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, April 4, May 3, 1863.

In making preliminary arrangements for building materials, for example, Cogshall contacted "two Dutchmen" and asked them to prepare a kiln for burning brick on the building premises. It would take some time to finish the kiln, but, he reasoned, the men would have to pay two thousand bricks for the use of the land on which the kiln stood; thus, Le Duc would not have to buy the bricks outright. In another instance, Cogshall arranged with a local lumber company to produce lime in Le Duc's old, worn-out kiln. The firm would give Le Duc six barrels of lime for the use of the kiln. "If it is cheaper to burn lime than buy," Cogshall wrote Le Duc, "I will burn a kiln after they get it fixed up." About a month later Cogshall made another contract with the lime burners. He advised Le Duc that he would "give them the use of the kiln for the season for 25 bbl of lime." Since the entire amount of lime needed for the house was estimated to be 125 barrels at seventy cents a barrel, Cogshall had made a good trade.<sup>12</sup>

CONSTRUCTION of the walls began about the middle of May, but it did not progress smoothly. The man Cogshall had put in charge of the quarry had underestimated the amount of rock needed, and when Cogshall started laying stone at the top of the foundation, he found he lacked "rock enough of one size to make one course around the house," and what rock he had was "in a bad shape." There was nothing for him to do but go to the quarry himself, cut the size he needed, then haul the rock up to the building site in a rough condition and smooth it as he needed it. The delay dismayed but did not daunt Cogshall. He had told Le Duc early in May that he had set harvest time as the deadline for completing the walls. "I will try and build the house with 3 masons and one stone cutter in a little over two months," he wrote on May 7. In

addition, he said he would need two men in the quarry, two on the handbarrow, one mortar man, and one carpenter. His estimated cost for meeting the deadline was \$1,120. The money would cover two months' wages of three masons, a stone cutter and a carpenter, each at \$50 monthly, and five laborers at \$36 each per month; lime at \$50; special stone from St. Paul at \$120; and "contingencies" at \$90. Cogshall asked Le Duc to send the money soon, "for work costs 20 per cent more after harvest than it does before." Besides, he added, "you have no idea how it strengthen[s] an Irishmans Nerves to get his pay every Saturday."<sup>13</sup>

Another reason for the deadline was the fact that ox teams for hauling rock were already scarce, and even fewer would be available during harvest. Truax, who had been hauling for Cogshall, would have to stop as soon as the crops demanded his attention. It sounded like a logical plan in May, but in a letter dated August 12, 1863, Cogshall had to admit that he was beaten. He explained to Le Duc that when construction began he had estimated that the supply of rock in the yard would be almost sufficient. Later he discovered he lacked about sixteen hundred feet of stone, and before that amount could be quarried all the laborers had been lured off to the harvest fields by higher pay.

This was not the first labor trouble Cogshall had met. During the spring of 1863 local workers had gone on strike in an attempt to raise their wages from \$1.25 to \$1.75 per day. News that several Hastings men were planning to build homes supported the laborers' confidence that their demands would be successful. Such was not the case; instead of paying higher prices, many of the men decided to postpone construction. Cogshall promoted a counterplot against the strikers by asking owners of buildings already contracted for to report that they, too, would put off building. The laborers called off the strike, fearing that soon there would be no work at all for them in Hastings. Most of the workers, Cogshall

<sup>12</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, April 4, May 3, 1863.

<sup>13</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, May 7, 26, August 12, 1863.

happily reported to Le Duc, were very willing to return at the old prices of \$1.25 to \$1.50 daily.<sup>14</sup>

Another attempt by Cogshall and Le Duc to save on labor costs was less successful. The plan involved several Hastings men who had purchased lots from Le Duc, but had never paid for them. The two builders thought it might be wise to have the men redeem their debts by working in the quarries, and Cogshall advised the debtors that they could clear the title to their land in this way. Their response to the proposition was not what Le Duc had hoped for. "Some of them," wrote Cogshall on May 7, "say they will work or pay the money and some may not do either." Those who were willing to work demanded such high wages that had Cogshall paid them he would have established an exorbitant wage scale for other laborers in town. Not one of the debtors would come to work on Cogshall's terms until he told them that Le Duc had issued an ultimatum: the men must either pay their debts in cash, work them off, or forfeit their property. After that Cogshall had ample laborers, but their accomplishments in the quarries were not satisfactory. Some of the men, he discovered late in May, had done inferior work which eventually cost both time and money to redo. Besides, they demanded that payment at the top rates of \$1.50 to \$1.62 per day be deducted from their debts.<sup>15</sup>

Added to the problems of house plans and laborers was another involving a specific type of stone. The designs called for window caps and sills of a decorative blue limestone as a contrast to the buff colored walls. Cogshall was confident that the stone would be available in St. Paul at a reasonable price, and he hoped that Le Duc would agree to his buying it there. He explained that the rock probably could be obtained at Hastings, but that he might have to quarry "rock enough to build a house" before getting just the right kind for sills and caps. Cogshall himself went to St. Paul to investigate the matter, and found he could buy stone for

twenty-four openings at a hundred dollars, delivered on the levee of the capital city. The price was cheaper than usual, the carpenter explained, because the dealers wished to bring in more trade from Hastings. He estimated the cost of shipping the blocks to Hastings at twenty dollars.<sup>16</sup>

Apparently with Le Duc's permission, the blue stone was ordered at St. Paul, and with the intention of getting it, Cogshall boarded a boat for that city one evening late in May. Before he reached his destination, the boat stuck on a sand bar at Pig's Eye, where he had to remain for the night. At eight o'clock the next morning he hired a skiff to take him ashore, and "footed it to St. Paul," where he found the rock was not yet ready. Empty-handed, he returned that evening to Hastings. Two days later the rock arrived—fifty-nine pieces weighing ten tons in all. The "bill that followed them was \$50" and shipping charges were \$29.50.<sup>17</sup>

THE SPRING OF 1863 was a dry one, and because of low water in the rivers, lumber was scarce in Hastings. Without a supply of logs from the north, several sawmills in the area were forced to close for the summer, while at the same time timber lay unused in the pineries. The shortage presented Cogshall with still another problem, when in November he was ready to shingle the roof. He had expected to get shingles from a Hastings sawmill which had suspended operations until after the harvest season. When the mill reopened in October,

<sup>14</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, May 3, 1863.

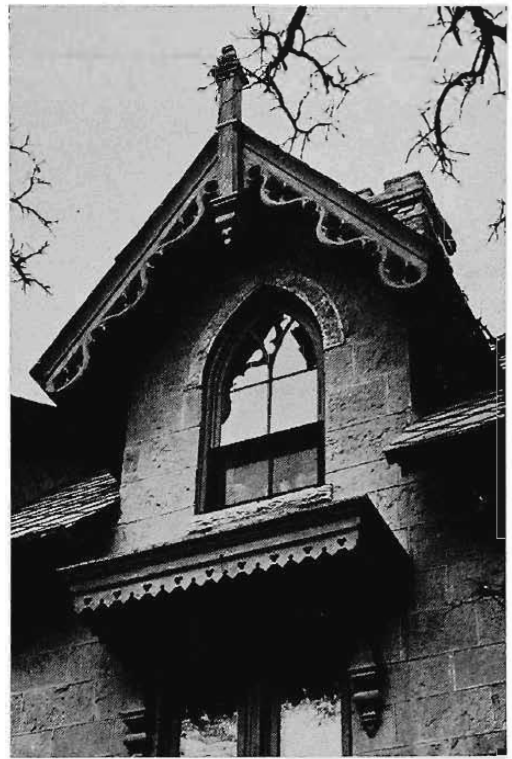
<sup>15</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, May 3, 7, 26, 1863.

<sup>16</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, May 7, 1863.

<sup>17</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, May 26, 1863. Among the pieces was the present front door sill, which is six feet four inches long, two feet ten inches wide, and eight inches thick; it alone weighed nineteen hundred pounds. There were also caps for the Gothic front door frame, of two pieces, each seven feet long, and caps for the large windows, measuring five feet eight inches in length. Sills and caps for windows and doors in the rear were obtained from quarries near Hastings. Cogshall to Le Duc, May 7, 1863.

Cogshall was there to claim the shingles as fast as they were turned out. After furnishing enough for only a third of the roof, however, the mill broke down, and the enterprising foreman had to supplement his materials from another source. Shingles were not plentiful at Hastings, and those that were available he thought too expensive at \$5.50 a thousand. Vainly Cogshall attempted to buy them at Prescott, Wisconsin. He finally sent Truax with a team and wagon to St. Anthony, where he succeeded in finding twenty thousand shingles at four dollars per thousand. Nearly five thousand of them were used for the tower roof alone. Although plans called for a tin tower covering, Cogshall independently decided that shingles were preferable, especially since they cost seventy-five to a hundred dollars less. Through Le Duc's brother, Charles, Cogshall later learned he had done as Le Duc wished, except that the owner wanted ornamented shingles and Cogshall had put on plain ones. In this matter the carpenter voiced his disagreement. "I think you will like them better [plain]," he suggested; "if not you can have them ornamented." He cautioned, however, that "it is quite a job to ornament so large a roof and I think shingles ornamented is to[o] Dutchy." Le Duc was persuaded by the carpenter's argument.<sup>18</sup>

Cogshall also needed a supply of lath if he was to "put the house in a shape to plaster in the spring." He told Le Duc that at one time he had plenty, but the sawmill where he had bought the lath had run out, and, promising to repay him after harvest, had borrowed back what it needed. Since the mill ultimately closed down, Cogshall was left with an inadequate supply. In fact, he wrote, he almost had to "fight to keep the balance[.] Men have been to me to buy and to borrow by the dozen and I am now agoing



DETAIL of Rhineland Gothic trim

to carry them into the house to keep them" from being stolen.<sup>19</sup>

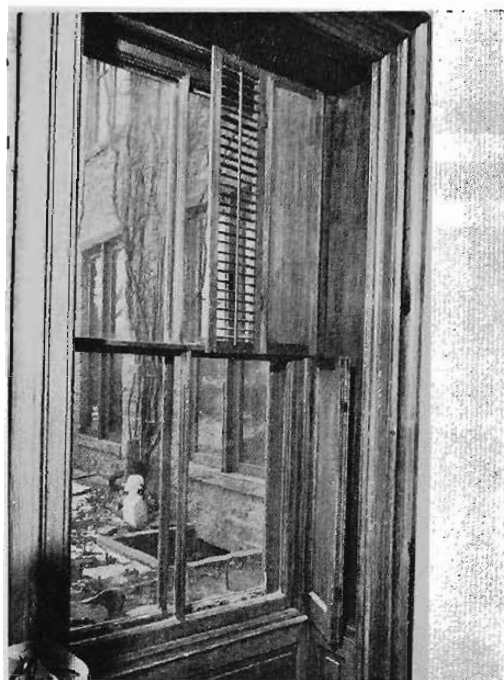
With the walls and roof completed in November, 1863, Cogshall was relieved to report to Le Duc that the house had "been put up without a mistake and not a dollars worth of work . . . done over." But the delays that had made it impossible to meet the harvest deadline had been expensive. The cost of labor alone had mounted to \$1,681.50 at this point, and that amount did not include Cogshall's wages. Le Duc had estimated that the house would cost about five thousand dollars in its completed state. By the time it was finished, however, the total had risen to six times that amount, or about thirty thousand dollars.<sup>20</sup>

As soon as the outer shell of the house was completed, workmen began on its interior. They plastered the walls and installed hand-rubbed Minnesota white pine woodwork throughout. The ten fireplaces were fitted with fronts of pine, instead of marble,

<sup>18</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, November 8, 1863. According to Mr. Simmons, the roof never was ornamented.

<sup>19</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, November 8, 1863.

<sup>20</sup> Cogshall to Le Duc, November 8, 1863; interview with Miss Le Duc.



LOUVRED shutters at the kitchen window

as Le Duc originally intended. The Civil War had made it impossible to import such luxuries. Also fashioned from the Minnesota wood were cabinets, doors, shelves, and closet fixtures. Le Duc later purchased brass chandeliers in hopes that Hastings would soon have gas lighting. These were dutifully installed, only to serve as ornaments while kerosene lamps lighted the rooms until the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup>

UPON HIS DISCHARGE from the army, General Le Duc took his family on a brief vacation in the East and then returned to Hastings. On August 17, 1865, the *Hastings Independent* noted their homecoming, saying "We are gratified to see General W. G. LeDuc . . . in the city. We recognize Gen. LeDuc as one of our best citizens and most cordially welcome him." Even though their new home would not be finished for another eighteen months, the Le Duc family moved in. Gathering around them their children, Mary, Florence, and Willie, the parents performed a fire-lighting ceremony to initiate "the house we built to be happy in."<sup>22</sup>

It was a spacious and cheerful home. Downstairs the dining room and the library, on the south, glowed in the sunlight that poured through the big windows. Across the hall, a large room was furnished as the formal visiting parlor. In the roomy kitchen, about sixteen feet square, a long iron range provided cooking facilities, and high cupboards built in along the north wall supplied ample storage space. Off the kitchen was a pantry and steps leading to the full basement below, where two of the five storage rooms could be heated by fireplaces whenever freezing temperatures threatened foods in the larder. Windows on the north and the south of the kitchen allowed fresh air to circulate freely through the room; ventilation was controlled by ingenious louvred shutters which folded back into the deep window wells when not in use. Similar shutters were fitted to each window on the first and second floors. Verandas on the south and west sides of the house made pleasant places to relax in summer.<sup>23</sup>

The second story was built in two levels. At the back of the house were a bedroom and a room for bathing which featured a zinc bathtub. Though this fixture had a lead pipe drain for easy water removal, the process of filling it was not so convenient. A bath had to be ordered in advance to allow the maid time to heat water in the kitchen and carry it in buckets up the back stairs to the bathroom. The second level at the front of the house was divided into the general's

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Mr. Carroll Simmons, January 30, 1959, Miss Le Duc, and Mr. Gardner. The fireplaces were badly designed and functioned only poorly at best. After one winter of smoke-filled, chilly rooms, Le Duc gave up and bought stoves to replace them. The fire boxes later were bricked up, and in 1948 Mr. Simmons removed the bricks and added marble fronts and mantels to several fireplaces.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Miss Le Duc. The story of the fire-lighting ceremony was a favorite of the family.

<sup>23</sup> Information in this and succeeding paragraphs was obtained from Miss Le Duc and Mr. Simmons. A wooden addition, which still stands in excellent condition, was built onto the rear of the house some time after 1868. It housed the summer kitchen and woodshed with a storage area above.

bedroom, an adjacent, connecting bedroom, and a guest room across the hall; each had a fireplace.

From the second story a back stairway was and still is the only passage to the third-floor servants' quarters. At the top of the stairs Le Duc had installed a small bell connected to a cord in the master bedroom directly below. The device was a convenience for Mrs. Le Duc, who sometimes found it necessary to summon a maid from upstairs.

Entrance to the upper chamber within the tower was gained at the north end of the third floor. There, in the small, out-of-the-way room, Le Duc could relax and enjoy a panoramic view through the tall windows on two sides. While the Le Ducs occupied the house, this room never was more than Spartanly furnished; probably the only pieces were the shelves holding books and a desk. In recent years, Mr. Simmons has converted the tower into a chapel, simply appointed with a small organ, an altar, and two prayer benches. Adjacent to the tower room are two unfinished areas—one used for storage and the other occasionally employed as a studio by artistic members of the family. In these rooms a thick stone dividing wall was left exposed to view.

The house was slowly and carefully furnished with pieces of walnut, mahogany, and rosewood, all hand-carved in the popular style of the period. Against the light colored wall covering in the drawing room there stood the fine woods of tables and two pianos and upholstered settees, sofas, and chairs. Over the fireplace hung a huge, gilt-framed mirror. In the dining room two large closets were stocked with expensive linens and china, purchased in the East. On one wall

stood a beautifully carved sideboard, hand made by a Hastings cabinetmaker who had emigrated from Austria. The Le Ducs' furnishings were supplemented in 1866 when Mrs. Le Duc inherited her mother's personal property which included many additional pieces of fine furniture.<sup>24</sup>

LIFE DURING the mid-nineteenth century was rather quiet, as recalled by one member of the family many years later. The Le Ducs became friendly with the family of Stephen Gardner, who had bought Le Duc's mill and moved to a home about a quarter of a mile away. For some time the children of the two families shared the services of a governess, who stayed alternately at each home; later the Le Duc children attended a small private school headed by their uncle, the Reverend Charles Le Duc. At home they enjoyed frequent sessions of reading aloud from the works of their favorite authors, Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. There were the usual birthday celebrations for the young, the ever-popular card parties—probably the most common social event—

*SECOND floor hall, facing the front*



<sup>24</sup> Interview with Miss Le Duc, Mr. Gardner, and Mr. Simmons. A copy of the will of Mrs. Le Duc's mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Bronson, dated June 28, 1866, is in the Le Duc Papers. Several pieces of the original furniture were seen by the author in the possession of the Le Duc family heirs. These items include settees, chairs, tables, and a buffet, as well as family mementos and portraits and other ornamental objects.

and invitations to supper at the homes of friends. There was, too, an occasional fancy dress party, like the one General Le Duc attended as Dickens' Captain Cuttle, complete with a hook for one hand. Church socials sometimes provided an occasion to see live drama, even though the fare was often limited to acting out of nursery rhymes. Summer became a season of increased gaiety in Hastings, for it was then that distant friends and relatives came to visit. To entertain them, the hosts had large evening gatherings where guests could enjoy square dancing.<sup>26</sup>

Although she had the help of servants, Mrs. Le Duc was kept busy as mistress of the large house. Her hired girls were most often the daughters of German or Scandinavian farmers, recently settled near Hastings. Usually the girls could speak little or no English and knew nothing of the American way of life, but they were willing to learn, and with Mrs. Le Duc as teacher, did very well. Sometimes the teacher's only reward for her efforts was the sudden announcement by her Scandinavian pupil, "I go Minnopolis"; and without further formality the girl would leave Hastings for a more exciting life in the big city.

Shopping for the household was done primarily at St. Paul, with occasional orders sent to stores in the East. Before trains reached Hastings, shopping trips were accomplished by steamboat or carriage and demanded a great deal of time and energy. The purchase of material for clothing was an important object of these excursions. Following one of them a seamstress would stay with the family for as much as three weeks at a time, stitching together the cloth that Mrs. Le Duc had cut from patterns in *Harper's Bazaar*, considered then to be the best magazine of its kind. The results of each sewing session included several dresses and other garments for Mrs. Le Duc and her girls.

Such was the ordinary life of the Le Ducs; but during the early years of their residence in the new home there occurred some out-

standing events which were long remembered. The first of these was the sudden death in June, 1866, of Charles Bronson, the twenty-seven-year-old brother of Mrs. Le Duc, who had moved to Hastings after the Civil War. Two years later, the house was brightened by the birth of the fourth child, Alice; and in 1873, Mary, the eldest, became the wife of Augustine V. Gardner in a wedding ceremony performed at home.

GENERAL LE DUC conducted much of his business in the library, his favorite room. He could often be found seated at his desk in front of the sunny windows facing the book-lined walls opposite. Following the war, Le Duc's interests turned once more to railroads. His efforts in that field, however, were short-lived, unsuccessful, and disillusioning. After losing a good deal of money, he left his family in Minnesota and went to Utah, where he attempted to recoup his losses with investments in a mining venture. This, too, failed, and he finally returned to Hastings and devoted his attention to farming, his major source of income until 1877. In that year he became President Rutherford B. Hayes's commissioner of agriculture, and the family moved to Washington.

During the four years the Le Ducs lived in the national capital, their Hastings home was closed—except for one memorable occasion. That event was the visit of President Hayes and his wife, along with a considerable number of others from Washington, in September, 1878. Committees in charge of the agricultural fairs at Minneapolis and St. Paul asked Le Duc, a personal friend of Hayes, to arrange and plan the presidential tour to Minnesota. Le Duc complied with the request and added to the itinerary a luncheon for the visiting dignitaries at his Hastings home, followed by a public reception in the courthouse square. Le Duc handled the preliminary arrange-

<sup>26</sup> The description of the Le Ducs' home life in this and the following paragraphs was given to the author by Miss Le Duc. A printed obituary of Charles A. Bronson is among the Le Duc Papers.



PORTRAITS of General and Mrs. Le Duc taken during the Civil War

ments for the Hastings affair from his Washington office. In a letter to his son-in-law, Gardner, he asked him to have "everything fixed up as well as an abandoned house will admit." With an eye for detail, he suggested that the flag be flying, the best horses be in the yard, and the mill at Vermillion Falls be stopped to make the river more attractive. The entertainment and menu he left in the capable hands of Mrs. Henry Pringle, a long-time family friend, and several other ladies of Hastings who were pleased to assist her.

To advertise the public reception, handbills were printed and posted around Hastings. They announced the arrival of "Distinguished Visitors," saying that "The Presidential party will arrive at the station

on the Hastings & Dakota Railway at Vermillion Falls, this city, by special train at about half past one o'clock, p. m., Monday, and will hold a reception at the residence of Gen. W. G. Le Duc from three and a half to five in the afternoon on the same day, at which time the President will be happy to receive the citizens of Hastings and vicinity."<sup>26</sup>

Monday, September 9, 1878, was a gala day at Hastings. For the first time in history the town was to be favored with a visit from the president of the United States, and probably all of Dakota County felt the excitement. By 10 A.M. the streets were crowded with people and teams, and from then until noon every major "thoroughfare leading into the city added its quota to the expectant multitude." Shortly before 1 P.M. a booming cannon announced the arrival of the presidential train. As they stepped from the cars, the honored guests were welcomed

<sup>26</sup> *Hastings Gazette*, August 31, 1878; Le Duc to Gardner, August 26, 1878, Le Duc Papers. One of the handbills can be seen framed and hanging in the Le Duc house.

by a reception committee which provided carriages and escorted them to Vermillion Falls. From there the party went to Le Duc's residence "and partook of a splendid collation," and a social hour.<sup>27</sup>

At 2 P.M. a procession took form on Second Street. It consisted of veterans, Hope Fire Company No. 1, the Mathew Temperance Society, the mayor and council, lawyers, citizens, and carriages, all led by the high-stepping city band of neighboring Prescott. The parade marched down Vermillion Street to the courthouse, where a speakers' stand had been built, "tastefully decorated with flags and surmounted by a live eagle." The mayor introduced President Hayes, who spoke briefly to the populace. Le Duc and several other military figures then entertained the crowd with short speeches, and the appearance of Mrs. Hayes on the platform in answer to chants from the spectators ended the ceremony. By then it was time for the President to catch his train, and the entire throng accompanied the party back to the depot. There, "for a full half hour Mr. and Mrs. Hayes shook hands from the platform of the rear coach, only

desisting when the rapid motion of the train made further approach impossible. It is probable that several thousand can truly say that they have clasped the hand of a live president of the United States," crowed the *Hastings Gazette* on September 13, 1878.<sup>28</sup>

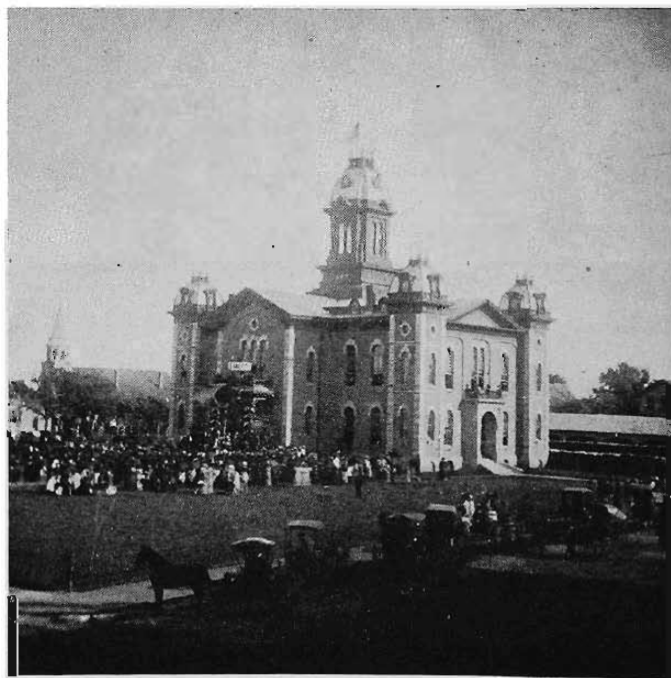
The Hastings reception was said to have been the most complete and successful affair the presidential party had enjoyed since leaving Washington. Much of the credit for the auspicious event went to General Le Duc, to whom, said the *Gazette*, "we are largely indebted for the first visit of a president to the state while in office."<sup>29</sup>

IN 1881 General Le Duc was replaced in the office of commissioner of agriculture, and shortly thereafter he brought his family home to Hastings. For many years the general and his family lived quietly in the big house with his daughter Mary, her husband,

<sup>27</sup> *Hastings Gazette*, September 7, 13, 1878.

<sup>28</sup> *Hastings Gazette*, September 7, 13, 1878.

<sup>29</sup> *Hastings Gazette*, August 31, September 7, 13, 1878.



PUBLIC reception  
honoring President Hayes  
at the Dakota County  
courthouse, 1878

and children. In 1904 Mrs. Le Duc died at home. Then came a period of near poverty for the general, whose small savings soon dwindled away. Throughout this difficult time, however, no mention was ever made of selling the beloved home or its furnishings. Later an inheritance from the widow of Le Duc's friend of many years, General Daniel Butterfield, once again brought a rise to affluence. The family stayed together until 1917, when "the honored patriarch" died of pneumonia in his upstairs bedroom at the age of ninety-four.<sup>30</sup>

Two years later the children moved to St. Paul and Minneapolis, retaining the old mansion as a summer home. For several winters the house was locked up and deserted, tempting thieves who entered in search of rich finds. Following several destructive intrusions, the Le Duc heirs proposed to Carroll Simmons, a distant relative of Mrs. Le Duc, that he move into the house and conduct his antique business there. Mr. Simmons accepted the offer in 1930, and since then has maintained the place as his home and shop. Throughout the past ninety-five years the Le Duc family and Mr. Simmons have been the only residents of the house. In 1940 Mr. Simmons became the owner of the property and from that time he has promoted its preservation. As a discriminating collector of antiques, he has contributed authentic pieces to the house's

nineteenth-century furnishings. His additions include imported marble fireplaces, several Brussels carpets, draperies and hand-made lace curtains, and French glass mirrors in gilt frames. It is hoped that some of these items, along with many original pieces of Le Duc furniture now owned by the heirs, will be permanently placed in the house.<sup>31</sup>

Under the terms of the transfer of property to the Minnesota Historical Society, Mr. Simmons will continue to live in the house. Conscious of the public's interest in the historic estate, he has for several summers conducted occasional Sunday afternoon tours through the home, giving visitors a preview of what the site will be like when it is restored. Meanwhile the society is proceeding with the restoration project, part of which will be financed by a contribution of \$7,200 made in 1958 by the Women's Division of the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Committee. A great deal of help will also come from Mr. Simmons and the Le Duc family heirs, all of whom are eager to see that the home be authentically restored.<sup>32</sup>

The Le Duc house was the first historic site to be acquired and administered by the society; it promises to be an outstanding example of what can be done to bring to the public a portion of Minnesota's past.

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## Memorials

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is received for the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Send your contribution to the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul 1, Minnesota, along with your name, the name of the person to receive the card, and the name of the person in whose memory the contribution is given.

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<sup>30</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 26, 1904, October 31, 1917; Curtiss-Wedge, *Dakota and Goodhue Counties*, 1:623; interview with Mr. Simmons.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with Mr. Simmons and Miss Le Duc.

<sup>32</sup> *Minnesota History*, 36:196 (March, 1959); interviews with Mr. Simmons, Miss Le Duc, and Mr. Gardner.

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