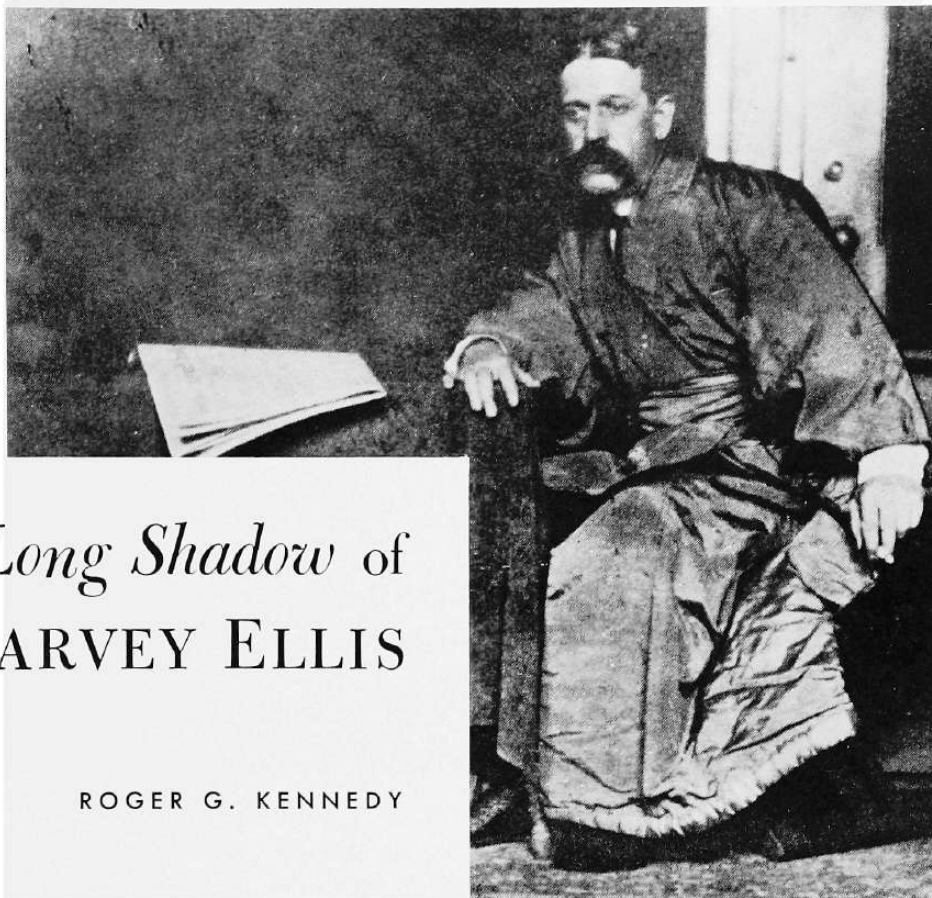


Harvey Ellis,  
probably about 1900



## The *Long Shadow* of HARVEY ELLIS

ROGER G. KENNEDY

THERE HAS BEEN an increasing interest among architectural historians in rediscovering the work of Harvey Ellis, a vagrant genius who exerted a powerful influence upon the development of midwestern architecture in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Minnesotans have good reason to share this interest, since Ellis' rediscovery has made it possible to attribute to him a number of prominent landmarks in the Twin Cities and elsewhere in the upper Midwest which have been long thought to be the work of lesser men.

It may seem strange that a man who died as recently as 1904 should already have been lost in the shadows, but it was one of Ellis'

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*Mr. Kennedy, who is senior vice-president of St. Paul's Northwestern National Bank, has written several previous articles dealing with the history of Minnesota architecture.*

peculiarities that he never emerged from a deliberate anonymity to claim his due. He used every ruse to baffle biography: false names, false addresses, long disappearances, and, to the end, a steadfast refusal to acknowledge his own accomplishments.

As William G. Purcell put it, writing in the *Northwest Architect*: "his designs [were] copied all over the country . . . [but] his 'employers' were unwilling to give credit to the mind that was making their reputations through buildings from his designs." Professional prudence on the part of men who put his talent to work was encouraged by Ellis himself; out of a working life of twenty-six years, his own name as architect appears on his published drawings only during a two-year span. The *Western Architect* lamented that circumstances "conspired to prevent him from carrying out his designs under his



*The John L. Merriam house as it appeared before alteration*

own name.”<sup>1</sup> It did not add that those circumstances were largely of his own making.

Who was Harvey Ellis? To the architect and critic Claude F. Bragdon he was primarily an experimental painter, “the Beloved Vagabond,” irresponsible, but unquestionably “a genius.” To Francis S. Swales, another critic who like Bragdon knew Ellis only in the last pathetic years before his death, he was “Architectural artist par excellence in pen and ink, charcoal and water color; designer of architecture in a very original and individual style; man of broad intellect and deep learning; philosopher, painter of charming decorative pictures; designer of the most delightful stained glass windows and of book covers and posters.”<sup>2</sup>

Neither Bragdon nor Swales had ever seen a building designed by Ellis in his years of grace between 1887 and his alcoholic collapse in 1893, but architects like Purcell and George G. Elmslie had. They knew his work

as they had known that of their early associates, Louis H. Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Looking back over a lifetime in architecture, a few months before his death in 1965, Purcell appraised Ellis: “Facing you—see a very great architect—before LHS [Sullivan], before Wright—paying no fealty to any—in my view greater than [Henry H.] Richardson—you have a man to appraise who stands on his own feet. No man’s name should be mentioned on any page about him.”<sup>3</sup>

HARVEY ELLIS was born in Rochester, New York, in 1852. After that little can be

<sup>1</sup> William G. Purcell, “Forgotten Builders—The Nation’s Voice,” in *Northwest Architect*, vol. 8, no. 6–7, p. 5 (1944); *Western Architect*, 3:15 (February, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> Claude F. Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 71, 79 (New York, 1929); Francis S. Swales, “Master Draftsmen, III: Harvey Ellis, 1852–1907 [sic],” in *Pencil Points*, July, 1924, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Purcell to the author, February 19, 1965.

stated with certainty except that he attended West Point, moved to Albany in the late 1870s, went to the Midwest in the mid-1880s, returned to the Rochester area a decade later, and died in the first week of 1904.<sup>4</sup> According to one family tradition, his de-

parture from West Point was speeded because of a secret marriage to an actress, which was annulled at the behest of his father, who thereupon arranged a trip abroad for his son to "cool off."<sup>5</sup>

Ellis probably studied painting in New York City and later found employment as a draftsman and designer with Henry H. Richardson, the most eminent American architect of the 1870s and early 1880s. Under Richardson, Ellis learned the massive Romanesque style that his mentor was popularizing, with an emphasis upon rich interiors and lavish decorative detail. He may have participated in the design of portions of the Albany City Hall and the New York State Capitol, particularly the ceremonial chambers of the latter, where the ornamentation strongly resembles some of Ellis' later work.<sup>6</sup>

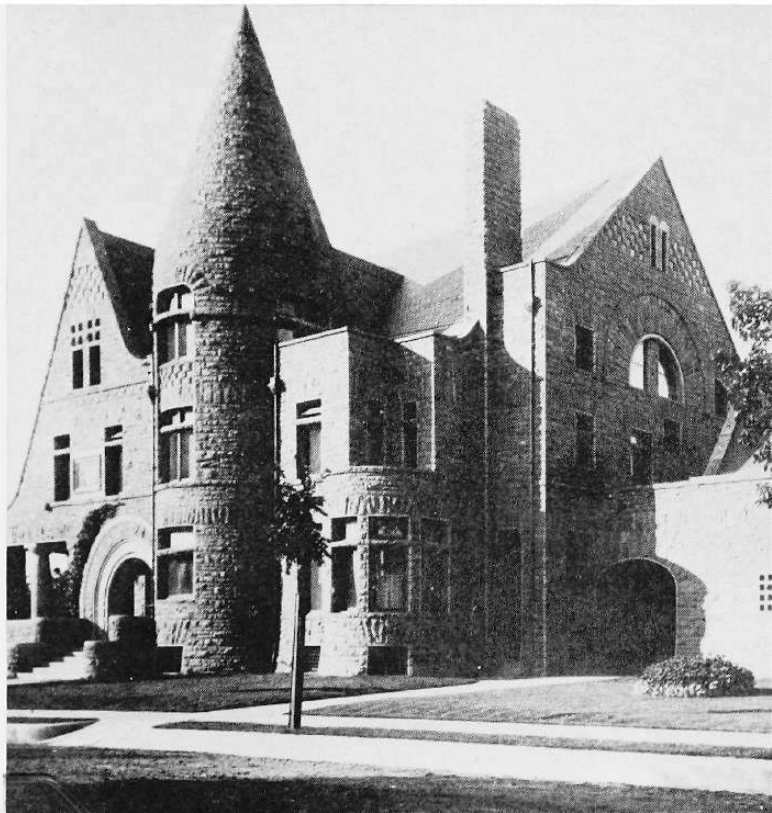
Leaving Richardson, he practiced with his brother Charles in Rochester for a short time in the early 1880s and is next found in St. Paul, where he was almost certainly responsible for the design of the magnificent mansion of banker John L. Merriam, built in 1885-86. This house, which in 1927 became the St. Paul Science Museum and in 1964 crumbled before the bulldozers, was

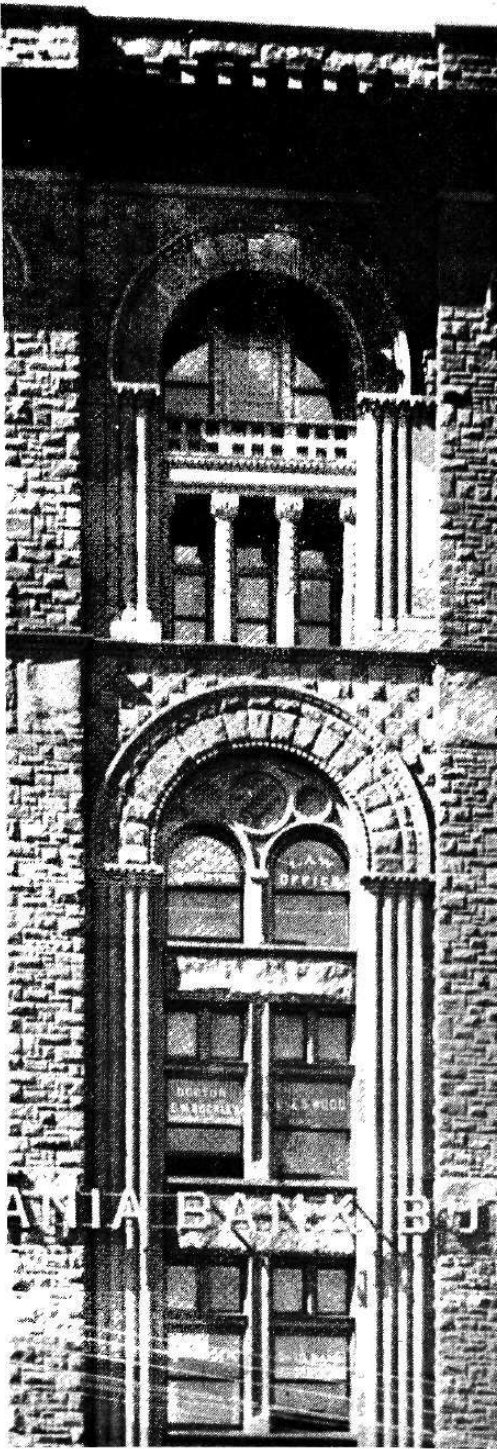
<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, January 6, 1904; *Union and Advertiser* (Rochester, New York), July 25, 1870; *A Chronicle of Architecture and Architects*, listing under "Ellis," (Rochester, New York, 1939). See also Swales, in *Pencil Points*; Bragdon, *Merely Players*. The most comprehensive and reliable essay on Ellis' life and work is a master's thesis by Eileen Manning (now Mrs. Joseph E. Michels) entitled "The Architectural Designs of Harvey Ellis" (1953), in the University of Minnesota Library. The author is indebted to Mrs. Michels' work at many points in this article.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ellis' niece, Miss Elisabeth Ellis, November 6, 1965. The story is given some support by a manuscript essay on Venetian architecture, apparently dating from the 1870s, among a small collection of Ellis' personal papers and sketches in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> Swales is the only authority for Ellis' study in New York and his employment by Richardson. Albany city directories show Ellis there from 1878 to 1880. For information on Richardson, see Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times* (New York, 1936). Hitchcock credits the ornamentation of the Capitol chambers with a great influence upon Sullivan and the Art Nouveau yet comments that Richardson "was really no ornamentalist" and relegated much of this type of work to his assistants. (P. 196)

*The Minneapolis mansion of Samuel C. Gale, built in 1888 and razed in 1933*





A section of the St. Paul Building,  
designed as the Germania Bank

a masterpiece, created before alcoholism had eroded much of Ellis' talent. Its massive exterior, suggesting clearly the influence of Richardson, bore intricate and delicately carved ornamentation on many of its red sandstone surfaces. Stained glass flooded the interior with golden light. In the two-story entrance hall rosewood, Spanish leather, cherry wood, and marble were shaped into a profusion of swirling designs similar to those employed in the New York Capitol five years earlier. Some impression of the grandeur of this hall can be gained from the staircase and fireplace which have been installed in King's Retreat House in Buffalo, Minnesota.<sup>7</sup>

When the Merriam house was destroyed it joined among the fallen giants a number of Minneapolis mansions designed by Ellis in the years from 1886 to 1893, when he worked intermittently for the popular and prolific architect LeRoy S. Buffington. Among those probably conceived by Ellis, two of the best were built for Samuel C. Gale at 1530 Harmon Place and for Fred C. Pillsbury at Tenth Street and Third Avenue.<sup>8</sup> The Gale house was probably Ellis' finest. Its forms were huge but simplified—continuous curves of masonry suggesting the vigor of the Romanesque style, uncluttered by fussy details.

Residents of the Twin Cities have lost many of Ellis' best works—buildings that

<sup>7</sup> The architects of record for the Merriam mansion were Charles T. Mould and Robert McNicol, but there seems little dispute that the stylistic evidence allocates it to Ellis, who according to the St. Paul directory for 1886-87 was employed by Mould. See H. F. Koepfer, *Historic St. Paul Buildings*, 72 (St. Paul, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Buffington (1848-1931) is credited with many notable Twin Cities buildings of the 1880s, among them the Pillsbury A Mill and the West Hotel. See Muriel B. Christison, "LeRoy S. Buffington and the Minneapolis Boom of the 1880's," in *Minnesota History*, 23:219-232 (September, 1942). Buffington's papers, now in the University of Minnesota Library, include many drawings signed by Ellis. Designs for the Gale and Pillsbury mansions are among these. For the Gale house see also *Northwestern Architect and Improvement Record*, vol. 7, no. 10 (October, 1889), and for the Pillsbury residence, *Architectural Review*, 15:182 (December, 1908).



were destroyed before their significance could be fully appreciated. Anyone who walks up Wabasha Street toward Fifth, however, and looks above the store window level can see his planning in the massive stonework and intricate ornament of the St. Paul Building. Erected in 1890 as the Germania Bank Building, this structure was until recently attributed to J. Walter Stevens, for whom Ellis also worked. Although Stevens, unlike some employers of Ellis, took pains to credit him for many of his best designs, he did not give the draftsman recognition for this edifice. Nonetheless, a listing of Ellis contributions to an architectural design contest in 1890 includes four

sketches which prove that he was responsible for St. Paul's most arresting relic of the building boom of the 1880s.<sup>9</sup>

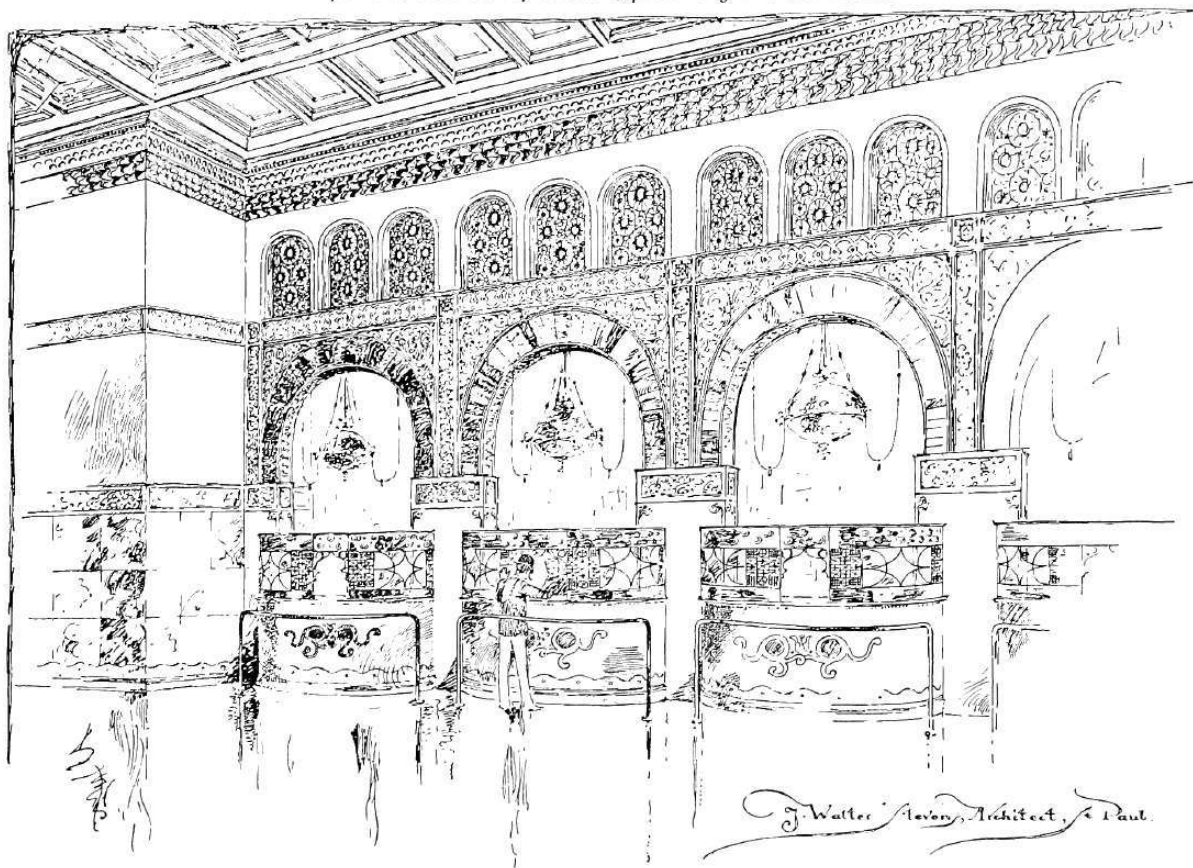
Other examples of Ellis' Twin Cities work are Pillsbury Hall, built in the late 1880s, and Nicholson Hall, both at the University of Minnesota. Pillsbury Hall, with its Auvergnat "checkerboards" of dark and light stone, its tower and cloister, is kin to the Merriam house. Many regard it as the most interesting building on the campus. Seen at a distance, Nicholson Hall has a dignified and balanced facade, but it was a product of the architect's fatigued mind, done just before he left the Midwest and returned to Rochester.<sup>10</sup>

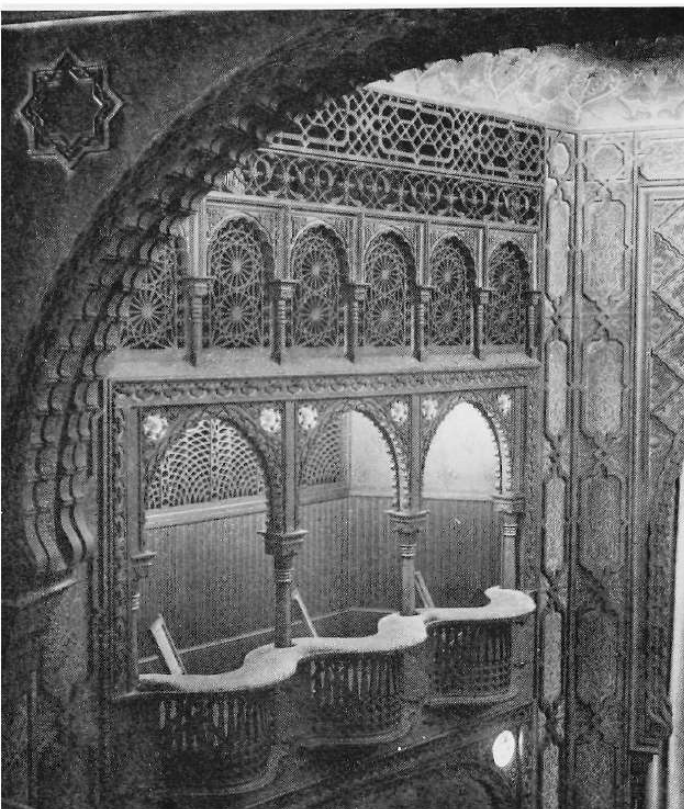
The best preserved Ellis building in the upper Midwest is the Mabel Tainter Memorial in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Designed in 1889, this remarkable structure houses a theater, a library, and town offices. It was donated to the citizens of Menomonie by

<sup>9</sup> Koepfer, *Historic St. Paul Buildings*, 37. The listing referred to is in a catalogue bearing the date 1890, among the Buffington Papers.

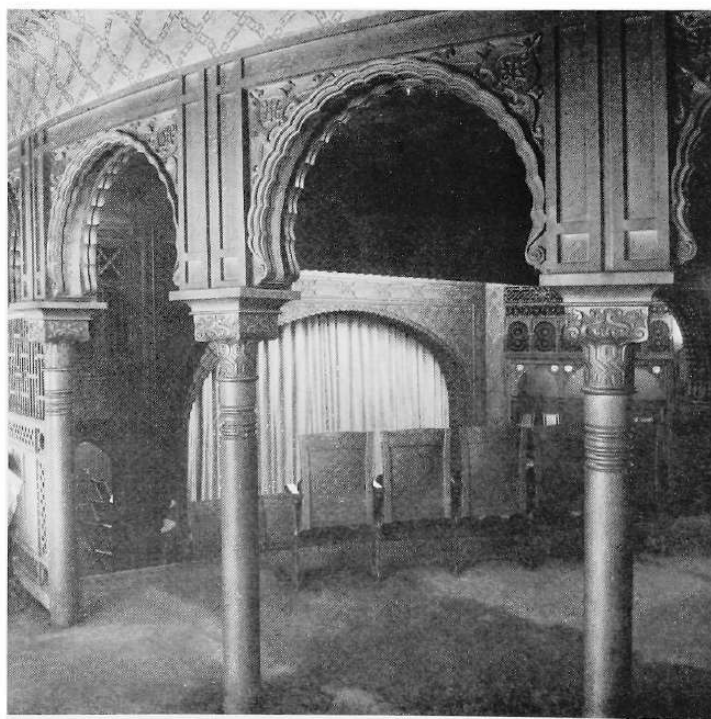
<sup>10</sup> Ellis' design for Pillsbury Hall, done for Buffington, appears in *Western Architect*, vol. 19, no. 9 (September, 1913). His drawings for Nicholson Hall are in the Buffington Papers.

*An Ellis sketch for the interior of a bank, probably the Germania*





Andrew Tainter, lumber baron of the Red Cedar River Valley. The sandstone exterior—originally light—has weathered to a dark gray, and the building faces Main Street like a medieval fortress, with a circular tower at each corner. Its grimness is relieved by a broad band of delicate carving which twists in leafy scrollwork above the door, while in front a ship's prow breasts a fountain of curling sandstone waves. Inside, the theater stands just as it was in 1890—rich in a profusion of Moorish ornament,



*The Mabel Tainter Memorial in Menomonie, Wisconsin: the exterior is shown above and views of the theater are on the left and at the top opposite.*

stained glass, and exuberant color. Visitors on the way to the building may also see Ellis' puckish stone carving on the otherwise undistinguished mansion built by Tainter for his son Louis and now in use as a college dormitory.<sup>11</sup>

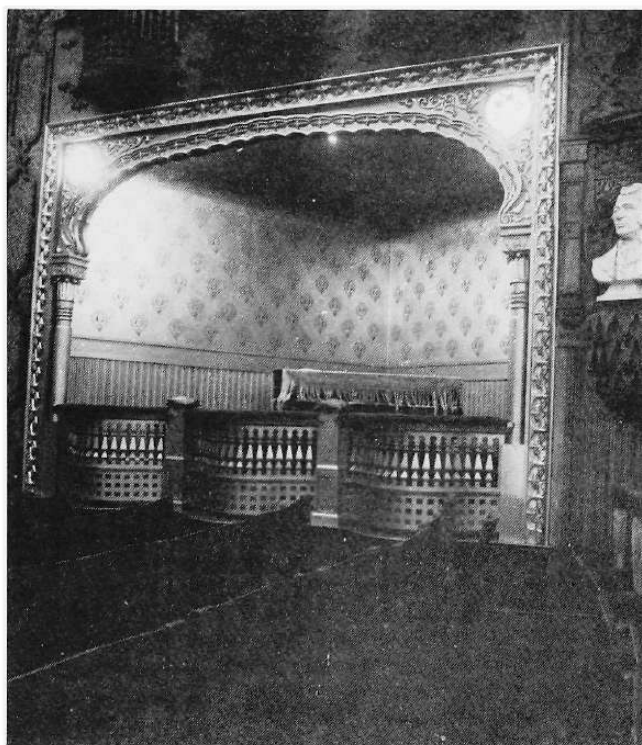
ELLIS LEFT Minneapolis in 1889 to work for the firm of Edmond J. Eckel and George R. Mann in St. Joseph, Missouri. There a number of his buildings still stand. The present occupant of a house which was attributed to Eckel but actually designed by Ellis wrote recently that "nobody could appreciate him more than I do, who live with his ideas and enjoy his genius every day of my life. . . . I can tell every house and building this Mr. Ellis put his hand to. What a mark to have left."<sup>12</sup>

When the monumental office buildings

<sup>11</sup> *Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography*, 346 (Madison, 1960). The Louis Tainter mansion is now known as Eichelberger Hall. Designs for both Tainter buildings are included in the Ellis material in the Buffington Papers. See also *Western Architect*, vol. 18, no. 8 (August, 1912).

<sup>12</sup> Lucile Boteler to the author, February 12, 1966. Examples of Ellis buildings in St. Joseph may be seen in *Northwestern Architect and Improvement Record*, vol. 8, no. 8 (August, 1890); vol. 8, no. 9 (September, 1890).

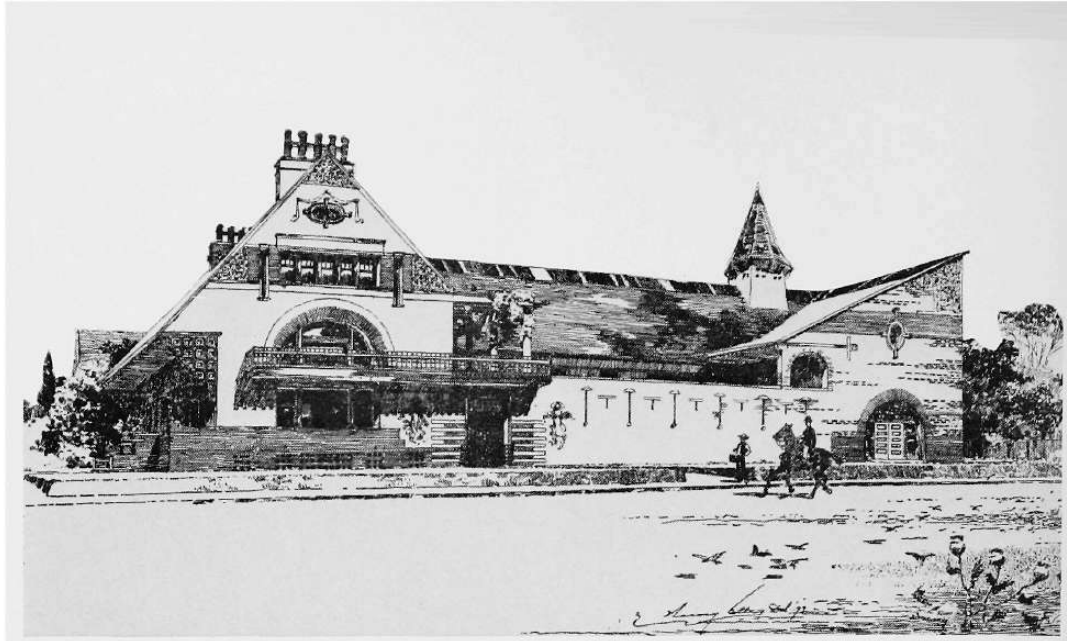
<sup>13</sup> For Ellis drawings of the City Hall, see *Western Architect*, vol. 17, no. 9 (September, 1911); of the hospital of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul and the Union Station, see *Northwestern Architect and Building Budget*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January, 1892); vol. 10, no. 3 (March, 1892).



and fantastic houses designed for the firm drew the attention of clients in St. Louis. Mann moved there, taking Ellis with him. For that metropolis the draftsman created City Hall (marred by the imperfect articulation of his plan), the enormous hospital of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, and probably the Union Station, a rival to Sullivan's Wainwright Building as an architectural masterpiece.<sup>13</sup>

### *Details of stone carving from the Tainter Memorial and the Louis Tainter house*





*Ellis' sketch for the house of George R. Mann in St. Louis*

Changes of locale, however, did not greatly alter the pattern of Ellis' gypsy life. He drank constantly; he said later that he was "preserved in alcohol for twenty years." Although his work was increasingly careless, he was still capable of turning out designs of a quality far surpassing that of his colleagues, and when a competition was announced, the first architect to find Ellis on skid row and keep him sober long enough to complete a set of drawings usually won. According to Bragdon, "he never knew what salary he was getting. When he found his pockets empty he went . . . for more money, and got it."<sup>14</sup>

Tradition among St. Louis draftsmen confirms stylistic evidence that Ellis made a trip to the Southwest during this period—probably in 1890—for there then appeared in his work a simplifying, refining impulse. Surfaces were cleaned of decoration or heavy masonry. Hipped or pyramidal tile roofs appeared over deep-shadowing eaves. Balconies, like cloisters, set on square pavilions, were used frequently, and with them came a tendency toward horizontal balance—toward that style later associated with the name of Frank Lloyd Wright. In a house designed for Mann himself in St. Louis, in a huge "mission style" project for a market center for Minneapolis (executed

at Buffington's behest), in a street entrance for Bell Place in St. Louis, and in many other works, the influence of the Spanish Southwest can be seen.<sup>15</sup>

Late in 1892 Ellis dropped out of sight. Drawings extraordinarily like his, however, began to appear over the signature of "Albert H. Levering," executed for architects in Minneapolis, among them Fremont D. Orff and Edgar E. Joralemon, old associates of Ellis in the Buffington office. Some of the Levering work was southwestern in aspect, and a series of sketches from San Antonio suggest the source of the influence. One design, a street entrance for Lowry Hill, was much like the gateway to a park in St. Louis, a Richardsonian work done by Ellis early in 1892.

The best building erected by Orff and Joralemon during this period—almost certainly from a design by Levering—was a

<sup>14</sup> Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 73, 76.

<sup>15</sup> The southwestern trip cannot be proved, but stylistic evidence as well as Ellis' later writings indicate a direct acquaintance with the area. See, for example, Ellis, "Sermons in Sun Dried Bricks," in *The Craftsman*, 5:212–216 (December, 1903). For a drawing of the Minneapolis market project, see *Northwestern Architect and Building Budget*, vol. 9, no. 1 (January, 1891); the entrance to Bell Place and an unfinished sketch of a church, both showing strong southwestern influence, appear in *Architectural Review*, 15:180, 185.



pink stone mansion for George W. Van Dusen in Minneapolis. Like many of the Ellis houses in St. Joseph, it is a craggy, whimsical variation on a Francis I theme. It still dominates the corner of La Salle and Groveland avenues, where it now serves as a wing of the Institute of Medical Technique.<sup>16</sup>

Levering appears in the Minneapolis city directory for 1893, 1894-95, and 1895-96, but not thereafter. Ellis does not appear, but during these years Buffington released a few designs over the artist's signature, and one wonders whether Buffington was in some way able to enforce an "exclusive" on Ellis working as Ellis.

<sup>16</sup> The Ellis gateway appears in *Northwestern Architect and Building Budget*, vol. 10, no. 7 (July, 1892). For Levering drawings see the same publication, vol. 11, no. 4 (April, 1893); no. 5 (May, 1893); *Western Architect*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January, 1904). Designs and presentation drawings for the Van Dusen house have apparently been lost.

<sup>17</sup> Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 74.

BEFORE THE END of 1895 Ellis was once again in Rochester. There he rejoined his brother Charles in an architectural office, but, though he designed at least one office building and two interiors, he was largely occupied with painting. "The only things he seemed to care for were to paint cryptic, unsalable pictures, under a still north light, with plenty of time and plenty of cigarettes, and to talk about anything under the sun except himself to anyone who would listen."<sup>17</sup>

Why had he left the West? According to Swales: "Realizing that all was not going to his satisfaction he broke away from the habits and acquaintances which he had cultivated to his disadvantage and returned east to seek some quiet nook where he could work in peace and be away from roistering friends." Bragdon was more specific: "On a certain day of a certain year he rose from his besotted bed and for a period of ten

*The Van Dusen house as it appeared before alteration*





*Design for a Minneapolis street entrance by "Albert Levering"*

years did not touch alcohol until, a few months before his melancholy death, weakened by disease, he sought its aid to give him strength for his daily task."<sup>18</sup>

During the last years of the nineteenth century Ellis worked as a painter in a two-dimensional mode derived from an intense study of Japanese prints. This was in accord with one of the tendencies of his time, a current which flowed from Paul Gauguin and Félix Vallotton toward Edvard Munch and the expressionists. Some of Ellis' less earnest work was akin to that of Walter Crane, and Ellis tried his hand at illustration. A water color of his surrounds a poem by Robert H. Stoddard in the December, 1899, issue of *Scribner's Magazine*, and one of his paintings serves as the frontispiece for the 1903 volume of *The Craftsman*. Ellis' paintings were seldom sold. Bragdon explained that "he could not endure the patronage of the wealthy buyer, while if a true connoisseur expressed a liking for one of his pictures, Harvey usually insisted on making him a present of it." Swales said that "he permitted himself to be continually cajoled into giving away his sketches, and even drawings, paintings, and etchings upon which he had often spent several days' or weeks' time."<sup>19</sup>

During the last two years before his death Ellis worked for Gustave Stickley's *Crafts-*

*man* magazine in Syracuse, New York. None of the furniture, textiles, or interiors he designed had the breath of life in them. He was drinking again, in pain, and his story dragged out to a gloomy close. Bragdon, ever attempting to clothe Ellis with gentility, suggested how it ended: "He had the dress, bearing and manners of a gentleman; there was a certain quiet dignity about him, and I think it was never more present, nor better became him, than in that crowded public ward of a city hospital to which (before his friends rallied to his aid) he had been taken, mortally stricken."<sup>20</sup> He died on January 2, 1904.

ELLIS' WORK was profoundly influential in the Midwest. After his death the *Western Architect* said that his "drawings and designs. . . came just a little short of influencing western work more strongly than that of any other designer, before or since his time." Thomas E. Tallmadge, a protégé of Sullivan, wrote in 1908 of the Chicago headquarters of progressive architecture in

<sup>18</sup> Swales, in *Pencil Points*, 49; Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 73.

<sup>19</sup> Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 74; Swales, in *Pencil Points*, 55. There are a few Ellis pictures in the Rochester (New York) Art Museum, but most of those extant are in the private collection of Mrs. Homer Strong of that city.

<sup>20</sup> Bragdon, *Merely Players*, 72.

*The entrance  
to Washington  
Terrace,  
in St. Louis*



Steinway Hall that "an ideal artistic atmosphere pervaded the colony in the old lofts . . . [Dwight H.] Perkins, [Frank Lloyd] Wright, [Robert] Spencer, Myron Hunt, George Dean, Birch Long, and with them — associated in spirit if not in person — was the gifted but irresponsible genius, Harvey Ellis."<sup>21</sup>

Was it only in spirit, or did Ellis actually work for Sullivan at some time during those

<sup>21</sup> Thomas E. Tallmadge, "The Chicago School," in *Architectural Review*, 15:73 (April, 1908).

<sup>22</sup> David S. Gebhard, "Louis Sullivan and George Grant Elmslie," in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 19:62-68 (May, 1960).

years? Did he carry into the Sullivan office the craftsmanship and the penchant for Byzantine ornament which he repeatedly demonstrated elsewhere and which he may have already put to the service of Richardson? The one man who knew best the answer to that question was Elmslie, who entered Sullivan's office in 1890, was his draftsman and eventually the executant of the magnificent designs for the Owatonna bank and the Carson Pirie Scott store, which Sullivan was unable to complete for himself during his alcoholic years.<sup>22</sup>

Elmslie was Sullivan's associate for twenty years. He told his own biographer, David

*Design for the "Security Bank," done by Ellis for LeRoy S. Buffington*



S. Gebhard, that he had known Ellis well — yet, until years after Ellis' death, Elmslie worked in none of the midwestern cities where Ellis is known to have sojourned. Could it have been in Chicago? Gebhard followed by asking Elmslie whether it was possible that Ellis had been employed by Sullivan and was responsible for some of his ornament. Elmslie had seldom manifested any strong emotion in his interviews with Gebhard, and never indignation. He was by nature an inhibited Scot, but he was devoted to Sullivan. At this inquiry he pushed himself to his feet, his face flushed, and he answered fiercely in the negative. He was an old man; Gebhard did not seek to goad him further. Elmslie died in 1958.<sup>23</sup>

There are two more clues to the possible influence of Ellis on Sullivan: In the late 1880s Ellis designed for Buffington a small, simple bank with lines suggestive of a jewel box, a frieze of figures in terra cotta, a rounded arch with carved ornamentation about the door, and a peculiar "Moorish" niche on either side. The first of Sullivan's jewel-box banks was that for Owatonna in 1907, but in 1893 his famous Golden Door for the Transportation Building at the Columbian Exposition displayed a frieze of figures converging on an ornamented rounded archway, with two "Moorish" niches, one on either side.<sup>24</sup>

A controversial design for a skyscraper, patented by Buffington, was drawn by Ellis in 1887. It shows, according to Purcell, "a building which anticipated Sullivan's Wainwright Building in St. Louis, in being a unit from sidewalk to roof and with no forced values in the general design treatment to make it appear as if of solid masonry."<sup>25</sup> The Wainwright Building was constructed in 1890–91. Is it a coincidence that Ellis was in St. Louis then? Is it another coincidence that Ellis' gateway to Washington Terrace, designed in those very years, used the same brick and wine-colored terra cotta and much the same sort of botanical ornament as the Wainwright?

It can also be argued that by bringing the

massive simplicity of the Southwest to the attention of the "Prairie School" architects, Ellis led them into the new century. In this context there is real poignancy in an encomium to Sullivan published by Ellis a year before his death: "The solution to the problem of domestic architecture based upon, but in no sense in servile imitation of, the old Spanish type, is to be found in the extremely personal and interesting creations of some of the younger architects of Chicago. . . . It is curious to note how the spirit of the Renaissance, as expressed by these Fathers of the missions, and combined with the curious Gothic trend of imagination, has produced the splendid and appropriate art of Louis Sullivan, who since these Mission Fathers, seems to be one of the few men in the United States, at all events, who have comprehended the meaning of the word architecture."<sup>26</sup>

Ellis' own designs for balanced buildings with long eaves, clean surfaces, and tile roofs had been conceived ten years earlier. But he never claimed to have influenced anyone.

<sup>23</sup> This incident was recounted to the author by Mr. Gebhard in an interview in Minneapolis on December 17, 1965. The talk with Elmslie to which he referred took place in Chicago, December 12, 1952.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis' design for the Security Bank appears in *Western Architect*, vol. 18, no. 3 (March, 1912). It was republished with a commentary by Purcell in *Northwest Architect*, vol. 8, no. 6–7, p. 6. The original of the published picture is in the Buffington Papers and is dated 1891. There is reason, however, to believe that this design, as well as a number of others done for Buffington, was worked out some time earlier. For example, Ellis' published drawing of the Tainter Memorial is dated 1891, but the building was completed in 1889, and by 1891 Ellis was working in St. Louis. For a picture of Sullivan's "Golden Door," see Carl W. Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture*, plate 94 (Chicago, 1964).

<sup>25</sup> Purcell, in *Northwest Architect*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis, in *The Craftsman*, 5:216.

THE DRAWINGS on pages 104, 106, and the top of 107 are from the *Northwestern Architect*, May, 1892, May, 1893, and March, 1893. Those on pages 101 and the bottom of 107 are from the *Western Architect*, February, 1904, and March, 1912. The photographs on pages 102 and 103 are by Eugene D. Becker; all other pictures are from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.





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