

Architect Cass Gilbert lived in Minnesota for twenty-six years and worked there for fifty. A park near the capitol in St. Paul and a University of Minnesota professorship bear his name. Free hats at the state fair have reproductions of Gilbert's capitol dome printed on them. His design plans are cited in modern reports on the future of St. Paul, and his ghost is invoked by local architecture critics. Yet Gilbert's ambition spurred him beyond the St. Paul houses, churches, and commercial buildings he designed in the 1880s and 1890s. Gilbert wanted a national reputation, and he set his sights early on New York City as the place to make his career.¹

For Gilbert, St. Paul could provide the staging, but only New York offered the spotlight. Much of what he did backstage during his twenties and thirties was to develop a network of clients, colleagues, and contacts that would support his talents and enable him to move East with a good chance of success. Although he impressed many Minnesotans with his buildings and plans

WEST HAILS EAST

Cass Gilbert in Minnesota

SHARON IRISH

within the state, the audience Gilbert addressed was by the Hudson River, not the Mississippi. This is the story of how his years in Minnesota set the stage for his nationwide practice in New York City.

Cass was the middle of three sons, born in Zanesville, Ohio, in 1859 to Elizabeth Wheeler and Samuel A. Gilbert, a surveyor. (The Wheelers, longtime Zanesville residents, remained business connections for the mature architect.) Why Gilbert's family boarded a packet boat and traveled to St. Paul in 1868 is not known. Shortly after they arrived, Gilbert's father died, but the family remained. Cass attended school, and at age eighteen he began training with A. M. Radcliffe, an architect in St. Paul since 1858. A year and a half later, Gilbert briefly joined a party surveying for the Hudson and River Falls Railroad in Wisconsin and then moved in 1878 to Cambridge for

¹Neal Peirce, "Saint Paul and Beyond," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 17-20, 1991, special reprint, p. 3; Larry Millett, "Ghost of Gilbert Bemoans Capitol Offense," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 6, 1991, p. 3D; Patricia A. Murphy, "The Early Career of Cass Gilbert, 1878 to 1895" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1979), 115.

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Architect Cass Gilbert atop unfinished state capitol in St. Paul, 1901 (above), and the monument three years later (left), still under construction

further architectural study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).²

IN THE EAST Gilbert joined at least two other friends from Minnesota: James K. Taylor and Clarence H. Johnston. Taylor, the son of a St. Paul businessman, had attended the same school as Gilbert. Johnston, whose family had moved to the city shortly before Gilbert's, had also worked in Radcliffe's office. Johnston stayed at MIT only a few months before returning to St. Paul to become a draftsman for architect Edward P. Bassford and then moved on to Herter Brothers in New York City in 1881.³

Gilbert himself left MIT after just one year. Taylor remained at MIT for two years and then became a draftsman in the New York offices of Charles C. Haight and Bruce Price before returning home in 1882. All three young men were in St. Paul again by 1883.⁴

Gilbert's training was typical of his generation. Less than a half-dozen schools taught architecture, and, as one practitioner recalled: "There were no professional draftsmen. . . . The architects who had studied abroad could almost be numbered on the fingers of one hand. . . . [We] were a pretty poor profession, with few experienced builders to back up our ideas." Young people typically apprenticed with an older architect or builder and then started their own businesses. Few guidelines and even fewer regulations existed for architectural practice.

Recognizing these dilemmas with an increasing self-consciousness in the 1870s, architects began to define professional qualifications in their offices and fledgling schools. Practitioners served as mentors to young people with promise. A tour of Europe to study and sketch further boosted one's skill and status.

Accordingly, Gilbert used money from his father's estate and from his grandmother to fund a trip to England in hopes of landing a job in the office of a London architect. Upon arrival, Gilbert found no obvious chance for employment, and so he set out for the continent, sketching and writing long letters to his mother and Johnston. When Gilbert ran out of money in the summer of 1880, he returned to the States.⁵

Never lacking opinions on any topic related to architecture, Gilbert had definite ideas about where he would and would not work. In September 1880 he landed a drafting position in the New York City offices of McKim, Mead, and White, one of the most up-and-coming firms of the day. At the end of his career, Gilbert explained to his son that there must be "an esprit du [*sic*] corps. . . . When I was a draftsman there were certain offices I wouldn't have gone into, at any salary. For instance I preferred to stay with McKim, Mead and White at \$20 a week than go to Herter



Gilbert in 1880, the year of his European tour

Brothers or Burnham and Root's [in Chicago] for \$60 and I had those offers from both."⁶

For two years Gilbert gained hands-on experience on the East Coast, overseeing the interiors of a yacht and the construction of the Ross Winans house in Baltimore. Although Gilbert worked closely with Stanford White, his mentor at the firm was William R. Mead. By August 1882, however, Gilbert wrote to Johnston: "I have been so long at McKim's and have in a certain way 'ran the scale' in that office that I feel it is getting time

²Zanesville became a center for tile and pottery manufacture after the Civil War, and Gilbert and his associates considered using the local clay for building tiles. Cass Gilbert to Rafael Guastavino, June 10, 1889, and Guastavino to Gilbert, June 22, 1889, both in Gilbert Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; DeWitt M. Lockman interview with Cass Gilbert, 1927, p. 1, DeWitt M. Lockman Papers, New-York Historical Society (N-YHS), New York City; Ernest R. Sandeen, *St. Paul's Historic Summit Avenue* (St. Paul: Macalester College, 1978), 76.

³Patti Hoversten, "Clarence Howard Johnston, Sr.: An Introductory Biography," photocopy of typescript, 1980, p. 52, MHS.

⁴Murphy, "Early Career," 33; Hoversten, "Johnston," 52; James K. Taylor to Jeremiah O'Rourke, Sept. 5, 27, 1893, Treasury Department, Personnel Records, Record Group 56, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

⁵Clarence Blackall, "Fifty Years Ago," *American Architect*, Jan. 5, 1926, p. 7-9.

⁶"Gilbert to Clarence Johnston, June 22, 1879, Clarence Howard Johnston Papers, MHS; Robert A. Jones, "Cass Gilbert: Midwestern Architect in New York" (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1976). Jones quotes extensively from Gilbert's European letters in General Correspondence, Cass Gilbert Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress (LC), Washington, D.C.

⁷Cass Gilbert to Cass Gilbert, Jr., Aug. 12, 1924, General Correspondence, Gilbert Collection, LC.

for me to get out of it—unless I have a certainty of something more than a draughtsman's position." Gilbert negotiated by letter about taking over Johnston's St. Paul office while Johnston traveled in Europe, but they failed to agree on the terms.⁸

GILBERT RETURNED to St. Paul in December 1882 as a midwestern representative of McKim, Mead, and White. At first this move seemed auspicious for the young architect: the firm's client, Henry Villard, was not only building townhouses in midtown Manhattan but was supplying his Northern Pacific Railroad with terminals, hotels, and depots along the route from St. Paul to Oregon. In 1883 McKim, Mead, and White completed a hospital for railroad employees at Brainerd, detailed and supervised by Gilbert, and in 1884, a hotel in Tacoma, Washington. As the architects' representative in Minnesota, Gilbert expected more commissions from Villard, but in 1884, while Mead and Gilbert were discussing opening a branch office to handle the anticipated work, Villard's empire collapsed. Luckily, Gilbert had made good business contacts, and he received commissions for houses, churches, and small commercial structures throughout the 1880s and 1890s.⁹

In 1884 Gilbert joined with his boyhood friend, James K. Taylor, in practice. Gilbert found Taylor to be expert in "matters of contracts, superintendence, and general conduct of affairs," and the two men worked together out of their downtown St. Paul office in the Gilfillan Block until 1891, shortly after which Taylor moved to Philadelphia. Using the business connections of Taylor's father, they developed real estate, obtained some small commissions, and pursued jobs as



White Bear Lake cottage designed by Gilbert and Taylor for Walter S. Morton, about 1891

far away as the West Coast. Although St. Paul and Minneapolis were growing rapidly in the 1880s, the two men had to push hard to establish their practice.¹⁰

In 1890 Gilbert wrote to Mead in New York, complaining about the economically dull times in St. Paul; in response, Mead encouraged him to "abandon the West and settle in New York." A year later Gilbert told his mother: "I would willingly do so if I could form a partnership with a good firm there." He mentioned the partnership of John M. Carrère and Thomas Hastings as a possibility, but hard economic times made it difficult to transplant a business. He would wait another eight years before abandoning the West.¹¹

Biding his time, Gilbert followed new leads, refined projects underway, and entered the competitive fray again and again. (As early as 1879 he had joked about his "audacious egotism" as an "amiable trait.") Reflecting on his ambitious nature, he observed late in life, "I never have time to loaf with a friend when I know that my job is lagging behind: but must forsooth spur myself on to make good. My life was always like that. It always will be."¹²

Because Gilbert's family connections were neither monied nor powerful, he worked to build his clientele by joining local organizations and accepting small commissions. One important network was the Minnesota Club, incorporated in 1884 for St. Paul residents to share "literary and social culture." Gilbert was the only architect among the incorporators, who included Henry H. Sibley as president, railroad magnate James J. Hill, and George C. Squires, Gilbert's attorney. Not only did Gilbert design houses for club members, but he also planned additions in 1892 and 1899 to the club's building at Fourth and Cedar streets.¹³

⁸See especially Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983) and Richard G. Wilson, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); Gilbert to Johnston, Aug. 24, 1882, Johnston Papers, MHS; Hoversten, "Johnston," 53.

⁹Roth, *McKim, Mead & White*, 92–93.

¹⁰Cass Gilbert to Edward Spiers, quoted in William T. Morgan, "The Politics of Business in the Career of an American Architect: Cass Gilbert, 1878–1905" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 46–47; Cass Gilbert to James K. Taylor, Nov. 20, 1889, Dec. 3, 1889, personal letterbook labeled 1899–1901, Cass Gilbert Papers, N-YHS.

¹¹Morgan, "Politics of Business," 56; William R. Mead to Cass Gilbert, Jan. 19, 1891, Gilbert Papers, MHS; Cass Gilbert to Elizabeth W. Gilbert, Feb. 3, 1891, General Correspondence, Gilbert Collection, LC.

¹²Cass Gilbert to Clarence Johnston, June 22, 1879, Johnston Papers, MHS; Cass Gilbert to Francis Bacon, July 25, 1927, Gilbert Papers, N-YHS.

¹³*The Organization and Government of the Minnesota Club* (St. Paul: The Club, 1886), 5, 8; Patricia Murphy, "Minnesota's Architectural Favorite Son," *AIA Journal* 70 (Mar. 1981): 76. The club building has been demolished.

BY THE 1890s, St. Paul had changed from a river port to a railroad center. As rail lines pushed farther into the Upper Midwest, buildings of local dolomitic limestone gained neighbors constructed of sandstone from Wisconsin, Michigan, and more northerly Minnesota, granite from St. Cloud, and Kasota stone from the Mankato area.¹⁴

Gilbert's career was linked to the railroads from the beginning. After Villard's financial collapse, James J. Hill, a "one-eyed robber baron" and patron of the arts and architecture, took over a bankrupt railroad in 1878 and spent the next decade consolidating the Great Northern Railway. In 1887 Hill hired the Boston firm of Peabody, Stearns, and Furber to design his sandstone mansion overlooking downtown St. Paul; Gilbert assisted on the adjacent powerhouse, fence, and gates.¹⁵

Gilbert did not hesitate to use his link to Hill. The architect had gotten a job as superintendent of construction of the federal post office and custom house in St. Paul on Hill's recommendation in 1891. When it became apparent that Gilbert would lose this job with the change from Republican to Democratic presidents in 1893, he wired Hill: "Kindly telegraph Secretary [of Treasury John G.] Carlisle and Supervising Architect [Jeremiah O'Rourke] in my behalf." (Despite Gilbert's efforts, Democrat Grover Cleveland replaced him with St. Paul architect Bassford.) In an undated memo to the state capitol commissioners, Gilbert evoked Hill's name again, making the dubious claim that he had appointed Gilbert superintendent of construction for the Great Northern in 1891.¹⁶

MINDFUL OF THE VAGARIES of politics and bent on advancing the status of the architectural profession, Gilbert became president in 1894 of the recently formed Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), an East Coast-oriented group of practitioners. This organization of architects working in residential, ecclesiastical, and commercial design eventually changed the nature and appearance of building in the state. Because they shared some of their expertise with engineers and speculative builders, nineteenth-century architects regularly found themselves bypassed by clients and their status and income thereby undercut. Only by convincing the public that fine buildings depended upon good design as well as an architect's supervision of construction did AIA members slowly ensure a niche for themselves. With this solid footing, they could charge standard fees based on a fixed percentage of total building costs.¹⁷

The attempt to establish architects as professionals at once created and fulfilled a need for large, embellished buildings. The effort coincided with a growing national self-consciousness that is variously labeled the American Renaissance or the City Beautiful move-

ment. American designers culled building types and motifs from the past and reinterpreted them for contemporary use, an "innovative nostalgia" exemplified by the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Architectural leaders including McKim, Mead, and White and Daniel H. Burnham suggested that social harmony would result from a combination of governmental reform, public education, and popular support of beautification projects. They maintained that aesthetic harmony should become part of a national unity of ideals and values that ultimately would benefit all Americans. The idea of the architect as a powerful player in this national drama drew Gilbert to New York City to become a leader in redesigning America and the architectural profession.¹⁸

Refusing to limit his historical adaptations to a single era, Gilbert chose freely from historical and con-

¹⁴Downtown St. Paul abounds in these bulwarks of stone transported from nearby quarries. See Sister Joan Kain, *Rocky Roots: Three Geology Walking Tours of Downtown St. Paul* (St. Paul: Ramsey County Historical Society, 1978), 8; John C. Hudson, "The Midland Prairies: Natural Resources and Urban Settlement," in *The Spirit of H. H. Richardson on the Midland Prairies*, ed. Paul C. Larson with Susan M. Brown (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988), 122-37; and Nicholas Westbrook, ed., *A Guide to the Industrial Archeology of the Twin Cities* (St. Paul and Minneapolis: Society for Industrial Archeology, 1983).

¹⁵"Meridel Le Sueur, *Crusaders: The Radical Legacy of Marian and Arthur Le Sueur* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 15; Paul C. Larson, "H. H. Richardson Goes West: The Rise and Fall of an Eastern Star," in *Spirit of Richardson*, 139 n.25; "Record of Work," Dec. 1891 to June 1902, p. 56-58, Gilbert Papers, N-YHS; Elisabeth Doermann, site manager, J. J. Hill House, to author, Jan. 24, 1983, in author's possession.

¹⁶J. J. Hill to William Windom, private letterbook, Dec. 29, 1890, Gilbert Papers, N-YHS; Cass Gilbert to J. J. Hill, May 23, 1893, James J. Hill Papers. James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 28, 1893, p. 4; Memorandum of Appointments of Cass Gilbert, undated, State Capitol Commissioners Board, Minnesota State Archives, MHS. If Gilbert had indeed been the Great Northern's superintendent, a job with tremendous responsibility and probably filled by several people, more evidence of it would be found in archival sources.

¹⁷On the organization of professionals, see Magali Sarfatti Larson, "Emblem and Exception: The Historical Definition of the Architect's Professional Role," in *Professionals and Urban Form*, ed. Judith R. Blau, Mark LaGory, and John S. Pipkin (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 49-86; and Judith R. Blau, *Architects and Firms: A Sociological Perspective on Architectural Practice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

¹⁸Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 271. On the American Renaissance, see Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Richard N. Murray, *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1979). On Gilbert's political views, see Geoffrey Blodgett, "Cass Gilbert, Architect: Conservative at Bay," *Journal of American History* 72 (Dec. 1985): 615-36.

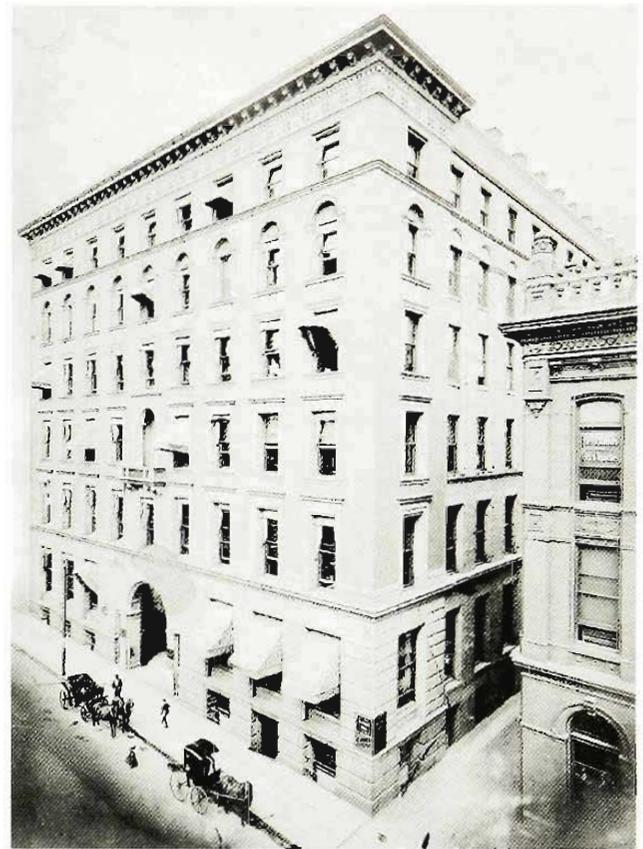
temporary architecture and decoration. If most mid-western designers were swayed by architect Henry H. Richardson's "medievalism," Gilbert arrived in St. Paul, one historian has observed, "with Richardson's medieval imagery in one pocket and McKim, Mead, and White's Renaissance Revival in the other."¹⁹

BUILDINGS are more than bricks, stone, and concrete. They are both the cause and the effect of social interactions occurring at a particular time and place. In St. Paul the Endicott Building (1888–90) and the Minnesota state capitol (1896–1904) reveal the social and political networks Gilbert carefully tended in his quest for prominence on the national scene.²⁰

Gilbert and Taylor had struggled in their business for four years before gaining the Endicott commission. One of their first commercial buildings, it was a plum. Belonging to prominent Boston clients, the site was well located downtown. Gilbert, eager to make his mark, attended to every detail to ensure quality and economy in design and construction. To his mother, he enthusiastically wrote in 1890: "I believe that the [Endicott's] style is so pure and so simple and so carefully carried out that it will be considered a scholarly peice [sic] of work."²¹

How did Gilbert, not yet thirty years old, and Taylor, only two years his senior, manage to receive the commission for a \$750,000 structure? The most likely link between clients William Endicott, Jr., his brother Henry, and architects Gilbert and Taylor was Luther S. Cushing, the manager of the Boston and Northwest Real Estate Company in St. Paul. Cushing, the son of a prominent Massachusetts judge, maintained ties between St. Paul and Boston throughout his life.²²

The Endicotts had a family dry goods business that supplied not only the Boston market but western cities



Fourth Street facade of the Endicott Building, about 1900, with entry arch and stone treatment reminiscent of Italian Renaissance buildings

as well. They lost a great deal of money when Villard's debt overtook him but stayed involved in investment real estate in St. Paul into the twentieth century, hiring Gilbert's office to design more office space and warehouses. The Endicotts also helped Gilbert receive other commissions in the Boston area. He understood his clients' desires to break provincial molds. As critic Montgomery Schuyler remarked in 1891: "There are among the emancipated practitioners of architecture in the West men who have shown that they can use their liberty wisely, and whose work can be hailed as among the hopeful beginnings of a national architecture."²³

The Endicott Building, a six-story store and office building, wraps around the twelve-story Pioneer Building (1888–89) on the northeast corner of Fourth and Robert streets in downtown St. Paul. The L-shaped lot gave Gilbert and Taylor the opportunity to design two separated street facades, one facing each street.²⁴

Working in the Renaissance-revival style made fashionable by McKim, Mead, and White's office in the early 1880s, Gilbert and Taylor designed different but harmonious exteriors linked on the interior by an innovative arcade. The Fourth Street main entrance is dis-

¹⁹Larson, "Richardson Goes West," 29.

²⁰See the approach developed in Nicholas Green and Frank Mort, "Visual Representation and Cultural Politics," *Block 7* (1982): 59–68.

²¹Cass Gilbert to Elizabeth W. Gilbert, Jan. 27, 1890, General Correspondence, Gilbert Collection, LC.

²²*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 1, 1891, p. 1; obituary, June 23, 1856, in Luther S. Cushing Papers, MHS; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 12, 1937, p. 1.

²³Mary C. Crawford, *Famous Families of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1930), 1: 77; James H. Morse, diary, Nov. 24, 1901, typescript copy, 12: 85–86, N-YHS; William Endicott to Cass Gilbert, Nov. 30, 1901, Henry Endicott to Cass Gilbert, June 22, 1894, and "Norris Estate Bldg.," July 3, 1894—all in Gilbert Papers, MHS; Montgomery Schuyler, "Glimpses of Western Architecture: St. Paul and Minneapolis," *Harpers Magazine* 83 (Oct. 1891): 736–55.

²⁴Four stories were added to the Pioneer Building in 1912. Owned by First Bank of St. Paul, both buildings were renovated in 1981. The drawings for the Endicott Building are in the Northwest Architectural Archives, Minneapolis.



Barrel-vaulted arcade of Endicott Building, with opalescent colored-glass ceiling and (at left) edge of the brass elevator screen

tinguished by a broad sandstone arch and stone treatment reminiscent of Roman and Florentine palazzi of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Robert Street entry is marked by four Tuscan columns of polished St. Cloud granite, designed using proportions suggested by Renaissance theorist Giacomo Vignola. Both sides of the building have basements of St. Cloud granite, ground stories of red sandstone from Upper Michigan, and upper stories of pressed brick with sandstone detailing.²⁵

The moldings, cornice motifs, and facade organization reveal Gilbert's careful study of Italian Renaissance models during his travels after attending MIT, as well as his familiarity with publications no doubt available to him in McKim, Mead, and White's office, if not his own library. In a letter advising a young man about the most valuable works on architecture, Gilbert recommended books by Vignola and Paul Letarouilly. Letarouilly's three-volume *Edifices de Rome Moderne* detailed palaces, churches, and other important buildings of Renaissance Rome. Aspects of the Endicott Building resemble the Farnese Palace in Rome.²⁶

The Endicott's barrel-vaulted interior arcade had an opalescent ceiling in grey, purple, and green glass. Thirty glass- and marble-fronted shops once faced the covered walkway that connected the two six-story structures housing 320 offices and two large banking rooms. Other Gilbert details enhanced the building's palatial effect: gilding, mosaic floors, brass elevator screens, and stenciled decorative borders. The building had its own central steam-heating plant and generators to run its elevators and electric lights.²⁷

The subcontractor for the Endicott's cut stone was the Matt Breen Stone Company of St. Paul, which owned quarries in St. Cloud and Kasota. Publicity for the Endicott applauded Breen's work: "Machinery can cut stones for veneering iron construction, but when an architect insists upon a whole series of receding angles, as Gilbert & Taylor have done in this pierwork, then the stone mason gets a chance to learn his business."²⁸

When estimates were gathered in 1888 for the likely costs of the building, Gilbert and Taylor wrote William Endicott about how to select a general contractor:

We advise that the suggestion of obtaining estimates from eastern contractors should come from you[,] as if it is known to come from us, will make us appear to be antagonizing the interests of local men, whereas it is supposed to be natural that you should want to give Eastern contractors a chance to do it and will make the competition sharper. . . If you approve this please forward [sic] the enclosed letters to them.²⁹

Gilbert and Taylor had worked before with the St. Paul firm finally awarded the contract, Hennessy Brothers, Agnew and Cox, known for a number of large buildings in St. Paul. Among the eighteen or so subcontractors Gilbert and Taylor hired, six were based in Chicago, seven were local, and the remaining five had headquarters on the East Coast.

The building's engineer was Louis E. Ritter, who would work in Chicago in the 1890s for William L. B. Jenney and William B. Mundie, well-known architects and engineers of tall office buildings. Ritter solved foundation problems, designed the interior framing, and made it possible to build next door to a newspaper plant without disturbing the printing presses.³⁰

²⁵Between 1902 and 1906, W. R. Ware, an architect and educator whom Gilbert knew, published *An American Vignola*, reflecting America's fascination with the Renaissance.

²⁶Cass Gilbert to H. S. Beckwith, Nov. 5, 1908, American Institute of Architects Letterbook, Dec. 1907 to Mar. 1909, Gilbert Papers. N-YHS.

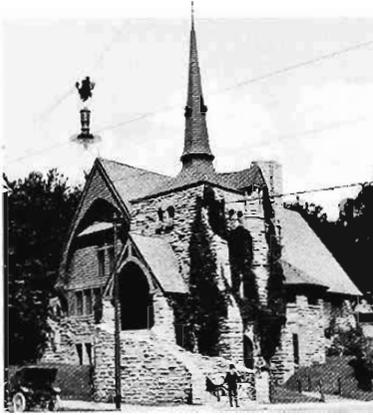
²⁷"New Business Structures," *Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 7 (Feb. 1889): 22-23; *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Apr. 16, 1883, p. 1S. 6S. Subcontractors for the Endicott's interiors included Winslow Brothers, Chicago, ornamental iron; Brown and Heywood, Minneapolis, stained glass; and Burke and Co., Chicago, mosaics.

²⁸E. R. Garczynski, *A Description with Illustrations of the Endicott and Arcade Buildings*, St. Paul (New York: Exhibit Publishing Co., 1891), n.p.

²⁹Gilbert and Taylor to William Endicott, June 29, 1888, Gilbert Papers, MHS.

³⁰Frank A. Randall, *History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 32.

GILBERT ABOUT TOWN



Gilbert's German Bethlehem Presbyterian Church (1890), about 1906

ST. PAUL and its environs are home to many surviving Cass Gilbert buildings—houses, cottages, churches, warehouses, railroad stations, and school buildings. Before 1891, Gilbert and James K. Taylor worked as a team; after that date, Gilbert practiced independently. In 1887 he married Julia Finch of Milwaukee, and in 1889 he designed their own house at 1 Heather Place (now altered). Heather Place is near the top of the ridge along which Summit Avenue runs.

Nearby, on Grand Hill at 506, 514, and 520, are other Gilbert houses. Toward Summit Avenue is the Paul H. Gotzian House (1889) at 33 Summit Court. Four more stand on Summit Avenue itself: the William H. Lightner House (1893) at 318, the Edgar C. Long House

(1889) at 322, the Crawford Livingston House (1898) at 339, and the Jacob Dittenhofer House (1898) at 705. Other St. Paul residences that Gilbert designed in the 1880s are the David W. McCourt House (1887) at Cambridge and Princeton avenues, the Charles P. Noyes House (1888–89), 89 Virginia Street (clearly indebted to McKim, Mead, and White), the Bookstaver row houses (1888), 548–554 Portland Avenue, and the house built for his mother, Elizabeth Wheeler Gilbert, at 471 Ashland Avenue (1882–84).

Gilbert's use of a variety of materials produced buildings with rich textures and colors. Several of his St. Paul churches are exemplary: St. Clement's Episcopal Church (1894–95) at 901 Portland Avenue, Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church (1886–88) at Dayton Avenue and Mackubin Street, the Swedenborgian Virginia Street Church (1886) at 170 Virginia, and the German Bethlehem Presbyterian Church (1890) at the foot of Ramsey Hill.

With many of his clients, Gilbert followed rail lines to the popular resort areas of Lake Minnetonka and White Bear Lake, where he designed summer homes. Most of these cottages are gone or changed beyond recognition, but in the Dellwood area of White Bear Lake, the A. Kirby Barnum Cottage (1884) still remains. So does the former Camp Memorial Chapel, now known as St.-Martin's-by-the-Lake Episcopal Church (1888) in Minnetonka Beach

(County Road 15 at Lafayette Bay).

Gilbert never specialized in any type of building. He designed a warehouse and wholesale store (1895) in St. Paul for Paul Gotzian at 352 Wacouta and the Minneapolis Van and Warehouse Co. Building (1904) at 106 First Avenue North, now the home of Minneapolis Theatre de la Jeune Lune. Almost as austere were Gilbert's low-budget buildings for the St. Paul Seminary (1892–99) at 2260 Summit Avenue. (Only the residence halls survive.)

Gilbert received a few commissions around the state, including early railroad depots in Anoka (1891), Willmar (1891–92), and Little Falls (1899). He also returned to Minnesota later in his career to complete or add to commissions. Shattuck School in Faribault has one remaining Gilbert building (1907–10), now a gymnasium.

Part of Gilbert's Minnesota legacy was his training of young designers. Long-time associate Thomas G. Holyoke traveled in Europe in 1890 with Gilbert's assistance. In addition to supervising construction of the Minnesota capitol, Holyoke collaborated with Gilbert on the chapel at Roselawn Cemetery (1903) in Roseville and maintained an independent practice.

For more information on existing Gilbert buildings, see David Gebhard and Tom Martinson, *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

Gilbert and Taylor supplied their eastern investors with an up-to-date building that echoed East Coast models. Foremost among the architectural sources for the Endicott were the Villard Houses in Manhattan, begun while Gilbert was still a draftsman in McKim,

Mead, and White's office. Joseph M. Wells, a designer in the firm, apparently tightened a plan sketched by Stanford White, using a fifteenth-century Roman palace as his main source. From New York, Gilbert had written to his friend Johnston in 1882: "The Villard house is up to the 2nd floor beams and has a good character. It is amusing to see how jealous Wells is of his masterpiece." In a penciled annotation on an article about his work, Gilbert later wrote that the "Villard House influenced me on Endicott."

¹¹Cass Gilbert to Clarence Johnston, Sept. 10, 1882, Johnston Papers, MHS; Francis S. Swales, "Mr. Cass Gilbert of New York and St. Paul," *The Builder*, Jan. 12, 1912, p. 32, annotated copy in Miscellany, Gilbert Collection, LC.

Another Wells design, the Russell and Erwin Building (also known as the RussWin Hotel) in New Britain, Connecticut, may have been a model for Gilbert and Taylor's organization of the Endicott facades, and the RussWin itself derived from another McKim, Mead, and White building. Gilbert knew about Wells's work in New Britain because Wells had written him in 1884: "I have one new work in hand, of considerable importance to me—An office building in New Britain, Connecticut. I think it will be more liked than Villard's Houses, though I have not aimed at Popularity. It looks very promising just now. It is a monumental work, where we had money to spend, and fair dimensions."³²

In order to gain recognition for his own effort in St. Paul, Gilbert sent photographs of the Endicott's facades to Wells. In reply, Wells wrote: "I like everything about the building, excepting the proportions of the [large stone arch] main entrance to the main building. That seemed to my eyes, as belonging too much to the Richardsonian order of things to harmonize with any style of architecture requiring good proportion. . . . But the general effect is *very good*, and dignified—and I congratulate you on it."³³

A DECADE AFTER the Endicott planning, the T-Square Club of Philadelphia solicited opinions from a dozen architects and critics of national reputation, including Louis Sullivan and Daniel Burnham, on the topic, "An Unaffected School of Modern Architecture in America—Will It Come?" Gilbert was solicited because of his winning design entry to the 1895 competition for the Minnesota state capitol and his energetic activity on behalf of the AIA. While the architects' visions of how to express American ideals ranged from organicism and medievalism to special design methods, Gilbert fit into none of these spheres. Never a theorist, he instead saw his role as developing solutions to architectural problems, as a provider of services to a client and a public. To a staff member in 1897, for instance, he wrote: "My plans are *instruments of service* and not merchandise to be bought and sold and if they want my design they must retain me fully as architect."³⁴

As for historical styles, Gilbert seemed to view them as catalog items to be assembled and executed under his supervision to fit particular tastes and needs. One of his early mentors at MIT, William R. Ware, noted in the T-Square Club survey: "[The] modern spirit is . . . a different one [from the spirit that wrought genuine styles]. . . . People who know of half a dozen ways to do things, all equally admirable and all equally unfamiliar, cannot possibly work as the men did who knew only one way, and knew that perfectly well."³⁵ Ware elaborated that numerous archaeological and historical studies had challenged local ways of designing and building, allowing architects and their clients to search

for different forms in the past and in far-removed locations. The Renaissance forms Gilbert used on the Endicott Building reflect this quest.

When thirty-six-year-old Gilbert prepared his design for Minnesota's capitol, he sought a monument that would attract the attention of leaders in his profession who shared Ware's view that creative eclecticism was the modern style. Along with other prominent architects, he ignored the first competition in 1894 because of its inadequate financial compensation for the winning architect. The state capitol commissioners and the East Coast juror selected for the second, more lucrative competition were pleased with Gilbert's winning entry in 1895. But the capitol he planned had more to do with Gilbert's ambitions than with Minnesota of the 1890s. "For myself," Gilbert wrote in the T-Square Club survey, "I prefer the development of art as a whole, in its larger sense rather than the development of an American art."³⁶

During the years Gilbert worked out the details of the capitol exterior and interior, his letters provide numerous examples of his eclectic methods and his ambitions. To his office staff in the Endicott Building in 1897, he cautioned: "Don't be tempted to get weights [for steel] too light. Remember this work is different from office buildings and must last 500 years." While designing the edifice, Gilbert consulted books, photographs, and "some of the best men in New York and Boston." In his travels, he studied buildings carefully and jotted down notes, writing in 1898 to staff member Frederick C. Gibbs, for example, that "I am going to climb the dome of the Florence Cathedral today to make notes of its construction with a view to our work. . . . This trip is a very valuable one for the Capitol work as I am constantly finding practical points." Later that year he instructed the capitol commissioners to have all the marble work given "a 'rubbed' finish instead of the 'drove cut' or 'tooled' fin-

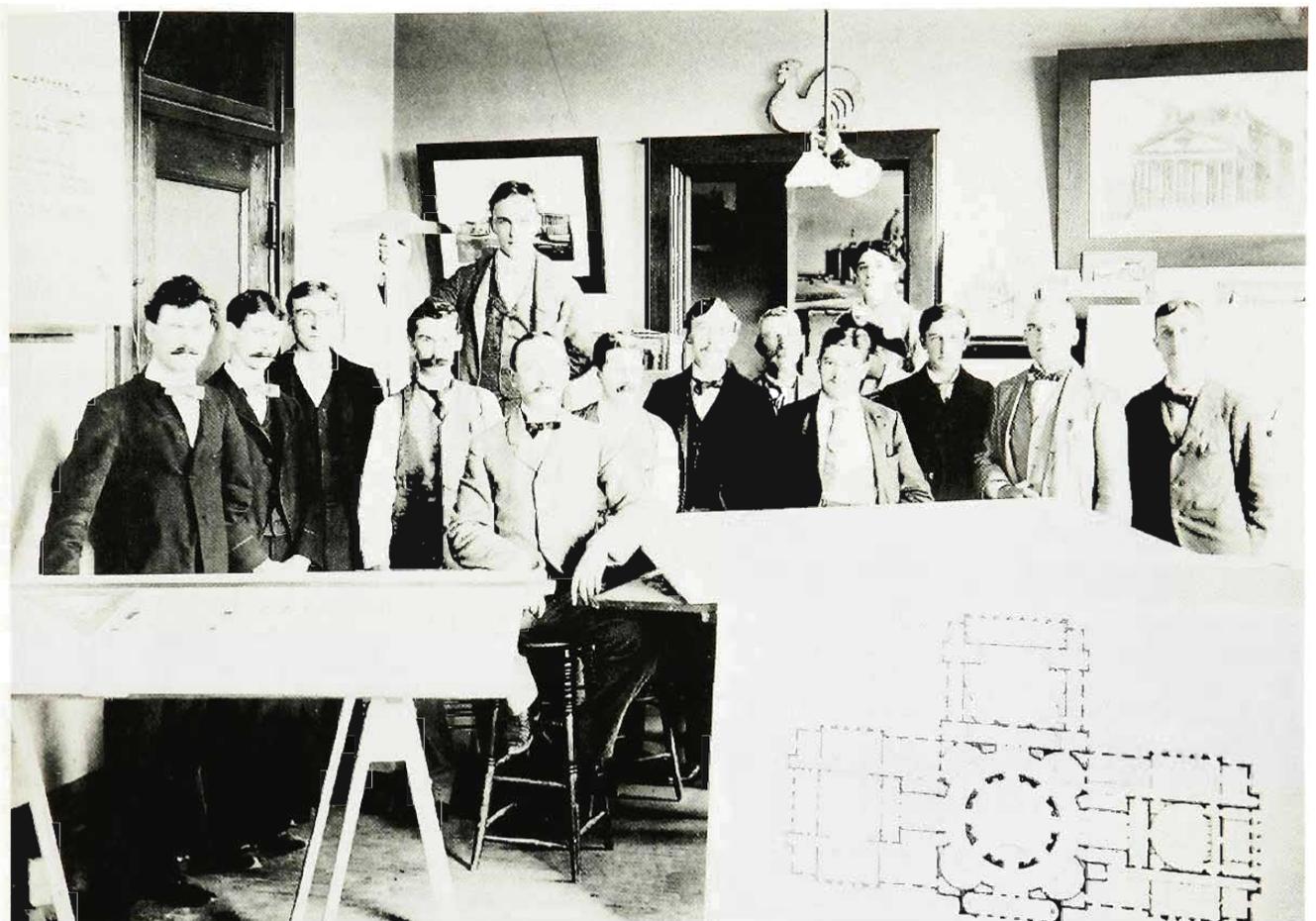
³²Roth, *McKim, Mead & White*, 94; Joseph M. Wells to Cass Gilbert, July 30, 1884, General Correspondence, Gilbert Collection, LC.

³³Wells to Gilbert, Nov. 6, 1889, General Correspondence, Gilbert Collection, LC.

³⁴"An Unaffected School of Modern Architecture in America—Will It Come?" *Catalog of the T-Square Club Exhibition and Architectural Annual* (Philadelphia, 1898); Cass Gilbert to F. C. Gibbs, Dec. 27, 1897, Gilbert Papers, MHS.

³⁵"Unaffected School," 23.

³⁶"Unaffected School," 27. See Richard Longstreth, "Academic Eclecticism in American Architecture," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17(Spring 1982): 55–82, and Carroll L. V. Meeks, "Picturesque Eclecticism," *Art Bulletin* 32 (Sept. 1950): 226–35. For descriptions of the many capitol controversies and fee negotiations, as well as construction details, see Morgan, "Politics of Business," 80–90; Neil B. Thompson, *Minnesota's State Capitol: The Art and Politics of a Public Building* (St. Paul: MHS, 1974).



Gilbert (on stool) and staff in Endicott Building office, with drawings of the capitol, about 1900

ish originally required . . . in conformity to the universal custom of marble cutting abroad, where I examined a number of buildings."³⁷

Gilbert did not look as far afield for other sources of inspiration. In 1891 McKim, Mead, and White had won the competition for the Rhode Island capitol in Providence, adapting Renaissance details to fit their

white marble monument. The organization of the facade was derived from the English Renaissance architect Inigo Jones, whose work had already been honored in the 1790s by William Thornton on the nation's Capitol in Washington, D.C. The tall, colonnaded dome of the Rhode Island capitol imitated Sir Christopher Wren's design for St. Paul's Cathedral in London.³⁸

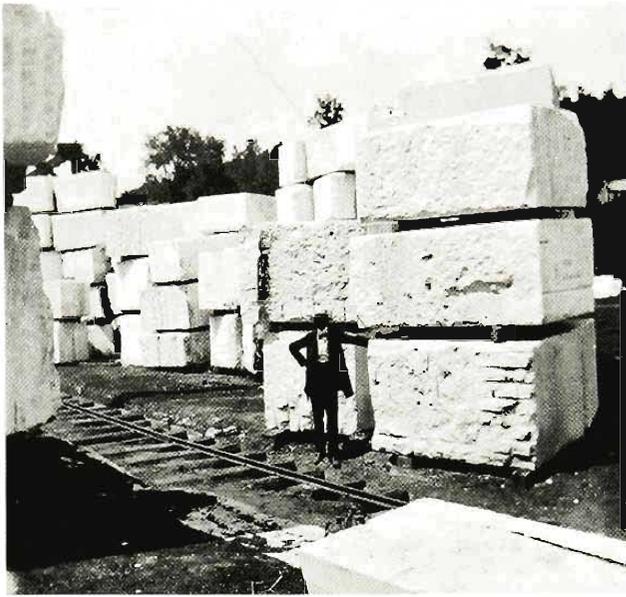
Because of a delay, the Rhode Island capitol was erected at almost the same time as Minnesota's (1895–1905), but Gilbert would have had access to the 1891 Providence design because of his connections to the firm and because the competition entries were published. Penciled on a 1912 article about his work is a note by Gilbert stating that his plan of the Minnesota capitol had been greatly influenced by the one in Rhode Island.³⁹

In both buildings, the senate and house chambers sit on the second floor, but Gilbert put the house in an intersecting wing instead of on an axis with the senate. McKim, Mead, and White located the main stairway in the rotunda, while Gilbert treated that circular, colonnaded space as a meeting area. "It is assumed," he

³⁷Note in Cass Gilbert's handwriting, Office to Cass Gilbert, Nov. 13, 1897, Gilbert Papers, MHS; Cass Gilbert to W. E. Eames, quoted in Morgan, "Politics of Business," 196 n.141; Memo book, Jan. 2, 15, 1898, Diaries, Gilbert Collection, LC; Cass Gilbert to Frederick C. Gibbs, Feb. 4, 1898, Gilbert Papers, MHS; Cass Gilbert to Capitol Commissioners Board, May 2, 1898, Capitol Commissioners Board Papers, MHS.

³⁸See Roth, *McKim, Mead & White*, 150–55; Henry-Russell Hitchcock and William Seale, *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the U.S.A.* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 218–24.

³⁹*American Architect and Building News*, Feb. 13, 1892, plates; Swales, "Cass Gilbert," Miscellany, Gilbert Collection, LC. The Minnesota dome virtually duplicated St. Peter's in Rome.



Stone for the capitol, 1901, quarried at Mankato, Ortonville, St. Cloud, and Winona

wrote, "that the purpose of the Rotunda is to provide a great central space . . . to accommodate the moving crowd of people."⁴⁰

By the time Gilbert designed his competition entry, the Renaissance-revival style of the Rhode Island statehouse had been acclaimed and widely accepted. Minnesota's capitol commissioners reportedly viewed the Providence building as ideal.⁴¹

THE CHOICE OF BUILDING STONE for Minnesota's capitol was at the center of the drawn-out controversy regarding the building and ultimately had long-term consequences for the architect. Local quarriers and shippers wanted Minnesota stone exclusively, and public opinion generally supported them. Gilbert, on the other hand, wanted a monument in marble that would last five hundred years. Compromise and economy resulted in an exterior veneer of white Georgia marble with foundation piers and dome supports of Kettle River sandstone, foundation walls of Winona and local blue limestone, and basement walls of St. Cloud granite. Minnesota stones—polished Kasota stone, granite, and pipestone—also decorated the building's interior.

The choice of Georgia marble was difficult for the capitol commissioners, who faced enormous pressures to vote against the "foreign" material and for Minnesota stone. In 1897 Commissioner Charles H. Graves wrote confidentially to Gilbert:

A majority of the Comm. feel [*sic*] that they *must* take Minnesota stone. [Eben E.] Corliss, [Edgar

Weaver, and [George A.] DuToit are surely that way. [Henry W.] Lamberton also, I think, unless you can get at him at once, and convince him to the contrary. My suggestion to decide on the stone and put you at work changing the plan to suit it, was no joke. I appreciate we have a marble or limestone plan, and not a sandstone or granite design."⁴²

Sandstone or rough-hewn granite might have been used for a medieval-revival building, but limestone or marble would have been the compelling choices for Gilbert's classical monument.

Gilbert's argument for a marble exterior succeeded in part because St. Paul's Butler-Ryan Company was awarded the low-bid construction contract in 1897. It operated a quarry in Georgia for the duration and also supplied the capitol's granite and sandstone. The firm alleviated some objections to the Georgia stone by having it milled on site by Minnesota workmen.⁴³

Ironically, while Gilbert won his battle, the use of marble from Georgia infuriated powerful men like James J. Hill, who now turned against him. A disgruntled Gilbert complained to Taylor in 1899:

My refusal to accede to demands of politicians and influential quarrymen and railroad magnates in letting the contract for the Minnesota State Capitol has . . . almost wipe[d] out my private business during the last year. Over \$200,000 in railroad business, alone, have been withdrawn from me . . . and the railroad officials have said openly in the Minnesota Club that the above was the cause.⁴⁴

It was the downturn in Gilbert's business caused by his success in managing the capitol design that finally forced him to do what he had wanted to do for at least a decade: abandon the West. The acclaim he received for this building enabled Gilbert, not yet forty, to move to New York City in 1898. From this vantage point he designed buildings of national significance such as the New York Custom House and the Woolworth Tower as well as the U.S. Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. Before completely closing his St. Paul office

⁴⁰Cass Gilbert to Capitol Commissioners Board, Sept. 9, 1895, draft, Gilbert Papers, MHS.

⁴¹Lyman Farvell (former McKim, Mead, and White employee) to Cass Gilbert, Nov. 12, 1894, Minnesota Capitol Correspondence, Gilbert Papers, MHS.

⁴²Charles H. Graves to Cass Gilbert, Aug. 24, 1897, Gilbert Papers, MHS.

⁴³*St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 28, 1933, p. 1; Martin R. Haley, *Building for the Future: The Story of the Walter Butler Companies* (St. Paul: Lincoln House Publishers, n.d.), n.p.

⁴⁴Cass Gilbert to James K. Taylor, Jan. 4, 1898 [*sic*], Broadway Chambers Letterbook, p. 291, Gilbert Papers, N-YHS.

in 1910, he also designed a master plan and mall for Minneapolis's University of Minnesota campus.

FOR GILBERT, the capitol battle had been a matter of principle. He had not fought long and hard to upgrade architects' control over government commissions only to lose ground to local economic interests. His insistence on professional pay of 5 percent of the building's cost meant his services would not be compromised. Seeing himself as representing practitioners throughout the country, he had argued for the right of architects to superintend their designs as well as shape the organization and evaluation of design competitions.⁶⁵

Once Gilbert won the Minnesota capitol commission, he made the most of it. He pushed for expenditure after expenditure to ensure use of elegant materials, high-quality decoration, and monumental status. He demanded, and got, national attention by sending complimentary photographs of the capitol to East Coast colleagues. He also asked influential New York artists like John LaFarge, Kenyon Cox, Edwin H. Blashfield, and Daniel C. French to provide decorations. The end result was a monument lavish with sculpture and murals that outdistanced in embellishment his model in Rhode Island. By taking off from the successful design of his East Coast mentors and importing sculptors and artists to complete his task, he

assured himself acclaim in the very circles he aimed to please. The capitol, like the Endicott Building, reveals Gilbert's intentional beckoning from the Mississippi River to the Hudson.⁶⁶

Early in his career, Cass Gilbert showed himself to be an able assessor of his own and others' capabilities. He cultivated the right contacts, associated with up-to-date contractors and engineers, and hired competent designers. In the complexity of interactions involved in executing a building, Gilbert sensed where he stood in the network and operated accordingly. Connections to colleagues, clients, politicians, bureaucrats, financiers, contractors, engineers, and real estate agents both created and reflected a process that affected the built product. In many ways, Gilbert acted as a politician who skillfully satisfies a varied constituency.

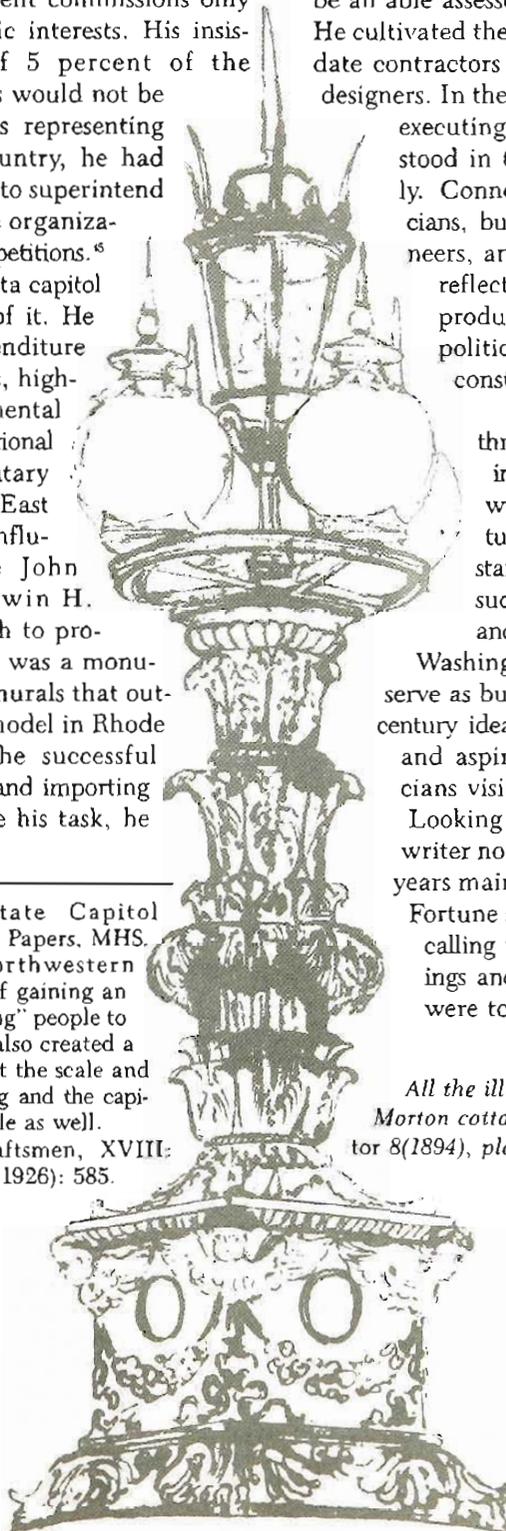
With the Minnesota capitol, Gilbert thrust himself and the state's government into the limelight that fostered his nationwide architectural practice. Today, structures that he subsequently helped create stand as vital national landmarks in cities such as Austin, Texas, St. Louis, Detroit, and Boston, as well as New York City and Washington, D.C. These eclectic monuments serve as built reminders of powerful turn-of-the-century ideals. Cass Gilbert made the expectations and aspirations of business people and politicians visible in civic and commercial projects. Looking back on his Minnesota career, one writer noted in 1926 that Gilbert "put in twenty years mainly at the drafting board before Dame Fortune smiled on him, and Reputation began calling upon him to appear at Directors' meetings and dinner functions." If true, those years were to Minnesota's benefit.⁶⁷

All the illustrations are in the MHS collections. The Morton cottage is from Architect, Builder and Decorator 8(1894), plate 180. The church photograph on p. 203 is by Truman W. Ingersoll.

⁶⁵Address to Minnesota State Capitol Commissioners, draft, n.d., Gilbert Papers, MHS.

⁶⁶David Van Zanten of Northwestern University first suggested the idea of gaining an audience for a building by "importing" people to work on it. Gilbert's house designs also created a dialogue with eastern architects, but the scale and urban context of the Endicott Building and the capitol caught the attention of lay people as well.

⁶⁷Francis Swales, "Master Draftsmen, XVIII: Cass Gilbert," *Pencil Points* 7 (Oct. 1926): 585.



Gilbert's sketch for an ornate standing light at the capitol



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