

# *Cass Gilbert &*

FALLING IN  
LOVE IN THE  
1880S



GEOFFREY BLODGETT

# Julia Finch

**JULIA FINCH**, a sprightly young lady from Milwaukee, crossed paths with the 26-year-old St. Paul architect Cass Gilbert toward the end of summer in 1886 while vacationing at Lake Minnetonka. They walked the beach together one August weekend looking for lucky stones. They dug holes in the sand and took a rowboat out on the water. “What a happy day that was,” Gilbert later mused, “with all the sweet uncertainty of love half confessed.”<sup>1</sup>

The couple had first met in New York City in 1880 when Gilbert was working in the Broadway office of the country’s leading architectural firm, McKim, Mead and White. Julia was attending a Manhattan finishing school at the time. Cass took to calling her “my New York girl.” After her Manhattan polishing she had toured Europe with her parents, studied music in Chicago, and become a practicing Christian. Now, six years later, she was a



Young architect Cass Gilbert, 1880, and Julia Finch, his spirited bride-to-be

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mature young woman of 24, straightforward and unaffected in social situations, strong-willed, saucy, and pretty—“stunningly pretty,” a bachelor friend reported. She lived in Milwaukee with her mother and younger sister. Her father, a prominent Wisconsin attorney, had died the year before, leaving them in reduced circumstances. They had been “in society” before the father died but now rarely went calling. Julia gave piano lessons in her home and sang solos in church. On summer vacation she played tennis and enjoyed sailing. She entertained a steady run of suitors, but none of them interested her very much. She had begun to think she might never marry.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Gilbert had completed his architectural apprenticeship under Stanford White at McKim, Mead and White in 1882 and returned to St. Paul, his home town, to launch his practice. He lived with his mother in a handsome Shingle-style house he had designed for her on Ashland Avenue near fashionable Summit Avenue. Mother and son were very close. Gilbert’s father had died when he was still a small boy. Elizabeth Gilbert was a strong, determined widow and a possessive mother. With her psychological and financial support, Cass was already emerging by 1886 as one of St. Paul’s most promising young architects, focusing his talents on houses and churches. His first house was his mother’s home; his first church was his mother’s nearby Dayton Avenue Presbyterian church. Fame was for the future. His grand design for Minnesota’s new state capitol in the 1890s, the Woolworth skyscraper in New York City (1913), and the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington D.C. (1935), among other great commissions, lay far ahead of him. He was a striving young architect on the make when he renewed acquaintance with Julia Finch at Lake Minnetonka in 1886.<sup>3</sup>

Falling in love, when it happened, was quick and easy for both. “The knowledge that I was in love came upon me with such overwhelming suddenness,” Julia told Cass a few weeks later, “that it took my breath away and I have been rather gasping ever since.” This sort of confession was squarely in line with the fixed middle-class romantic mating rituals of the 1880s. Following the sequence of these rituals through Cass and Julia’s courtship is rather like leafing through an album of old brown snapshots—the breathless discovery of shared affection, the arrival at an “understanding,” the whis-

pered secret, the joshing of friends, the solemn burial of previous courtships, anxiety about the other person’s mother, eager confessions of mutual unworthiness, the taut ceremony of engagement, the treasured diamond, a crisis or two to test the other’s firm intentions, careful caresses by parlor gaslight, imagining one’s wedding. This expected rhythm for approaching marriage has survived only in fragments a long century later. In the 1880s its viability was intact, implicitly governing the performance of middle-class young folks seeking out their mates.<sup>4</sup>

Julia showed her conformance to ritual—and her personal poise—soon after she and Cass rediscovered one another by traveling from Lake Minnetonka to St. Paul to meet his mother. Early exchanges between the two women were pleasant but a trifle cool, and this

**Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church (still standing at the corner of Mackubin Street) about 1890, one of Gilbert’s first St. Paul commissions**



tone lasted through most of the courtship. If Cass was bent on falling in love, his mother must have decided to approve the choice and tried hard not to think about losing her son to another woman. In fact she outdid herself in staging an engagement dinner for the couple at her Ashland Avenue home in November 1886, on her son's twenty-seventh birthday. It was the first time she had invited guests to the house in more than two years. The catered dinner was an elaborate 13-course display—raw oysters, red snapper, beef filet, sweetbreads, breast of partridge, cheese soufflé, all graced with sweetened ices and concluding in a flourish of brandied peaches, bon bons, salted almonds, and coffee (but no wine or liquor)—served by two black waiters in swallowtails and white gloves. After dinner Julia displayed her diamond in the parlor. (Three days later she wrote from Milwaukee: "The gas has just been lighted and I am watching my ring sparkle and send forth happy bright colors in the light. Do you not want to say good evening to it?") But she returned to St. Paul only once more before her wedding a year later. Elizabeth Gilbert was one reason. The tight bond between mother and son, and the threat that she seemed to pose to it, bothered Julia. "There is no earthly reason why Mrs. Gilbert should like me," she told Cass. "Just suppose that the more she sees of me the less she would like me. I assure you it makes me quite unhappy to think of it." Throughout their courtship Cass acted as a nervous liaison between the two women, torn between them, hoping for the best.<sup>5</sup>

**THAT WAS NOT** the only strain. Though Cass broke free to visit Milwaukee as often as his work allowed, theirs was mainly a correspondence courtship. They wrote letters to each other two or three times a week for more than a year, often chasing mail wagons to the train station after dark, spending extra for special delivery, and fretting about letters that crossed in the night. Long-distance telephones lay years ahead. "[N]o one who had to depend on the railroad for their love would ever call that road smooth," Julia mused after a few weeks of it. For his part, Cass joked that he had "forsaken Architecture to write love letters."<sup>6</sup>

Julia turned out to be a gifted and fetching lover by mail. She promised that her letters would teach Cass "all the little traps and managements that girls make use of." "We are a dreadful set," she added confidently, "but very interesting to study nevertheless." She then proceeded to entice him with sensuous fancies that seem more torrid today than they were intended to be in the 1880s, when premarital sex among urban middle-class couples was rarely attempted and more rarely

achieved. Julia's coquetry, protected by distance and prevailing rules, was nevertheless downright seductive.

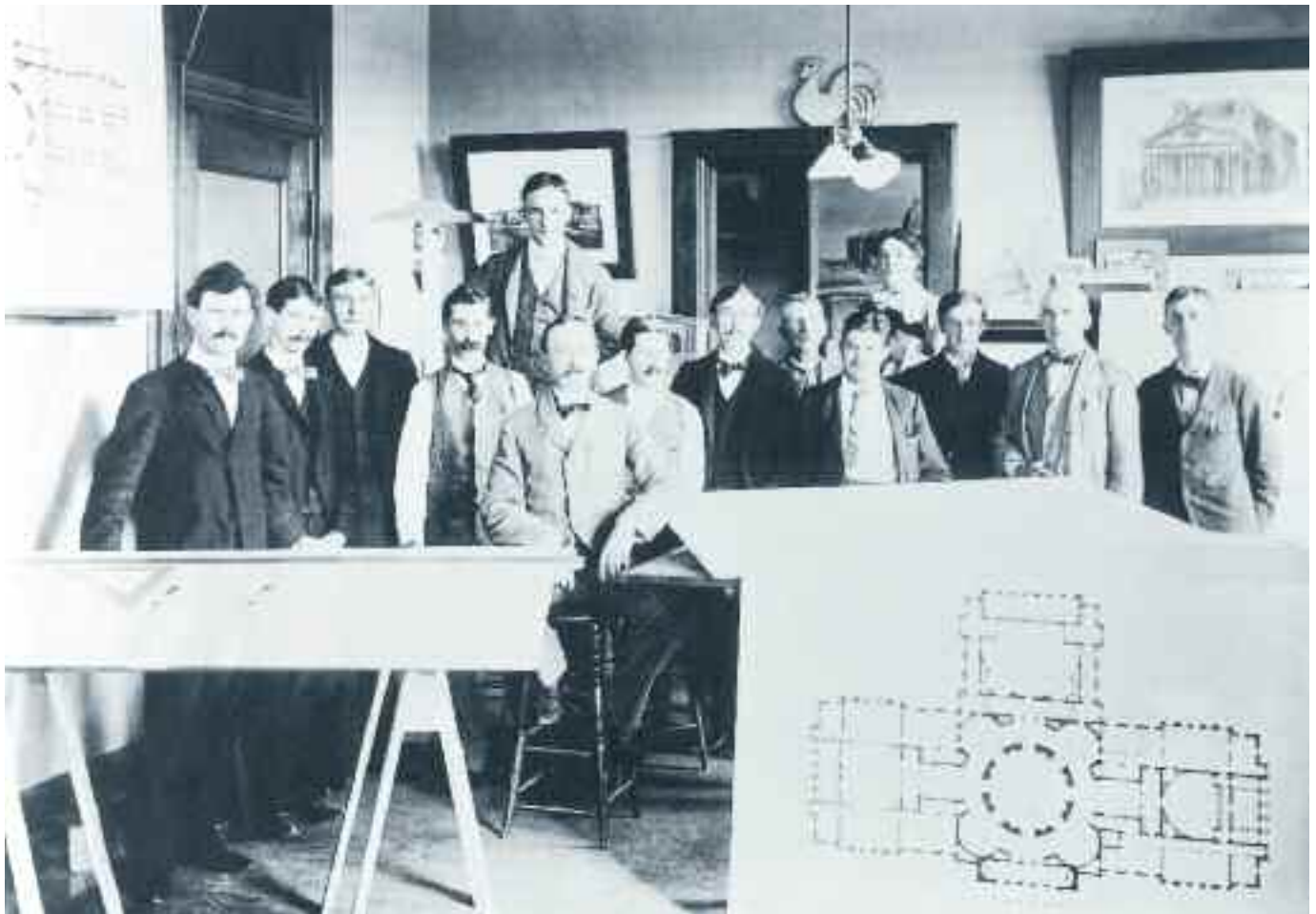
Six weeks into the courtship: "Oh Cass Cass I wish you were with me this instant. I long to tease you, there is nothing I would not do this morning." Christmas 1886, when sickness delayed Cass's visit to Milwaukee: "We will have a delightful quiet time together and I will show you what an irresistible nurse I can make." March 1887: "So here I am, saying in my most persuasive tones, 'Julie wants to be loved please.' I am thinking, even while I write, that you are sitting here beside me, and I am laughing at you and singing to you, and now I have stopped in the middle of my song because, well because, I like better just now to be made love to rather than sing." Six weeks before their wedding, a dream of married life, with them sitting before the fire: "And after we have been still for a long time I shall go quietly over to your chair and lean over it and kiss you, and then you will have to love me until it is time to light the gas."<sup>7</sup>

Cass could not match this imagery. Mainly he responded with lunging desires to come to Milwaukee to hug her and then store up her kisses in the mail.

The reality beneath these romantic sallies was that Cass and Julia did not know each other very well. They both worried a bit about that. "Do you think God made us for one another and so, since his works are always in harmony, there was no need of our knowing each other so intimately before?" Julia asked less than a month into their courtship. And a little later, "My blessed Cass, you make me tremble. I am probably the most commonplace young woman of your acquaintance, and I dread the time when a more prolonged inspection of my merits and demerits will convince you of the fact." Cass assured her that if she were too perfect, he would not have a ghost of a chance with her, given his own flaws—about which he was not, however, very specific.<sup>8</sup>

Julia intended that she and Cass become close religious partners. When she invited him to join her for communion the next time he came to Milwaukee, it was Cass's turn for a serious display of self-doubt. He was not ready for communion:

I have allowed myself to be so completely engrossed in the affairs of the present and in an ambition for a certain kind of success, that almost all my old feelings of a personal interest in the Bible as a guide to a good life have been gradually smothered. . . . I do not disbelieve, I do not seriously question, but the discouraging thing is that I am content to let the whole matter go, my mind is full of other things, and they clog it. . . . I want to be right [but] I go about it in a perfunctory way, genuine in my intention,



No longer merely dreaming of fame, Gilbert (seated, center) posed with his staff and plans for the Minnesota state capitol, about 1900

but soon forgetful. My heart is not in it, and I doubt my sincerity.

Julia pounced on this. It was not a matter of being good enough to take communion, she lectured him. Christ died to *forgive* their sins. “*Because* we are sinners we ought to go to Communion.” She then cited chapter and verse of Paul’s epistle to the Romans for Cass to study. Cass thanked her for the lesson and meekly promised that when they were married he would help her keep a Christian home.<sup>9</sup>

The thickest thread in their correspondence had to do with architecture. Cass was bent on making sure that Julia understood its importance to him. His moral as well as professional autonomy—salient priorities among middle-class men approaching marriage in Victorian America—needed stressing. Falling in love, he told her early on, had rejuvenated his career: “I have again that old pure feeling about my work, and the desire to do it well for its own sake and because I love it, and it is part of my life, and I was made to do it and for nothing else.” This was Julia’s first written warn-

ing about the engine of ambition she had decided to marry. After that he kept reminding her. His aim, he told her, was to win a “position in the world which will increase my chances of getting great work to do, and of having the influence to carry it out.” His ultimate goal was “to stand not only well in, but at the head of my profession.”<sup>10</sup>

He wanted her to know with precision how avidly he pursued his work and so described a typical day to her. The report has value for its glimpse into a young architect’s routine a long century ago, as well as for the evidence it brings of the architect’s insistence on personal control over his work. Gilbert was up and off at 7:30 A.M., like a physician making his rounds. He first stopped at the Presbyterian church rising on Dayton Avenue near his home to check progress and correct some flaws:

My word is law; and if it is not up to the mark down it comes no matter what it costs to make it right. . . . Sometimes I find the material delivered is defective, and the defect has been skillfully concealed. A sharp

reprimand follows. . . . There is a row imminent, and no end of trouble on hand, but a firm word or two and then a pleasant one avoids the row and attains the end. . . . Then with the carpenter a moment to test the strength of the beams. . . . A word with the man who is waiting to ask about some iron work, a hasty explanation of a drawing to one of the mechanics, a smile and a pleasant word to a laborer as he passes (for nothing gets one better service than a kind word—even if it is not said for the pleasure of pleasing to one whose life must be a dull monotony of toil). . . . Away I go to the next place. This is where an honest Swede is digging for a foundation. A little inspection of his lines and the location stakes shows he is getting on all right. . . . He is working down in the pit with his men and teams, doing two days work in one. . . . I rush off to meet Mrs. Bigelow about some decorations. This is in the quiet of an occupied house. A little talk, a reference to the principles of good taste, a discussion of some recent magazine article, a few practical suggestions, and the thing is settled. . . . Next to the office. . . . Dr. Bryant has been in, wants to know if his plans are nearly ready. Mr. Warren comes in tearing his hair because his estimates were \$500 higher than anybody expected. Then a beggar, a match boy, a tramp, a peddler, and a capitalist in succession. Mrs. Noyes wants to know if I can meet her at the office at four o'clock. . . . The afternoon is spent in my office, seeing people, writing letters arranging business, making a sketch for this thing or a design for that, calculating the weights on a pier, or the strains on a wall, talking with a foundry man about an iron roof truss, making a water color sketch for a summer cottage.<sup>11</sup>

Cass decided further that Julia needed careful tutoring in what lay behind it all. He told her to read the *Discourses* of the French architectural theorist Viollet le Duc. A little later he added Charles Eliot Norton on medieval churches to her required list. When Cass's architectural hero H. H. Richardson died that fall, he urged her to read Henry Van Brunt's tribute to him in the *Atlantic Monthly*. "There is so much in it that exactly coincides with my own ideas," he added rather ponderously, "that I may be able in that way to explain in a measure my own attitude toward my profession in regard to its higher aim." Julia responded to all this with light-hearted bravery. "I have commenced my studies in architecture," she announced. "But after trying to imagine an ancient temple in which I placed the architrave on the floor, reared nine Doric pillars above, and surmounted the whole by a caryatid, I have come to the

## *A Sampling of Gilbert's Minnesota Buildings*

Ambitious young architect Cass Gilbert returned to Minnesota in December 1882 as the western representative of the New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. Soon striking out on his own (and in partnership with his friend James Knox Taylor), Gilbert built a succession of houses, churches, and small commercial buildings throughout the 1880s and 1890s before winning a major commission—the Minnesota capitol—in 1895. Although he and his family moved to New York in 1898, he maintained his St. Paul office until 1910.

While courting Julia Finch by mail, Gilbert claimed to have "forsaken Architecture to write love letters." Nevertheless, his work load during those months included the following buildings, all still standing:

**DAYTON AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**, Dayton and Mackubin Streets, St. Paul, reflecting the influence of Gilbert's hero, H. H. Richardson

**CAMP MEMORIAL CHAPEL** (St. Martin's-by-the-Lake Episcopal Church), County Road 15 at Lafayette Bay, Minnetonka Beach, a beautiful example of the Shingle style that he brought to Minnesota

**VIRGINIA STREET CHURCH**, Virginia Street and Selby Avenue, St. Paul, mixing the Shingle style with the use of boulders, another possible Richardson influence

**DAVID W. MCCOURT HOUSE**, 161 Cambridge Avenue, St. Paul, a handsome, compact Shingle-style gem

**CHARLES P. NOYES HOUSE**, 89 Virginia Street, in which Gilbert introduced the Georgian revival style to St. Paul

**JASPER TARBOX HOUSE**, 2517 Manitou Island, White Bear Lake, one of several resort homes he built for clients in areas made newly accessible by rail lines.

On Gilbert's years in the state, see Sharon Irish, "West Hails East: Cass Gilbert in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 53 (Spring 1993): 196–207; for more on existing Gilbert buildings, see David Gebhard and Tom Martinson, *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

conclusion that my Saturday reading will have to be done over again.” Cass then confided to her his tactics for landing commissions and, in anticipation of their future together, began to tap her practical savvy. “I don’t believe it is ‘the thing’ for a man to look to his wife for advice on business matters,” he wrote, “but when we are married that is precisely what I am going to do. Because you have clear insight and good judgment.”<sup>12</sup>

Julia’s musical talent also impressed Cass. He cheerfully acknowledged that his own understanding of music was limited to conventional preferences and asked her to repair his technical ignorance. But he could not resist trying out some architectural metaphors on her. Beethoven conjured for him early Romanesque cathedrals. Mozart’s “infinite delicacy and fancy,” he wrote, “seem to me like the beautiful lacework tracery of some rare old Gothic window.” On to Wagnerian opera: “Great, splendid somber piles, whose strong lines and broad surfaces, deep mysterious shadows, and stately masses are sublime.” Julia’s response to these efforts was delightfully polite: “Your idea of music is very good, dear, and I am sure the more you know of it the more you will love it.” For her part, she promised, she fully intended to finish Viollet le Duc’s *Discourses* some day very soon.<sup>13</sup>

Georgian revival Noyes House, 89 Virginia Street, St. Paul, one of Gilbert’s projects during his courtship of Julia Finch



**THREE WEEKS INTO** his engagement, Cass received a long letter from fellow architect Joseph Wells, an irreverent bachelor he had befriended while working at McKim, Mead and White. Wells warned Cass not to get married. “In France,” he wrote, “they have a proverbial expression ‘He got married’ to explain a failure.” He proceeded to cite several famous authorities to nail down the point that marriage would be the ruination of Gilbert’s life as an artist and architect. “Be sure to remember,” he concluded, “that no matter how calmly it is entered into, or how late in life, marriage is always done in a desperate hurry, and that I have Beethoven, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Plato, and all philosophers and great men on my side while you have only the Almighty on yours.” Cass laughed the letter off as a sample of Wells’s twisted humor. But his mother took offense when he showed it to her, so he decided not to let Julia read it until after they were married and she had met Wells. “I don’t want to run the risk of your disliking one of my best friends,” he told her.<sup>14</sup>

But Wells had touched a nerve. As the months of their engagement passed, Julia’s letters came to dwell on wedding plans, the nuances of social diplomacy regarding friends and relatives, and the niche she wanted for them “in society.” In response, Cass seems to have felt an occasional twinge of nostalgia for the more spacious life he had once known as a free and urbane artist in Manhattan. A business trip to New York in May 1887 brought back to him the quick pulse of the place. He wrote home to Julia about calling on friends at the Dakota Hotel, dining at Delmonico’s, swapping choice gossip with Joseph Wells and Gilbert’s flamboyant mentor, Stanford White, sharing a lavish dinner with the Whites, and spending two fine hours with White’s partner William Mead and his interesting new wife—“a Hungarian with olive complexion, soft brown hair and gray eyes.” Cass ended the description of his nostalgia trip to the Big City on a note of gentle condescension by thanking Julia for her “sweet little letter of Friday.”<sup>15</sup>

A month later, back in St. Paul in a radically different mood, Cass told Julia how he felt about his artistry, in language that implicitly excluded her. He experienced, he wrote, a familiar “queer feeling when I am doing imaginative work.” He put his life into his art but he knew that no one else could quite understand how he felt about it. “And I feel that I am working for nothing at all, to no purpose, with no result. . . . I don’t know what I want. I don’t know how I would have it different. But I feel starved and lonesome for that intelligent sympathetic atmosphere of congenial friends that we used to think were around us in the days in New York.” Then he told Julia about meeting an old painter



Fashionable new Albion apartments, across the street from William A. Frost's and Allan Brown's drug store at Selby and Western Avenues, St. Paul, 1889

friend who was a little peculiar in manner and appearance since he was an artist. "I like to know such men, they are more near the real natural human being than some of our very correctly dressed and formal mannered friends who are apt to be just a trifle artificial." Cass concluded, "I am afraid that after we are married I will worry you a good deal by inviting my old bohemian friends from time to time."<sup>16</sup>

Julia's letters never responded to these wayward impulses. She remained much more concerned about Cass's mother than about bohemians. Concern turned to alarm when Cass wrote that his mother wanted them to move in with her in her St. Paul home after their marriage and when he later proposed that he "build a double house for Mother and us." Julia mulled over these prospects and wondered if their marriage should

not be postponed till they could afford a house of their own where they might start life together without a hovering mother-in-law.<sup>17</sup>

She responded more cheerfully when Cass began talking about the merits of apartment living, the latest modern arrangement among young couples. He located a new St. Paul apartment building for them in early summer 1887. The advantages of the Albion at Selby and Western Avenues were clear. Cass rattled them off from his viewpoint: elevators, dumbwaiters, no furnace work or lawn work or sidewalks to shovel, no tramps or peddlers or live-in servants to worry about. For her part Julia found very appealing the prospect of regular meals with friends at the building's attached cafe—a common feature of the new apartment living in the 1880s. Like many young women of



her family status she didn't know much about cooking. She knew less about cleaning. "Life is not worth living without servants," she told Cass, but she was ready to try it for a while. She even decided to practice a bit. "I have swept!" she soon announced triumphantly. "It was not such a dreadful undertaking after all. The sweeping I do not mind at all, but the dusting!! When we get into our apartment I am going to open all the windows and let the wind blow through the rooms and thus *blow* the dust out." Letters back and forth about furnishing and decorating the apartment pulled Cass and Julia closer. "Of course everything we have will have to be simple," Cass wrote, "but then that's no reason why it should not be in good taste." He told her essentially the same thing about their wedding ceremony.<sup>18</sup>

**AS THE WEDDING APPROACHED**, their courtship took on aspects of a roller coaster ride. A brief visit by Julia to St. Paul in the summer of 1887 had not helped. Mrs. Gilbert's frosty manner startled Julia and discouraged Cass from talking through their wedding plans together with his mother. Julia vacationed by herself in Wisconsin later that summer, sailing, fishing, playing tennis, and worrying happily about her suntan. Cass meanwhile occasionally left work for some rowing on the Mississippi. He took in a couple of St. Paul professional baseball games with fellow architect James Knox Taylor, cheering and yelling and tossing coins at their favorite players. In August he spent a weekend hunting up North. Julia was cheered to learn he could relax and asked if he would take her hunting too some day. "I feel perfectly confident that I should not scream every time you fired," she promised, "and there is just a possibility that I might shoot something myself—by mistake."<sup>19</sup>

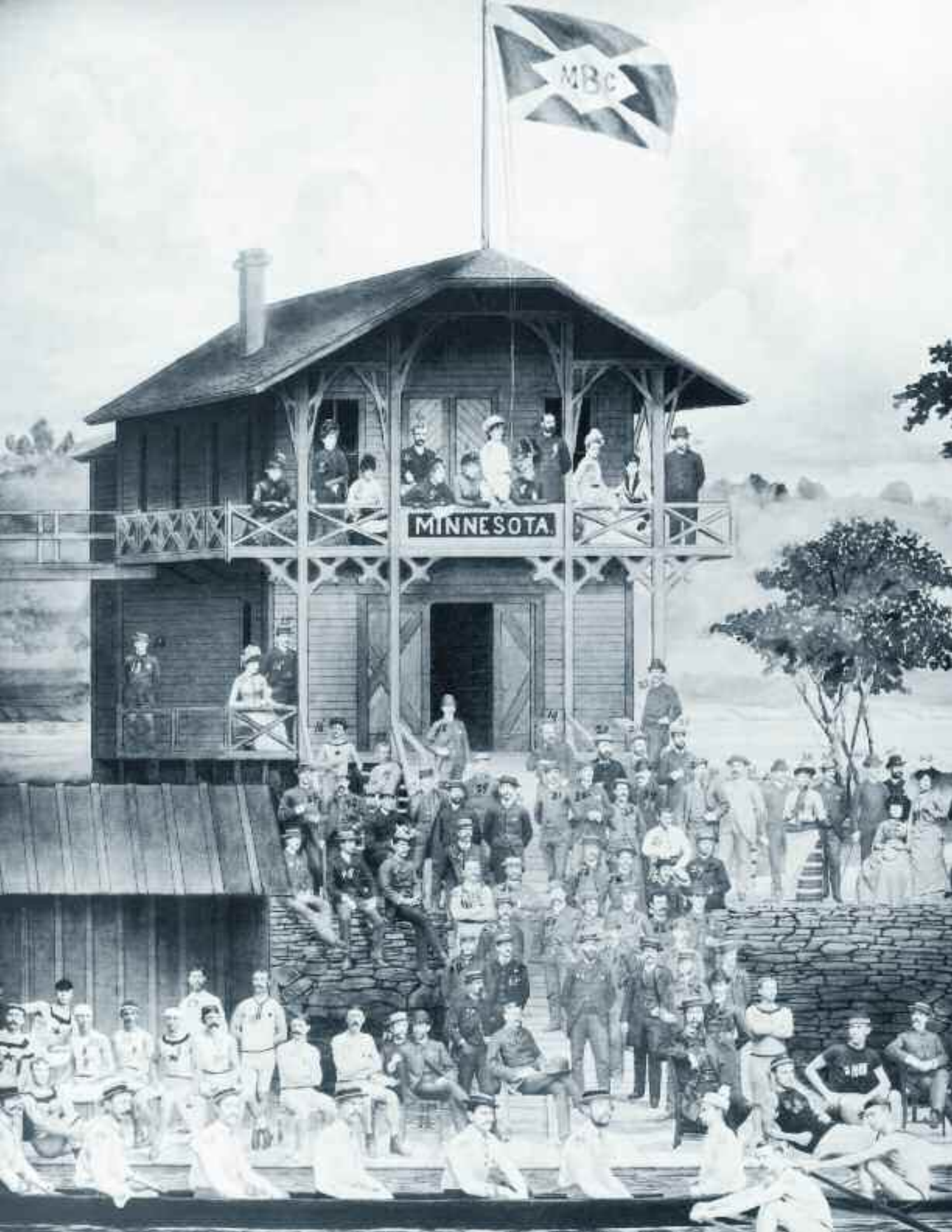
Then a sudden September storm gusted through their romance. A passing query from Cass about her wanting to marry an overworked architect set Julia off: "Cass, don't you want to marry me? If you don't, tell me so, but do not keep me so uncertain and anxious any more, it is killing me. I cannot stand it." If he didn't want her, she would take a job she had been offered at Elmira College in upstate New York teaching music. The needed assurances from Cass arrived by return mail, and the September crisis subsided swiftly. Within a week Julia was daydreaming by mail about married life—about waiting for Cass to come home from work for her kiss and "when you are particularly preoccupied I will devote myself to my books and music till the maid announces dinner." Cass's heavy work schedule did provoke a tart letter soon after that: "Are you going to be able to get away to be married, please? . . . One thing

I do beg, let us finish getting married when we once commence, it would be so difficult to remember just where we left off."<sup>20</sup>

Their romance endured one last ripping disruption 12 days before marriage. When Cass finally brought himself to spell out the wedding plans for his mother, she broke down in tears. Through the sobs came her reaction: her beloved Cass, having left her in ignorance for so long about their plans, was now withdrawing his affection from her. Therefore she could not be present at the ceremony. Cass was flattened. His mother remained the most important person in his life. "No one can know what we have been to one another," he told Julia. "She has lavished on me all her love and pride and ambition. I have been her favorite son . . . and now she tells me I am leaving her. No one can take her place in my heart, Julie, for it is a peculiar one, and my love for my wife can not be less strong or pure because of the love I shall always have for my Mother." Cass felt helpless, torn between two demanding women. Only Julia could mend the conflict. "She seemed to think you were taking me from her," he wrote. "She wants your love, Julie, she wants a daughter's comforting sympathy. Your kind heart will tell you how best to offer it. . . . At the first advance you will have won for yourself the love of the strongest, noblest, most unselfish heart that ever beat. . . . Write to her at once." Thus responsibility for solving the mother problem in St. Paul passed to the sweetheart in Milwaukee.<sup>21</sup>

Julia met the challenge. The letter she wrote to Mrs. Gilbert apparently worked, and she soon received from Mrs. Gilbert in St. Paul a pretty swatch of lace to perfect her wedding dress. Julia's letter back to Cass prickled with quiet reproval, however. She asked if he had by now managed to discuss with his mother the wedding plans they had agreed on. She went on to hope that she and his mother would turn out to be good friends. "I think it would have been better last summer, dear, if you had encouraged my talking over things with her instead of fearing that she would not understand me nor like me," she wrote. Then this: "I think it will always be best for me to manage my friends in my own way." Next she asked Cass to buy her a new wedding ring, instead of using his father's ring to marry her.

**Bachelor Gilbert (second from left in scull) and other Minnesota Boat Club members posed for photographer Charles A. Zimmerman, about 1885. Friend and fellow architect James Knox Taylor sits fourth from left in scull; client Charles Noyes stands on balcony at right.**



She was sure his mother would be happier if Cass himself wore his father's ring. Julia went on to specify that her own new ring be made with square edges, not rounded. "I believe," she said, "in meeting this world and things in general squarely." All this struck home as intended. Cass finally took full blame for the whole misunderstanding and pleaded with Julia to accept his father's ring. Having made her point, she agreed.<sup>22</sup>

The wedding took place as planned in the parlor of Julia's uncle's home in Milwaukee on November 29, 1887. Cass and his bride then left for a ten-day wedding trip to New York City. On the same day, Elizabeth Gilbert, who apparently did not attend the wedding, closed her house in St. Paul and headed west to live with her eldest son Charlie in southern California. The mother and her favorite son shared a last exchange of sentiments. She told Cass that he had left her desolated by going off to start a home of his own. She hoped he would nevertheless eventually remember that "your home is where your Mother is." For his part Cass wrote more cryptically: "I do not feel that I am going out of the home, Mother, except for just a little while and then we will be together again." Neither letter mentioned Julia Finch.<sup>23</sup>

But Julia emerged the clear winner. She had survived the long contest for Cass Gilbert's devotion and replaced his mother as the strongest person in his life. Moreover, by marrying Cass she went far to resolve the conflict that long roiled inside him between the dreamy artist recalling his taste of bohemia and the ambitious architect yearning to succeed. As his New York friend Joseph Wells might well have predicted, the home and family Julia prepared for Cass would soon banish bohemia from their table. Instead they headed together for respectable success.

**DURING THEIR FIRST SEVEN YEARS** of marriage, Julia gave birth to four children—Emily, Elizabeth, Julia, and then Cass Jr. In 1895 Gilbert's winning design for the new Minnesota state capitol won him sudden national prominence and the beginning of personal wealth. Five years later, having landed several major commissions in New York City, Cass and Julia moved



Elizabeth Gilbert,  
after leaving St. Paul to live with  
another son in California

their family from St. Paul to Manhattan's Upper East Side and soon entered the city's social register. In 1907 Cass was elected president of the American Institute of Architects, his profession's highest honor. That same year he bought a summer place in Ridgefield, Connecticut, a rambling shingled farmhouse dating from the Revolutionary War era, called the Cannonball House. A few years after that the dime-store millionaire Frank Woolworth asked him to design the tallest building in the world, a skyscraper completed in Lower Manhattan in 1913 and lighted for its dedication from a telegraph button in the White House pressed by President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, Cass and Julia, his constant companion, sailed for Europe on long summer jaunts with increasing regularity before and after World War I, touring England, Scotland, and the continent from Belgium to Athens by train and chauffeured motor car. In size, dress, and social bearing the couple took on a certain

Four children, probably the Gilberts', frolic outdoors in this summery picture taken by Cass Gilbert



formal majesty in their later years. Cass could look back with satisfaction on more than 200 buildings he had designed nationwide since creating a home for his mother in the early 1880s. In 1934, shortly before the completion of his last great commission, the neoclassical Supreme Court building in Washington, he died at age 74 with Julia at his side while seeking summer rest in Brockenhurst, England. His obituaries vindicated the personal ambitions he had shared with Julia back in 1887. The *Times* of London called him “the most

remarkable architect of his generation in America,” and the *New York Times* announced that “New York City has lost the prophet of her distinction among the cities of the earth.”<sup>25</sup>

Julia Gilbert lived on for 18 more years, mostly at the country place in Ridgefield. She contributed to deserving philanthropic causes, presided over a growing swarm of grandchildren, and tended the orderly garden beds laid out by her husband decades before. □

**Grandparents Cass and Julia Finch Gilbert (seated) and family posed for Connecticut photographer Joseph Hartmann at their Ridgefield house, Thanksgiving 1928. Standing adults (from left): son-in-law Charles M. Post, daughters Julia Gilbert Post and Emily Gilbert, daughter-in-law Jarvis Gilbert, and son Cass Gilbert; children (from left): Charlie Post, Grosvenor Gilbert, Julia Post, Cass Gilbert III, and Jarvis Gilbert**



## NOTES

1. Cass Gilbert to Julia Finch, Feb. 14, 1887, Cass Gilbert Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. All correspondence cited is in this collection.

2. Julia Finch to Cass Gilbert [Sept. 5, 1886]; Elizabeth Gilbert to her sister, Nov. 28 1886; Cass Gilbert to Julia Finch, Feb. 14, 1887. Bachelor John Riley's remark repeated in Cass Gilbert to Julia Finch, May 19, 1889.

3. For a summary interpretation of Gilbert's later career, see Geoffrey Blodgett, "Cass Gilbert, Architect: Conservative at Bay," *Journal of American History* 72 (Dec. 1985): 615-36.

4. Finch to Gilbert, undated [Sept. 1886]. For useful scholarly discussions about falling in love, see Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 3-13, 179-202, and Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28-55, 157-91.

5. Finch to Gilbert, undated [Aug. 1886], Nov. 27 [1886], Mar. 11, 1887; E. Gilbert to her sister.

6. Finch to Gilbert, Oct. 11 [1886]; Gilbert to Finch, Jan. 3, 1887.

7. Finch to Gilbert, Oct. 3, Nov. 1, Dec. 25 [1886], Mar. 24, Oct. 16, 1887. When Julia wrote of being "loved" and being "made love to," she was doubtless musing about caresses and whispered words.

8. Finch to Gilbert, Sept. 17, Nov. 1 [1886]; Gilbert to Finch, Oct. 19, 1886.

9. Gilbert to Finch, Dec. 1, 1886; Finch to Gilbert, Dec. 12 [1886].

10. Gilbert to Finch, Sept. 12, Oct. 20, Dec. 16, 1886; Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 17.

11. Gilbert to Finch, Oct. 25, 1886.

12. Gilbert to Finch, Oct. 31, Dec. 9, 1886, Mar. 2, 1887; Finch to Gilbert, Nov. 1 [1886]; Henry Van Brunt, "Henry Hobson Richardson, Architect," *Atlantic Monthly* 58: (Nov. 1886): 685-93.

13. Gilbert to Finch, Dec. 10, 1886; Finch to Gilbert, Dec. 12, 1886.

14. Joseph M. Wells to Cass Gilbert, Dec. 12, 1886; Gilbert to Finch, Dec. 16, 1886.

15. Gilbert to Finch, May 15, 16, 1887.

16. Gilbert to Finch, June 11, July 17, 1887.

17. Gilbert to Finch, Jan. 4, Apr. 29, 1887; Finch to Gilbert, Mar. 1, 1887.

18. Gilbert to Finch, Jan. 4, July 15, July 24, Aug. 5, 1887; Finch to Gilbert, July 12, July 15, Aug. 5, Sept. 14, Sept. 23, 1887. On the new popularity of apartment living and cafeteria dining in the late-nineteenth century, see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 135-51; for a contemporary view of the relationship between apartment living and "the servant problem," see Robert Grant, *The Art of Living* (New York: Scribner's, 1895), 63-75.

19. Gilbert to Finch, June 3, July 17, 1887; Finch to Gilbert, July 28, Aug. 3, Aug. 24, 1887.

20. Finch to Gilbert, Sept. 17, Sept. 23, Oct. 11, 1887.

21. Gilbert to Finch, Nov. 16, 1887.

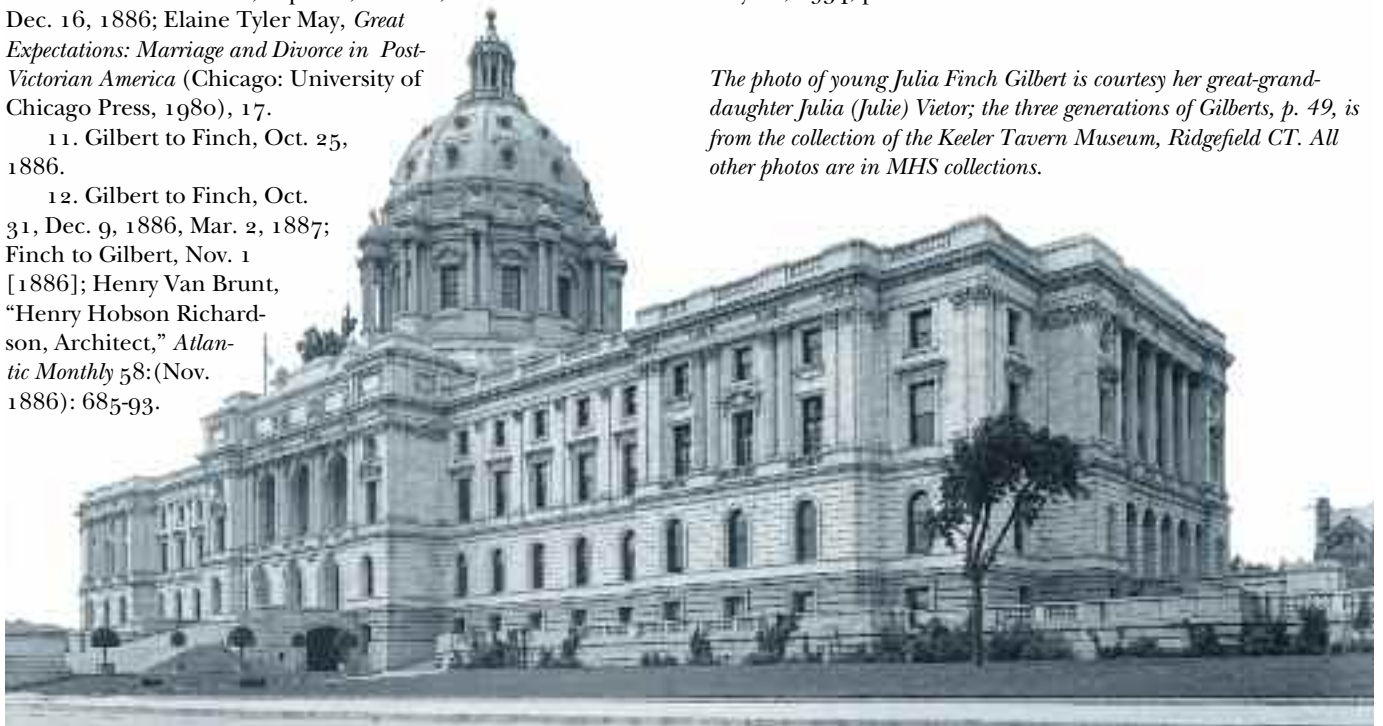
22. Gilbert to Finch, Nov. 14, 1887; Finch to Gilbert, Nov. 18, 1887.

23. Cass Gilbert to Elizabeth Gilbert, Nov. 24, 1887; Elizabeth Gilbert to Cass Gilbert, Nov. 30, 1887.

24. Gilbert to Finch, Apr. 5, 1900; Gilbert to George Seymour, Aug. 24, 1907, personal letter book, Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio; *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1913.

25. *Times* (London), May 18, 1934, p. 16; *New York Times*, May 18, 1934, p. 22.

*The photo of young Julia Finch Gilbert is courtesy her great-granddaughter Julia (Julie) Vietor; the three generations of Gilberts, p. 49, is from the collection of the Keeler Tavern Museum, Ridgefield CT. All other photos are in MHS collections.*





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