

# THE CASS GILBERT SOCIETY

*Organized to preserve the work of Minnesota's most important architect.*

## MEMBERSHIP MEETING NOTICE

### A CAPITOL LECTURE

**MARCH 23, 1999, 7 TO 8 P.M.**

**UNIVERSITY CLUB**

**420 SUMMIT AVENUE**

**ST. PAUL, MINN.**

The meeting will feature two speakers. Thomas O'Sullivan, curator of art at the Minnesota Historical Society, will talk about "Gilbert's Minnesota State Capitol: Think globally, design locally." Carolyn Kompelien, historic site manager, Minnesota State Capitol, Minnesota Historical Society, will present "Minnesota's Showplace: Politics and Preservation." Cass Gilbert considered Minnesota's State Capitol one of his best designs and it will be interesting to hear two experts tell society members about Gilbert's vision in designing it, and what is required to preserve it.

## CASS GILBERT: AMERICAN ARCHITECT

Few American architects have achieved Cass Gilbert's national prominence. His works, although concentrated in St. Paul and New York, are scattered across the American landscape.

Gilbert was born in Zanesville, Ohio, on Jan. 28, 1859, to Augustus and Elizabeth Gilbert. His father, an engineer and surveyor, had been an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard and served as a colonel in the Civil War.

Cass Gilbert was brought to St. Paul by his mother in 1868, the year his father died. He attended St. Paul schools and spent the summer of 1876 working as a carpenter's helper in Red Wing. That summer job has been credited with stimulating Gilbert's interest in architecture. Deciding not to finish his last year of high school, he instead took a job at the Twin Cities architectural firm of Abraham M. Radcliffe.

Two years later, in 1878, he enrolled in a two-year architectural program at M.I.T., where he received training in the principles of the Parisian Ecole des Beaux-Arts. But after only a year, he left the program to travel around Europe. Upon his return, he spent two formative years working in New York for the firm of McKim, Mead & White before returning to Minnesota in 1882. On Jan. 1, 1883, he opened his own office in the Gilfillan Block in downtown St. Paul.

Some evidence suggests that financial success was not immediate for Gilbert's new firm. For example, in 1884 he entered a partnership with James Knox Taylor, a St. Paulite who had been a classmate of Gilbert's at M.I.T. But after a short time, Taylor withdrew from the partnership for lack of work.

## IS YOUR HOME A "CASS GILBERT?"

A number of people have contacted the society, saying they believe their house might have been designed by Cass Gilbert. The society welcomes these communications.

Information received about any building "suspected" of being a Cass Gilbert design must be researched and documented. These efforts are headed by architect Tom Blanck and his assistants. Sometimes the documentation can be found in Minnesota historic records. Other times, the research requires a visit to the New York Historical Society, where Cass Gilbert's family has donated the major collection of his papers.

If you have any information that might further the society's efforts to publish a catalog of Cass Gilbert's works, please contact Jean Velleu (651) 298-1127 or Tom Blanck (651) 224-8455.



*Cass Gilbert and a Shingle-style cottage he designed on Manitou Island in White Bear Lake.*

Biographies of Gilbert naturally focus on his professional work. But some clues about his social and personal life appear in the minutes of the Informal Club, an organization of St. Paul's movers and shakers. The club was founded in 1894 when a small group of men got together "for the purpose of organizing an informal club for social intercourse and the discussion of matters of interest..." Letters were sent to 50 prominent men in the city, stating that "as the membership is to be strictly limited to fifty, it becomes important that all the members should be congenial and 'clubable.'" Cass Gilbert's name was on that list of 50.

The club's meeting notice for Jan. 26, 1899, says the discussion session would be led by Mr. Cass Gilbert. The topic was titled "What About Expansion?" and centered on the Philippine Islands. The topic reflected Gilbert's interest in international affairs. One of the early supporters of active American intervention in World War I, he participated in pro-war rallies and, in 1917, marched in a New York parade of Americans advocating direct U.S. involvement in the war in Europe. His views changed, however, when he learned of the devastation caused by the war; he became an isolationist and opposed United States membership in the League of Nations.

Gilbert was a workaholic. The large number of projects he completed suggest he did not have much leisure time, although he did find time to marry Julia Finch on Nov. 29, 1887, and have four children with her: Emily, Elizabeth, Julia and Cass Junior. But a letter chronicling his day's activities written June 28, 1887, to Julia, then his fiancée, illustrates his dedication to his career. Early in the day, he traveled by train from St. Paul to New Richmond, Wis. After he inspected a house he had designed, he boarded another train to journey to Ellsworth, Wis., where he inspected another residential project. Then, he climbed aboard yet another train for a trip to Red Wing, Minn., where he made a third inspection. Finally, Gilbert wrote, he returned to St. Paul at 11 o'clock that night.

As his letter suggests, Gilbert paid great attention to detail in his projects. The owners of a Gilbert-designed house on Grand Hill have notes, possibly in Gilbert's own handwriting, that say, "It will require 30,000 bricks to construct this house." The notes also state that the cost of the house would be \$12,500 and that the ceiling of the basement could be plastered for an additional \$12.50.

In 1895, Gilbert rose to national prominence by winning the competition for the Minnesota State Capitol. Three years later, he opened his New York office, and a year after that, in 1899 he won the much coveted commission for the new home of the United States Customs House. An elated Gilbert wrote his wife: "Our ship's come in. She's in the harbor now!"

Cass Gilbert left an indelible mark on New York's skyline. In October 1998, his work was celebrated by the Alliance for Downtown New York.

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THE CASS GILBERT SOCIETY  
550 Portland Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55102

## CASS GILBERT SOCIETY

The Cass Gilbert Society is an organization of people interested in the rich architectural legacy of one of America's premiere designers. Initial steps were taken late in 1998 when a small group of people, most of them living in residences designed by Cass Gilbert, met to discuss the potential interest in such an organization, and what its goals might be.

Tom Blanck, a St. Paul architect, and Jean Velleu, who with her husband, Richard, lives in a residence designed by Gilbert, have a deep interest in the architect's work, and were among those from St. Paul who attended New York's celebration of Cass Gilbert on Oct. 11, 1998. It was mainly through their efforts that the early meetings were planned, leading to the incorporation of the society at the end of the year.

The organization has set for itself several goals. Among these are the identification and preservation of Gilbert-designed buildings and serving as an information center for his work. It also will promote, through fund-raising activities, the creation of exhibits appropriate for display throughout the state and an illustrated catalog of his designs in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Member programs will be held regularly throughout the year. In keeping with the education mission of the society, they will feature lectures about Gilbert and his work. Tours of the state Capitol also are planned. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of the Capitol.

Business meetings of the society's board of directors are held monthly. Members who have comments about the society's programs and goals are encouraged to contact Jean Velleu, president of the Cass Gilbert Society (615) 298-1127.

Annual membership dues are nominal: \$25 per household. Corporate membership is \$50. The Cass Gilbert Society is structured as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization.

— Cass Gilbert bio continued from front —

The celebration included a tour of all six downtown buildings Gilbert designed, plus his Brooklyn Army Terminal. On the tour were the United States Customs House (constructed 1899-1907), the Broadway Chambers Building (1899-1900), West Street Building (1905-1907), the Woolworth Building (1910-1913), the New York County Lawyers' Association building (1928-1930), Brooklyn Army Terminal (1918-1919) and the United States Court House (1934-1936). This last downtown New York project was completed by Cass Gilbert, Jr. after his father's death.

When the 50-story Woolworth Building was completed in 1913, it was the tallest building in the world and led Gilbert to be known as "the father of the modern skyscraper."

Gilbert's work was not limited to Minnesota and New York; he designed the capitols for the states of Arkansas and West Virginia, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C. Samples of his work still exist in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon and west-central Wisconsin.

But it was in Minnesota, particularly in St. Paul, that Cass Gilbert built his reputation and honed the genius that was to make him one of the nation's greatest and most prolific architects. His first project was a residence at 471 Ashland Ave., which he designed for his mother. At least another 60 residences, several churches, and numerous commercial structures in St. Paul have been identified as Gilbert's work. Interestingly, it appears that fewer than six of his designs (only one a residence) were built in Minneapolis. Among these was the Federal Reserve Bank building. He also designed a campus plan for the University of Minnesota.

Gilbert frequently traveled abroad during the later years of his life. It was on one of these trips that he died suddenly at Brockenhurst, England, on May 17, 1934, at the age of 75.

—Historical information for this article was contributed by Tom Blanck, St. Paul architect.

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## CASS GILBERT SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

Yes, I would like to become a member of the Cass Gilbert Society.

I am a member but would like a gift membership for a friend listed below.

Enclosed is my check for  \$25/Household or  \$50/Corporate to **Cass Gilbert Society**.

Member's Name \_\_\_\_\_

New Member Information:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Send your check to: Cass Gilbert Society, 550 Portland Ave., St. Paul, MN 55102