



LECTURE SERIES WILL FEATURE HISTORIAN GEOFFREY BLODGETT



*Dr. Geoffrey Blodgett
Architectural historian*

Political and architectural historian Geoffrey Blodgett, Robert S. Danforth Professor of History at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, will be the featured speaker at the Cass Gilbert Society's lecture series at 7 p.m. Tuesday, June 8, at the University Club, 420 Summit Ave., St. Paul.

His talk, "The Early Years: From Hard Times to Takeoff," examines the period in Cass Gilbert's life from 1887 to 1894, when the young architect was struggling to make a name for himself as a designer of upscale residences. It wasn't until 1895 that Gilbert began his rise to national prominence by winning the competition to design the Minnesota State Capitol.

Dr. Blodgett was born in Hanover, N.H., and attended public schools in Schenectady, N.Y. He attended Oberlin College, and was graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1953. He then served three years in the U.S. Navy, assigned to the Pacific Fleet.

After his time in military service, he enrolled at Harvard University, earning his Master of Arts degree in 1956 and his Ph.D. degree in 1961. Since then, he has been a member of the history department at Oberlin.

Dr. Blodgett has researched and written extensively on American political history and American architectural history. Part of his work in the field of architectural history focused on Cass Gilbert, who had been the architect for projects at Oberlin College. He currently is working on a biography of Gilbert, who was born on Nov. 24, 1859, in Zanesville, Ohio.

His lecture for the Cass Gilbert series, which will include slides of some of the architect's most important works, is open free to the public. It is the second in the Cass Gilbert Society's four-part series planned with support from the Minnesota Humanities Commission.

CASS GILBERT STROLL FUNDRAISER IN JULY

What's more inviting than a stroll through the Historic St. Paul neighborhood on a fine summer day? Especially when your leader is Tom Blanck. Emphasis will be on characteristic architectural features of Cass Gilbert residences and how they compare and contrast with other buildings. Tom also promises to share some of his classic Cass Gilbert stories, and will answer your questions about this most distinguished Minnesotan. The stroll will cover an easily walkable area along and around Summit Avenue and include an architect's analysis of the exteriors of 10 edifices. An added feature: gardens along the avenue should be at their peak.

SUNDAY, JULY 25

1 TO 3 P.M.

MEET IN NATHAN HALE PARK

(WHERE SUMMITT AND PORTLAND AVENUES MEET)

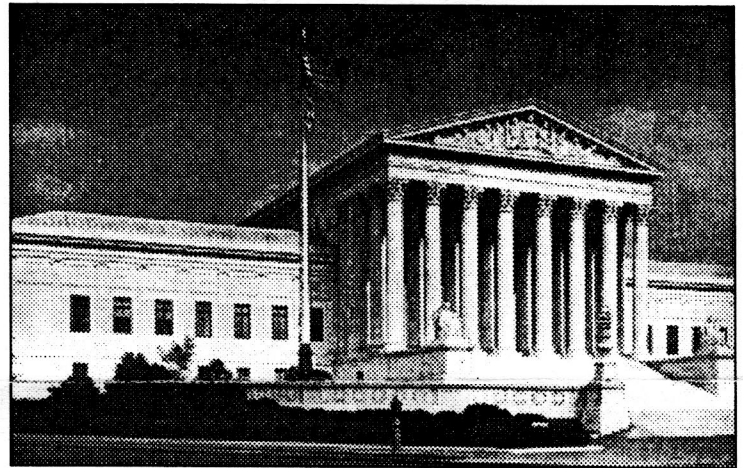
COST OF STROLL: \$10 PER PERSON

Wear comfortable shoes

Bring a sun hat or parasol

Lemonade promised

(In the event of rain at 1 p.m., the stroll will be postponed until further notice.)



U.S. Supreme Court Building, Gilbert's last major civic project.

SOCIETY PRESIDENT ATTENDS CASS GILBERT CELEBRATION AT THE U.S. SUPREME COURT

By Jean Velleu

In late March, Nancy Peterson, historian of the Cass Gilbert Society, and I traveled to Washington, D.C., for the commemoration of Cass Gilbert's last large civic project, the U.S. Supreme Court Building.

As soon as we settled into our fine accommodations at the Latham Hotel, we decided to visit the Library of Congress. Tom Blanck, St. Paul architect and a founder of our society, had told us we might find some old photographs there of Cass Gilbert buildings in St. Paul.

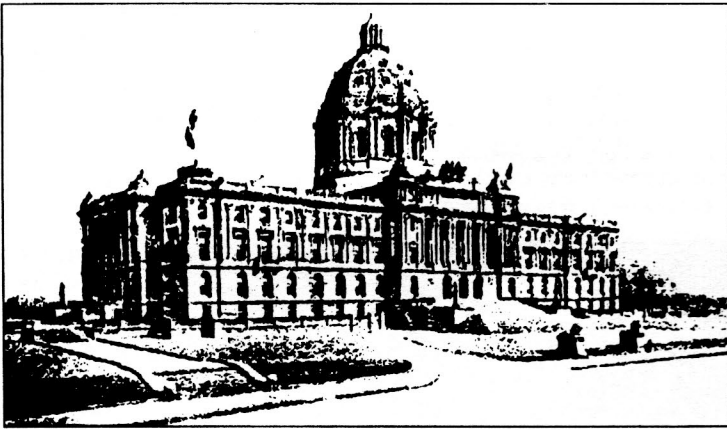
The Library of Congress was a first experience for both of us, so it was a delightful adventure. In the photo section, we were told to carefully read the instructions on handling the materials. We also were required to secure our purses in a locker before we were allowed to enter the area. The staff was most helpful and told us how to look up materials by site, geographically by state and biographically.

In the site reference, under Ramsey County, Minn., we located two addresses we could identify: Riley Row and Bethlehem Church. We knew the latter was a Cass Gilbert building (and his favorite). However, there was no photo of the church to be seen, and we surmised that somebody had stolen it before the library tightened its security.

Under "Geography" we located several views of our State Capitol, with many interior pictures that appeared to be the same as those shown us by Carolyn Kompelein, Historic Site Manager at the Capitol, during her Lecture Series presentation to our society on March 23. We selected several photos to copy. One was a sketch of the Capitol that we liked better than the photos.

In the "Biographical" section we chose a profile sketch of Cass Gilbert that was different from the photos we already had. We had been told we could copy any of the material, but now the difficulty began! The department had a color copying machine and we were told we would get the best result by setting it on automatic. Now we had to buy a copy card that would activate the machine. This meant we had to go back to the lockers, retrieve our purses, buy the necessary card at the department entrance, and return to the copy machine.

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CAPITOL TOURS

Cass Gilbert's career rose to national prominence when, in 1895, he won the design competition for the Minnesota State Capitol. People interested in visiting the building, or showing off this architectural treasure to out-of-town guests, should know that the Minnesota Historical Society conducts an active tour program for the Capitol.

Tours are provided year around, Mondays through Fridays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. Tours begin on the hour and are free. The Capitol Historic Site Program also offers special tours and events and educational programs throughout the year. Those that might be of special interest to Cass Gilbert Society members are Art & Artists of the Capitol, 1:30 p.m. Saturday, July 18, and The House that Cass Built, 1:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 11. Reservations are required for these special tours, and there is a modest fee.

For reservations, call (651) 296-2881. For a recording of other tour information, call (651) 297-3521.

CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP

The Cass Gilbert Society appreciates the support it has received from area businesses and organizations. Following is a list of the society's current corporate members:

Edina Realty, 1050 Grand Ave., St. Paul.
 Coat of Many Colors, 1666 Grand Ave., St. Paul.
 Grand Avenue Hardware, 1676 Grand Ave., St. Paul.
 Historic Hill Homes, 439 Portland Ave., St. Paul.
 Louisiana Cafe, 613 Selby Ave., St. Paul.
 Macalester College, 1600 Grand Ave., St. Paul.
 Mississippi Market Co-op, 622 Selby Ave., St. Paul.
 St. Clement's Church, 901 Portland Ave., St. Paul.
 The University Club, 420 Summit Ave., St. Paul.

VICTORIANS CONVENING IN ST. PAUL

The Cass Gilbert Society wishes to welcome The Victorian Society in America to St. Paul for its 33rd annual convention, June 9-12.

CASS GILBERT'S SOCIAL NETWORKING

By Tom Blanck

A distinctive feature of Cass Gilbert's architectural career was his deft employment of his social skills and connections to advance his architectural ambitions.

From the beginning, Gilbert understood the value of social contacts in developing his clientele. From assiduous cultivation of his family, church and neighborhood associations in St. Paul, Gilbert constructed a durable and profitable business network that eventually led to four neighborhood church designs, several commercial designs and a significant portion of his residential work.

Gilbert's aggressiveness in founding and participating in social and professional groups yielded many clients. He was a founder of the University of Minnesota's architectural fraternity, Alpha Rho Chi, and of the Gargoyle Club of St. Paul, an architects' social club that still survives. He also was an active member of the St. Paul Rowing Club. Not surprisingly, in 1888 Gilbert designed the Minnesota Boat Club Building.

Gilbert also was a founder of the prestigious Minnesota Club in St. Paul, where today Gilbert is memorialized in its "Gilbert Room."

The time Gilbert spent socializing in the Minnesota Club and elsewhere paid off handsomely in commissions. A St.

Paul newspaper's list of guests at a prominent social event in the 1880s documents the effectiveness of Gilbert's social strategy: 30 percent of those attending either had been, currently were, or later would be Gilbert's clients. The social strategy he developed and honed in St. Paul was later to be employed to great effect in New York. In 1881, in fact, even before he moved to New York, he had helped found the New York Architectural League, which was to be a valuable long-term venue for the display of his work.

Perhaps the most lucrative of Gilbert's social activities in St. Paul was his charter membership in the Informal Club, a neighborhood discussion group of about 50 members. Begun in 1894, the Informal Club met bi-monthly. During the six years Gilbert was active in the club, from 1894 to 1900, the club's meetings were held in 28 residences, half of which had been designed by Gilbert himself. Like New York's Architectural League, which was to display Gilbert's later work, the Informal Club displayed to St. Paul's influential elite a continuing three-dimensional, life-size exhibit of Gilbert's work — the living rooms of his clients.

There are many examples of Gilbert's use of his social prowess to augment his architectural talents and further his career. His commission for Minnesota's State Capitol building is one, as demonstrated by the fact that the membership of the Informal Club included Minnesota's Governor at that time, as well as the chairman of the Minnesota Capitol Committee and the State Senator who sponsored the Capitol funding legislation. While deliberating on who should be awarded the capitol architectural commission, all were regularly meeting in Gilbert-designed residences.

Gilbert's relationship with a neighbor, C. P. Noyes, also is revealing of the role his social acumen played in his architectural career. Noyes, an original owner of Manitou Island in White Bear Lake, may have given Gilbert his first opportunity to build a cottage there. In the early 1880s, Noyes was a member of the House of Hope Church, which assisted in starting Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, an important Gilbert project.

Gilbert's 1889 design for Noyes at 89 Virginia Street often is described as the first Colonial Revival residence in St. Paul. In the same year, Noyes



Cass Gilbert, social animal

donated a substantial sum to build the Bethlemlen German Presbyterian Church, one of Gilbert's most creative designs and one that marks Gilbert's movement away from what he might have developed had he remained in the East. This romantic design, nominally Swiss-inspired, was Gilbert's favorite St. Paul building. (It is hard to imagine this and the Noyes house on the drawing board at the same time for the same client.)

In 1893, Gilbert also was to design a rather eccentric Shingle-style home for Gregory Bolt, a founder of the Bethlehem church.

As his relationship with Noyes illustrates, Gilbert was extraordinarily effective in using social networking to advance his architectural ambitions. His own Summit and Crocus Hill neighborhood in St. Paul was an especially fertile ground for his social spadework; it was the epicenter of Minnesota's successful entrepreneurs and capitalists. Because many of these industrial iconoclasts had Eastern origins, the neighborhood was sometimes referred to as the "Boston of the West." As a consequence, Gilbert's carefully curated and maintained friendships on the East Coast enjoyed special currency in St. Paul. One example is work on the house of James J. Hill, the railroad baron, located at the head of Summit Avenue. After Hill terminated Sterns and Peabody's architectural contract for the house, he turned to his neighbor, Cass Gilbert, to finish the project.

The tightness of Gilbert's social network and architectural clientele is revealed by the fact that although Minneapolis was growing to far surpass St. Paul in population, before he built a significant building in Minneapolis, Gilbert designed buildings in Montana, Oregon, Boston, and New York. In fact, it appears that less than six of his designs, and only one of his 60 residences, were ever built in Minneapolis.

(St. Paul architect Tom Blanck is a founding member of the Cass Gilbert Society.)

UNIVERSITY TO ASSIST CASS GILBERT SOCIETY

University of Minnesota President Mark Yudof has authorized the University's Architectural Department to support and assist the Cass Gilbert Society and Tom Blanck in the documentation of Gilbert residences and other buildings in the area. The project will have a time line of approximately nine months.



Sketch of the C.P. Noyes cottage,
Manitou Island in White Bear Lake.

WHAT IS THE 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 to create the society 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. From those meetings, the formal society was born.

The society 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. Raising public awareness and appreciation of Gilbert's projects is a major part of the society's mission. These efforts should help assure that communities with precious pieces of his legacy will become more informed of their presence and importance.

For 1999, the society is presenting a lecture series in keeping with its education mission. It also is supporting the work of Tom Blanck, a St. Paul architect, to identify and prepare an illustrated catalog of Gilbert's designs in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

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, (651) 298-1227.

The society's annual membership dues are modest: \$25 per household. Corporate membership is \$50 annually.

ANY VOLUNTEERS?

Membership in the Cass Gilbert Society continues to grow and, as with any organization that relies on volunteers to keep things moving, the need for more volunteers to lend a hand in our society's activities also is growing. Members who would like to contribute some of their time to help ensure the continued success of the society are encouraged to contact Jean Velleu, president, at (651) 298-1127.

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, Inc.

Member's Name _____

New Member Information:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____

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

The Cass Gilbert Society is structured as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization.

We did all this, all the time wishing we were carrying cash in our pockets, only to find that the machine kept flashing a message that it needed more money! This meant another trip to the lockers and our purses. We bought a second card. But it, too, failed to satisfy the copy machine. Our frustration level rising, we sought help from the staff, and it was determined the ticket machine was malfunctioning. We were told that if we wanted reimbursement, we could fill out a form, which would be sent across the street to the Adams Building and (perhaps!) somebody would come to fix the machine and refund our money.

This was our first introduction to Washington bureaucracy, and we registered our dissatisfaction. The staff then took pity on us, and the manager went through staff cards, raising the necessary amount to trigger the copy machine. We were able to make our copies and were quite pleased with them. We took our precious copies back to the hotel, where we rested up for the big event of the evening.

When we arrived at the Supreme Court Building at about 6 p.m. on March 24, we saw people entering at a side door on the lower level, so we followed them. After passing through security, we checked in at the reservation table. I had brought 100 brochures about the Cass Gilbert Society and received permission to leave them at the table for people to pick up as they passed by.

We were ushered to an elevator and taken to the Court Chambers on the upper level. The area already was filled with people and all, I realized, had bypassed the society brochures. (These later were brought to the reception area and all were picked up by those interested in joining the Cass Gilbert Society.)

Because we hope to get printed copies of the remarks made at the program (which will be made available to society members), I will relate only a few recollections here. The first speaker was from the Supreme Court Historical Society, who covered the history of the site where the building was to be constructed.

Associate Justice David Souter then introduced the evening's main speaker, relating that the speaker had switched his career from law to architecture after sitting as a judge on cases involving historic preservation. Paul Steven Byard is now an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and the author of "The Architecture of Additions: Design and Regulation," published in 1998 by W.W. Norton & Co.

Prof. Byard gave a lively talk supplemented with slides. He focused his presentation on "where Cass Gilbert, architect, was coming from" when he designed the Supreme Court Building. The speaker described 1893 as a turning point in Gilbert's career, a year when he was turning away from the frontier of architecture toward Beaux Arts Classicism — a movement toward beauty, the way things "ought to be" to be most beautiful. Prof. Byard noted that while Gilbert could design to fit any subject matter, Beaux Arts Classicism seemed to fit the architect's inner sensitivity.

He described Gilbert as a civic person who believed his task was to shape the future the way it ought to be. Gilbert was quoted as saying, "Never make believe" and do whatever it takes to "make things right."

The Supreme Court Building project was a dream commission for Gilbert, a chance to relate the law to stone. The original commission had been awarded in 1924 to Henry Bacon, who had designed the Lincoln Memorial in 1911. But Bacon died after completing one draft, and Cass Gilbert stepped in to take his place. He had strong support from former president Robert Taft, who at the time was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The challenge facing Gilbert, Prof. Byard related, was to create a design that could compete with nearby buildings, the U.S. Capitol and the "burly" Library of Congress. Gilbert wanted a single temple forum with perfect symmetry derived from Greek and Roman architecture. It did not have to be big, but it had to be impressive, a building that could hold its own.

Gilbert submitted many sketches to the building commission and faced competition from the Modernists of the period, but in the end, Beaux Arts Classicism won out.

As Prof. Byard described it, we had come to a place where a building could finally be "itself." We could see things as they are and make our beauty only of it. Thus, the building illuminates our state of mind.

Unfortunately, Gilbert did not get to see the finished product of his genius, having died while on a trip to England in 1934. But the project was far enough along that it was completed as planned in 1935.

Following Prof. Byard's presentation, a grand reception was held. About 200 people attended the celebration.

It was a wonderful trip. We were proud to be the representatives of the Cass Gilbert Society at this unique event.

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