



## ARCHITECT'S FAMILY UNLUCKY IN REAL ESTATE

By Charles Locks

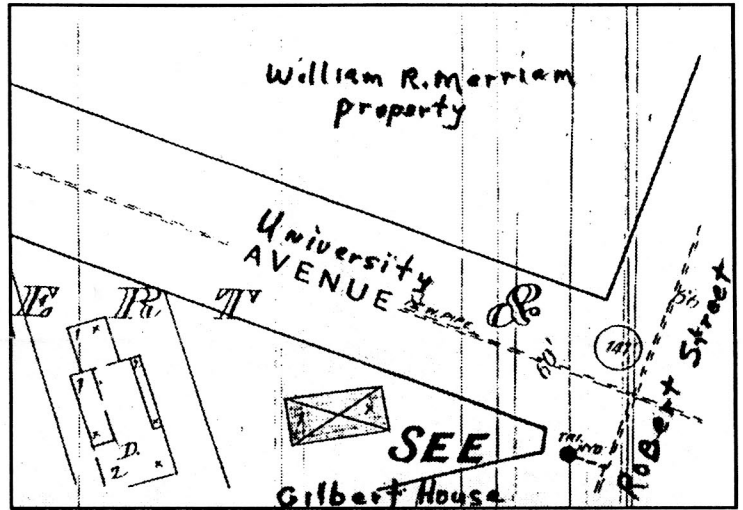
Today it has become almost a matter of form that hardships experienced during youth are magnified greatly in later reminiscences. Past summers are hotter and past winters colder. The one-mile hike to school grows to two or three. Tougher times, emptier cupboards, and the scarcity of shoes all contribute to the character-building theme. It is therefore refreshing to read how Cass Gilbert, in his later years, downplayed the hardship of his youth—refreshing, but not altogether accurate.

Gilbert came from a socially-prominent family, but he was eight years old when his father died, and the family was not well off financially. His mother, Elizabeth, described their home on Aurora and Robert Streets in St. Paul as a stable, and it is likely that it originally was a stable. During the family's occupancy of the house, the lot was split by the extension of University Avenue. Gilbert's mother sold that portion of the land to the adjacent property owner, William R. Merriam, adding a tiny patch to what would become his park-like estate. Today, a portion of that land is now, ironically, a part of Gilbert Park.

It was not a fashionable neighborhood until after the Gilberts left it. Not only was the family's timing bad, but the University Avenue right-of-way greatly diminished the size and value of the remaining land. The Gilbert home was razed about 1888, and the Aurora property sat vacant until it was sold in 1908. Gilbert had many schemes to construct or move a house to the site, but his plans never came to fruition. As one of four owners, along with his mother and brothers, and the only one generating much income, he was likely concerned that the Aurora property would become as much of a liability for the family as its downtown property.

At the time of his death in 1868, Gilbert's father was a partner in a building under construction in downtown St. Paul at Third and Robert Streets. The Gilberts had invested \$10,000.00 initially. After her husband died, Elizabeth had to come up with another \$5000.00. She raised it by cashing in her life insurance policy. Later, when her late husband's partner sold his interest to a man that Elizabeth Gilbert could not tolerate, she bought out her new partner (selling the house in Zanesville, Ohio that her father had given her as a wedding gift.) She would not build the house in St. Paul for which she and her husband had planned and contracted. She would forego, as she put it, carriages and horses and servants. The tragic aspect of the family's plight was that Elizabeth sacrificed nearly everything for the "Gilbert Estate" (as the family referred to the property), believing that it would provide for her old age and be a legacy for her sons. Instead, it would bring hardship for her family throughout the decade of the 1890s and beyond.

The Gilbert Estate was divided equally between Elizabeth and her three sons, each owning an undivided quarter interest. A site plan shows it was really separate buildings. Only one of the three buildings was actually built by Samuel and Elizabeth Gilbert, the



Gilbert's boyhood home.

three-story stone building at 115 E. Third Street. The building facing Robert Street (originally a house) was wood-frame construction, and the two-story building on the corner was brick-faced. Let to commercial tenants, the Gilbert Estate was regularly altered to suit their needs, and the many building permits that Gilbert later signed were for modest improvements. The creation of Kellogg Boulevard caused the demolition of whatever portions of the Gilbert Estate that survived the early decades of the 20th century.

The panic of 1893 and the depression that followed (the most severe in the 19th century) hit the Gilbert family hard. Elizabeth, at this time, was living a rather vagabond life. She stayed often with her son Charles in Los Angeles and with Cass in St. Paul, but she also stayed with friends and other relatives. Her house at 471 Ashland Avenue was let to various tenants. By re-mortgaging 471 Ashland and by mortgaging the Aurora property, the family was able to hang on to the Gilbert Estate a little longer, extending the pain. Eventually the property went into foreclosure.

In 1897, when Elizabeth died (her net worth being approximately zero), the family had given up all hope of saving the Gilbert Estate. Because of depressed property values, the building was worth less than the mortgage, and in 1899, a deficiency judgement of \$6000.00 was awarded in favor of the mortgage against the Gilberts. The sale of the Ashland property in 1902 to E.C. Stringer did not cover the entire amount of the judgement, and it is likely that Gilbert covered the difference. The situation was so exasperating that even Stiles Burr, the Gilbert Estate's legal and financial representative, wanted out.

Always the promoter, Gilbert managed to acquire architectural commissions from a number of one-time tenants of the Gilbert Estate: Dr. W. Davis (409 Laurel, 1883); Dr. C.E. Riggs (595 Dayton, 1895); J.B. Tarbox (14 Manitou Island, 1889). He also designed a house for Burr at 943 Summit in 1899. One tenant he did not get for a client was the druggist, W.A. Frost.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

By Jean Velleu

Two diverse things crossed my desk recently: an obituary notice and a coloring book.

The New York Times featured the death of **Adolf K. Placzek** (PLAH-cek), a distinguished architectural librarian, historian, editor and preservationist. For 32 years Mr. Placzek transformed the Avery Architectural Library at Columbia University into one of the world's finest repositories of architectural books, drawings and other archival materials. Peg Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy said, "he...was a resource par excellence for preservationists and architects. He inevitably knew the answer to their questions and inevitably had something illuminating to add." It makes one regret not having had a conversation with him about Cass Gilbert. The article goes on to say Mr. Placzek was involved with three works absolutely crucial for architects and scholars. He was editor in chief of the *Macmillian Encyclopedia of Architects from Egypt to avant-garde 20th-century*. He was co-editor of "The Buildings of the United States" under the editorial direction of the Society of Architectural Historians (in process) and "Avery's Choice: Five Centuries of Great Architectural Books; One Hundred Years of an Architectural Library, 1890-1990. The mention of these books makes one long for a rainy afternoon in front of the fire to peruse them. Dare we hope to deposit them in our library?

St. Paul architect **Peter Kramer** sent with his membership fee a coloring book entitled "Conversations at Cossetta's: Emmanuel Masqueray and Cass Gilbert talk about art, architecture and the future of St. Paul." Besides "coloring for your mental health" there is a tongue-in-cheek script. "Some of (which) it may not be fact but it is all true..."! to quote the author. There is a cyberspace communication describing the corner where Dick and I live...the Bookstaver House at Portland and Kent and the brownstone where the cyberwriter lived. "Our block did not have an alley, so we had marvelous rear yards separated by brick walls. At the time I used to speculate we were like a little corner of Boston with the ambiance created by the row houses." It is exactly what attracted us to them when we bought 25 years ago. This charming publication will go into our library and be

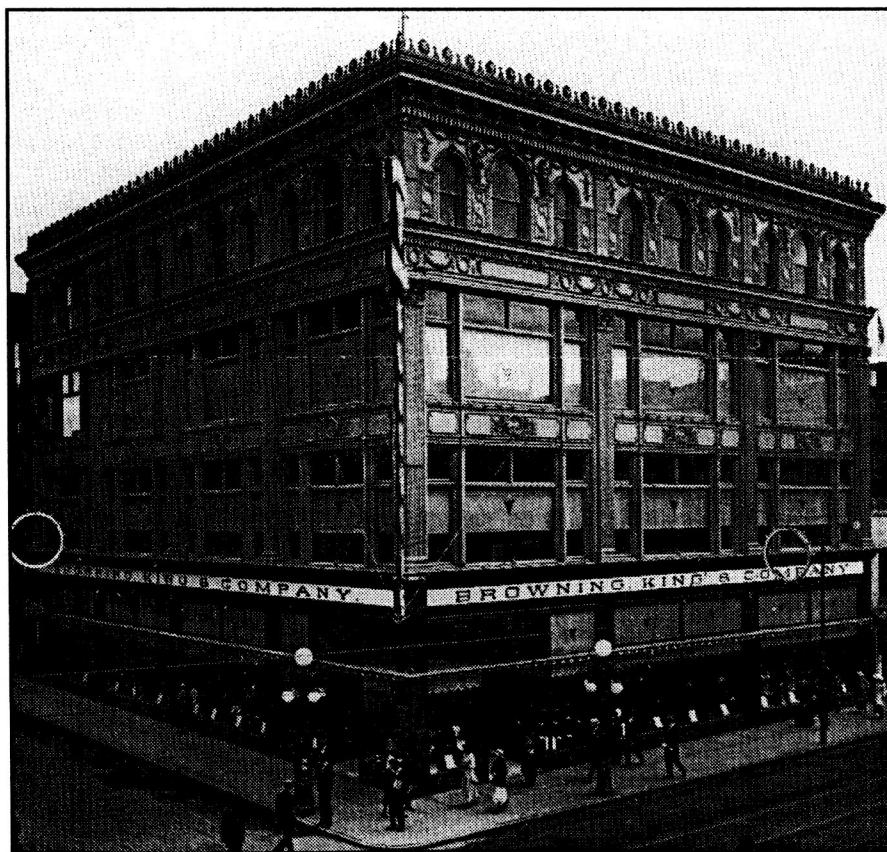
available to our members...but if you want to have your own copy it can be ordered from: Peter Kramer, Editor in Chief, Neo-Functional Press, 2929 Fourth Ave. So., Minneapolis, MN 55408 for \$15.

At the end of April the Cass Gilbert Board of Directors will hold its first retreat to review successes, analyze weaknesses and project a vision for the future of the Society. From our inception in 1998, when we first put down our roots around my dining room table, we have accomplished a great deal. In two years we have obtained our 501(c) 3 non-profit status, grown our membership from 0 to 150, attracted the support of local foundations to fund our lecture series and do our research on midwest projects by Cass Gilbert, published our newsletter, sponsored our first architectural stroll fund raiser, held our first annual meeting and elected new officers, celebrated the restoration of the Rathskeller with tours of the Capitol and started our library. All of this energy was initially propelled into place by visiting scholars from New York who

informed us they planned to honor Cass Gilbert in New York and they wanted to learn what treasures we had here in the midwest. Everyone knew we had our beautiful Capitol, but what else did we have? We weren't sure, but we certainly wanted to find out! Thus began the search and documentation of 200 Cass Gilbert projects, which is still in process.

Our lecture series for 2000 has been funded by the Humanities Commission, our next architectural stroll fund raiser is planned, the Butler Family Foundation has been generous with a grant for operating expenses, and the first phase of our research will be completed this spring. What are the things that must concern us as we plan for the future? Financial security, membership growth and involvement, visibility, exciting programs, Board strength and leadership, networking with other organizations and completion of the research are some of the things we must discuss. We welcome ideas and input from any of our members. Call me at (651) 298-1127.

## IN MEMORIAM



**THE BOWLBY BUILDING  
1895 - CA 1965**

*The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Cass Gilbert Stroll  
A Mother's Day Walking Tour  
May 14, 2000. 3 PM and 4 PM*

*The Cass Gilbert Stroll is scheduled for Mother's Day, May 14, 2000. We will gather at Overlook Park, Ramsey Hill and Summit Avenue (400 block of Summit). The Walking Tours will be approximately 45 minutes in length, beginning promptly at 3 PM and 4 PM; nine Gilbert buildings on or near St. Paul's Grand Hill will be the focus of this walk. This tour will feature the architecture and the context of Gilbert's work; we will not be entering the houses.*

*We are limiting the tour groups to 20 people. Payment must be enclosed with your pre-registration; you will receive a confirmation from the Cass Gilbert Society Inc. In case of rain we will send you a self-guided walking tour booklet featuring the houses on this tour so that you can take the stroll on a good weather day. There will be no refunds.*

*For additional information, please call 651-291-1541. Reservations will not be accepted by phone. If you do not pre-register by May 8, you will take a chance that the tours will be full. If there is space available, the cost of the event is \$12.00 on the day of the tour.*

---

**Cass Gilbert Stroll – May 14, 2000**

Number in party:      Tour #1: 3 PM \_\_\_\_\_      Tour #2 4 PM \_\_\_\_\_  
Cost per person:      member: \$5                      non-member: \$10

(membership rate applies to each person in a member's party; membership for 2000 is \$25 per household)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zipcode \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Amount enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_

The deadline for pre-registrations is May 8, 2000.

Send check payable to: The Cass Gilbert Society Inc.,  
550 Portland Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55102

When her children were younger, Elizabeth was certain that her oldest son Charles and her youngest son Samuel would fare well in the world. She wasn't certain that her artistic son Cass would be so lucky, and that caused her great concern. She did live long enough to see Cass earn a national reputation in his profession, but it must have broken her heart that she was not in a position to help her other two sons. Both struggled mightily and neither had promising prospects.

Of course, having a national reputation doesn't put bread on the table. Gilbert's income from the Minnesota State Capitol was significant, but it was also spread out over many years. In 1896 he laid off George Carsley, a longtime employee. Carsley would later return to Gilbert's employ and become the man in charge of his St. Paul office during the last five years until it closed in 1910. As late as the summer of 1899, William Endicott, Gilbert's landlord, wrote Gilbert thanking him for the rent check and acknowledging that he had instructed his agent, Luther Cushing, not to bother Gilbert for rent because Endicott was confident that Gilbert would pay when he was able.

Obtaining the commission for the U.S. Custom House in October 1899 changed everything. Gilbert wired his wife from New York that their ship had come in. Gilbert was probably pleased for the opportunity to pay his client G.C. Squires (19 Summit Court) for his legal services related to acquiring the project. Something of a tightwad, Gilbert was probably shocked, however, at the bill for 3-weeks work: over \$5000.00.

Gilbert's refusal in later life to give due emphasis to the lean times he and his family had experienced may perhaps be attributed to his personal self-esteem and his belief in the old American adage about pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. Another possibility is that Gilbert, who was not sympathetic to the plight of the poor—blaming their plight on improvidence—was in a manner of speaking just keeping his mouth shut.

## LECTURE SERIES

The Cass Gilbert Society thanks Paul Larson for his engaging and informative lecture on February 22, 2000. His examination of Gilbert's early career in St. Paul revealed some interesting surprises. Best of luck to Paul in his new endeavor to write a definitive study of Cass Gilbert's Minnesota career for Afton Historical Society Press.



*Terra-cotta roundel from  
the Bowlby Building.*

### MOTHER'S DAY EVENT

**THE 2ND ANNUAL  
CASS GILBERT STROLL  
IS SCHEDULED FOR  
MAY 14, 2000  
TOUR STARTS AT  
OVERLOOK PARK  
FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL  
651-291-1541**

### 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 \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ 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.*

## LECTURE SERIES WILL FEATURE ART HISTORIAN SHARON IRISH

Sharon Irish, a Graduate College Scholar at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, will be the featured speaker at the Cass Gilbert Society's lecture series at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 25, at the University Club, 420 Summit Ave., St. Paul. The title of her talk will be "Beyond Modern Traditionalism: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert in the 20th Century."

Dr. Irish spent part of her youth in the Twin Cities, and her father was a sociology professor at Hamline University for over 20 years. Dr. Irish graduated magna cum laude in 1976 from the University of New Mexico. She earned both her M.A. (1982) and Ph.D. (1985) degrees from Northwestern University. She has been selected as a Fellow, Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2000-2001.

The author of 5 articles on Cass Gilbert and guest curator of "From Sight to Insight: The Design and Renovation of Cass Gilbert's United States Custom House," an exhibition held at the U.S. Custom House in 1998, she has recently won the L. Gebhard Book Award of the Minnesota Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians for *Cass Gilbert, Architecture: Modern Traditionalist*. Ruminator Books will have her book available for sale at the lecture.

Cass Gilbert Society lectures are open to members and non-members. There is no admission fee for members. There is a nominal fee for non-members. Those who join the society on the night of the lecture will not be charged a lecture admission fee. Membership in the Cass Gilbert Society, registered as a non-profit organization, is \$25 per family, and is tax deductible.



*Terra-cotta roundel from  
the Bowlby Building.*

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