

“ Ramsey County Court House and the Men Who Inhabit It ”

(1903)

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Foreword

By

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In 1932, during ceremonies dedicating the new St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse, Oscar Hallam, a former district court judge and associate justice of the state supreme court, recalled the lengthy construction and swift obsolescence of the court house that was being replaced:

At the time the court house was planned and, its construction commenced there were three judges of the district court, and three court rooms were designed and prepared. By the time it was occupied there were six judges, which number has risen to eight, and never at any time has there been as many court rooms as there have been judges to occupy them. Yet who could foresee the rapid changes that came after the construction of the court house was designed and commenced in 1884? Who could see that before that building would be completed the population of the city would practically treble? The court house was designed, planned and built by men of high standing in the community, men of foresight, but our conditions changed with such rapidity that it has become now so inadequate that we discard it altogether.¹

Plans for building a new courthouse — the second in the county’s history — began in 1873, were rebuffed by the voters in the wake of

¹ “Dedication of the St. Paul City Hall - Ramsey County Courthouse” 16-17 (MLHP, 2012-2013) (published first, 1932).

the Panic of 1873, started anew in 1881, and completed in 1890. Thirteen years later, *The St. Paul Globe* carried a two-page article on the tortuous history of the courthouse, titled "Ramsey County Court House and the Men Who Inhabit It." It was accompanied by photographs of forty city officials, including the mayor, attorney, treasurer, comptroller, clerk, bridge engineer, aldermen, assemblymen, police commissioners, members of the Board of Public Works and Municipal judges.



Curiously the judges of the district court and the many lawyers who practiced regularly in the county courts were not featured. It is popular history. It is also, plainly, a vehicle for city officials to have their photographs published in the local newspaper.

The article was published first on pages 12-13 of the *Globe* on November 1, 1903. It follows, reformatted but without the photos. The 1885 advertisement for bids on page 6 was not part of the original article in the *Globe*. It has been added by the MLHP. The complete article can also be found on Chronicle America, an online service of the Library of Congress, available through the MHS, that provides scanned copies of issues of certain pre-1923 newspapers (when copied, pages are, as above, blurred). ◇

THE SAINT PAUL GLOBE

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1903

Ramsey County Court House and the Men Who Inhabit It

"IT took a little better than \$1,000,000 to build that structure," said a well known builder the other day as he stood on Wabasha street and critically scanned the city hall and court house, but you couldn't do it for the same money now.

"And they tell me the commission that had it in charge had money left when the building was completed," he continued. "My, they must have been honest men."

And they were honest, too. Honest from the soles of their shoes to the tops of their heads, for no better, no more substantially built public structure exists in the state today. Architects and builders of this generation may differ with the commission on some details in the construction of the building, but they stand to a man when stability is questioned.

St. Paul, or rather Ramsey county, has had two buildings which have been the seat of its government, and it will be many years before there is a call for another. Ramsey county's old court house is not beyond the memory of the present generation, for it existed as late as 1884, when it was torn down to make room for the present structure, but there are only a few living who were present at its inception.

Only One Survivor.

How time flies and men pass away is evidenced by the fact that of those who constituted the commission which followed the present structure through its various stages of construction and saw that every penny was honestly earned are all dead but one. Mayor R. A. Smith is the only survivor.

The first court house was conceived in 1860. The records of the board of county commissioners of that year record the fact that the members offered a prize of \$10 for the best set of plans and that it was awarded to David Day. The contract was captured by Joseph Daniel and Cyrus M. Freeman and the building was completed the following year it was not used for office purposes, however, until 1852.

The work on the building, it is said, was hurried, for the little town of St. Anthony Falls, which was then in Ramsey county, was a competitor for the county seat and threatened to capture it. Protests were even filed by St. Anthony Falls residents

With the filing of a deed by Vetal Guerin, transferring the present court house block for the city, an advertisement for bids for the building was placed and the contract was let a month later.

No Money In Sight.

Where the money would come from to pay the bill, the promoters did not know, but they permitted no grass to grow under their feet, and were soon enabled to place \$5,000 worth of bonds with Boston financiers. Even then a hitch resulted", for when the bonds were received at Boston it was found that more than one of the county commissioners had signed them with an X, the mark being duly attested to by the clerk.

The bonds were promptly sent back and for several days William Pitt Murray worked industriously in an endeavor to teach the unlettered commissioners how to sign their names. He succeeded and soon the money was forth coming.

The bonds were signed by R. P. Russell, Louis Roberts and Benjamin Jarvis and the record is that they were promptly paid when they fell due. The only man now living who was active in the building of Ramsey county's first court house is William P. Murray.

The old court house, for its day and generation, was a fine building. It was constantly used for political caucuses and conventions and it also served for religious assemblies.

Present Building Projected in 1873.

The present city hall and court house was really conceived in 1873, when the legislature passed an act authorizing the county to submit to the voters a proposition to issue \$250,000 in bonds with which to construct a new building.

A commission was also authorized and the county judges appointed George W. Armstrong, Dr. David Day, William Dawson, W. G. Hendrickson and C. D. Gilfillan. On the organization of the commission David Day visited all the principal cities of the United States and examined the public buildings there, and on his return competitive plans were advertised for and submitted. Those submitted by Radcliff & Buffington were accepted. With slight variations, they were the same as used in the construction of the present capitol.

But the bonds were never issued. It was during a time of great financial depression [caused by the Panic of 1873] and when the time came to vote on them the entire proposition was turned down. The vote was overwhelmingly against the issue.

Successful in 1881.

It was not until 1881 that a second attempt was made to secure public approval for a new building, and this time it was successful. An act of the legislature authorized an issue of \$250,000 in bonds and required that work on the building commence not later than 1885. Horace R. Bigelow, David Day, William Dawson, C. D. Gilfillan and W. G. Hendrickson were named as the commission to superintend the erection of the building. As the mayor of St. Paul, Robert A. Smith was the chairman, and M. F. Kain, then county auditor, was the secretary.

In 1883 the issue was increased to \$300,000, and with this as a starter, plans submitted by E. P. Bassford were accepted and a contract placed with Mathias Breen for the excavation and first story. He commenced work in 1884. In 1885 the legislature authorized another \$300,000 in bonds and in 1887 supplemented it with another act authorizing \$400,000 more in bonds, or \$1,000,000 in all.

Completed in 1890.

The building was completed in 1890, though some of the court rooms were occupied the year previous.

To Builders!

COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE,
RAMSEY COUNTY, Minn.,
SAINT PAUL, June 6, 1885. }

Notice is hereby given and advertisement hereby made, for proposals or bids for all the part of the work and of the material for the

Building and Construction

OF THE

Court House & City Hall,

Located on Court House square (the same being block twenty (20) of St. Paul Proper), in the city of St. Paul, county of Ramsey, state of Minnesota, hereinafter stated, that is to say: All walls, iron floors, beams and all masonry necessary to complete building for roofs and floor girders and cut stone, cut and set for all walls, according to the plans and specifications on file in the office of E. P. Bassford, Architect, at room 28, in Gillan block, at the corner of Fourth and Jackson streets, in said city of St. Paul, and all of said work to be

FULLY COMPLETED AND FINISHED

On or before Fifteenth (15th) day of September, A. D. 1886.

Such proposals or bids will be received at the office of the County Auditor for said Ramsey county, in said city of St. Paul, until the

(20th) Twentieth Day of July,
A. D. 1885.

All bids to be addressed to the Chairman of the Court House and City Hall Special Commissioners.

The right is hereby reserved to reject all bids of incompetent or irresponsible persons and all such bids as may be unreasonable.

No bid will be received or considered unless accompanied by the bond of the bidder or bidders with satisfactory sureties in the penal sum of ten thousand (\$10,000) dollars, conditioned that if the bid shall be accepted and the contract awarded to the bidder or bidders, he or they will enter into and execute such contract, or by deposit with the commissioners of a check for the sum of five thousand (\$5,000) dollars in some bank in the city of St. Paul, duly certified in lieu of such bond.

No bid will be accepted unless the bidder or bidders will enter into such bond and give such security, for the performance of his or their contract, as may be required by the Commissioners, and approved by a three-fourths vote of the County Commissioners and Common Council of the city of St. Paul, and the members elect in joint session.

By order of the Court House and City Hall Special Commission.

JAMES O'BRIEN,
County Auditor.

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In the construction and equipping of the building nearly 100 different contracts were placed, every one of which had to be approved by a two-thirds majority of the council and county commissioners acting jointly. Finally this red tape became so burdensome that the legislature authorized a superintendent of grounds and buildings and David Day was appointed.

It was originally intended to have the main entrance of the building on Wabasha street, but the presence of the old jail would not permit it. Under Mr. Bassford's plans the building is so arranged that if any enlargement is ever proposed the Fourth street entrance can be duplicated on Fifth street.

In its structure the city hall and court house is thoroughly fireproof. The building is 263 feet in length and 180 feet in width; its general height to the cornice 92 feet and to the comb of the roof 128 feet. The tower, from foundation to weather vane, is 248 feet. The clock face is 10 feet in diameter and stands 172 feet above the ground. The building has a floor space of 119,070 square feet.

[← Call for bids published in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Friday, July 10, 1885, at 7]

The building entire cost \$1,014,592.08. The commission had as a building fund \$1,029,133.24 and when the structure was completed turned over to the city treasurer an unexpended balance of \$14,541.16. The biggest amount paid out under any contract was to Mathias Breen, who received nearly \$400,000 for excavations and stone and iron work. E. P. Bassford, as architect, received \$24,273.76. ■

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Related Article

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(MLHP, 2012-2013) (published first, 1932).**

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