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# Minnesota's OLDEST COURTHOUSE

JAMES TAYLOR DUNN

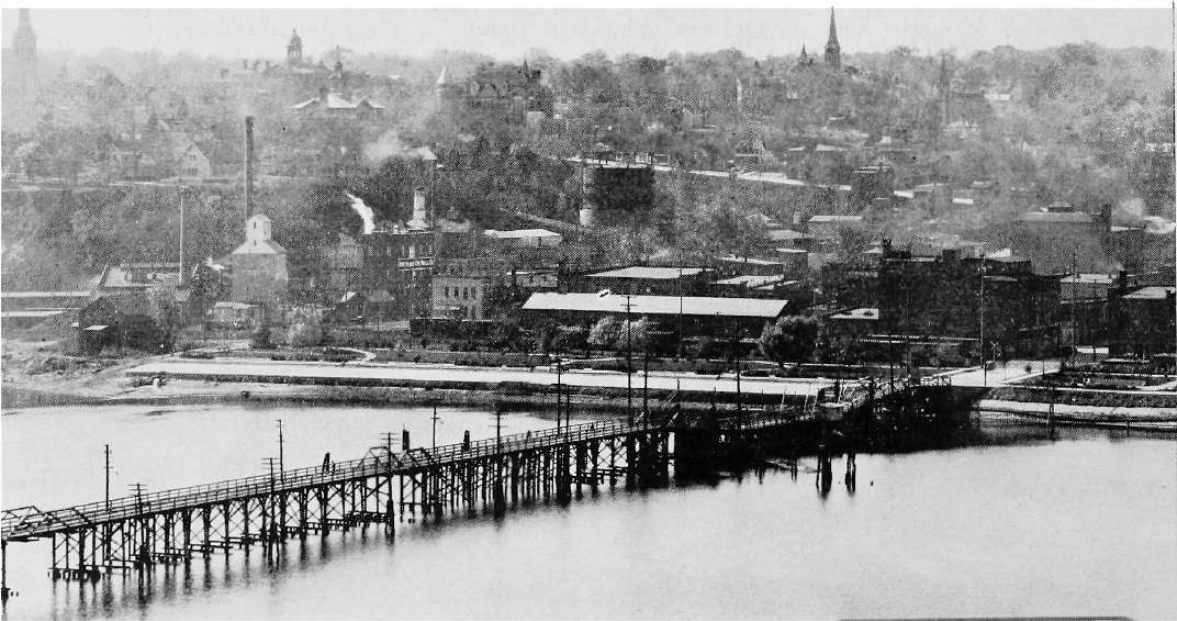
CITIZENS of Washington County seem to have agreed in 1866 that a new courthouse was needed. The *Stillwater Messenger* of June 6 reported the old building to be "totally unfit for the uses for which it was constructed," and the county commissioners unanimously resolved to submit to the people at the next general election a plan for the construction of a new courthouse and jail. The existing building was a three-room frame structure, which had been erected in 1849 on the corner of Fourth and Chestnut streets in Stillwater. It was Minnesota's first courthouse. The editor of the *Messenger* called for its preservation, saying that "it

might be made to serve a useful purpose in connection with the new building." Nothing, however, came of this attempt to save what would today have been one of the state's foremost historic shrines.

At the local elections on Tuesday, November 6, 1866, a "Loan for County Buildings" was approved by a majority of 148 out of 944 votes cast, and the commissioners were immediately faced with the problem of where to construct the new home for county offices.<sup>1</sup> Residents on South Hill spoke out for that area. Another faction wished to lo-

<sup>1</sup> *Stillwater Messenger*, November 14, 1866.

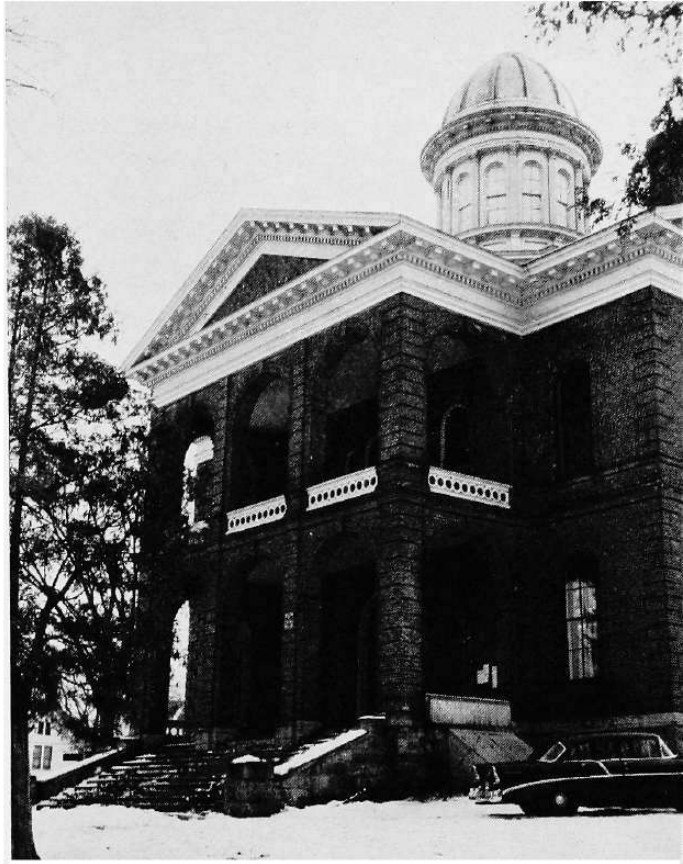
*AN early view of Stillwater, showing the cupola of the courthouse at left*



cate the courthouse in the center of town on a block bounded by Myrtle, Chestnut, and Second streets and Union Place. A good share of this section was leveled by a spectacular fire on Christmas night, 1866, and John McKusick, the owner of the property, offered it to the village, but insisted on a contract with certain restrictions and binding clauses.<sup>2</sup>

Early in April, 1867, Socrates Nelson of the prominent lumbering firm of Churchill and Nelson made a proposition that immediately silenced all argument. For the token sum of five dollars, he offered to give the city the whole of Block Thirty-Six in Stillwater's Nelson Addition. High up on "Zion's Hill," the property commanded a sweeping panorama of the St. Croix River Valley, and the gift, unlike McKusick's, had no strings or restrictions attached. Stillwater immediately and gratefully accepted. Nelson himself lived only long enough to see ground broken for the new Washington County Courthouse in late April, 1867. He died suddenly on May 6 at the age of fifty-three.<sup>3</sup>

BY THAT time Augustus F. Knight had been commissioned to design the building. Knight, who was St. Paul's first resident architect, was already well known for several capital city edifices done in the classic style. He had designed St. Mary's Catholic Church and the Merchants' Hotel, and he was the supervising architect for the St. Paul Customs House. Today he is probably best known as the man who drew the plans of General William G. Le Duc's handsome mansion at Hastings, now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Thomas M. Newson, a St. Paul newspaper man, described Knight as "very quiet in movements



STILLWATER'S historic landmark, 1962

and conversation," and a "man of fine tastes, as many of [his] buildings . . . indicate."<sup>4</sup> Born in New York in 1831, Knight first became a carpenter, studying architecture on the side. In 1857 he went to St. Paul, where he opened offices on Bridge Square. He remained in Minnesota for the rest of his life, practicing his profession through many years. When he died in 1914, he was called the "dean of Minnesota architects."<sup>5</sup>

After Knight completed his design for the new courthouse, the county commissioners awarded the contract for its construction to George M. Seymour and William M. May. The two men bid the job at \$46,500. Seymour, a local carpenter and manufacturer of flour barrels, had become a resident of Stillwater in 1858. Within three years he had obtained a lucrative state prison contract, which gave his firm the use of prison buildings for a yearly rental of about seventy dollars and the benefit of prison labor at

<sup>2</sup> Augustus B. Easton, ed., *History of the St. Croix Valley*, 1:323 (Chicago, 1909).

<sup>3</sup> Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 543 (*Minnesota Historical Society Collections*, vol. 14).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 646 (St. Paul, 1880).

<sup>5</sup> *Mankato Review*, April 18, 1914.



AUGUSTUS F. Knight

thirty cents a day per man.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, his barrel enterprise had prospered, and in 1867 he was one of Stillwater's leading contractors. May, who shared the courthouse undertaking with him, was a Civil War veteran and a well-known local carpenter.<sup>7</sup>

Excavation for the foundation was begun as soon as the frost left the ground, and throughout the following year work progressed smoothly on the native stone and brick walls. Construction materials were transported to Stillwater mainly by water, and the new 112-foot sternwheeler, "Nellie Kent," was kept busy hauling St. Croix Valley cut stone for the contractors. Financing of the building also proceeded without difficulty, and by June, 1868, the last of the bonds authorized to pay for its construction were sold. They were to be retired in fifteen years through the levying of a one-and-a-half-mill tax, and the bulk of them—amounting to thirty thousand dollars—were purchased by two upstate New York capitalists.<sup>8</sup>

Construction was temporarily slowed late in October, 1868, when inadequate scaffold-

ing on the inside of the building suddenly gave way, throwing some half-dozen workmen to the ground. Two were seriously injured, and one bricklayer, Henry Ghostly of Minneapolis, was catapulted some fifty feet over the wall, turning two somersaults in mid-air and landing squarely on his head. His death, of course, was immediate.<sup>9</sup>

By September, 1869, the handsome three-thousand-dollar cupola was in place and work on the interior was progressing, according to the local newspaper, "with all possible dispatch." In spite of what the *Messenger* of September 14 called "numerous obstacles and discouragements," May optimistically predicted that the courtrooms would be ready for use that fall. He did not, however, reckon with the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of laying the floor tiles imported earlier that year from England. Local workers finally gave up trying to solve the complicated jigsaw pattern of the tiles, and May was about to send to New York for a specialist when William Willim, an English-born plasterer and stonemason and former mayor of Stillwater, stepped into the breach. After considerable experimentation Willim finally succeeded in working the puzzle unassisted and slowly completed the job of fitting each tile in place.<sup>10</sup>

THE WINTER had nearly passed before the building was ready for occupancy, and it was March, 1870, before the first prisoners were safely housed in the jail section. Nevertheless, the citizens of Stillwater and Washington County were mightily pleased with what they saw. Dramatically located on the crest of an expanse of steep lawn, the Washington County Courthouse dominated the surrounding area. Its exterior, classic in de-

<sup>6</sup> James Taylor Dunn, "The Minnesota State Prison During the Stillwater Era, 1853-1914," in *Minnesota History*, 37:143 (December, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, eds., *History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley*, 586 (Minneapolis, 1881).

<sup>8</sup> *Stillwater Republican*, August 30, June 30, 1868.

<sup>9</sup> *Republican*, October 27, 1868.

<sup>10</sup> *Messenger*, October 5, 1869.

sign, was a typical example of the romantic style in American architecture. The facade was enhanced by a wide, ten-arched, balconied portico reminiscent of the imposing Italian-inspired work of the Eastern architect, Alexander Jackson Davis. Local residents called it a “magnificent structure” and

<sup>11</sup> *Messenger*, May 1, 1867.

<sup>12</sup> It is the oldest building of its kind in the state. The Dodge County Courthouse at Mantorville was begun a year earlier but was not ready for occupancy until late in 1870, and offices in it were not assigned until September 15, 1871. See *History of Winona, Olmsted, and Dodge Counties*, 801 (Chicago, 1884); *Mantorville Express*, June 17, September 16, 1870; September 15, 1871. In Pope County the log cabin first used as a courthouse (in 1866) has been preserved on the grounds of the present courthouse in Glenwood. It was built as a private dwelling and is now a museum.

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the finest building of its kind in the state. It is “an ornament to the city,” said the *Messenger*, as well as “a credit to the county.”<sup>11</sup>

And so the Washington County Courthouse remains now—less than a decade short of a century old—still a credit to its community, and, in fact, to the entire state.<sup>12</sup> Edwin H. Lundie, one of today’s leading St. Paul architects, has called the building “architecturally unique” in Minnesota. Despite its solid construction—ironically verified by its recent designation as a fallout shelter—its very existence is threatened in the name of progress, and there is talk of razing it to make way for a parking lot. The defeat in the 1962 fall elections of a bond issue to construct a new courthouse on the site has, it appears, only temporarily postponed plans for a much-needed county building, which may or may not include preservation and historic restoration of the present landmark.

*A view of the Washington County Courthouse taken in 1888*





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