

JOHN FRANCIS RAGUE—  
PIONEER ARCHITECT OF IOWA

BY M. M. HOFFMAN

John F. Rague came to Dubuque in 1854. There he met the Honorable Stephen Hempstead, just returned from his four years of governorship of the state of Iowa at Iowa City. He and Hempstead became friends and he allowed Hempstead to prevail upon him to remain in Iowa as a permanent resident. Rague had been in Iowa before. His name was connected with the erection of "Old Capitol" at Iowa City, in which building Hempstead had held forth as governor of Iowa. A persistent tradition has made an artistic Italian missionary, the Dominican priest, Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli, the designer of the plans of "Old Capitol", but cold historical facts make John Francis Rague the constructing architect of that exquisite, old state house, the pride of classic Iowa. And just as Father Mazzuchelli had erected his edifices in three different states, so had Rague likewise reared his monuments of beauty in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.

Rague's father was a surgeon in the French army who came to America with Lafayette during the Revolutionary War.<sup>1</sup> After the war he remained in America and married the daughter of a New Jersey family. The family Bible of this Presbyterian lady, John F. Rague's mother, which he brought to Dubuque with him, states in the birth records: "John Francis Rague, born at Scotch Plains, N. J., March 24, 1799." His mother, forty-one years of age at the time of his birth, had previously been an intimate friend of Washington Irving's mother, and had helped rear young Washington during his babyhood while Mrs. Irving had been incapacitated by illness. In 1806 young Rague commenced to attend school in New York, and later received his architectural education

<sup>1</sup> The material about Rague's domestic life, and ancestry, the writer obtained in 1928 from interviews with Mrs. John O'Keefe who for over twenty years had lived with the second Mrs. Rague as business partner and companion. She has in her possession now the Rague family Bible, in which is written down much concerning Mr. Rague.

under the then famous Milard Le Fevre. In 1824 when Lafayette was making his last triumphal visit to America, he was tendered a monster civic banquet in New York. Learning that young Rague, the son of his former military surgeon—now long since dead as the result of an obstinate wound received during the Revolutionary War—was in the assemblage, he requested that he be brought forward and seated next to him during the celebration.

After engaging in architectural work for a few years in New York, Rague came west to the growing town of Springfield, Illinois, in 1831. Here he affiliated with the Presbyterian church and being a musician with more than ordinary talents and endowed with a rare tenor voice, he became a leader in the church choir. With him in this choir during the following years were, among others, Mary Todd, Abraham Lincoln and Stephan A. Douglas, and a young lady whom Rague courted and married. Although Rague was Lincoln's senior by ten years, a close friendship sprang up between the two, and the awkward young lawyer allowed himself to be groomed for public functions by the polished architect from New York. It was Rague who induced Lincoln to wear white gloves for the first time to attend a dance.<sup>2</sup>

In 1836 John F. Rague was elected one of the trustees of the town of Springfield. When, during the following year, Springfield having just been made the capital of Illinois, it was decided to erect a state house there, Rague had already risen to such prominence in his field, that he was retained by the building commissioners as supervising architect of the structure at a salary of one thousand dollars a year.<sup>3</sup> The building was of the colonial-classic type, and at its completion brought Rague such renown that he was asked to prepare the plans in 1839 for the first capitol of Iowa at Iowa City. He made the plans for the Iowa capitol while still living at Springfield; and as some sort of an outline or sketch had been probably sent to him (the proposals for the design of the building having been previously published in the *Iowa*

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. O'Keefe, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> From correspondence with Miss Georgla L. Osborne, secretary of the Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield. Also see *Transactions of Illinois Historical Society*, No. 31, p. 148.

*News*, at Dubuque), it was doubtless at this point that the original design of Father Mazzuchelli was forwarded to him.

The contracting firm of Skeen and McDonald began operations in the spring of 1840 and pushed the work so vigorously that on July 4th an imposing ceremony of laying the corner stone was able to take place. "John F. Rague, after doing about ten thousand dollars worth of work, nearly completing the basement, threw up his contract and abandoned the work." Thus states H. W. Lathrop in the *Iowa Historical Record*;<sup>4</sup> but this is not entirely true as it was Rague's contracting firm of Skeen and McDonald which abandoned the contract. The building was completed under the direction of Chauncey Swan.

In 1844, due to business and domestic difficulties, Rague left Springfield and took up his abode in Milwaukee. He lived alone there as he had divorced his wife, Eliza. In his advertisement he made no reference to his thirteen years' residence in Springfield: "After twenty years of practical building in the city of New York, he will draw plans and specifications and contracts for all types of buildings." He was one of the first two architects known to have worked in Milwaukee as architects. He also spent considerable time at Chicago, Madison and Janesville. Among the buildings in Milwaukee designed by him was the Phoenix Building and several school buildings for the city for two of which he received the sum of one hundred dollars. In regard to his projects in Madison, Arthur Peabody wrote: "The most interesting record of the man concerns the designing of the three buildings for the University of Wisconsin: University (now Bascom) Hall, North Hall, and South Hall. . . . The buildings still remain and have been admired by several architects of note for their simple lines and refined architectural character. It would be a graceful thing to inscribe his name on these buildings. The records of the Board of Regents of 1850 and the notices of the *Wisconsin Argus* of the time are all that an architect could desire for commendation."<sup>5</sup>

Rague kept up his interest in music as well as in local politics. He was treasurer of the Beethoven Society, the first

<sup>4</sup> *Iowa Historical Record*, Vol. IV, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. X, Dec., 1926, p. 220.

musical organization in Milwaukee. He was defeated in the race for justice of the peace in 1846 and for alderman in 1849.

After coming to Wisconsin, Rague abandoned the Presbyterian faith, and although still believing in God, he became an open and avowed Freethinker. At Janesville he met Miss Chestina Scales and her he assiduously courted. Her family, being strict members of the Episcopal church, forbade her marriage to a divorced man, a *rara avis* in those days, but they were later married by a Congregationalist minister. She was many years his junior and it was shortly after this marriage that the couple came to Iowa.

At Dubuque, Governor Hempstead's influence did much for his friend Rague. The latter designed and built the Dubuque county jail which still stands in service today. He modelled it closely after the old Tombs of New York, even down to the fierce, mediaeval-looking dungeons deep below the structure. When James O'Donnell Bennett, the literary and cultural critic of the *Chicago Tribune* was in Dubuque several years ago, he marvelled at "this gem of Egyptian architecture, transplanted across the Mississippi River." Rague built the present City Hall of Dubuque; for this he obtained the idea from the old Fulton Market House in New York. But some of his designs were entirely original, such as the old octagonal Langworthy home which still is in use today. He designed and built the First, Third and Fifth ward school buildings, the Third Ward building being used today as an apartment house. Its gingerbread decorations reveal the taste of the old Milard LeFevre school. One of his finest buildings, no longer standing, was the residence of the Hon. F. E. Bissell, the then attorney general of Iowa.<sup>6</sup>

In Dubuque his proclivity for local politics again manifested itself, and he was elected to the school board of which he became an active member.

In the 60's Rague's eyesight began to show impairment and in a few years he became pitifully and totally blind. In 1868, Governor Hempstead, because of an accident, was compelled to have his right leg amputated below the knee, and the two old friends were wont to visit and commiserate with

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<sup>6</sup> We were greatly helped in collecting these biographical facts not only by Mrs. O'Keefe, but by a long obituary article in the *Dubuque Telegraph* of September 26, 1877.

one another. Rague's first wife, Eliza, came to Dubuque to visit him several times in his affliction, and upon her death he had her body brought to Dubuque and buried upon his lot in Linwood cemetery. He arranged his own funeral ceremonies before he died, and wrote out a long poetical epitaph to be inscribed on his monument embodying his peculiar philosophy of life. He passed away on September 24, 1877.

His second wife, during her husband's blindness, and for many years after his death, conducted a combination studio and lace- and fancy-work shop, which many of the matrons of present-day Dubuque patronized in their youth. And to-day she, like the first wife, lies buried beside the remains of that pioneer architect of Iowa, John Francis Rague.

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(It is pertinent for the editor of the ANNALS to add the poetical epitaph referred to above as it appears in the files of the *Dubuque Herald* of September 26, 1877, as follows:)

This planet earth, it's face I've trod  
 For three score years and o'er,  
 Now in it's bosom make my bed,  
 To rest for evermore.

Though ere a thousand years shall pass,  
 My dust shall rise again;  
 May generate e'en flowers or grass,  
 By aid of sun and rain.

The bees will sip these fragrant flowers,  
 The lambs will eat the grass,  
 And thus they'll spend their earthly hours,  
 Till from this life they pass.

Then all return to mother earth,  
 Some time again to rise,  
 Though no one knows the kind of birth,  
 But God, the only wise.

Thus Nature's laws are God's own cause,  
 Obedient to his will;  
 Men sometimes teach, but let them pause;  
 All Nature speaks—be still.

Roll on our planet, in the train  
 With million others, roll.  
 Man need not fear, he can't be slain—  
 He's under God's control.

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