

A Plan for the Capitol

One hundred years have come and gone since the ground was cleared on Capitol Square for the erection of the Old Stone Capitol. And yet, throughout all these years, the story of this historic monument as a building designed by a distinguished architect and constructed according to his plans has been given little more than a doubtful telling.

Just as the Old Stone Capitol has come to be looked upon as something more than stone and mortar, so the story of this building has come to be something more than documented history: it has come to be history interwoven with traditions and legends pleasing to the imagination.

Of all the traditions that have added color to the history of the Old Stone Capitol, the legend of an ecclesiastical designer is perhaps the most fascinating as it has been the most enduring. Briefly stated this legend attributes the planning of the Old Stone Capitol to Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli, a Dominican missionary priest who pioneered in religion on the Iowa frontier between the years 1830 and 1864. Devout, resourceful, and public spirited, Father Mazzu-

chelli went about doing good, but the common assertion that he conceived the classic form of the Old Stone Capitol is a myth.

The true story of the plan of the first permanent capitol of Iowa began with a Congressional grant of \$20,000 "to defray the expenses of erecting public buildings at the seat of Government." It is an interesting fact that one-half of this sum was, in due course, paid to the man who really designed the Old Stone Capitol and began its construction.

After providing for the location of the seat of government in Johnson County, the Legislative Assembly decreed that the commissioners "shall agree upon a plan" for the capitol building "and shall issue proposals, giving six months notice thereof, and contract for the erection" of the building "without delay". Mindful of their specific obligations in this matter the commissioners, on May 4, 1839, "consumed the day in drawing plans for the Capitol and placing a stake in the center of the proposed site."

The commissioners also signed a NOTICE, or advertisement, which was dated, "Napoleon, May 4th, 1839". This "Notice" was for the most part an invitation for bids or "proposals" on materials to be furnished in the construction of the public buildings at Iowa City. It was prepared for publication in the newspapers of the Territory and for

the information of prospective bidders. The building specifications contained in the "Notice" were such as to suggest that they were prepared, not by an experienced architect, but by the amateur board of commissioners which consisted of two farmers and a miner.

It is significant that the "Notice" contained the statement that "a plan of the building" may be seen upon application to the commissioners or any one of them. This statement, along with the published specifications, seems to suggest that the Capitol had been planned before or at the meeting of the commissioners at Napoleon. But no one in the Territory seems to have seen the plan before the bids on materials were opened early in November. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that the plan for the erection of the Capitol was designed by none other than the distinguished architect John F. Rague of Springfield, Illinois, sometime between May 1st and November 6th of the year 1839.

On December 6, 1839, Chauncey Swan reported that "a draft of the plan for the erection of the public buildings is in the hands of the Architect, Mr. Rague". And he added that "it was thought necessary by the board of commissioners, as well as by himself, that he should retain the plan which was adopted by the board, to enable

him to draw a bill of items, and form his models in accordance with the specifications."

On December 20, 1839, the story of a plan for the Capital reached a climax when the Council of the Legislative Assembly resolved that, "Whereas Chauncey Swan, Acting Commissioner of Public Buildings, in his report to the Legislative Assembly, at this session, could not, because of the absence of the Architect, present a plan of the Public Building; and whereas, Mr. Rague, the Architect, is now in Burlington with said plan, therefore, Resolved, That a committee of two be appointed to call on Mr. Rague, and request that said plan be exhibited to the Council at 3 o'clock, P. M. of this day." The House of Representatives passed a similar resolution.

During the afternoon of the same day, Mr. Ralston of the select committee reported that the committee "had called upon Mr. Rague, architect, &c. and that he was now present and ready to exhibit his plans for the Public Buildings". The report was adopted and "Mr. Rague was invited within the Bar of the Council to exhibit his plans."

When it became apparent that the progress of the work on the Capitol building would reach the stage where the cornerstone could be laid on the Fourth of July, 1840, preparations were made for holding the ceremony on the national holiday. As

the hour approached for placing the chosen stone in the southeast corner of the building, it seemed as though the whole population of Iowa City and Johnson County had come to witness the ceremony which was performed with "unusual calmness and respectability".

After exhibiting to the people there assembled the copper box that was to be placed in the cornerstone, Chauncey Swan introduced the "Reader of the Day" who described the documentary contents of the copper box. Among the articles mentioned by him was a scroll on which was inscribed the name of Mr. Rague in this form:

JOHN F. RAGUE, ARCHITECT OF THE
CAPITOL OF IOWA.

There it stands — the Old Stone Capitol — a work of art, radiating the spiritual values of simplicity and dignity, proportion and harmony, poise and tranquility. And in the years to come, while the Old Stone Capitol will remember that the name of John F. Rague as architect has been preserved in the cornerstone, the spirit of Father Mazzuchelli will live to inspire reverence and loyalty in the hearts of men.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH