

THE STONECUTTERS

by John T. Sielaff

“It’s about stone. . .”

Hundreds of people were involved in the construction of the Minnesota ‘Peoples’ House’ between 1896, when ground was first broken, and 1907, when the sidewalks and grading were completed. The roles of the politicians and the architect in this process have been well documented¹. During the celebration for the Capitol’s centennial in 2005 however it became apparent that little was known about the people who actually worked on the construction.

Like any contemporary building, tradesmen such as carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, sheet metal workers, ironworkers, and hoisting engineers were employed. However, when one looks at the Capitol the most obvious feature is the enormous quantity of precisely cut and carved marble. Ginny Lackovic, an architect who has been involved in restoration work on the Capitol since 2005, reflected on the character of the building: *“This building is really a monument made of stone. The exterior is about stone. The interior is also stone. There are eight different types of stone, but (only) one type of wood.”*²

An examination of the stone and those who worked it is long overdue. Skilled stonecutters, mostly European-trained immigrants, did not only the shaping and carving of the exterior stone, but also the interior stone staircases, balusters and handrails.³ Less skilled laborers operated stone saws and planers. A hundred years ago the stonecutters and carvers were well known and respected members of the building trades and, although the evidence of their expertise endures, little is known today about the stonecutting trade and the lives of those artisans. As it turns out, Minnesota’s capitol was built during a time when new technology would drastically change the centuries-old craft.

In the summer of 1897, before the contract for the capitol’s superstructure was awarded, Minnesota newspaper writers were up in arms over the impending decision to use Georgia marble on the state’s new building. The architect, Cass Gilbert, professed to have come to favor marble only after a thorough consideration of the durability, cost and appearance of various materials. However, there is evidence that his mind was made up from the beginning.⁴

The legislation establishing the Capitol Commission back in 1893 stated that *“preference shall in all cases be given to Minnesota materials and labor,”*⁵ and many felt this required the use of stone from the state. Organized Labor also supposedly strongly favored Minnesota stone and some union organizations passed resolutions to this effect.⁶ At a ‘mass meeting’ in St. Paul on June 25, 1897, union leaders and local politicians spoke out against the use of Georgia marble although St. Paul businessmen and union members were notably absent. Maybe it was difficult for St. Paulites to see how it would make much difference to them.⁷

The country had been suffering through a prolonged economic depression and unemployed stonecutters may have felt the huge Capitol project was now poised to provide them with little relief. The building was contracted in stages and when St. Paul builder, George Grant, constructed the foundation of the Capitol the previous year, he had used some local material and labor. However, his contract required the foundation to be mainly constructed of large blocks of stone which came fully dressed from Winona, Minnesota.⁸ The new Federal Courts building (now Landmark Center) was also under construction and that contractor had gone to St. Cloud in 1893 and opened a granite quarry to furnish the material.⁹



above: Carving one of the many eagles that adorn the capitol building.
below: Front-page cartoon featuring Walter Butler and the marble controversy, St. Paul Daily Globe, September 2, 1897.

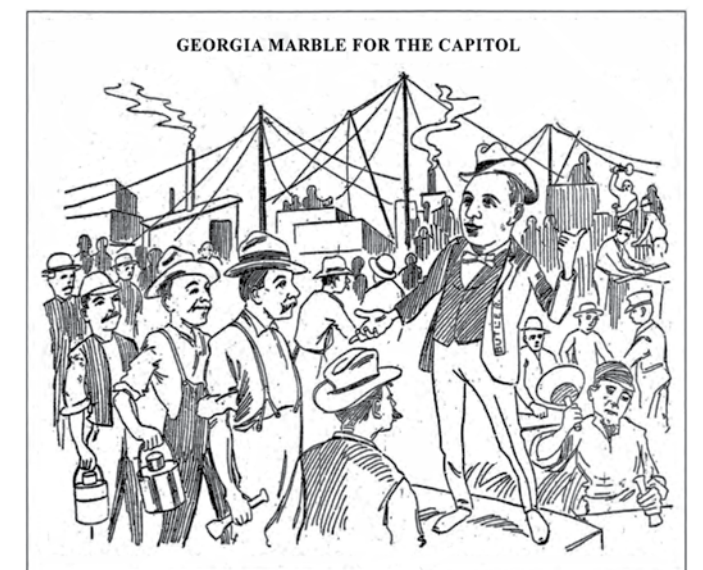


photo: Jason Onerheim

“The Man Who Actually Built the Capitol. . .”

Many of the workers who built the Capitol were recent emigrants, a good number of them from Sweden. Most of the earlier Swedish emigrants came to America seeking farm land and came as part of an entire family.

The period between 1880 and 1905, however, is thought of as the fourth wave of Swedish emigration and was characterized by young single men and women seeking work in urban areas. It was during these years that St. Paul's Swedish population surpassed that of the Germans and the number of Swedes in the Twin Cities grew to be second only to Chicago.

There were many Swedes involved in the construction of the Capitol, but possibly the best known around the job site was master stonemason Nils Nelson. He was born as Nils Nilsson in Sweden in 1864 and grew up on its southern coast. His father was a farmer but Nils declined to follow that line of work; on his 18th birthday in 1882 he left home bound for America.

At that time he gave his occupation as *arbetare* (worker) rather than *drang* (farmhand), indicating that he had some work experience off the farm. Later in life he said he had become acquainted with the use of ropes and pulleys from working as a sailor so he may have paid for his trip across the Atlantic working on ships.

Nils was young, single, and sought work in an urban area rather than the rural areas popular with earlier emigrants. Chicago, which attracted more Swedes than any other American city, became Nil's first destination. He claimed that he had worked as a stonemason on the construction of the Chicago Board of Trade Building which was built between 1882 and 1885. This might have been one of his first jobs in the city. He probably started out as a laborer and during the construction boom of the 1880's moved up the ladder to become a much higher paid stonemason. He married and in 1886 had a daughter whose birth was recorded in Cook County, Illinois.

It is unknown what brought Nils to St. Paul but construction trade workers, both then and now, commonly move to find work. In later years he said that he had worked on the New England Life Insurance Building in Kansas City which was built between 1886 and 1887 and also the Chicago Court House completed in 1893. Sometime between these moves Nils and his wife made their home base St. Paul and two more children were born in Minnesota in 1889 and 1890.

The *St. Paul Trades and Labor Bulletin* of December 1893 printed a report by N.I. Nelson, secretary of the Stonemasons' Union, announcing the union had notified their employers that as of April 1894 they would be working 9 hour days at 35 cents per hour.

By 1895 Nils owned a home at 1107 Payne Ave. in the Swedish community on the east side of St. Paul and was working for the Butler-Ryan company as a mason.

Butler-Ryan and their successor firm Butler Brothers were the contractors for the superstructure and finish of the Capitol, and Nelson was their lead stone mason. As the building was being completed the Pioneer Press ran an article about Nelson titled *The Man Who Actually Built the Capitol*.

In a memoir written by Emmett Butler, one of the Butler Brothers, Nelson is described as “a redheaded Swede who came here from Chicago and had been a sailor, (he) had a red goatee and was a big fellow, and of course he could set up derricks, and was an expert rigger and when he was doing that kind of work nobody spoke, he was the captain, everybody took orders from him. . . . He was a man and knew it and was the best man in every way, physically, mentally and morally.”

He confirms that Nelson was their chief stone mason and that he and his crew, which included Nelson, a hoisting engineer, a fireman to tend the steam-powered hoist and three laborers, set 75% of all the stone.

Butler contributes an amusing anecdote about Nelson. Once when the Capitol's architect, Cass Gilbert, was in town from New York inspecting the job he saw Nelson's crew hoisting a large column into place and, thinking the rope was about to break, shut down the operation. Nelson exploded and was so insolent to Gilbert that the architect demanded that the Butlers fire him. The Butlers called Nelson into the office to smooth things over and Gilbert tried to explain that the job was like a ship where he was the captain and the sailors had to follow his orders without question. “You're a damn fool,” Nelson rejoined. “Sailors don't take orders from the captain. They take orders from the boatswain. Bill Butler is the captain around here. I'm the bos'n, and you're just nothing.”



How this was resolved is not known. The Butlers would not have wanted to lose one of their most valued employees so I suspect Nelson may have been sent to one of Butler's other jobs until Gilbert returned to his New York office. There were even letters written assuring Gilbert that Nelson was 'dismissed.' The incident happened in December of 1903 but the Butler Brothers submitted a bill to the Capitol Commission for extra work done in 1904 and 1905 and N.I. Nelson's name appears on it numerous times as the foreman stone setter. His pay, at 55 cents an hour is equal to that of John Butler, one of the company owners. ■

Nils Nelson continued to work off and on for the Butler Brothers for many years.

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above: Architect Cass Gilbert.

right: Minnesota State Capitol Rotunda April 4, 1904. The stonemason standing by the plinth on which the column is about to be set is most probably Nils Nelson. He has a goatee which Nils is known to have sported and his attitude is definitely Nelsonian.

