

BUILDING FOR THE AGES

OMAHA'S ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS



KRISTINE GERBER

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COVER PHOTOS



TOP ROW (L TO R)

Flatiron Hotel, Joslyn Art Museum, Aquila Court,
Riviera Theater/The Rose



MIDDLE ROW (L TO R)

Masonic Temple/Douglas Building, Otto H. Barmettler Residence,
Riviera Theater/The Rose, Westlawn Mausoleum



BOTTOM ROW (L TO R)

St. Cecilia's Cathedral, Scottish Rite Cathedral,
Rialto Theatre, Old Post Office

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INTRODUCTION PHOTOS



(L TO R)

All Saints Episcopal Church, Thomas R. Kimball Residence,
Masonic Temple/Douglas Building, Burlington Station,
Early 16th Street View, Withnell-Barton Residence



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“When we build let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone upon stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labor and wrought substance from them ‘See! This our fathers did for us.’”

JOHN RUSKIN

JOHN RUSKIN, THE FAMOUS 19th century English writer and critic, grasped the immense importance of architecture on shaping the quality environment of future generations. *Building for the Ages – Omaha’s Architectural Landmarks*, takes its inspiration from Ruskin’s succinct observation. In the timeline of history, Omaha at 150 years is a young city, yet its history is rich and unique, and the quality structures that have stood the test of time are now portals to its future — a future that recognizes design excellence, whether past, present or future, as an essential ingredient to the city’s vitality, individuality and sense of pride in what we can become.

This book used 1950 as the cutoff date, omitting structures from the last half of the 20th century. The National Trust for Historical Preservation generally uses 50 years as a criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and since many of the buildings in this book are either on the National Listing or designated as Landmarks by the City of Omaha’s Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, we have been consistent in applying that criteria.

While this book focuses on great examples of historical structures that are with us today, we begin by featuring some of the most significant buildings Omaha has lost. We have only photographs by which to experience these icons of our past. We will never be able to tour these buildings, or examine their craftsmanship, or experience the context in which they were situated. They helped shape the quality of Omaha’s development, but they are gone forever. Keep this in mind as you view the remaining chapters of the book, for the structures that have survived are the flesh and bones of Omaha’s architectural heritage today. They are defining features of our city’s image and character — a source of civic pride — and they must continue to play a significant role in Omaha’s future.

The buildings have been organized by age groupings beginning with the earliest buildings of Omaha’s past and concluding with

structures in the 1940s. This offers an opportunity to trace the development and rich diversity of architectural styles and to place the buildings in the context of Omaha’s business, social, institutional or political history.

No book of this nature can be totally inclusive. Lack of space meant that many buildings considered for this publication could not be included. Those selected were chosen for architectural significance, contribution to Omaha’s unique history, and diverse building types and architectural styles, which help define Omaha’s visual tradition.

To the greatest extent possible, we have included current photographs of the buildings. However, several of the buildings are now obscured by landscaping, surrounding walls or other structures. In those instances, we have included historical photographs that present the buildings as they were intended to be viewed, thus providing a full appreciation of the architectural styles and settings of these structures.

Landmarks, Inc. a non-profit organization that serves as an advocate for the preservation of Omaha’s historic environment, is proud to sponsor this book. The organization was founded as a result of the controversy surrounding the demolition of the old Post Office building at 16th and Dodge Streets, which stirred preservation advocacy in Omaha.

This book, then, is a celebration of Omaha’s architectural landmarks — structures that were built for the ages and have defined the community’s character. They testify to the benefits of preservation and provide a glimpse of what this city can become by embracing its past. Community growth can now be balanced with the quality of Omaha’s image, recognizing and respecting our unique heritage and architectural legacy.

W. LARRY JACOBSEN, AIA

Past President, Landmarks, Inc.



AFTER THE HERNDON HOUSE at Ninth and Farnam Streets became the headquarters for the new Union Pacific Railroad in 1869, Omaha had no large hotel.

A syndicate was formed and raised \$130,000 to construct the Grand Central Hotel. The walls and roof of the five-story structure were completed by the end of December 1870. Then the funds were exhausted and work stopped for almost two years.

The building sat on a limestone foundation, and the basic construction was masonry with load-bearing walls. Limestone lintels and sills were used at the windows. A distinctive mansard roof covered the top.

Another syndicate raised additional capital through a stock subscription and the hotel was finally completed in the fall of 1873. Considered the most elegant hotel in Omaha, its elaborate

interior included fireplaces, imported chandeliers and mirrors. The first guests were received in October.

Financial woes surfaced at the beginning. In 1878, a \$100,000 mortgage was foreclosed, and on April 18, the property was sold at auction to Augustus Kountze. George Thrall then purchased a lease from Kountze to manage the hotel.

In the summer, the Kitchen Brothers took over this lease and undertook a remodeling and renovation of the hotel. Improvements included the installation of an elevator – a luxury at the time.

On the evening of Sept. 24, 1878, a fire broke out. Before it could be brought under control, five Omaha firemen lost their lives and the hotel was destroyed. A careless workman had left an open candle burning as he left to eat dinner and had caused the fire. In 1882, the first Paxton Hotel was built on this site.

14th and Farnam Streets

BUILT: 1873 LOST: 1878

ARCHITECT: *Unknown*

STYLE: *Italianate/Second Empire*

ON THE SOUTHWEST CORNER of 14th and Farnam Streets, the magnificent Grand Central Hotel was built in 1873. After the Grand Central burned in 1878, the Kitchen brothers built the original Paxton Hotel in 1882 to replace it. The hotel was named for community leader and businessman William A. Paxton, one of the founders of the Omaha Stockyards and Paxton Vierling Steel Co.

In 1927, plans developed to create a new Paxton Hotel at the same location, and the old hotel was torn down. Architect Joseph G. McArthur of Omaha received the commission to design the new hotel in a more modern style. The new structure had 11 stories and was primarily of brick construction on a steel frame with reinforced concrete. Bedford limestone and terra cotta as used for exterior ornamentation. Described as fireproof, it measured 151' x 132'.

The 325-room hotel was built by the Selden-Breck Co. at a cost of \$1.5 million and opened the doors to receive guests June 26, 1929.



In the 1960s, operations as a hotel ceased. In July 1966, the structure was leased to the Federal Women's Job Corps as a residence for program participants until June 1969. Vacant for two years, it was taken over by an investment group, remodeled on the interior, and once again opened as a hotel in May 1971. Financial difficulties and a high vacancy rate caused the venture to fail.

Facing an uncertain future, the building was given a second reprieve when converted some years ago into an assisted living facility for the elderly

and mentally disabled and called the Paxton Manor.

As the Paxton Manor closed in 2000, and has since been vacant, awaiting redevelopment plans. The hotel remains one of the few significant Art Deco structures in the city.

14th and Farnam Streets
BUILT: 1928

ARCHITECT: *Joseph G. McArthur*
STYLE: *Art Deco*



HILLSIDE WAS THE ESTATE OF HENRY WHITEFIELD YATES SR., president of the Nebraska National Bank. Constructed of irregular blocks of buff Amherst stone, it was three full stories and contained 30 rooms. Building began in 1887 and took two years to complete. The initial cost was \$40,000. The firm of Rice and Bassett, from Austin, Illinois, was the contractor and Herts and Co. of New York provided all of the interior decorations.

The overall plan was asymmetrical, with a large rounded wall tower on the east. Numerous chimneys and gables rose above the steeply pitched slate roof.

A central feature of the interior was a large entry hall (20' x 40') with a 12-foot ceiling. The hall, which included the front staircase, was finished in heavily paneled quartersawn oak. An enormous carved stone fireplace extended to the ceiling. The

rooms were elegant with inlaid parquet floors. The dining room was finished in solid mahogany with a large fireplace and beamed ceiling. Most magnificent was the drawing room, decorated in pink and gold, with painted frescos on the ceiling and gold plated lighting fixtures. A conservatory and library were also located on the main floor. There were 10 bedrooms and six bathrooms.

In 1915, after the death of Yates, the family sold the west half of the property for construction of Yates Elementary School.

Mrs. Yates continued to live in the home until her passing in 1929. The house was then rented to the Bickel Advertising School. Thereafter, a medical fraternity rented until 1943. In 1944 the land was sold and the house razed. The Hillside Court apartments occupy the site today.

3120 Davenport St.

BUILT: 1889 LOST: 1944

ARCHITECT: *F. M. Ellis*

STYLE: *Eclectic/Richardson Romanesque*

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