

Large numbers of Irish helped build Minnesota State Capitol

By Randy Croce

Special to the Irish Gazette

The Minnesota State Capitol is a handcrafted architectural gem, but the workers and contractors who actually made it have been largely forgotten. A team of researchers has been uncovering the stories of these builders. They've read thousands of documents and interviewed descendants of people who created this Minnesota icon and invite readers to help them learn more.

They've discovered that most of the Capitol builders were first or second-generation immigrants, many of them from Ireland. This first of two articles features those

Irish in the trowel and stone trades.

The Butler Brothers firm acted as general contractor for most of the Minnesota Capitol construction. The partners' father, Patrick Butler of Co. Wicklow, earned a civil engineering degree from Trinity College, Dublin. As the son of tenant farmers, he witnessed the horrors of the potato famine and, in 1852, joined the mass emigration to the United States. Patrick married Mary Anne Gaffney, and worked as a tavern owner, teacher and contractor before finally settling on a farm near Northfield, MN, where the couple raised six sons and two daughters. Being the only Catholic family in the area,

the Butlers encountered discrimination, including attempts to exclude them from the local school. However, five of the children attended Carleton College, including Pierce Butler, who became a U.S. Supreme Court Justice.

Walter became president of the Bricklayers union in St. Paul, which he and his brother William helped organize. They went on to form their own company, which involved all of the brothers and business partner Mike Ryan. Butler-Ryan (later Butler Brothers) employed up to 200 workers at a time on the Capitol project. The Butlers pioneered such innovations as steam hoists on raised tracks and a machine for cutting column flutes.

Another Irish tradesman, Everett Shahan, initially a stonecutter, was a mathematical genius who tackled the complicated problem of helping design the Capitol dome, one of only four freestanding marble domes in the world. According to Emmett Butler's memoir, 22-year-old Shahan "built the working pattern from which the dome was ultimately constructed piece by piece . . . in full size on the gymnasium floor of the St. Paul YMCA." He used the model to give instructions to the stonecutters who built the structure. Shahan accurately predicted that the fin-



Photo courtesy Butler Family Foundation

The Butler family, 1888. Standing, top row, left to right: Cooley, Pierce, Isabelle, John and Emmett; seated: Walter, Mary Ann (ne Gaffney), Patrick, Catherine and William.

ished dome would settle $\frac{5}{16}$ of an inch. His father Winfield and two brothers also worked for Butler Brothers.

Albert S. Corwin, from Londonderry, was a celebrated sculptor who carved the marble eagles at the base of the Capitol dome and several of the statues above the main entrance, as well as decorations inside the building. He also worked on other buildings across America, including the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Anyone who has information about people who worked on the initial building of the Capitol or later restoration efforts are encouraged to contact Randy Croce, at

rcroce@umn.edu or call (612) 625-5546. He and fellow researchers, Dan Ganley, Dave Riehle, John Sielaff and Victoria Woodcock are happy to share more details on the builders with descendants or anyone else.

They are creating a website and a video documentary to share findings. This University of Minnesota Labor Education Service project is supported by the State of Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society, the Butler Family Foundation, Education Minnesota and the Bricklayers, Operating Engineers, Sheet Metal Workers and Teamsters unions.

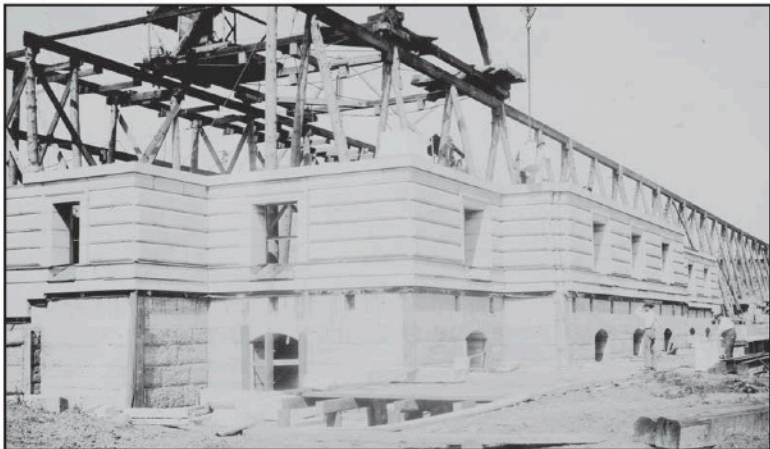


Photo courtesy Tom Blanck

A pair of steam hoists on raised rails for lifting stone and other loads on the Capitol construction site, 1898.