Construction of the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul began early in 1896. The immense undertaking was completed nine years later. This was not the state's first capitol building. The initial attempt, at Tenth and Cedar Streets, was completed in 1853 as the territorial capitol, and it continued as the seat of Minnesota's government with statehood in 1858. After two expansions, in 1874 and 1878, the pedestrian Greek revival–style statehouse was consumed by fire. It was replaced with a new building on the same site in 1882. While also featuring classical architectural elements, the second capitol building had a Victorian air. Almost from the time it was erected, it was thought too small for the state's business.

With the third building, Minnesota finally got it right. A marvelous Renaissance monument in the Beaux-Arts tradition, the elegant design was the handiwork of St. Paul architect Cass Gilbert, who embraced the grandeur possible with traditional architectural forms. For Gilbert, the capitol commission provided entrance to the national stage; even as it was under construction, he relocated to New York. There Gilbert would complete his neo-Gothic design for that city's Woolworth Building, one of the country's early skyscrapers. Other major commissions followed, including the US Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC, an unashamed early-twentieth-century expression of classicism.

Gilbert topped the Minnesota State Capitol with a monumental marble dome and attired the building in a polychromatic swirl of white Georgia marble. Virtually every manner of classical embellishment festooned the capitol—including actual festoons—paying overt deference to the Renaissance palazzo. Fluted columns with ornate capitals are adjacent to immense Roman arches accented with scrolled keystones. Six sculpted figures symbolic of humankind's better qualities adorned the entablature over the portico, upon which gleamed the quadriga of golden horses—The Progress of the State sculpture created by Daniel Chester French and Edward C. Potter. Paired columns encircled the richly ornamented dome, supporting a cornice bearing raptors, while window openings featured pediments and scrolled hoods framed within recessed panels parceled by the dome's vertical ribbing. The final garnish on this architectural confection was a lantern with shining, globed finial.

The capitol's interior was even more classically exuberant. Here also were finely detailed arches, columns, entablatures, piers, and balustrades. Rich earth tones accented in gold warmed public spaces. Inside the rotunda and dome were blue hues, the contrast making plain Gilbert's desire to evoke earth and sky. Elaborate, colorful murals embellished walls, providing allegorical illustration of Minnesota's evolution. Easel paintings (some of which ultimately would spur controversy) hung in the governor's reception room, an ornately decorated space of white oak with gilded plaster of Paris emblems of the state.

Though more than a century of harsh winters and deferred maintenance have exacted a toll, this incredible statehouse continues as the seat of government in

The Minnesota State Capitol building may have appeared fine from a distance, but leaks and cracks were multiplying behind the scenes. At close inspection, it was grossly evident that the exterior stone was far from fine. Inside, the building was giving up its age piece by piece. In 2010, a section of one of the zodiac murals encircling the upper reaches of the capitol dome, composed by artist Elmer Garnsey, broke free. Fortunately, due to work being done inside the dome, the canvas’s fall was arrested by a construction tarp, limiting damage to the art. In 2012, a photographer captured an iconic image of Representative Dean Urdahl hefting a stone scroll while speaking in the House chamber. His prop had been removed with a few taps of a hammer, proving that the capitol was shedding stone.

Subsequent investigation convinced the reluctant that it was time to pony up for the state’s principal monument. In previous years, attempts at restoration were piecemeal, some dollars acquired here or there in an attempt to restore one or two aspects of the building. It was inefficient, reminiscent of the fantastic cathedrals of Europe, perpetually obscured by scaffolding that moved from one location to the next in an attempt to keep up with the faltering buildings. A comprehensive master plan for the building was completed in early 2012. Although the state legislature wrangled somewhat over timing, funding, and overall scope, the state’s leaders understood that comprehensive restoration could no longer wait, and that the aesthetic delight that was the state capitol building need not be forever blemished by metal framework.

Finally, thankfully, the Minnesota State Capitol underwent a thorough restoration, the largest preservation effort since it opened. Many labored to re-polish our capitol jewel in the past three-plus years. The exterior marble was cleaned, repaired, restored, or replicated using marble from the same Georgia quarry that was the stone’s source. Skylights were uncovered and restored; murals and decorative stencil work were restored to appear as they did when the capitol opened in 1905; and the basement level has been opened up to reveal exposed limestone foundation walls and original arched tile ceilings.

The building reopened to the public and to government business in time for the 2017 legislative session in January. Grand reopening festivities are scheduled for August 11–13, 2017. Public space has doubled to nearly 40,000 square feet and includes an expanded information and tour center, and new meeting rooms, event spaces, and classrooms. Accessibility features throughout the capitol make the building available to all.

This restoration has been a pricey endeavor, but when the public views what $310 million buys, including $4 million for fine art restoration and $350,000 for regilding the beloved quadriga, criticism should be muted. It is a once-in-a-century endeavor, ensuring another hundred years for Minnesota’s testament to the democratic process.

---


All photos courtesy Minnesota State Capitol Restoration Project.
Top row

LEFT: Worker’s initials from 1902 are uncovered during demolition in a west wing restroom.

RIGHT: Architects assess and catalog the level of stone damage along the capitol’s south facade, June 6, 2014.

Middle row

LEFT: An example of cracked marble, October 15, 2010.

RIGHT: Marble blocks are reviewed, inspected, and selected by the design team during a September 2013 visit to the Tate Marble Quarry in Georgia. The capitol’s exterior marble restoration used stone from the same quarry that was the source of the original building.

Bottom row

LEFT: Approximately 4,700 nails were used to recreate the patterns on 10 doors, door panels, and frames in the Supreme Court and house chambers. The new nails match the color, diameter, and dome height of the original, historic nails.

RIGHT: The capitol as seen from John Ireland Boulevard, October 22, 2015.
Top row
LEFT: West grand stairs, looking down to ground floor
RIGHT: Roof work on the east wing included removing layers of old roofing material down to the basic structure, repairing the stone and brick elements around the roof, installing a new waterproofing system, and laying new tile.

Middle row
LEFT: This wreath on the south side of the capitol has been repaired to restore its historic character.
RIGHT: A lunette-shaped “zodiac” canvas mural is carried to a prepared area on scaffolding in the rotunda. It was separated from its wall space so that conservators could repair damaged and disintegrating plaster behind it.

Bottom row
LEFT: A rarely seen detail from the hand-carved plaster statuary in the house chamber. The artwork was commissioned by a New Deal work program to St. Paul father and son sculptors Carlo and Amerigo Brioschi in 1938.
RIGHT: Scaffolding reaches up to the 12 majestic marble eagles that circle the capitol dome. Minneapolis skyline is in the distance.
Top row

LEFT: Signage directed visitors through temporary corridors in the basement tunnel, February 24, 2014.

RIGHT: Progress of transforming Aurora Avenue into a pedestrian mall, July 11, 2016.

Middle row

LEFT: A special frame was built to transport this piece of curved stained glass for restoration. The stained glass skylight above the capitol's spiral staircase had not been touched for over 100 years.

RIGHT: Here, the restored stained glass skylight above the stairs in the east wing.

Bottom row

LEFT: The removal of the charioteer from the quadriga on September 23, 2014, was a momentous event. Here, the repaired and regilded charioteer returns home, April 29, 2015.

RIGHT: Column capital deterioration, 2015. In the background is the St. Paul Cathedral.
Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission: [contact us](mailto:). Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](mailto:). Include the author’s name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

**Students and researchers**
- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: [http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html](http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html)
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

**Teachers**
- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](mailto:) for more information.

**About Illustrations**
- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](http://www.mnh.org/mnlibrary).