THE Samuel Yellin firm executed ornament in hand-forged iron for significant architectural projects throughout the United States—including Minnesota—particularly during the American building mania of the 1920s. At that time the company employed more than 200 men who fired 60 forges. But today, no one thinks much about ornamental ironwork in architecture and only crafts blacksmiths might recognize the Yellin name. The Great Depression that halted construction during the 1930s, Samuel Yellin’s death in 1940, and the adoption of the unadorned International Style have obscured this facet of architectural history.

Already an experienced blacksmith, Yellin emigrated from his native Poland to the United States in 1905, joining his mother and sister in Philadelphia. The Europe he left had experienced a resurgence of interest in architectural wrought iron during the last half of the 19th century. During that time European architects had revived and adapted the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and French 18th-century styles to fit projects of their own era. These revival styles and projects clamored for the highly articulated ornamental iron of their historical precedents. Hand-forged work was superseded by the more economical cast iron during the early 19th century, but the renewed appreciation of historical ironwork and the handcraft orientation of the Arts and Crafts Movement gave impetus to a blacksmithing revival.¹

By 1909, when Yellin set up his blacksmithing concern in Philadelphia, American architects were fluent in the revival styles. Minnesota's State Capitol, designed by architect Cass Gilbert and completed in 1904, stands as an example of the academic revival period, its basic design recalling a Renaissance palazzo with dome a la Michelangelo. The capitol building exhibits a great deal of ornamental detail in metal, and Gilbert chose wrought iron as the principal material for stair railings and most grillwork.² In his time Gilbert was innovative in pursuing the decorative possibilities of wrought iron, but he did so with some trepidation. While the railing for the cantilevered stairway rising from the capitol's northwest corner and some of

¹ See Richard J. Wattenmaker, Samuel Yellin in Context (Detroit: Flint Institute of Arts, 1985) for a thorough treatment of the historical relationships between European architecture and ornamental metalwork.

² Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, Minneapolis, provided cast-iron railings for the capitol. A photograph of the third-floor railing and fascia surrounding the rotunda appears in the firm’s advertisement in Western Architect 4 (Oct., 1905): xi, an issue devoted entirely to the capitol building.

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the less prominent railings and balustrades are clearly wrought iron, the highly visible balustrade surrounding the main rotunda's third floor, though made of the same material, is disguised by gold paint so that it appears to be bronze. As one architectural writer of the late 1920s commented: "[U]ntil recently, wrought iron was mentioned only briefly in a footnote in the social register of building materials... Its European ancestry was acknowledged as being duly ancient, but was thought to be of unfashionable origin. Bronze was the

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4 Philadelphia architect Frank Miles Day was a friend to Yellin and wrote letters that were crucial in helping him obtain wider recognition in architectural circles. Jack Andrews, Samuel Yellin, Metalworker, reprint from Anvil's Ring (Athens, Ga.), Summer, 1982, p. 1.

SMITHS at work in the Yellin shop during the 1920s

Samuel Yellin, along with some major architects of the day, worked to dispel the prejudice that wrought iron was a substandard decorative medium. Not an uneducated village blacksmith by any means, Yellin built up a library of works on historical ornament and collected European and American examples of fine wrought-iron work that he placed in his shop as models for his workmen and potential clients. The studio class that Yellin taught from 1907 to 1919 at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Art (now Philadelphia College of Art) brought him into association with other tradesmen and architects, some of whom, having seen the master's work from the anvil, passed along word of his talents. A 1911 commission from the New York architectural office of C. Frank LaFarge for wrought-iron gates for J. P. Morgan's Long Island estate helped to raise the status of the medium and was a turning point for Yellin.

THE YELLIN EXHIBITION presents works related to major commissions for the Yellin forge. The metalwork and sketches on display bring well-known landmarks in American architecture into the museum gallery. There are, for example, a grille sample and scale drawing of ornamental details for the Federal Reserve Bank, New York City (York and Sawyer, architects, 1923-24). For this project Yellin's blacksmiths turned out 200 tons of decorative wrought iron. A grille "sketch" in iron, stud-
Ornamental Ironwork Firms in the Twin Cities

At the same time that Paul Watkins, Elizabeth Quinlan, and George Christian were looking to the Yellin firm in Philadelphia for ornamentation, clients from across the country were turning to Minneapolis for metalwork to adorn a wide range of new buildings. A leader in such metal production in Minnesota was Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, a company that began as a Minneapolis blacksmith shop in 1893. The Crown Iron Works, one of many iron companies established to service the milling operations at St. Anthony Falls during the late 19th century, also grew into a regionally important supplier of ornamental work.

The Flour City firm fabricated products of wrought and cast iron, bronze, and, beginning in the 1930s, of the white metals. Although some critics decried the replacement of wrought iron by cast materials, Flour City’s contracts show that both their cast and wrought work were appearing in buildings designed by some of the country’s leading architectural firms. Among these were the U.S. Mint (James Knox Taylor, architect, 1897-1906) in Denver; the Tribune Tower (Howells & Hood, architects, 1925) and the Palmer House (Holabird & Roche, architects, 1927) in Chicago; and the second John Hancock Building (Cram & Ferguson, architects, 1947) in Boston. In 1939, the firm crafted a series of bronze doors with sculptures by Carl Milles for the Pennsylvania Finance Building in Harrisburg. In Minnesota the firm’s work appears in the state capitol (Cass Gilbert, 1893-1904), the Mayo Clinic Plummer Building (Ellerbe Architects, 1928), and the Rand Tower (Holabird and Root, 1929). In 1939, Commercial West magazine dubbed the firm “A Minneapolis Institution — Greatest of Its Kind in America.”

Crown Iron Works, doing business mostly in the Midwest, also made a significant contribution to the ornamentation of new buildings. Crown’s early years at St. Anthony Falls, beginning in 1878, were followed by a stint in the original St. Anthony City Hall building and a long-term tenure at its plant on Tyler Street in northeast Minneapolis. Early work of the company appeared in the Guaranty Loan (Metropolitan) Building (E. Townsend Mix, 1890) and the City Hall/County Courthouse (Long and Kees, 1888-1905), both in Minneapolis. Later work included ornamental elements for the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City, Iowa (Purcell and Elmslie, 1918) and the Fox Theatre Building (C. Howard Crane, 1928) in Detroit.

The physical plant of Flour City Ornamental Iron Works on 27th Avenue South is currently being documented by the State Historic Preservation Office because of its local significance. The operations and products of both the Flour City and Crown firms, as well as those of a host of other local iron companies, await research, documentation, and analysis.

—Dennis Gimnastad
State Historic Preservation Office

The exhibition does not include information on any of the commissions the Samuel Yellin forge did for Minnesota clients; National Building Museum staff, however, provided a list of orders the firm shipped out to the state. Obtained from a client card file at the still-operating Yellin establishment in Philadelphia, this list revealed that during its peak years from 1919 to 1927, the firm filled at least 18 orders for architectural projects in the state, but in several cases an address was all that the client files divulged. In other cases the entries were more complete, listing the project, architect, client, order date, and the type of item ordered, such as “lighting fixtures” or “railing.” The Minnesota-Yellin story went only as far as that list.

Further research in the company files and in local sources, while not exhaustive, has yielded tantalizing information on Yellin ironwork in Minnesota and how it came to be here. The orders present a glimpse into...
the virtuosity of Yellin's smiths. The commissions also serve to point out the challenges the firm met: filling orders of all sizes from a distance; trying to please various architects and their clients; and adapting to a range of architectural styles and building functions.

Most Yellin ironwork forged for Minnesota clients was for residential projects—13 orders destined for eight private homes were placed between 1919 and 1926. The first Minnesota job was number 1677: "work for Pillsbury residence, Minnesota." A photograph taken in the Philadelphia shop documents at least one piece of this order, an exquisite grillwork gate that includes two herons in the design. Ordered by architect H. T. Lindeberg, the gate was destined for Southways, the Tudor-style residence of John S. and Eleanor L. Pillsbury of the well-known flour-milling family. The door for the Pillsbury home on Brackett's Point at Lake Minnetonka was not an uncommon decorative element in the residences Lindeberg planned. Similar arched grillwork doors, though not by the Yellin firm, were produced during the same decade for substantial homes in Glen Cove, New York, and Greenwich, Connecticut.

A predilection for wrought iron was not only this particular architect's choice but the clients' as well. In 1922 Eleanor Pillsbury commissioned a winter home in the then-developing Palm Beach resort in Florida. Under her direction, a Palm Beach architect, Marion Wyeth, designed a Spanish-inspired stucco dwelling that was ornamented with exterior window grilles, balconies, and lighting fixtures in wrought iron. Mrs. Pillsbury took a great deal of interest in the design of this home that she dubbed "La Chosa," noting that "my inspiration came from a house I had seen in Seville on my wedding trip."^8

Minneapolis architects William S. Hewitt and Edwin H. Brown also placed orders with Samuel Yellin during 1919 for the residence they were designing for another flour-milling executive, George C. Christian, at 2301-03 Third Avenue South (now the Hennepin County Historical Society). For this Renaissance palazzo Hewitt and Brown specified ornamental iron grillwork for the glazed front-entry door and the railing for the prominent stairway that ascends from first to second floors. Andirons and fire tools (of unknown design) were additional accoutrements for the Christian residence. The Yellin shop executed these orders in a restrained manner; from a distance, the front-door grille betrays only some simple scrolling, primarily in the fan and sidelights. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals rather delicate foliation that curls around the members of the grille.9

Another order for fireplace tools came from Hewitt and Brown in 1923, for Ella W. C. and George D. Dayton's residence at 2020 Blaisdell Avenue South, Minneapolis. Shop drawings called for a shovel, poker, tongs, wall bracket, tool stand, and a pair of andirons to be simply fashioned of wrought iron. Urn-shaped brass finials completed the set to fit a Colonial-style decor.10 Though individually crafted, this type of set was a production item for Yellin smiths. Sample andirons and tools of this design, minus the brass finials, are still displayed in the shop, and clients can choose ornamental hardware to suit their tastes.

One interesting order that appears in the Yellin records during 1923 is for a "grille for entrance door at 2702 Vernon Blvd., Minneapolis, Minn." The designated location for this order is confusing, as there is no such address in Minneapolis; historical map sources and a contemporary windshield survey in St. Louis Park and Edina, current locations for Vernon Boulevard, yield no structure in St. Louis Park and no such address in Edina. The order was placed by George B. Melcher, a designer at Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, a Minneapolis firm. It was not for his own residence. There is a full-scale shop drawing in graphite that depicts an elevation for this arched door grille that measures about two feet wide by three feet high.11

The Minneapolis architect, Wilbur H. Tusler, ordered from the Samuel Yellin shop a grille for the peep-hole of the Tudor-style house he designed for himself in 1923 at 4363 East Lake Harriet Boulevard. The grille, still extant, is very simple in execution, being a diamond pattern created from hammered rods held at interstices by collar bands. Tusler also ordered a lamp of unknown description and a new, incised handle plate for an existing lock he placed in his front door.12

Arch St., Philadelphia, since 1915. Thanks are due to Marion Yellin, current firm owner; Jack Andrews, consultant designer to the firm, and Louis Boceana, shop manager, for their untiring assistance. Acknowledgements are also due to the State Historic Preservation Office staff at the MHS for answering numerous queries concerning local architects and structures.

^7 Shop Order Book I, [1916?–1923], Yellin files. Three log books record orders chronologically and by job number, beginning with 1500 and running through current numbers beyond 4000. On Lindeberg, see Geerlings, Wrought Iron, 175-178.

^8 Eleanor Lawler Pillsbury, My Family Story (Lake Minnetonka, 1972), 119-122.


^10 Order nos. 2113, 2170, Order Book I, Yellin files.

^11 Order no. 2282, Order Book I, Yellin files; Minneapolis City Directory, 1923, p. 1496.

^12 Order no. 2263, shop drawings I, "Grille to peep hole in door;" and 2, "Details of existing lever handle, etc."; Order no. 2084, "Lamp for W. H. Tusler, Minneapolis, Minn."

Order Book I, Yellin files.
YELLIN'S first Minnesota job (1919), a conservatory gate for the Pillsbury residence at Lake Minnetonka, shows that skilled hands can work iron to display attenuated grace and a sense of motion.

SHOP DRAWING for fireplace tools, 1923, ordered for the Minneapolis residence of Ella and George Dayton.
DRAWING (left) for an acanthus bracket, made to support an interior balcony at the Quinlan home, Minneapolis. Yellin also provided the curved balcony railings (below) that grace the home's second-floor front facade.

SHUTTER pins, most likely from the Yellin shop, whimsically punctuate the Shepard family's simple New England-style farmhouse.
The final known Yellin residential commission in Minneapolis was for two exterior balconies and an interior stair railing for the home of style-conscious Elizabeth C. Quinlan, co-owner of the Young-Quinlan women's apparel store.\(^3\) Quite a bit of documentary evidence surrounds the construction of the Tuscany-inspired stucco house, built at 1711 Emerson Avenue, South. As the house was being planned and constructed (1923-25) Quinlan corresponded frequently with her New York architect, Frederick L. Ackerman. One ongoing item of concern was the ornamental ironwork to be executed for the structure.

Issues of cost and quality were at hand. Ackerman argued that Yellin's work was far superior to any local ornamental ironworking concern could furnish, though more expensive. Quinlan was interested in Yellin's work, but felt the need to economize in less prominent areas of the house. At one point she wrote to Ackerman, "Regarding the iron work: While I dislike paying the difference between Mr. Yellin's prices and the prices quoted elsewhere, I still have decided in favor of Mr. Yellin's work for the three outside curved balconies. The remaining iron work I must be satisfied with the kind to be found here." Quinlan ordered from at least two Minneapolis metalworking concerns: "one interior balcony" and "two stair railings" from W.E. Challman & Company, "Machine Blacksmiths and Manufacturers," and ironwork for front and interior doors and register grilles from the Kienzle & Merrick Manufacturing Company. Ackerman prevailed in the end when it came to the main interior stair railing. The order, originally placed with Challman, was cancelled and the job was turned over to Yellin.\(^4\)

Only two orders were placed with the Yellin firm for Minnesota residences outside of Minneapolis. One was for hardware to enhance the summer residence of Roger B. Shepard, president of the St. Paul dry goods firm of Finch, Van Slyke, McConville and Company and later director of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. In 1920, while the family resided at 271 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, Shepard and his wife, Katherine, purchased land in the Cottage Grove area, then very rural, for a summer farm complex called "Green Acres." St. Paul architect, Thomas Holyoke, designed the main house for the property. The two-story, central-hall building with rear-wing addition recalls late 18th-century rural New England. It was sheathed in simple, narrow white clapboards and the windows shuttered. It is the wrought-iron shutter pins, about two dozen in number, that may be the Yellin contribution, along with the front-door handle and keyhole cover, also of wrought iron; neither Yellin records nor family recollection indicate with any certainty.\(^5\)

In Winona the home of Paul Watkins, who headed the Watkins Product Company from 1911 to 1931, is the other non-Minneapolis residence to feature Yellin ornamental ironwork. Through a corps of door-to-door salesmen, Watkins' company sold household products and spices; in 1924, the success of this business enabled its owner to hire the leading Gothic-revival architect of the day, Ralph Adams Cram. With the overriding goal of constructing a finely crafted home where Watkins' European art collection could be displayed, Cram designed an estate-scale manor house that was "partly Tudor, partly Elizabethan" in style. In 1928 the architect wrote, "Every effort has been made to bring all the arts together after an harmonious fashion and the architecture of the house not only includes building as a constructive art, but also metal work, wood carving, sculpture and indeed all the arts that must co-operate with architecture toward the building up of a constant unity."\(^6\)

Yellin's contribution to this setting was a pair of doors of elaborate acanthus grillwork, the focal point at the home's front entry. Additional wrought-iron gates from Yellin span the passages from the great room to the terrace and from the vestibule to the porte-cochere. Bracket lanterns grace the front entry and the terrace, and ceiling fixtures hang in the front outer vestibule and in the porte-cochere. For this commission Yellin smiths also produced wrought-iron grilles for windows, wrought-iron flower boxes, and an assortment of door hardware including lever handles, finger holds, hinges, floor bolts, and keys. All of these items fit into a co-ordinated design scheme with other decorative features of the house and were produced to specifications that Cram furnished.

IN ADDITION to residential commissions, Yellin works were ordered for three Minnesota churches built

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\(^13\) Order nos. 2303, 2419, shop drawings, Yellin files.

\(^14\) Quinlan to Ackerman, Sept. 19, 1924; Challman to Quinlan, Oct. 13, 1924, Mar. 10, 1925; invoice, Kienzle & Merrick Mfg. Co., to Nels Jenson (Quinlan's contractor), Feb. 24, 1925; Ackerman to Quinlan, Jan. 31, 1925—all in Elizabeth C. Quinlan papers, Elizabeth C. Quinlan Foundation, Minneapolis.

\(^15\) The entry for Order no. 1769, Order Book I, Yellin files, reads: "Shepard hardware, Minnesota"; the commission list furnished by the National Building Museum gives the Cottage Grove designation. Stanley Shepard and Constance Shepard Otis, children of Roger and Katherine, and Mrs. Robert Bruce, property caretaker, furnished helpful details, including name of architect and date of construction; interview notes in author's possession.

\(^16\) Here and below, see Cram, "House of Paul Watkins, Winona, Minn.,” American Architect 134 (Aug. 20, 1928): 244; Order no. 2634, Order Book II, Yellin files. Shop files contain 15 vellum drawings on this order. Much of the work can still be seen in situ; the residence, now the Watkins United Methodist Home, allows visitors in the common areas.
YELLIN gates fortified the main reception area at the Federal Reserve Bank, Minneapolis, the largest of that shop's commissions in Minnesota (right).

THE FINE and building arts mesh at the Watkins house, Winona, where a gate silhouettes the front entry and finely executed hardware (above) graces an ornately carved wooden interior door.
in historical revival styles between 1915 and 1920. Very little has surfaced concerning the sanctuary lamp ordered for the new church edifice of St. Mark’s Catholic parish, completed in 1919 at 2001 Dayton Avenue, St. Paul, and designed by John Comes, chief architect in the Pittsburgh firm of Comes, Perry, and McMullen. There are no shop drawings on file for this lamp, and a visit to the church did not reveal any ironwork that appeared to be out of the Yellin shop.\footnote{Order no. 1716, Order Book I, Yellin files; Joseph A. Corrigan, The History of St. Mark’s and the Midway District (St. Paul: The Church, 1939), 71-88.}

Comes returned to St. Paul at Archbishop John Ireland’s directive to execute the plans for a new church edifice for St. Luke’s parish as well. Ground was broken for the building at Lexington and Summit avenues in 1919 and the basement level was completed soon thereafter. In 1920 the Yellin firm furnished a pair of wall sconces for candles. These were installed beneath statues of St. Luke and the Sacred Heart that flanked the main altar in the basement level (which served as the primary worship space before completion of the upper church). The sconces are no longer in place, but the full-scale shop drawings still exist.\footnote{James C. Byrne, The Building of St. Luke’s (St. Paul: The Church, 1922); Mrs. A.W. Cannon, comp., The Church of St. Luke, Saint Paul, Minnesota: Golden Jubilee, 1888-1938 (St. Paul: The Church, 1938), 49-59; Order no. 1883, “Wrot Iron Brackets, St. Luke’s Church, St. Paul,” shop drawing, Yellin files. See Byrne, Building St. Luke’s, figure facing p. 2, for a photograph of the sconces installed.}

Very little can be reported about order number 1711, “Work for Duluth Church, Minn.” The shop’s client card file is more specific, indicating the work to be a cross and candlesticks, the church to be St. Paul’s, and the year ordered, 1919. No shop drawing has been located to provide full-scale renderings of these pieces.\footnote{Order no. 1711, Order Book I, and entry for “St. Paul Church,” client card file, Yellin files. For illustrations of the church building and information on its construction, see Arthur J. Larsen, A Century of Service, 1869-1969; St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Duluth, Minnesota (Duluth: The Church, 1969), 8-10; St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Anniversity Celebration, 1869-1944 (Duluth: The Church, 1944). Ann H. Hartley, long-time church member, provided snapshots of metalwork currently in the church.}

TWO commercial enterprises in Minneapolis are also known to have included works from Yellin’s forges. The Golden Pheasant Inn, a Chinese and American restaurant, operated on the second and third floors of 52-56 South Seventh Street during the 1920s. The order for rail placed in 1920 with Samuel Yellin attests that its owners lavished attention on its interior. The restaurant was newly opened in June, 1920, when a local happenings guide reported chattily, “There is always something doing at the Golden Pheasant. In the short time since it opened, this Oriental cafe has become one of the most popular in the Northwest. Good music, a lively crowd, unexcelled cookery and the dancing as an added attraction make this place worth visiting.” The Golden Pheasant was advertised as the “Newest and Most Beautiful Cafe in the Twin Cities,” and one waiter’s sister described the place as “a stylish night spot” with a sumptuous turquoise-and-gold interior color scheme. A railing that she remembered vaguely as being of wrought iron surrounded the mezzanine area of the restaurant. It is likely that this was the Yellin work; unfortunately, the building no longer stands and there are no shop drawings to provide further clues.\footnote{Order no. 1751, Order Book I, Yellin files; Minneapolis This Week, May 30-June 5, 1920, p. 24, Oct. 10-16, 1920, p. 12; telephone interview of Marvell Chong, July 23, 1986, notes in author’s possession.}

The other commercial structure in Minneapolis for which Yellin received a commission was the Federal Reserve Bank, a Beaux-Arts style work designed by Cass Gilbert and constructed in 1924 at Fifth Street and Marquette Avenue. This was the largest commission the Yellin shop filled in Minnesota in terms of unit sizes. Gilbert ordered two sets of large iron grillwork gates for the bank’s main reception area. Full-scale shop drawings depict the gates at just more than ten feet high. Simple, square, hammered rods (rather than twisted ones) form the vertical grilles of the stationary side panels and swinging gate sections. Spear-point and spayed finials form the gate crests and add a vertical thrust. This particular building has suffered extensive remodelings over the past 20 years and, when the Federal Reserve Bank removed to a new structure in 1975, many architectural elements, including the Yellin gates, were auctioned off.\footnote{Order no. 2330, “Two screens for Federal Reserve Bank, Minneapolis, Minn.,” Order Book I, Yellin files.}

FOR MINNESOTA, as elsewhere, the Yellin shop produced work for a range of settings, from domestic to commercial. These works involved a cluster of participants—architects, artisans, and clients who could afford such services—in the architectural process. The buildings produced echoed historical precedents in their styles and embodied what was fashionable for their day. As tastes and circumstances changed during the decades at the middle of this century, the call for the kind of forged ironwork created by Yellin smiths diminished. However, styles are changing again. In recent years the lean look in architecture has waned, and architects are once again finding decorative ornament an attractive feature. Smiths who at first took up the anvil as part of the crafts revival may now find possibilities suggested in the Yellin legacy.