

JOHN MILLS VAN OSDEL, CHICAGO'S FIRST ARCHITECT

by B. C. "Bud" Hopkins, AIA-E

From a historical perspective, our profession has come a long way in 150 years. We owe a great debt to some of the early architects who have gone before us, who were self taught and emerged from the Master Builder trade. One such individual helped shape the great city of Chicago, considered today to exhibit some of our greatest architecture - both past and present.

John Mills Van Osdel was born in Baltimore on May 21, 1811 of humble beginnings, the son of a carpenter. John Mills worked at the trade with his father until after passing through the grade of master builder and contractor, when he devoted himself solely to architecture. At the age of twenty-two, he had already compiled and published a book on house carpentry.

According to *CHICAGO: Growth of a Metropolis*, by Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade (1969), John M. Van Osdel was a self-taught architect who prepared by reading for two years in The Apprentice Library in New York City. He first came to Chicago in late 1836 at the invitation of William B. Ogden. At first he occupied the position of a master builder, but Ogden commissioned him not only to build, but to design his house. Van Osdel's name is associated with many of the early Chicago buildings, the finishing work on the first ships built in Chicago, the erection of the first grain elevators, the Tremont House, the five-story iron front buildings erected before the mid-1860's, and homes for a number of Chicago's leaders. John Mills Van Osdel was truly a renaissance man of the 1800's.

The following was taken from the

book *60 Years A Builder*, which was published in 1942 and written by Henry Ericsson, a man who knew both Van Osdel and his work. History records Van Osdel's coming to Chicago from New York, and is best described by Ericsson in his book. "So William B. Ogden scoured New York City for the right man to send to Chicago to build his home. How it came about that he met Van Osdel I never did learn exactly, but his twenty-five-year-old architect-builder was the kind of young man Ogden would naturally hear about. Here was a working man who read every book in the Apprentices' Library. What is more, he had redrawn or redesigned every piece of work shown in those books. He had organized classes to which he taught drawing. With all that, he was regularly employed, meeting the responsibilities of a large family in a period when his father, a builder to whom he had been apprenticed, became incapacitated from an injury." Ogden soon became Chicago's first mayor.

"I suspect that Ogden wanted Van Osdel as much for Chicago as to build a house for him. Ogden was a superb judge of men. At the time that he chose Van Osdel he chose a young lawyer from down state (Illinois), who until he became President of the United States continued to serve Ogden, Sheldon and Company or affiliated interests. Abraham Lincoln was two years older than Van Osdel; they were equally slight of girth, though Lincoln was a full head taller."

The health of John Mill's wife necessitated his return to New York in 1840, where for a year he edited the building department of the *American*

Mechanic, now the *Scientific American*. But the work proved too confining for him, and the following year he returned to Chicago, abandoning his role as builder to become the first architect per se to practice in that city or in the West.

Sometime prior to 1856, Van Osdel and ten other men signed an extraordinary document for its time. The document is addressed, "To Our Patrons," and reads as follows, "We, the subscribers, in order to establish uniformity in our charges, for services as Architects and Superintendents, have agreed upon the following scale of fees, which we submit, as a fair and equitable compensation for such services, risk and responsibilities." Obviously, from a different day and time, as we would not try this today.

Van Osdel was appointed by the governor to the original board of trustees of the University of Illinois, and when the board organized, he was made chairman of three of its most important committees. As quoted from *The Movement for Industrial Education and the Establishment of the University* (Illinois), by university historian Dr. Burt B. Powell, "John M. Van Osdel, who served as trustee from 1867 to 1873, was a professional architect of many years' practice, and one possessing the confidence and esteem of a state-wide acquaintance. His appointment was a most fortunate one for the young educational enterprise. He well understood the great need of society for educated mechanics and artisans. He knew most thoroughly the inadequacy of any and all existing institutions to supply this need, and entered into the work of installing and setting in

motion the forces which he hoped and believed would fill the long-felt want of society. His professional knowledge and judgment were of the greatest service to the board, fitting up of the building on hand for its best service as well as architect for the buildings that were erected as fast as the legislature furnished the means for their construction."

Van Osdel's original account books, now housed in the Chicago Historical Society archives, cover his work from 1856 until his death. These books contain records of each building, contracts awarded by trades, and the names of the contractors, together with the amount of each contract and record of payments made on each contract as the work progressed. Fortunately these books were preserved by the quick thinking of Van Osdel at the time of the Chicago fire. On that fateful night of October 8, 1871, when Van Osdel saw the flames racing across the sky toward the business section of the city, he hurried from his home to his office, where he gathered as many of his priceless books, papers and records as he could carry. He took them to the Palmer House, which was under construction, and went to the basement where he dug a pit, into which he carefully packed his books, papers and instruments. He covered them with sand two feet deep, and over that placed a thick layer of damp clay. Several days later, from the debris of the Palmer House, he dug up his books and records, which had been preserved by the baked clay he had so carefully tamped down over his precious working materials.

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In addition to the "buried account books," two other literary efforts have survived. One of these was an essay entitled "Extracts, by a Working Man" on behalf of the election of Abraham Lincoln for the presidency in 1860, which he wrote and circulated widely at his own expenses. The other is a series of papers written for *The Inland Architect* entitled *Recollections*, which were published in the 1880's. This was the last serious work from his pen, and gave many quaint descriptions of the early days in the building of Chicago, before and after the fire of 1871.

Although my research is far from complete, I have located only three buildings which are still standing that are examples of his talent. Possibly the most well known in this day and age may be "Old Main" on the University of Arkansas campus. This building is a duplicate of the old "University Hall" at the University of Illinois at Urbana, the first building on the campus which was subsequently demolished. "Old Main" was renovated and rededicated in 1990, and again serves the University with dignity and honor. The University of Arkansas web page at www.uark.edu has a photograph of the campus with the twin towers of "Old Main" shown in the distance. According to 1873 minutes of the Board of Trustees, after learning that John Mills was the architect for the building at Urbana they so admired, a member of the Building Committee traveled to Chicago to visit with Van Osdel. However, upon arriving he was told the plans for the building had been destroyed by the "great fire." Van Osdel then offered to

reproduce the plans for the University for a fee of \$1,000.

Only two of his Chicago works appear to remain standing. One is the Loop End Building at the southeast corner of State and Lake Streets, which was formerly known as the Page Brothers Building (1872). The Lake Street façade is one of the only two remaining cast-iron fronts left in downtown Chicago. The prefabricated cast-iron panels on this building are beautifully detailed, with Van Osdel designing the first ones in Chicago in 1856. The other work of which Van Osdel played an important part in the design is the Holy Family Church (1857-1860) on West Roosevelt Road in Chicago. This is the oldest Jesuit church in Chicago, and is mostly Gothic in style, with some Romanesque influence. The official History of the Parish credits Van Osdel with "its rich interior, lighted from windows of colors seldom excelled in American churches." After closing the church in 1984 due to general deterioration, a massive reconstruction program was undertaken, and the church reopened in 1995. Holy Family was one of only five public buildings to survive the Chicago fire.

Among the many notable old buildings that Van Osdel designed, but which have long since been torn down or destroyed by fire, were the City Hall & Market (1848), Court House (1853-58), Palmer House 1 (1869, Palmer House 2 (1871), Palmer House 3 (1875 - first fire-proof hotel in the West), Kendall Building (1873), Chicago Post Office and Custom House (1879), and the Monon Building (1890). The Monon building was his last work and was

the first modern building in the world to reach 13 stories.

Van Osdel's influence in the early years of Chicago's building was so strong, that after the fire it is reported he was planning and designing buildings that totaled a mile and a half of street frontage. When one looks through the pages of his account books directly after the fire, one observes that his old clients were the first in his office. Among them was Cyrus McCormick. After the Chicago fire Van Osdel was responsible for establishing the grade for the city (minimum building elevation), served as an alderman, was on the city building committee, and drafted and secured the passage of Chicago's first building code. He held several US patents, designed two of the first large steamer ships in Chicago, and designed the first grain elevators erected in Chicago. After Lincoln's assassination, Van Osdel designed the catafalque that carried Lincoln's body through the Chicago streets.

John Mills died on December 21, 1891 in Chicago. His nephew and partner, John Mills Van Osdel, II, carried on the Van Osdel architectural practice after his death until around 1900. He published a book honoring John Mills' work in 1896 with photos and sketches entitled *A Quarter Century of Chicago Architecture*.

An article entitled *Death of Chicago's First Architect*, published in the January 1892 issue of *The Inland Architect*, pays great tribute to John Mills. "He was a gentleman, and of what is termed the "old school." Courtly always, dignified always, and he knew no more of moral than he

did of physical fear. The truth to him was always the truth beyond any suggestions of compromise. He accepted nothing without investigation, and once convinced, he was a loyal supporter of his convictions. Ever anxious that others should have the advantage of his knowledge, he gave the affairs of others the same careful thought that his own received, but was never arbitrary regarding the use of the advice given..... He belonged to an epoch that passed with him, and with his death the scene changes in the history of the nation's architecture. He lived to see the old order change, giving place to new, and the work of a lifetime well completed."

Author - Bud Hopkins is the gg grand-nephew of John Mills Van Osdel. Bud was an active member of the Dallas Chapter for a number of years prior to "retiring" in the early 1990's. Bud is currently a real estate consultant, family historian, and architectural researcher. He has done extensive research on John Mills and this article is a brief overview of the life and accomplishments of this very interesting and long "forgotten" architect.