

Arthur L. Pillsbury (1869-1925)

Arthur L. Pillsbury was born in Bloomington, Illinois on November 29th, 1869. He grew up in Bloomington and attended schools in Normal. His father, William L. Pillsbury, was principal of the Model School at Illinois State Normal University. In 1880 his father became principal at Springfield High School and his family then moved to Springfield. Arthur graduated from Springfield High School in 1888.

After graduating high school, he attended Harvard University and graduated in 1892 with a degree in Engineering.¹ He then moved back to Illinois to attend the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. At the same time, his family was also living in Urbana because his father was a registrar at U of I. Arthur played on the University's baseball team and on its first football team. In 1890 U of I became the first university to offer a four year degree in architecture. Arthur graduated with a degree in architecture in 1895. He continued to attend sporting events at his Alma Mater and remained a loyal U of I alumnus and generous benefactor of the University throughout his entire life. After graduation, Arthur traveled to Chicago, Toledo, Buffalo, and New York where he worked for a short time and explored the architectural works of these cities.

Illinois was the first state to require architects to have a license. In 1897 the head of U of I's architecture program, Nathan Ricker, along with Dankmar Adler, moved the Architectural Registration Act through the Illinois legislature. This act would require architects to be licensed. This act was the foundation to widespread architectural licensing throughout the United States. During the first year of licensing, "any Illinois resident who could prove that he was a practicing architect was granted an Illinois license." Pillsbury became one of the first architects to become licensed in Illinois at that time. The following year, 1898, the state tightened up its requirements for granting architectural licenses by instituting an Architect's Registration Board exam and the first exam was given that year.² That same year Pillsbury settled in Bloomington and partnered with Herman Evans, a local architect. Arthur, however, became Bloomington's first architect with a university degree.³

Along with beginning a new work partnership, he married Daisy Deane Hill on November 9th, 1898. She was the daughter of a prominent Bloomington doctor, Dr. William Hill. The wedding took place at the home of her parents at 109 East Olive Street. The Rev. S. A. McKay pronounced the ceremony. This was a small ceremony with only close friends and family in attendance.⁴ After their wedding, they resided with Daisy's parents and continued to live there even after both her father and mother died. They had one daughter, Frances H. Pillsbury.

Pillsbury's career really took off after the Great Fire of 1900 in Bloomington. On June 19th, 1900 within eight hours, 45 buildings and four and a half city blocks were burnt to the ground.⁵ Arthur, along with architects George Miller and Paul Moratz, were given the opportunity to rebuild the entire downtown area. The three architects developed "harmonious" designs to rebuild the new Downtown Bloomington. A classical design was chosen because it

¹ Henry and Elsie Rathburn Withey. *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (deceased)*. (Los Angeles : New Age Pub., 1956) 474

² Exhibit text for "A Passion for Detail: The Architectural Legacy of A.L.Pillsbury" 2010

³ Carl Ekberg, Ann Malone, William Walter. *The Legacy: A Historical Survey of Architecture in the Town of Normal*. (Normal: Town of Normal, 1990) 59

⁴ "Chrysanthemum Wedding," *The Pantagraph*, November 10, 1898

⁵ Bill Kemp, "Bloomington's 'Great Fire' of 1900 quickly swept through 45 buildings," *The Pantagraph*, June 14, 2008

was very popular after the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. The rebuilding of downtown was finished after only 18 months. Arthur's designs for the new city center established his reputation as a fine architect.

In the first few years after the fire Pillsbury designed over a dozen new buildings for downtown Bloomington. Those buildings included the Griesheim Building (1900) located at 217-221 North Main street, the McGregor Building (1901) at 311 N. Main Street, the Schroeder Building (1903) at 316 N. Main Street, the Cole Brothers Building (1900) at 213-215 North Main street, and the Braley-Field Building (1900) at the south-west corner of Jefferson and Center streets.⁶

Pillsbury's architecture business grew very large during his career. To this day, Pillsbury continues to be well known for the buildings he designed in Bloomington-Normal, McLean Co., and other towns outside the county. While most of the buildings he designed were private residences, he also designed churches, schools, businesses, barns, and other buildings. He designed homes in every popular architectural style of the period. His clients need only to tell him what was wanted and what they could afford, and he created a design to suit.⁷ During his career he designed and renovated approximately 16 garages, 17 banks, 22 barns, 32 churches, 73 businesses, 104 schools, 435 homes, and numerous other types of buildings. Today, 110 of the homes Pillsbury designed in Bloomington-Normal remain standing. Some of his Bloomington-Normal designs include: the Christian Science Church, the Congregational Church, the Ensenberger Building, the sixth floor addition to the Illinois House Building, the Bloomington Country Club, several buildings at Illinois Wesleyan University, Kelso Sanitarium, Normal's Masonic Temple, and People's Bank. He also designed the boyhood home of Adlai Stevenson II, located at 1316 Washington Street in Bloomington, built in 1900.

Pillsbury was also known for the schools which he built and designed. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, attitudes towards education were beginning to change dramatically. In the 19th century, secondary education (high school) was "only considered suitable for those who because of social and economic status or by virtue of intellectual superiority and ambition, could look forward to higher professions and to careers of leadership."⁸ By the turn of the century, a more progressive and democratic outlook on education was being formed. The idea was that society as a whole would benefit from everyone receiving higher education (like high school) regardless of social class, ethnicity, or culture and that schools were to become a more effective agency for which this change would be made.⁹ These changes included students receiving a high school education which would include vocational training in agriculture and trades. Also, these new ideas on education would break from "the traditional pedagogy of drill, discipline and didactic exercises in the classroom."¹⁰ Instead, students would be taught "to understand the relationship between thinking and doing" which would help them become active and contributing members of a democratic society. This form of education would require that

⁶ "A Passion for Detail: The Architectural Legacy of A.L. Pillsbury"

⁷ "A Passion for Detail: The Architectural Legacy of A.L. Pillsbury"

⁸ I.L. Kandel, ed. *Twenty-five years of American Education*. (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1924) 266

⁹ *The John Dewey Project on Progressive Education*. "A Brief Overview of Progressive Education."

<http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/articles/proged.html> 1

¹⁰ "Progressive Education- Philosophical Foundations, Pedagogical Progressivism, Administrative Progressivism, Life-Adjustment Progressivism," <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2336/Progressive-Education.html> 2

schools be divided into “classrooms and space for auditoriums, shops, laboratories, and playground areas.”¹¹

These changes resulted in a need for additional or larger schools to be constructed throughout the United States that would reflect this new democratic view of education. Pillsbury came to be called upon for designing many new school buildings in downstate Illinois. His knowledge of school issues and needs, because his father worked in the education field, made him a prime candidate for many communities needing a new school. All of his schools included “specialized classrooms used to teach vocational skills as well as combination gymnasium/auditoriums.” His schools were also gathering places for the communities in which they were built, “serving as symbols of the new democratic view of education.”¹²

For many years, he served as architect of the Bloomington City Board of Education (today known as District 87), and was in charge of planning and building five schools in town.¹³ Those schools were Bloomington High School, Irving Elementary, Emerson School, Jefferson School, and Horatio G. Bent School.¹⁴ Today, Bent Elementary School is still used by District 87. Of the above schools, the one he was most known for in Bloomington was the old Bloomington High School. It opened in 1915 and was located at 500-510 East Washington Street.¹⁵ The Bloomington School Board asked Arthur to design the new high school to allow for areas for “teaching of woodworking, domestic science (sewing and cooking), printing, bookkeeping and stenography (writing shorthand).”¹⁶ He designed it as a brick structure in the style of a 17th century English manor house. The building was also coined the “half-million-dollar-High School.”

One of the last buildings Arthur designed during his career was the Ensenberger Building, located at 212 North Center Street. This English Gothic Style building was completed in May of 1926, however, Arthur died six months before it was finished. The building cost \$250,000 at the time of construction, which in 2008 would be an estimated cost of \$3.1 million. When the building was finished, an estimated 40,000 people visited it during the first week it was open including people from California and New York.

Arthur’s work was favorably viewed by others state wide. Lorado Taft, the famed sculptor, commented that “I have never met Mr. Pillsbury but I have seen much of his handiwork. He has done more to beautify the various communities of Illinois where his school buildings are located than any other one man.”¹⁷ This comment was the highest honor that Pillsbury ever received. *The Daily Pantagraph* also called Pillsbury “the ideal architect, conscientious and insisting that his clients be given the value received. No details escaped him, even the minor ones.”¹⁸

He had many friends in the community and he was very involved in social organizations including: being a member of Second Presbyterian Church, the Freemasons, American Institute of Architects, the Bloomington Country Club, his college fraternity, Sigma Chi, and the University of Illinois alumni association. He was also an active member of the community. He

¹¹ Progressive Education- Philosophical Foundations, Pedagogical Progressivism, Administrative Progressivism, Life-Adjustment Progressivism,” 2-4

¹² “A Passion for Detail: The Architectural Legacy of A.L.Pillsbury”

¹³ Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (deceased)*, 474

¹⁴ “Board of Education Voices Tribute to A.L. Pillsbury,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 13, 1925

¹⁵ *Bloomington and Normal Illinois City Directory*, 1917, 139

¹⁶ Don Munson and Greg Koos. *History You Can See*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1991) 78

¹⁷ “Hundreds pay tribute at funeral rites for Arthur Low Pillsbury,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 28, 1925

¹⁸ “Arthur L. Pillsbury Meets Tragic Death When Car Overturms,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 26, 1925.

donated his and his associates' services to designing the Home Sweet Home City Mission building in Bloomington. In honor of his services and generosity, his picture was placed in the new mission's hall. He also donated his time as the McLean County Chairman for the State Council of Defense. With this position, he was responsible for insuring that non-essential construction projects did not draw supplies that would otherwise be used for the war effort during World War I.¹⁹

Tragically, Pillsbury's life came to a startling halt on the night of October 24th, 1925. He was attending an Illinois vs. Michigan game in Champaign with some friends. On the way back to Bloomington, a broken steering knuckle caused the automobile they were traveling in to plunge down an embankment and turn over. Arthur was thrown out of the car and the car came to rest upon his chest. He was crushed by the weight of the automobile and was pronounced dead at the scene. Others in the car were badly injured as well but they eventually recovered. His funeral was held at First Baptist Church, which was filled to capacity with friends of Arthur and his wife Daisy. Both Rev. Charles Durden from First Baptist Church and Rev. Charles T. Baillie from Second Presbyterian Church gave the eulogy.²⁰ *The Daily Pantagraph* reported that all work was suspended on all the public buildings planned by Pillsbury that were being constructed at the time of his death. He was laid to rest in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Lisa Dretske, October 14, 2009

¹⁹ Edward Pierson. *McLean County, Illinois, in the World War, 1917-1918*. (Bloomington: McLean County War Publishing Company, 1921) 367

²⁰ "Hundreds pay tribute at funeral rites for Arthur Low Pillsbury," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 28, 1925