

## **Paul O. Moratz: Architect of Bloomington's Past**

Paul O. Moratz (1866–1939) was a talented architect who left a lasting mark on Bloomington, Illinois. He designed homes, schools, libraries, concert halls, and even hospitals. Some of his buildings were grand mansions for wealthy families, while others were simple homes for working-class people. Although many of his creations have been torn down, others still stand today, inspiring admiration and curiosity about who built them—just as Moratz had hoped.

### **Early Life and Family**

Paul was born on April 14, 1866, in Granwitz, Posen, Germany. He was the oldest of seven children. His father, Herman Moratz, was a skilled carpenter who learned the trade from his own father. Herman also served in the Austro-Prussian War in 1866 as part of the Pionier Corps—soldiers trained in construction and engineering.

After the war, Herman decided to move to the United States for a better life. In 1867, he arrived in the U.S., and in 1868, he settled in Bloomington, Illinois. The next year, he sent for his wife Emelie and young Paul to join him. At the time, Bloomington was booming thanks to the growth of the Chicago and Alton Railroad.

### **Growing Up and Learning the Trade**

As a boy, Paul went to both German and English schools. He also worked in his father's carpentry shop, which was first in a shed behind their home on South Main Street. By 1884, Herman opened a larger shop across the street. There, Paul learned the skills of carpentry and architectural drawing.

Eager to improve his knowledge, Paul wanted to study how buildings were designed in America. Around age 19, he found out about the Illinois Industrial School (now the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). His parents supported his dream, and he set off for school, carrying a chest filled with tools and clothes.

### **Working Through School**

Paul paid his own way through college by taking on small carpentry jobs. In one story he later shared, he fixed a broken door and made alterations to a shaving mug case at a barber shop in exchange for free haircuts for the remainder of the school year. He also did some work for a tailor, who then provided free cleaning and repairs for his clothes. Paul joked that this made him the “foxiest student” at school.

Records show that he studied architecture between 1888 and 1889, and possibly graduated with the class of 1892. After finishing his education, he passed the state architecture exam with high honors and returned to Bloomington.

### **Building a Career**

Back in Bloomington, Paul worked with his father and took over managing the planing mill. He began advertising as a designer and manufacturer of verandahs, doors, furniture, and more. This was during the peak of the Queen Anne style in architecture, and business was booming.

In 1892, Paul designed homes for several important locals, including a large house for brickmaker John Van Schoick. This house at 103 West Wood Street stood for almost 100 years until it was torn down in 1991 to make way for a gas station.

## **Family Life**

On December 28, 1893, Paul married Emma Riebsame, the daughter of German immigrants. They moved into a home Paul designed at 105 West Wood Street, later moving into two other homes—also designed by Paul—on the same street. They had two sons, Roland and Armin, and were active members of the Unitarian Universalist Church.

In 1896, Paul designed another house at 302 West Wood Street for William Van Schoick, vice-president of Rankin Brick Yard and former owner and operator of the Bloomington Pork Packing Plant. The house still stands today, though it has been heavily modified over the years.

## **Becoming a Licensed Architect**

In 1897, Illinois became the first state to require architects to be licensed. Because Paul had been practicing for years, he didn't need to take the exam. He received his license on December 17, 1897, after paying a \$25 fee.

That same year, Paul opened his own architecture office at 101 East Front Street in downtown Bloomington, later moving to the First National Bank Building on North Main Street.

## **The White Place Neighborhood**

One of Paul's most famous projects was in the White Place neighborhood, created by builder Samuel White. White wanted to design a modern, suburban-style neighborhood. He hired Paul to design his own house at 27 White Place, a Queen Anne style home with Dutch Colonial and Romanesque features.

Paul also designed the iron gates at the entrance to White Place, inspired by a similar design in St. Louis. The gates, which still stand today, are made of stone with iron lettering spelling out "White's Place" and the year 1898.

## **Making Architecture Accessible**

In 1899, Paul published a book called *Up-To-Date Homes*, which featured building plans that were affordable and stylish. He wanted to help everyday families build beautiful, comfortable homes. His designs used materials from his planing mill and could be customized.

Homes built using these designs included:

- 518 East Chestnut Street (1898)
- 807 South Main Street (1898)
- 909 South Center Street (1895)
- 1107 East Monroe Street (1898)

Paul also published a monthly magazine called *Artistic Homes*, which showed real houses built from his designs, with descriptions and cost estimates. It also featured ads for local businesses that offered services related to home construction.

## **A Grand Estate**

In 1906, Paul designed a mansion for Bird and Margaret Van Leer at 1301 South Fell Avenue in Normal, IL. The house, named “Broadview” because of its hilltop view, had 22 rooms and a special covered entrance for carriages. In 1949, Margaret left the estate to the Immanuel Bible Foundation, which still uses the home today as a music and arts center.

## **An Architect of Many Designs**

Paul Moratz didn’t just design houses—he worked on many different buildings during his career. These included libraries, office buildings, churches, bridges, and more.

On June 5, 1897, Moratz was hired to build an addition to Withers Public Library. The project cost \$5,020 and used iron beams and a tin roof.

In 1893, he designed a new building for St. Patrick’s Church on West Locust Street. Four years later, he designed the home for the church’s priests next door. This two-story brick building had 11 rooms, finished in oak wood and decorated walls. In 1902, he designed a school next to that house. It had two stories, with four classrooms on the first floor that each fit 50–60 students. The second floor had a big hall for 500–600 people and a stage for plays. The church and priest’s home still stand today, but the school was torn down in 1969.

1902 was a very busy year for Moratz. That summer, he designed a school and convent for St. Mary’s Catholic parish in Pontiac. It had three stories, with a stone first floor and a brick upper part. That fall, construction finished on another church he designed for St. John’s parish in Fairbury, Illinois. It was made of bright red brick with stone and a tall spire. The inside was finished in oak and had room for 350–500 people. A beautiful stained-glass ceiling was added. The church cost about \$15,000 back then (about \$417,000 in 2015) and is still in use today.

In November 1902, Moratz’s design was picked for the new Edwards School (801-810 West Market Street) in Bloomington. It had a classic style, with space for 800–1,000 students and an auditorium for everyone on the third floor. The outside was yellow brick with stone details, and the roof was slate. The entrance had tall columns, and there were two square towers on the roof. Inside, classrooms had windows along the walls, closets for teachers, and separate wardrobes for boys and girls. The halls were wide enough to hold all the students, and fresh air systems were planned for every room.

In February 1903, Moratz finished the final blueprints. But the school board rejected the first round of bids because they were too expensive—more than \$55,000 (about \$1.5 million today). Moratz made changes to save money, and eventually, F.M. Garthwait won the bid at \$51,421. Construction began in July, and two local girls, Kitty Mahaffey and Maude Kirkman, laid the first brick.

By spring 1904, the school was almost finished. It was called one of the best school buildings in Illinois. The final version had some changes, like a smaller auditorium (700–800 seats) and updated classrooms with separate entrances for boys and girls. The basement had science rooms, playrooms, and restrooms.

The school had modern features for its time, like a heating and ventilation system that used fans and steam to bring in fresh air. Each room had a thermostat, and a telephone system replaced the old bell system. The total cost was about \$65,000 (about \$1.8 million in 2015). Edwards School opened in fall 1904 and operated until 1969. It was later used for other things until it burned down in 1984. The site today is home to Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church.

Moratz's most famous project was the Coliseum, built in 1898. It was located at Front Street and West Street. It was a big red-brick building with iron supports and a roof almost 60 feet high. It could hold up to 5,000 people. Though construction was delayed, it opened on December 27 with a band concert. The building helped bring events and visitors to Bloomington, and many people were proud of Moratz's design.

The Coliseum hosted all kinds of events—dog shows, concerts, theater, car shows, and even a “Corn Palace” made of corn and plants in 1915 and 1916. It became a bowling alley in 1938 and was torn down in 1961.

After a major fire destroyed part of downtown Bloomington in June 1900, Moratz and two other local architects, George Miller and Arthur Pillsbury, were hired to help rebuild. They used classical designs, which were popular at the time. Moratz's best-known design from this project was the Klemm Building on West Jefferson Street.

Moratz also designed a bridge in Miller Park (1,000 block of South Summit Street) using leftover materials from the old McLean County courthouse that had burned down in the fire. The bridge had a cast iron arch and used stone from the destroyed county courthouse. It made the park more beautiful and used pieces from a sad part of the city's history.

Moratz also became known for designing many Carnegie Libraries—libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie, a wealthy businessman. Between 1897 and 1914, Moratz designed at least 28 libraries, most of them in Illinois and nearby Midwestern states. These libraries helped small towns grow and gave people a chance to learn.

Carnegie decided to support libraries because he believed in giving others the same chances he had. As a boy in Scotland and later in America, he loved reading and wanted others to have that same chance. Towns had to promise to take care of the libraries and to help sustain them

financially if they wanted Carnegie's money. Moratz's first Carnegie Library was built in 1897 in Loda, Illinois.

Moratz later designed libraries in places like Pekin, Fairbury, El Paso, Paxton, and Tuscola in Illinois, and in towns in Michigan, Kansas, Indiana, and Tennessee. Two other libraries were designed by his former employee, A.T. Simmons.

After 34 years as an architect, Moratz focused more on his woodworking business. In 1905, he built a large new factory called the Acme Planing Mill. It grew fast and had up to 80 workers. But in 1925, the mill burned down. The fire started in the drying room where wood was stored. The fire spread quickly, and the loss was estimated at \$120,000 (about \$1.6 million in 2015).

Moratz decided to rebuild. This time, he focused on producing a special type of read-to-install hardwood flooring that he invented and received a patent for in 1934. He built a new one-story factory that was bigger and more modern.

In 1931, another fire hit the mill. Thanks to a fireproof wall Moratz had added, only part of the building was destroyed. He rebuilt again and ran the factory until his death in 1939.

## **Legacy**

Paul O. Moratz dedicated his life to architecture and design, making a lasting impact on Bloomington and the surrounding areas. He worked in many styles and created buildings for people of all income levels. Some of his works have been lost to time, but many still stand as reminders of his creativity and skill.

Paul Moratz died on March 4, 1939, at the age of 78. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Many of the buildings he designed still stand today. His work helped shape Bloomington and nearby towns, leaving a lasting legacy.