

Cass Gilbert

Architect (1859 – 1934)



I remember when I was negotiating a contract with Secretary Mellon for the Post Office Building in Washington, seeing Cass Gilbert at breakfast at the Metropolitan Club. I had been offered what I felt was a rather low fee. I approached the great architect and said I was going to ask a very impertinent question which he need not answer, but that it would help me if I knew how much he was receiving as commission on the Supreme Court Building. "Not at all, not at all: six per cent, with all the engineering fees extra. I told them I could not be bothered for less. Here's the contract," said he, pulling it out of his pocket. "You see, it is signed by all nine Justices."

WILLIAM ADAMS DELANO

Gilbert was born in Ohio and, at the age of nine, moved to St. Paul, Minnesota after his father died. He dropped out of Macalester College, attended MIT for a year, before spending a year in Europe. He then worked as STANFORD WHITE's assistant at his firm before starting a practice in St. Paul. He designed a number of railroad stations and buildings in the upper Midwest before his break-through commission of the U.S. Custom House in New York City in 1899. He moved there that year and followed that with plans for the Union Club and the New York Life Insurance Company Building. For the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, he designed what is now the St. Louis Art Museum.

Gilbert executed libraries in Detroit, New Haven and St. Louis, the State Universities of Minnesota and Texas, and the state capitols of West Virginia, Minnesota and Arkansas. His design for the George Washington Bridge was later greatly modified, but the support towers are his. In 1913, he achieved a national reputation with the Woolworth Building, long the world's tallest and still considered one of the finest early skyscrapers.

He completed many projects in Washington D.C. including the Supreme Court and Chamber of Commerce buildings, and he was on the design committee that guided and eventually approved the modernist design of Manhattan's groundbreaking Rockefeller Center.

Proposed by fellow architects WILLIAM MEAD and THOMAS HASTINGS, Gilbert was elected to the Club at the last monthly meeting of the 19th Century and remained a Centurion for 35 years. Upon his death in England, the *London Times* wrote, "The list of his most important buildings would only be long enough to prove him the most remarkable architect of his generation in America."

Cass and his wife Julia Finch had four children: Emily, Elizabeth, Julia, and CASS GILBERT JR., who also became an architect. He completed work on the Supreme Court Building after his father's death.