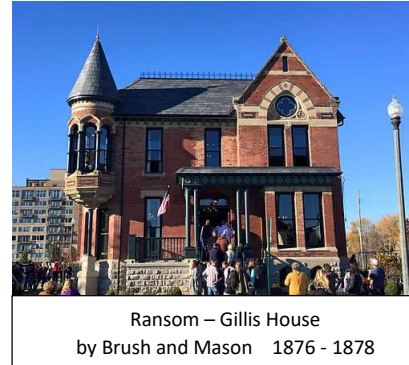


A Brief Essay on the Origins of City Hall, Marine City and the Style of Its Design.  
Judy White

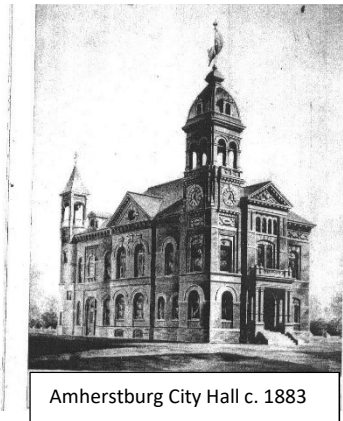
George Dewitt Mason was born in New York on July 4, 1856 and began working as an architectural assistant in 1876. His parents had moved to Detroit in 1870 and it was during his high school years that he developed a deep interest in architecture. The assistant job was working with architect Henry T. Brush on the design and construction of the Ransom-Gillis House on Alfred Street in Detroit. It is most unusual that such a young man, lacking a college degree, would be given name credit on the drawings.

The Ransom Gillis House was designed in Venetian Gothic style. European historic architectural styles were the dominant influence in American architecture then. Neither Brush or Mason had been to Europe. Instead they studied design books that illustrated old styles and contemporary decorative motifs based on ancient influences.



Ransom – Gillis House  
by Brush and Mason 1876 - 1878

George Mason formed a partnership with architect Zachariah Rice in 1878. From Mason's diary, now housed in the Burton Collection, DPL, we learn that Mason was the outgoing partner traveling the metro area, going to cities of the river district as far as Port Huron and to western Ontario meeting potential clients and overseeing projects. Young, energetic, friendly and gregarious, Mason landed contracts for barns, houses, factories and government buildings. He traveled by Inter Urban railway and ship. His diary recounts a day when he left his office in Detroit in early morning, rode the electric rail line up to Port Huron, saw clients, had lunch in St. Clair with contacts, got to Marine City late afternoon for more meetings and then found a ship heading for Detroit and steamed home that evening.



Amherstburg City Hall c. 1883

He designed a structure which he called the "salt block" in his notes and it must have been part of the attempts to create a salt mining industry in Marine Village. This project, and probably others we know nothing about, gave him influential contacts with business men and politicians in Marine Village. It was that way in Canada too for he was commissioned to design the Amherstburg City Hall in August of 1883. That structure had round arches, twin towers, projecting pediments and a windowed basement. Now demolished, this surviving illustration suggests a brick structure with lavish stone embellishments in a refined, Romanesque revival style. Further research in Amherstburg is warranted to learn more about this building and Mason's development as a designer.

In 1870 the Village of Marine government acquired the former Newport Academy building and had it moved from a spot one block away to its present location. It was a sturdy, 1847, post, beam and dowel building constructed from local hardwoods. It was repurposed as the Village Hall (now the Pride and Heritage Museum). The main floor was used for council meetings and a court room. The basement

housed the police station and jail. It served the village well for over a decade but the village was growing, local industry was booming, and village leaders knew they had to expand. They also wanted to make a statement with a big, brick, stylish building that could speak of growing wealth and prestige. Discussion moved forward in 1882. They selected city owned property known as The Park (now 300 Broadway) as the location for a new town hall and asked that the property be measured and examined for suitability.



In December of 1883 council members reached agreement with Mason for the design of a new town hall. Mason noted in his diary that he committed to produce the drawings quickly. Construction began in the spring of 1884. Mason left for Europe in June. It was his first trip there and it would have great influence on his development as an architect. It is assumed Zachariah Rice covered for Mason during his absence.

It should be noted that the original design and construction did not include indoor plumbing, electricity or natural gas service. Heat was supplied by cast iron pot belly stoves burning wood or perhaps coal. There are no indications the building ever used gaslight and before electricity was brought into the building oil lamps would have been used for illumination.

Although many have looked, no architectural drawings for City Hall have been found. Very odd and unusual, George Mason's professional files were not preserved. Compounding this dearth of information, there are maybe a dozen known 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of the outside of the building and only two of the interior. No evidence of a horse barn has been found on the property and no evidence of the location of the outhouse.

The original building measures 45' wide by 90' long. The majority of the building rises from a 'Michigan' or windowed basement putting the main floor about four and a half feet above grade level. The west end of the building housed the fire department and sits at ground level. A hand drawn pumper was originally parked there behind carriage doors. Anecdotal evidence says the police department was moved to this location in the 1940's but it may have been based there from the beginning. Court proceedings and city council meetings were held up a half flight of stairs in the great room on the main floor. City offices or departments were housed in two or perhaps three rooms off the north side of the great room. That possible third room is now a jail with multiple cells. The jail can be accessed from the great room and from a door at ground level on the north façade. That space has not been studied yet so there is probably more to learn.

The second floor Opera House is the diamond in the crown of City Hall. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was more seemly to refer to an entertainment facility as an opera house thus connoting refinement. It suggested there weren't going to be vulgar burlesque road companies invading the community. All over Michigan cities and towns built buildings that combined city government with an opera house. A famous and well preserved example is found in Calumet, Michigan. Sometimes the Opera House was an independent structure and business like the Howell Opera House.

Having this entertainment space upstairs made City Hall the hub of the political and social life in Marine City for decades. Anecdotal evidence suggests the Opera House was a place for dances, parties,

concerts and even some movies up until the 1950's. The floor space was used for a while as a gym and when that ceased it became a storage facility. Although sad it meant that no structural changes were made in the room. This part of the building is the most original, most authentic of all.

The oddity in the floor plan of City Hall is the space we call the mezzanine. Mezzanine means a low ceilinged story that is found between two regular stories of a building. In City Hall a series of small rooms exist over the top of the fire hall and underneath the stage. From 1924 to approximately 1948 fireman Walker Furtaw and his family lived in those rooms. He was also the building custodian. His son William Furtaw was born there.

In the 1930's the city expanded City Hall by building an addition on the west end of the building to house more police and fire personnel and vehicles. This flat roofed addition was done in an Art Deco style with a parapet or crenellated design at the top of the walls. All first floor windows on the west end of the original building were lost. Roof leaks prompted the addition of a hipped roof in later decades. The parapet design was cut off the tops of the walls to accommodate the new roof. The new roof also covered the second story windows on the west end of the original building.

#### The Architectural Style:

Throughout Europe and the Americas architecture of the nineteenth century is marked by a passionate resurrection of famous historical styles drawn from ancient Egypt up through the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These designs might be called neo-classic or Greek Revival, neo-Gothic or Gothic Revival and so forth. Some architects engaged in revivalism did so with unique creativity that became quite influential. In the United States the architect Henry Hobson Richardson of New York was inspired by Romanesque style. Romanesque means 'Roman like' or 'in the Roman way' and makes reference to the fact that builders of 800 A.D. and after had relearned the ancient Roman technology of building round arches, barrel or tunnel vaults, and groin vaults. What we call the Romanesque period lasted from c. 800 till about 1150



Allegheny Court House  
by H.H. Richardson 1888

A.D. Surviving examples of the style are found in churches and castles. There is a heavy, strong look to such structures with a great sense of mass and a repetitive use of round arches for doors and windows which tend to be small openings in very thick walls.

Richardson's Romanesque inspired designs began to capture great public attention by 1872 when he designed Trinity Church that sits in Boston's Copley Square. The name Richardson Romanesque (also expressed as Richardsonian Romanesque) was born then. George Dewitt Mason, like so many other American architects, was influenced by Richardson and we see that in his designs for Amherstburg, Marine City, Belle Isle Police Station, Cass Avenue Methodist Church, First Presbyterian Church, Woodward and others.

That Romanesque quality of City Hall begins right at sidewalk level with the use of rusticated limestone. It is given that description because of the rough, i.e. rustic, surface which looks strong. Rising from these rusticated stone bases are five projecting arches that march across the façade. Rusticated limestone is used as accent points in several places on the building. The brick work is meant to look strong and thick and as a matter of fact, although unseen, the walls are four wyths thick (4 bricks). It is said the bricks were manufactured in Marine City from clay mined from a pit on Degurse Street. The

brick kiln was located on property along Belle River Road. A small brick business office for the brick firing still existed there as of 2010.

Doors and windows of the first floor follow the round arch theme with a variation of rectangular windows above and below. It wouldn't be Romanesque without towers and City Hall has two. Based on some sketches in his notebook Mason may have intended the south west tower, nicknamed the hose tower, to feature a clock. That tower maintains the theme of round arched and rectangular windows. It is a fact that firemen hung their fire hoses in that tower to dry after a fire run. The two story wood drying rack is still there. Flanking that tower on the east side is a covered porch, with balcony above, sheltering two entrances to the building. The south east tower projects from the corner of the building and creates a covered porch for an entrance. A second story balcony echoes the hose tower balcony. That tower concludes with an observatory like tiny room that is akin to a miniature third floor. The tower is capped by a bell roof that used to sport a balustrade and decorated lightning rod.

The east façade centers on the flight of stairs and double doors bringing you into the foyer and the grand double staircase that ascends to the Opera House. A ground level door was added to the left at some point which destroyed a window. The limestone lintel still survives. One of the most charming windows of the entire building is to the right of the staircase. This little window is topped by a miniature version of a pure Roman arch having two springers at the bottom, two voussoirs (angled blocks) above that and topped by a large keystone.



The large array of windows on the second level serve to bring a good deal of light into the second floor landing and entrance to the Opera House. They also light the staircase up to the Opera House balcony. A new brick pattern is introduced at the top of the north east corner. A projecting, stepped brick pattern brings a textured emphasis to the peak here and seems to suggest a third tower too. The ocular (round) window in that peak is the only one of its kind in the building.

The north wall of the building does not carry any decorative work and was treated as an unimportant back of the building, sort of the backyard façade. That is a bit convenient for the modern era restorer as it provides a place for the installation of necessary machinery like air conditioning units.

When City Hall was finished certain councilmen quibbled about the quality of construction that had been done by Morley and Bower Company of Marine City. When Mason returned from Europe councilmen sought his opinion on the matter. He returned to Marine City and toured the building. He then reported to the council that the building was constructed correctly and was very sound. Bower and Morley sent him the picture seen below and it is now in the Burton Collection with other Mason materials.

Mason and Rice would continue as partners till 1888. Mason would head his own firm from then on. He would develop a stable of very capable architects. One of whom, hired in 1885 at the age of 16, was the soon to be famous Albert Kahn. The staff photo seen below is dated 1888 and may have been taken to commemorate the new firm. There is no evidence that Mason ever came back to Marine City. With an illustrious and long career Mason ultimately became known as the Dean of Detroit Architects. He died in 1948 at age 91.





This picture is part of the Detroit Publishing photo collection. Written on the back: "Draughting Room, July 30, 1888, 80 Griswold St. – Staff. Chas. Kotting, Mrs. B. Stratton, Geo. W. Nettleton, R. Arthur Bailey, Joe Webber, Albert Kahn, Francis Brown, Beden, Theo Laiss, Jean Hackett, Me? (G.D. Mason)"



This picture is in the George Mason file of personal effects in the Burton Collection, Detroit Public Library. Written on the back: "Marine City Town Hall – 1884 – compliments of Morley and Bower" Stamped on the back: "W.M. Courliss, photographer" The picture measures 4.75" X 8"