

Capitol of Light

THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE



OUR CAPITOL:

THE ORIGINAL ARCHITECTS

They were a partnership made in architectural heaven: John E. Tourtellotte, the brilliant designer and savvy promoter; and Charles F. Hummel, the classically trained architect and civil engineer.

Each provided what the other needed; in fact, you could say that Hummel brought structural strength to Tourtellotte's visionary ideas.

Today you might be inclined to use the phrase "right brain/left brain" to describe these two. Together, they created some of Idaho's remarkable buildings, including Boise's Carnegie Library and St. John's Cathedral, as well as the University of Idaho's Administration Building.

And they designed Idaho's iconic and stately Capitol.



A young Charles Hummel with his grandfather and original architect Charles Hummel.

The grandson of Charles Hummel, himself an architect and another Charles, put it this way: "Tourtellotte was the promoter, the visionary. He knew how to get work, and he knew how to talk. He was a designer of some capability. His tastes were pretty Victorian, rather ornate. My grandfather, who was classically trained as an architect in Germany, understood construction thoroughly, and he brought to the firm the classicizing side."

Tourtellotte moved to Boise in 1890. By 1903, he had formed J.E. Tourtellotte & Company. Hummel came to Boise in 1895 and joined the firm in 1903. Eventually, the world would come to know them as the architectural firm of Tourtellotte & Hummel.

For our documentary, we asked actor M.A. Taylor to play the role of John Tourtellotte; and we found our actor an old fashioned Dictaphone, which was in vogue at the turn of the century.

"My grandfather called it a 'talking machine,'" says

grandson Charles Hummel. "The only person in the office who really used it in those days was Tourtellotte. That was his forte. He really knew how to promote and how to talk and how to get people to visualize buildings."

It was with the help of his "talking machine" that Tourtellotte composed his essays emphasizing the importance of light to good government.

Even though Tourtellotte and Hummel were well known to Boise residents, getting the commission to design Idaho's new capitol was not a slam dunk for the firm. They first had to beat out eighteen other architects from Idaho and back east. And it was not a unanimous vote by the Idaho Capitol Commission back in 1905. Governor Gooding wanted someone else. But finally, on the third ballot, Tourtellotte and Hummel prevailed.

Perhaps it was the emphasis on light that tipped the scale.

With Hummel by his side to give him a thumbs up or thumbs down on whether his drawings would actually stand up, Tourtellotte designed a capitol with light as its hallmark.

The building was to be flooded with light from skylights, and the interior would reflect light from stark white walls and light-colored marble. Color, when he used it, would pop.

Hummel's grandson has noticed. "Tourtellotte loved skylights, and that white marble and the white colored scagliola flooded with light is one of the real achievements of this capitol."

Or, as Tourtellotte himself wrote: "If the people are well balanced in their ideal and understand... that the great white light of conscience must be allowed to shine and by its interior illumination make clear the path of duty... then this Capitol truly represents the Commonwealth of Idaho."



John Tourtellotte in the dome of the Capitol.



M.A. Taylor as John Tourtellotte.



John Tourtellotte.

Photos courtesy: Idaho State Historical Society

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