

The Contribution of Icarian, Alfred Piquenard, to Architecture in Iowa and Illinois

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THE QUESTION HAS OFTEN been raised: what became of the Icarians? In addition, some persons have asked: what contribution have the Icarians made to our American Way of Life?

When the various Icarian colonies disbanded, many of the members followed their original trade and opened many types of shops in neighboring cities. Others purchased land and became farmers. With the emphasis on education in the colonies, the majority entered various professions. They became teachers, artists, physicians, lawyers, or entered politics. One member of the original group, Alfred H. Piquenard, followed his calling of architecture.

In this essay I shall endeavor to answer to simple questions. Who was the Icarian, Alfred H. Piquenard? And what was his contribution to the architecture of the Midwest?

Alfred H. Piquenard was born in 1826 near the town of Bernay in the Department of Eure, France, a few miles northwest of Paris and south of Rouen. His father was a builder and in easy circumstances. At an early age young Piquenard was sent to Paris to be educated at l'Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures,¹ where he gained distinction by his industry

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1. Letter from Professor Jacques Ranciere, an Icarian scholar in Paris, October 12, 1985, who found that at the time Piquenard studied architecture in France there was a radical change in the method of teaching architecture from a strictly theoretical approach to one of practical application of essential principles. The school Piquenard attended was created in 1825 and became very successful in its approach. This method is now pursued today in most schools in France. F. H. Bosworth, Jr. and Roy Quids Jones in *A Study of Architectural Schools* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932) report that the first course in architecture offered in the United States was at M.I.T. in Boston in 1865 followed by the University of Illinois in 1868, Cornell University in 1871, and Columbia University in 1881. Many American students of architecture studied in Paris and were influenced by French methods.

and talent. He had a record of many achievements early in his career including building a railroad in France.

While in Paris Piquenard became a follower of Etienne Cabet, a member of the Chamber of Deputies who received 95,885 votes for the presidency of France in May 1849 even though he was not a candidate.² Cabet, a lawyer, journalist and author of the book *Voyage en Icarie*, was an idealist. His book patterned after Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* was a description of the journey of an Englishman to a mythical country, Icaria, where there was no crime, no taxes, no inflation and everyone had an equal opportunity for an education. Cabet believed that with a truly democratic social organization, poverty could be erased.³ Piquenard subscribed to this philosophy and became Cabet's secretary.

Piquenard was one of the sixty-nine men who volunteered to come to the United States with the "Advance Guard." They left *Le Havre* on February 3, 1848 for New Orleans to prepare the way for the fellow believers who called themselves Icarians. The Icarians planned to demonstrate their ideal social organization to the world.⁴ Cabet leased one million acres of land from the Peters Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, in Denton County, Texas, located along the Red River north of Dallas. In accordance with the pattern of land speculation at the time, the sections were not contiguous making it impossible to establish a colony. Many of the men succumbed to malaria; the physician went mad; and lightning claimed the life of another member of the group. This was the last straw. The group decided to return to New Orleans to await the arrival of their families.⁵

Disillusioned, Piquenard left the group in New Orleans to make his way to St. Louis. Through a prank, he was introduced as a doctor, and in that capacity spent a season with the American Fur Company on the Upper Missouri Valley.⁶ He also served as a surveyor and joined the United States township survey of Iowa in the vicinity of Dubuque.

The Federal Census of November 5, 1850, of Hancock County by Wesley Williams, Assistant Marshall, lists the name of Alfred Piquenard, twenty-five years of age, as an architect. In 1851 the Illinois General Assembly passed a bill incorporating the "Icarian Community" which was signed by Governor August C. French. The name of Alfred Piquenard is listed as an officer and incorporator.

2. Jules Prudhommeaux, *Icarie et son Fondateur, Etienne Cabet* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Porcupine Press, Inc., 1972), p. 236.

3. Etienne Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie* (Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelly Publishers, 1973).

4. Prudhommeaux, *Icarie*, pp. 212-218.

5. Keith Shelton, "Rain Changed the Path of Denton County History—French Socialists" (Denton, Texas: *The Denton Record—Chronicle*, April 23, 1967).

6. *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 8, no. 1, (April 1952): 308.

As a former secretary to Cabet in France, Piquenard was familiar with the details of the organization of Icaria, and Cabet selected him to be director of the newspaper *The Popular Tribune* in 1851-1852 during Cabet's absence from the Colony. Cabet was subpoenaed to appear in court in Paris to defend his contract with the Peters Company for the procurement of the land in Texas. Cabet won his case.⁷

After Cabet returned to Nauvoo, Piquenard visited France. Because he expressed himself too freely on the subject of the *coup d'etat* when Napoleon III was elevated to the throne of France, Piquenard was arrested and sent to prison in Paris. His father gave bail for his appearance in court. Piquenard, fearing the result of the trial, forfeited his bail and in 1853 returned to the United States, not returning to France until after the death of Napoleon.

In 1853 Piquenard left the Colony to practice his profession as an architect in St. Louis and in Leavenworth, Kansas, in partnership with George Ingham Barnett.⁸ With the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted as a captain in the St. Louis home guard and took part in the capture of Camp Jackson under General Lyon. He re-enlisted in the state militia and was subsequently transferred with his company to the volunteers in the United States service. He was assigned to the specific duty of protecting the communication line of the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

After the Civil War Piquenard's fame as an architect grew rapidly in Missouri, Illinois, and Iowa. He designed many churches, mansions, county courthouses, and other public buildings. He joined the architectural firm of John C. Cochrane in Chicago sometime following the Civil War.

Piquenard was married to Marie R. Denuzieras and four children were born to this union: Alfred E. and Juliette. (A daughter, Rosa M. died on June 17, 1870, at three years of age and a son, Bideau H. Louis, died on March 2, 1875, at two months of age.) The family resided in Springfield, Illinois, at the time of his death. He died on November 19, 1876 of "congestion of the liver." His illness was severe and of some duration. He was a member of the Odd Fellows who managed his funeral in Springfield. He is buried at Oak Ridge Cemetery.⁹

This paper does not presume to deal with the entire work of this fine architect, but only to provide a brief description of five notable buildings with some notice of their present condition.

7. Prudhommeaux, *Icarie*, pp. 220 and 273.

8. Communication with Ten Wofford, supervision architect for restoration of governor's mansion, Jefferson City, Missouri, which was designed by the firm of Piquenard and Barnett of St. Louis.

9. Obituary from *The Daily Illinois State Register*, November 21, 1876.

1. *State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois*

On February 24, 1867 the Twenty-fifth General Assembly of Illinois authorized the construction of the sixth and final capitol.

To secure a design for the new State House, a contest was put forth in July of 1867. The design presented by John C. Cochrane was selected. Research has proved that most of the work was drafted by his two associates, George O. Garnsey and Alfred H. Piquenard, the latter becoming the supervising architect. In the first report of the architect to the Board of State House Commissioners on January 4, 1869, Cochrane acknowledges "the valuable assistance of his partner, Mr. A. H. Piquenard." He adds, "in regard to the quality of the work it doubtless will compare favorably with not only the best in this country but in Europe."¹⁰

Ground was broken on March 11, 1868, and the cornerstone was laid on October 5th. The General Assembly moved into the building in 1876. Although the cost of the construction was originally limited to \$3,000,000, the expenditure had risen to \$4,500,000 at the time of completion.

The Capitol, situated on a nine-acre plot, is laid out in the form of a Latin cross. The facade is classical with a French style mansard roof. The circular foundation is ninety-two feet in diameter. The walls supporting the dome are seventeen feet thick from the foundation to the first floor. They are built of granular magnesium limestone from the quarries of Hancock County. The building measures 379 feet by 268 feet and 361 feet in height to the top of the dome.¹¹

Following Piquenard's death in November 1876, his student and associate, Mifflin E. Bell, became the supervising architect for the completion of the interior. Mr. Bell also completed the construction of the Statehouse in Des Moines, and the construction of the Bloomington Court House. Plans prepared by Piquenard for the Bloomington Court House came to approximately \$240,000.¹²

2. *State Capitol, Des Moines, Iowa*

Thomas Teakle in his article "The Romance in Iowa History" rightly assesses Piquenard as "the brilliant architect of the beautiful capitol at Des Moines. Nurtured beneath the sunny skies of France, Piquenard early espoused the cause of spiritual and intellectual freedom and became

10. Report of the Architect to Board of State House Commissioners, to General Assembly of Illinois, Twenty-Sixth Session, January 4, 1869 (Springfield: Illinois Journal Printing Office, 1869), pp. 7-10.

11. Jim Edgar, ed., "Illinois State Capitol," *Illinois Blue Book 1981-1982*, p. 35.

12. *History of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Chicago, Illinois: Interstate Publishing Company, 1881), pp. 289-292, 640.

a prophet of the Nineteenth Century renaissance. He rapidly rose to fame as an architect. Enduring monuments to his genius stand the capital buildings in Springfield, Illinois, and in Des Moines, Iowa." ¹³

When Iowa became a state in 1846, Iowa City was designated as the capital, being the center of population at that time. In 1855 the capital was moved to Fort Des Moines. A temporary capital was built with private funds. The building was purchased by the State in 1864. The General Assembly met in the temporary building from 1858 to 1886 when the new state capital was completed.

A bill was introduced in the General Assembly on February 1, 1868, authorizing the building of a Statehouse at the cost of \$1,500,000. The finances of the State were in bad condition and the legislators feared that taxes would have to be increased at the expense of children "running around with their little knees protruding through their pants." There was much dissension and dissatisfaction among the legislators with the choice of the Board of Capitol Commissioners.

A new Board of Capitol Commissioners was selected to choose an architect and to select the materials to be used in the foundation. The plans submitted by the architectural firm of Cochrane and Piquenard were chosen and on June 13, 1871, the workmen began laying the concrete for the foundation. The cornerstone was laid on November 23, 1876. However, the foundation crumbled during the winter and had to be replaced along with the Board of Commissioners.

Early in 1872 Mr. Cochrane resigned and Mr. Piquenard became the sole architect until his death in November 1876 when his two assistants became the chief architects. The legislative portion of the building was completed and dedicated on January 17, 1884. The final cost of the building came to \$2,873,294.59.¹⁴

Piquenard insisted on quality material. At one point he refused to accept delivery of defective stone. He insisted that some of the materials be purchased at least two years in advance to allow for aging and to be on hand when needed to save time and expense. He insisted that real stone be used for the Corinthian caps on the stone columns rather than painting cast iron to imitate stone. He claimed in his report "Besides the sham this represents which ought not to exist in a public building, especially the most important and costly to be built by the great state of Iowa, and destined to represent to future generations the degree of culture, intelligence, wealth, and public spirit of our times, these materials are destined to decay and will require in a certain time to be replaced.

13. Thomas Teakle, "The Romance in Iowa History," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 14, no. 2, (April 1916): 163.

14. Jacob A. Swisher, "The Capitols at Des Moines," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 39, no. 1, (January 1941): 52-87.

The iron will certainly rust and will run on the stone underneath and discolor it. The cost of such Corinthian caps and cornice, if made of stone, will be \$85,000 including stone, cutting, and setting and I believe no money can be better applied to make the building substantial in fact as well as in appearance."¹⁵

Piquenard would have been pleased if he could have heard the dedication address made by John Kasson on January 17, 1884, when he said, "It is for us all a course of profound gratification that from the day when the present commissioners assumed control with their accomplished Superintendent of Construction that not one act of speculation or spoliation, not one coin wasted, or vainly spent has defaced the bright record of their administration. It shall be a part of the legacy we leave to our children that all these vast and durable walls have been laid in the cement of honesty, and built by the rule of fidelity. More proud of this legend are we than of all these classic columns and brilliant domes which please the eye and gratify taste."¹⁶

3. First Westminster Presbyterian Church, Keokuk, Iowa

In 1870 when the New School and the Old School Presbyterians merged to become the First Westminster Presbyterian Church, the congregation of 250 members overflowed the small stone building on Seventh and Blondeau. The merged congregation appointed a Building Committee to work with the architect, Piquenard, planner of the State Houses at both the Illinois and Iowa state capitals at the location of Seventh and Blondeau streets facing Blondeau.¹⁷

The new edifice of the First Westminster Presbyterian Church, sixty feet by 100 feet, was built of native stone yellow-buff in color from the Sonora quarry at Mount Moriah, Hancock County, Illinois. A tower, seventy-five feet high, was surmounted by an eighty foot spire. French Gothic style was chosen for the exterior and interior. The church was embellished with frescoed ceilings and walls, stained glass windows, and commodious proportions to seat about nine hundred persons. Colonel William Patterson, a member of the Building Committee who owned the quarry, donated much of the stone. Of incidental note is the fact that Orion Clemens, brother of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), married Colonel Patterson's niece. Mr. Clemens was later excommunicated from the church in 1879 for his views on religion.

15. *Third Biennial Report of the Board of Capitol Commissioners to the Governor of Iowa, November 30, 1875* (Des Moines, Iowa: R. P. Clarkson, State Printer, 1876), pp. 54-55.

16. Steve C. Cross, ed., *Under the Dome, The Story of Iowa's State Capitol*, 3rd ed., March 1976.

17. Unpublished brochure, "The United Presbyterian Church of Keokuk, 1843—140th Anniversary History—1983."

On January 12, 1882, the *Daily Gate City* editorialized, "The new edifice of the First Westminster Presbyterian Church is one of the finest structures of its kind in the State, and is a very important acquisition to the public improvement of our city."¹⁸ On April 16, 1963, the building was destroyed by fire. Most of the records were saved and no bodily harm was incurred. The building and its contents were valued at \$600,000.

4. *Somonauk United Presbyterian Church, Somonauk, Illinois*

Located northeast of Joliet on Route 24, the Somonauk United Presbyterian church was dedicated on June 24, 1875. Designed by Piquenard, it was the first rural church built in DeKalb County. The edifice is of true Gothic style with a high roof and windows with pointed arches. The building measures sixty-eight by forty feet with an audience room of fifty-eight by forty feet having a seating capacity for 500 persons. At the time of the dedication, both choirs and instrumental music were forbidden by the laws of the church. The total cost was \$10,300 and there was no debt on the building at the time of the dedication.

The stained glass windows came from Chicago. The style of their construction has been the subject of much discussion throughout the history of the church. One Sabbath morning the pastor stopped in the middle of the sermon to say that for a long time he had thought about the strange windows in the church until a message finally dawned on him. He pointed out that the large panes of glass in the central part of the windows are neither stained glass nor frosted glass—yet neither are they clear glass. They have a design hardly transparent for outside distractions to be visible; yet, at the same time light is not hindered from coming through the panes. The congregation appreciated this accommodation to natural light especially since when the church was built there was no electricity.

The sanctuary has ten windows, five on each side. On each side, four are of identical design and the fifth is of a second design. Half of the windows have oak tree figures. Oak trees are native along the banks of the Somonauk Creek. In popular belief the oak tree is the mightiest, longest-lived, sturdiest, and toughest tree of them all. The other half of the windows had panes showing grape branches and bunches of grapes.

The carriage sheds which were lined up across the backyard and along the side of the church have been torn down. Church members were originally able to put their carriages under cover without having to unhitch the horses.¹⁹

18. *The Daily Gate City*, Keokuk, Iowa, March 16, 1870 (newspaper).

19. James Hay Beveridge, *The Church of the Pioneers, Somonauk United Presbyterian 1842-1971* (Printed privately by the church, 1974), pp. 31-48.

5. *Clover Lawn, Bloomington, Illinois*

The three-story Davis mansion called "Clover Lawn," located in the heart of Bloomington, was designed by Piquenard while he was also working on the capitols of Illinois and Iowa, and the McLean County Court House as well as the Missouri executive mansion.

The yellow brick mansion built in 1870-1872 was once surrounded by hundreds of acres of farm land. The first owner, Supreme Court Justice David Davis, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, came from Maryland to Illinois to practice law. He had organized the forces behind the 1860 nomination of Lincoln for the United States Presidency. His descendants continued to reside in the mansion until 1960 when they donated the home and its furnishings to the people of Illinois. It is one of the few homes today furnished with original family furnishings. The mansion is truly a museum of elegant nineteenth-century living. The cast iron railings, verandas and bay windows are typical of the Victorian period. There are eight Italian marble fireplaces.²⁰

The Davis home was one of the most imposing in the Midwest. It is a variation of the Italian villa style which expresses a mingling of country and city life. It covers an area sixty-four by eighty-eight feet and has a three story tower with a mansard roof and contains twenty rooms plus a full basement and attic. Only the finest materials were used. It took over two years to build the mansion at a cost of more than \$50,000.²¹

Alfred H. Piquenard, born and educated in France, was an idealist who believed in the pursuit of equality, liberty, and brotherhood as expressed in the principles of the Icarian Movement. He adhered to his ideals throughout his life. He contributed much to the construction of public as well as privately owned buildings which brought joy and beauty to the persons who are benefactors of his passing through this world.

From his Icarian heritage Piquenard was faithful to the authenticity of building materials. He influenced the General Assembly in Iowa to avoid short cuts and substitutions in building materials. He actually instructed some contractors to rebuild parts of the capitol in order to preserve a beautiful structure for posterity. He felt an obligation to future generations.

Piquenard furthered the architectural style popular in France during the nineteenth century. The French Gothic style of architecture was developed in northern France from the middle of the twelfth century

20. Penny Ledford, "Bloomington's Davis Mansion," *Illinois Magazine* 23, no. 3, (May-June 1984): 24-29.

21. *Clover Lawn* (Illinois State Historical Library, 1980) a brochure of twelve pages.

characterized by the converging of weights and strains at isolated points upon slender vertical piers and counterbalancing buttresses and by pointed arches. This style can, of course, be seen in many churches built at the turn of the century.

The mansard roof developed by Francois Mansart in France during the seventeenth century was promoted by Piquenard in many of his plans. This roof, having two slopes on all sides with the lower slope steeper than the upper one, has been readapted in the twentieth century and can be seen on almost every Main Street in the United States.

Piquenard's grave at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield is marked by an obelisk at the base of which the following lines are inscribed:

Green be the turf above you
Friend of my better days.
None knew thee but to love thee
None named thee but to praise.

Numerous buildings in the Midwest now stand as monuments to the great contributions of the Utopian idealist and Icarian, Alfred H. Piquenard.