



Welcome to Saint Paul City Hall – Ramsey County Courthouse



Architecturally significant spaces and features within Saint Paul City Hall – Ramsey County Courthouse

This self-guided walking tour includes detailed descriptions of some of the unique and beautiful features of Saint Paul City Hall – Ramsey County Courthouse, which opened in 1932 and underwent an extensive renovation from 1989-1995.

Please note this is a working building; not all rooms are available to tour at all times. To schedule a guided tour, call 651-266-8000. Welcome, and enjoy your visit!

OVERVIEW

History

A 21-story monument to high-rise architecture, Saint Paul City Hall – Ramsey County Courthouse opened in 1932. The building captures the evolution of American Art Deco “Skyscraper Style” architecture by using both the American Perpendicular and Zigzag Moderne Art Deco styles.

Designed by architects Holabird and Root of Chicago and Ellerbe and Co. of Saint Paul, the building was originally financed by a \$4 million public bond offering in 1928. Due to the stock market crash of 1929, the cost of labor and materials became much less than anticipated. As a result, the building was finished with fine artistic details and domestic and foreign woods and marbles.

Ramsey County led and funded a \$48.8 million restoration and addition that was completed from 1989-1995. The project preserved the building’s historic appearance, increased efficiency and refurbished period furniture.

Today, the building continues to house several county and city offices and serves as the main location of Minnesota’s Second Judicial District Court.

Fast Facts

- The building houses state, county and city offices.
- Construction cost (1931) – \$4 million
- Renovation cost (1989-1995) – \$48.8 million
- Average construction wage in 1931 – \$0.45/hour; skilled carvers – \$2/hour
- The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.
- Exotic woods include Koa (Hawaiian), Peroba (South American) and Avodire (West African).
- A 60-gallon soap dispenser automatically filled all bathroom dispensers until the 1940s.
- A central vacuum system was used throughout the building prior to the renovation.
- Ramsey County and the City of Saint Paul co-own the building.

Building interior

The interior of Saint Paul City Hall – Ramsey County Courthouse features ornate Zigzag Moderne, an Art Deco-style derived from a 1925 Paris art exhibition. The Art Deco theme is displayed throughout the building on details including the bronze elevator doors (pictured below), light fixtures, stair railings, lobby mailbox, door handles, locks and more.

The bronze door fixtures (locks and handles) were manufactured by the Corbin Company specifically for the building. These locks later became known as the Ramsey Lock and are no longer manufactured.



LOWER LEVEL

The lower level, or concourse level, includes historic exhibit space, meeting rooms, a large conference room, offices and the jury operations room, which houses people serving on jury duty.

Glass mural commons

The glass mural in the commons area is composed of etched and cast images that summarize the history of Ramsey County and the City of Saint Paul. Glass was chosen for the mural, which was added during the 1990s renovation, because it was a popular tool in Art Deco architecture. The piece was designed by artists Christopher Cosma and Denise Amses. A narrated light show is built into the mural and can be started by request at the first floor information desk or by calling 651-266-8000.

FIRST FLOOR

Memorial Hall

Measuring 85 feet by 21 feet, Memorial Hall – the building's atrium – is three stories high and serves as the true centerpiece of the building. Memorial Hall is dedicated to Ramsey County soldiers who died in World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Their names are engraved on the first, second and third floor columns. A gold mirror ceiling caps the space, and Blue Belge marble from Belgium adorns the walls in a book-matched pattern (a sample from the second floor shown below). In this style, a piece of marble is sliced in half and laid flat like the pages of a book. The quartz veining pattern becomes a mirror image reflecting itself on the other page or side.



Vision of Peace

The Vision of Peace statue (pictured at right) dominates the first floor. It is the largest carved onyx figure in the world. The 60-ton, 36-foot-high statue depicts five Native Americans sitting around a fire smoking their pipes of peace. In one hand, the figure holds a peace pipe, while the other hand signals a gesture of good will. Dedicated in 1936 to the war veterans of Ramsey County, it is a tribute to everlasting peace. "Out of that smoke of tobacco and fire arises in their imaginations, their vision of peace, talking to them and to the world," wrote Swedish sculptor Carl Milles, a pacifist, who designed the work. Milles' idea for the masterpiece came from a peace pipe ceremony he attended in Oklahoma.

Originally the statue was to be made of glass, but it was not possible using available technologies. Instead 98 blocks of onyx were ordered from a quarry in Peder, Mexico. The blocks were driven 50 miles by ox cart to be shipped to San Diego, where Saint Paul stone carver Giovanni John Garatti sorted through the blocks and shipped 70 of them by rail to Saint Paul. Garatti and 19 local stone carvers created the Vision of Peace, which has 38 sections cemented together on a steel backbone with bronze ribs.

The statue rotates on a motorized turntable, 66 degrees to the left and 66 degrees to the right. It takes 2-1/2 hours to complete a rotation.



First floor facts

- The elevator doors feature bronze reliefs by artist Albert Stewart. They depict six periods of history important to the county and city. When built, these were the second fastest elevators, next to those in the Empire State Building.
- The ceilings on the first three floors are 23½ karat gold leaf.
- All railings and column light fixtures are bronze with a nickel-silver cap.
- In 1933, a plaque with President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address was placed outside the elevator lobby in honor of the Grand Army of the Republic by its auxiliary, the National Women's Relief Corps.
- The bronze mailbox near the elevators is original.

SECOND FLOOR

County Board Offices, Room 220

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners office, located in the 1990s addition, features black cherry wood. While not among the original wood types used, it was chosen for its beauty and availability.

The chairs in the lobby are original and have been refurbished. The lamps in the hallway are two of the original bronze lamps in the building that have been restored, and the hallway table is also an original piece.

The table in the county board's conference room has wood inlays of the Star of the North and the county's symbol.

County Manager's Office, Room 250

The Ramsey County Manager's Office is located in what used to be the Public Utility Lobby, a place where residents paid their water bills. The walls are made of American black walnut. The furniture is original and has been refurbished. One significant feature is the wood-scalloped framed opening at the east end of the reception area.

Second Floor facts

- The floor in the elevator lobby contains a terrazzo map of Ramsey County in 1932. The river and lakes are inlaid in white metal, and main highways and railways are inlaid in bronze and metal.
- Flags representing the United States and POW/MIA also decorate the elevator lobby.
- On the 4th Street stair lobby, there is a bust of José Martí, a Cuban writer and patriot. It was presented to the City of Saint Paul, the home of Robert Butler, former U.S. Ambassador to Cuba, in appreciation of his courageous work in creating a positive relationship between the two countries. Martí is considered one of his country's greatest heroes.

THIRD FLOOR

Council Chambers, Room 300

The Council Chambers is the largest room in the building and is used as the meeting space for both the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners and Saint Paul City Council.

The room features a horseshoe-shaped table made of golden Padouk from Burma with peanut-shaped inlays of Hungarian ash and sides of ebony and European pear. It is centered in the middle to permit easy communication between members.

The canvas oil mural paintings (pictured at right) were painted by John Norton of Chicago, a famous Depression-era artist. These murals represent the growth and development of the city and county from the time of the earliest French settlers to the 1930s. They show the evolution of transportation from canoes to trains.



Mayor's Office, Room 390

The Saint Paul mayor's office contains some of the finest examples of original Art Deco furniture in the building, as well as beautiful wood paneling. The reception area is paneled in red birch, and the hallway baseboard and small office outside the mayor's office are Primavera wood from Mexico. The mayor's office is paneled in Peroba wood from Brazil, considered by many to be the most beautiful wood in the building.

The large cabinet in the office was crafted by the carpenters working on the building. It was given as a gift after the completion of the building in gratitude for the work provided during the Depression. The cabinet is inlaid with samples of the exotic woods used in the building. The doors show the previous courthouse/city hall on one side and the current building on the other. Cass Gilbert's original plan for the Capital Mall and city streets is on display.

The mayor's conference room was formerly the grand jury room and is paneled in French walnut. The table is crafted with American white oak with inlays of a four-pointed star pattern. The marble baseboard in this room is Red Levanto from Italy. Note the hand-crafted scalloped molding around the ceiling.

Third Floor facts

- The ship's bell (pictured at right) in the third floor elevator lobby is from the USS Saint Paul, a naval cruiser which saw action in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The Navy decommissioned the ship in the 1970s, and the bell was presented to then-Saint Paul Mayor McCarty.
- The paneling in the hallway between the mayor's office and council chambers is oriental wood from Australia. This rare wood is so hard that only a 10-foot section of veneer could be cut before the saw blade had to be sharpened or changed.



COURTROOMS

Floors 4-17 consist of courtrooms, judges' chambers, city and Second Judicial District offices. The eighth floor courtrooms are the largest courtrooms in the building and display several Art Deco characteristics.



Courtroom 840

Courtroom 840 is paneled in original full-height Cuban mahogany. The marble base is Red Levanto from Italy. The unique Art Deco light fixtures, rosewood judge's bench and audience seating, bronze railings and window grates are all original. The rosewood jury box was added to match the judge's bench. In the wood panels above the jury box is a natural pattern of wolves' heads.

Courtroom 880

Courtroom 880 was moved from the eleventh floor and reassembled on the eighth floor during the 1990s renovation. A false wall behind the judge's bench hides a wheelchair access ramp. The courtroom has teak walls and original teak furniture from the fourteenth floor. It also contains original bronze door handles and light fixtures with an Italian Red Levanto marble base. Doors are covered with leather and a bronze edge.

Courtroom facts

- There were originally 21 courtrooms in the building; now there are 31. Some historic courtrooms have been moved and reassembled on other floors.
- During the 1990s renovation, one courtroom on floors 11, 13, 14 and 15 was removed to make room for secure holding areas, conference space and waiting rooms. Several courtrooms were also made handicap accessible.

LAW LIBRARY

The Law Library is appropriately located on the highest floor as a symbol that law presides over all. Only two elevators provide access to the library and its walnut-paneled lobby. The library is open to the public Monday-Friday, 8-4:30 p.m.

WOODS USED IN SAINT PAUL CITY HALL – RAMSEY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Floor	Room	Wood
Lower Level		Black Cherry (United States)
1st	Room 110	Black Cherry (United States)
	Room 122	Butt American Black Walnut
	Room 130	Black Cherry (United States)
	Room 140	American Black Walnut
	Room 160	Avodire (Africa)
	Room 170	American Black Walnut Red Oak (United States)
2nd	Room 220	Black Cherry (United States)
	Room 250	American Black Walnut
	Room 280	American Black Walnut
3rd	Lobby	Oriental Wood (Australia)
	Room 300 – Council Chambers	Walls/Benches: English Brown Oak U-Shaped Table: Padouk Wood (Burma) with Hungarian Ash inlays, sides are Macassar Ebony (India)
	Room 330	English Brown Oak
	Room 390	Reception Lobby: Quartered Red Birch (United States), Peroba (Brazil) Mayor's Office: French Walnut – walls Woods from City Hall/Courthouse – cabinet Conference Room: Qtrd White Oak (United States) – table
4th	Lobby	Australian Blackwood
	Room 400	Black Cherry (United States)
5th	Lobby	Black Cherry (United States)
	Room 500	Black Cherry (United States)
6th	Lobby	Koa (Hawaii)
	All Other Rooms	Black Cherry (United States)
7th	Lobby	American Black Walnut
	All Other Rooms	Black Cherry (United States)
8th	Lobby	English Brown Oak
	Courtroom 840	Cuban Mahogany – walls Indian Rosewood – furniture
	Courtroom 880	Teak (India) – walls and furniture
9th	Lobby	Primavera (Mexico)
	Other Rooms	Black Cherry (United States)
10th	Lobby	Emeri (Ivory Coast, Africa)
	Courtroom 1040	American Black Walnut – walls and furniture
	Courtroom 1060	Black Cherry (United States) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
	Courtroom 1080	Honduras Mahogany – walls Indian Rosewood – furniture

Floor	Room	Wood
11th	Lobby	English Brown Oak
	Courtroom 1140	Indian Laurel (India) – walls Honduras Mahogany – furniture
	Courtroom 1160	Red Birch (United States) – walls Mexican Mahogany – furniture
	Courtroom 1180	Emeri (Ivory Coast, Africa) – walls Teak (India) – furniture
12th	Lobby	American Black Walnut
	Courtroom 1240	American Black Walnut – walls and furniture
	Courtroom 1260	Black Cherry (United States) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
	Courtroom 1280	Brazilian Rosewood – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
13th	Lobby	English Brown Oak
	Courtroom 1340	Black Cherry (United States) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
	Courtroom 1360	Teak (India) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
	Courtroom 1380	Paldao (Philippines) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
14th	Lobby	English Brown Oak
	Courtroom 1440	Indian Rosewood – walls and furniture
	Courtroom 1460	Avodire (Africa) – walls American Black Walnut – furniture
	Courtroom 1480	Primavera (Mexico) – walls Indian Laurel – furniture
15th	Lobby	English Brown Oak
	Courtroom 1540	Indian Laurel – walls & furniture
	Courtroom 1560	Avodire (Africa) – walls Indian Laurel – furniture
	Courtroom 1580	Mexican Mahogany – walls Indian Rosewood – furniture
16th	Lobby	Quartered Red Birch (United States)
	Courtroom 1620	American Black Walnut – walls and furniture
	Courtroom 1660	American Black Walnut – walls and furniture
	Courtroom 1670	American Black Walnut – walls and furniture
17th	Lobby and all rooms	Black Cherry (United States)
18th	Lobby and all rooms	American Black Walnut

The original Ramsey County was 400% larger.

When Ramsey County was formed in 1849, its boundaries included more than 7,000 square miles and all or parts of 11 now-existing counties: Ramsey, Anoka, Isanti, Kanabec, Washington, Pine, Carlton, Aitkin, Mille Lacs and Hennepin.

Today, Ramsey County is the smallest of Minnesota's 87 counties at 170 square miles. It ranks second highest in population and highest in population density.

Guided Tours

Ramsey County staff and volunteers offer 60 to 90-minute group tours for schools, seniors, veterans and others.

Call 651-266-8000 for more information or to schedule a tour.

