



Bethinking of ⁴⁻²⁰⁻⁸³ Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

Vol. V

"THE MILLION DOLLAR STAIRCASE"

No. 16

I find that there are many people who have never heard of the Grand, Western or "Million Dollar Staircase" (It's known by all three names) at our state Capitol in Albany. Unquestionably, it is considered to be one of the most beautiful and extraordinary staircases in the world.

The architectural beauty of the Capitol is largely due to the artistic ability of three 19th Century architects who were Leopold Eidlitz, H.H. Richardson and Isaac G. Perry. The western staircase attests to the skill and genius of Mr. Perry (1822-1904) who designed it and supervised its construction. He was born in Vermont and served an apprenticeship with his father who was a contractor. After gaining a fine reputation as an architect he moved to New York City where for twenty years he engaged in that business. In 1872 he moved to Binghamton where he designed many beautiful churches and public buildings in that area of the country. In March 1883 he was appointed Capitol Commissioner by Governor Cleveland.

The work of erecting the staircase began in March 1884 which took five and one-half years to complete. It is located in the center of the western portion of the Capitol which occupies a space measuring seventy by seventy-seven feet. From the floor to the top of the dome above the staircase it is 119 feet. From corridors at the east and west of the staircase are broad central runs of steps which ascend to a central landing about one-third the total height. From this landing short runs of steps rise at right angles to landings along the walls from which are four runs of steps, two on each side, to the corridors above. Thus, four large wells are formed which emit light from the dome above, to the main floor. Romanesque in style, it is reminiscent of the grand staircase at the Paris Opera House in France.

The Medina Quarry Company whose general offices were located in Albion published a little brochure eighty years ago and in it is printed a letter signed by Issac Perry. Here is an excerpt: ".....I have used considerable Medina Sandstone for building purposes and regard it as one of the best known sandstones...I used this stone for the steps of the interior western staircase, each step being about twenty-two feet long and perfectly sound. It can be worked down fine and has just enough grit to prevent slipping."

And so there you have it - Medina Sandstone, which was quarried right out of Orleans County. It's a never-ending source of amazement to me, the far-reaching aspects of our county, its people and its products. If you're ever in Albany, be sure to see this extraordinary and beautiful American landmark. I'm sure you'll feel proud to think that little old Orleans had something to do with it.