Minnesota Unraveled

EP113 - Brick by Brick: The African Americans who Built the Capitol

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Chantel Rodríguez:

A few weeks back, my work brought me to the State Capitol. After some meetings, I had a few spare moments to myself, so I took a seat on the steps outside. There, I had the chance to get a closer look at the building itself. From a distance, it's a gleaming domed building sitting on a hill, but from this vantage point I could see some differences in the marble. Each slab was mostly white, but the gray and black veins in the marble differed piece to piece. It got me thinking– whose hands had cut and laid this stone? Where had the stone come from in the first place? And how had the Capitol been built?

When I got back to my office, I thought it would be a fairly quick answer to find. I was not quite right about that. It turned out there's quite a bit of historical debate on who the workers had been. Some sources said that African-American stonemasons had been a major part of the workforce, that would've been fairly notable when it was being built in the 1890s to early 1900s. By 1910, there were barely more than 3000 black residents in St. Paul, a city of almost 200,000. But in spite of that, other sources did not mention them at all. This meant I'd need to go beyond my quick research. I talked with three experts, each with different knowledge about the history of the Capitol's Construction.

Brian Pease:

Brian Pease, state manager at the Minnesota State Capitol Historic site, part of the Minnesota Historical Society, so expert in all things Capitol.

John Sielaff:

My name is John Sielaff. I'm a retired carpenter, still a member of Carpenter's Local 322 here in the Twin Cities. And in about 2011, I heard about this project that a guy was doing to research the people that had actually worked, construction workers who had worked on the Minnesota State Capitol between 1895, 1906. And so Randy Croce at the Labor Education Service over at the university was planning to make a video interviewing actual descendants of the people who worked on the job, to locate descendants. I initially agreed to try to find carpenters who had descendants, and I was successful in that.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

My name is Marvin Roger Anderson, I'm the executive director of the Rondo Center of Diverse Expression, and the Rondo Commemorative Plaza here in St. Paul, and I chair the board of Directors of Reconnect Rondo, which is an organization that is organizing a movement in the Rondo community for the creation of a Rondo historic district connected by a land bridge in the Rondo Corridor over I-94.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Marvin was who I wanted to speak with first. He has a wealth of knowledge about the history of the Twin Cities, but there's another element to his expertise. His grandfather, Ernest Jones, was one of the workers who helped build the Capitol.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

Papa we called him. Papa was born in Tennessee, a small county in Tennessee called Rutherford. He was born in Rutherford, Gibson County, Tennessee. And my grandfather was born in 1871. I remember him. I looked at his vital statistics, he was five foot seven, I'm five foot six. He weighed 150 pounds. I weigh 150 pounds. I remember how immaculately dressed he was. He always wore a suit, and a vest, and a hat, and a cane. And he seemed to know everybody along the route where we would go, to the barbershop where he got a shave, his shoes were shined, to the luncheon mat. Wherever we went everybody knew Ernest, Ernest this, Ernest that. And it was just a marvelous opportunity for me to get a chance to meet him and spend time with him.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Hearing about Ernest raised a pretty immediate question. How did someone from rural Tennessee end up working on a building all the way in St. Paul?

Marvin Roger Anderson:

My grandfather was one of seven children, and his oldest brother, who was born in 1861, was listed as a mason, a masonry worker. And even though my grandfather was younger, he was a mason worker. And then we assumed that he had learned his skill from his older brother. In 1890, 1891, my grandfather married Mary Wade who lived in an adjoining county, and they eventually made their way north as far as Chicago, where my grandfather was a member of the Masonry Union in Chicago. And we believe, well, I'm pretty sure this is the connection, he had a friend there named William Tillman. William Tillman was born in the same county as my grandfather, about the same age, and William Tillman was also a Mason in Chicago. William Tillman was the brother-in-law of a man called Casiville Bullard. And Casiville Bullard was the captain of the team of black Masons that were hired to come to St. Paul to

work on the construction of the State Capitol. So that's the background that I have been able to put together.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So according to Marvin's family stories and his own research, masonry work took Ernest from Tennessee all the way up to Minnesota to work on the new Capitol. But wait a minute, I knew that the state already had a Capitol before this time period. Why exactly did they need to build a new one? That question was one I posed to Brian Pease, the historic site manager of the State Capitol. I know that the current Capitol was not Minnesota's first Capitol building. Can you tell me a bit about the buildings that came before it?

Brian Pease:

The first Capitol was a territorial Capitol built in the 1850s, completed in about 1855, and it was if you're looking at coordinates, it's where the history theater is today. And so that was our state government central location all the way up until the 1890s, up until the present-day Capitol was built. As the state was growing, the Capitol had to be expanded, so they changed the roof line, added a cupola, expanded the wings of the chambers. And then in 1881 it was destroyed by fire, and so it burned to the ground. Once again we didn't have a lot of money to spend on brand new Capitol buildings at that time, so they decided to build the second Capitol on the same location as that first Capitol building. And that was completed in 1883, had limestone and sandstone exterior, beautiful big building, had a big tower in the center.

Unfortunately, it was built hastily, so ventilation wasn't very good. People were getting sick because of the bad ventilation system. It was already getting too small for the growing State of Minnesota. So 10 years later they were already talking about what we have to do to get a bigger, better fireproof building, and make it big enough to expand as we need as the government gets larger. And so that's the evolution of our present-day Capitol. In the 1890s, they created a Board of Capitol commissioners to oversee the funding that was given to start selecting an architect, and a building site, and getting all the contractors put together. So it was a huge task because they wanted to do it right.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So the state was in need of a new, bigger and better Capitol building. The board tapped a local firm to handle the construction. The Butler-Ryan Company was run by five brothers in the Butler family. John Sielaff told me he's found one source that shed light on the company's role in the construction of the Capitol, the memoir of one of those brothers, Emmett Butler.

John Sielaff:

It just goes through the history from how his parents grew up and came over from Ireland, and he had five brothers, one of them was a famous Pierce Butler who became a Supreme Court justice. The other four were in the construction firm, and they did big jobs around the country after they did the Capitol here, and they also did other jobs within St. Paul,

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Butler brothers oversaw the construction, but they still needed to find laborers. And that construction work is what brought Ernest Jones here. But I still didn't understand why the builders would need to source workers from out of state, or why workers would travel so far. Just how specialized was this work? Couldn't just anyone do it. According to Brian, not so much. And that had to do with the design of the building itself, and the preferences of the architect behind it. A man named Cass Gilbert, he'd go on to design the United States Supreme Court, and the Woolworth Building in New York. But the Minnesota State Capitol would become his first major design that established his national reputation. Here's Brian again.

Brian Pease:

He was inspired as were architects all over the United States from the Chicago World's Fair, the 1893 Columbian Exposition. In Chicago drew millions and millions of people to see all these pretty interesting technology things. But also the idea was we're remembering Columbus' arrival to America, and he was an Italian, so they designed the entire fair to have these Italian Renaissance buildings, which are white marble buildings with domes, and pediments, and columns, and all kinds of decorative art and statues. So once again, that World's Fair brought in so many people. You had government officials and civic leaders, wealthy folks that were coming in to see that fair. So when they went back home, it might've been a year or two later, they said, "Well, we have to build a courthouse." We have to build a Capitol or a library.

And so they were so inspired and influenced by the architecture they saw, that that's what we have this whole period of public architecture from, inspiration from the World's Fair. So Cass Gilbert was there to jury some of the work of art that was there, but also had that inspiration. So one of the requirements the Board of Capitol Commissioners had is the building had to have a dome.

Chantel Rodríguez:

We'll come back to the idea of a dome a bit later, but that Italian Renaissance inspiration meant that Gilbert had specific preferences for the stone that would be used on the building, stone that could not be found in the state of Minnesota. Gilbert

and the Butler brothers found a place to source the white marble he was after, at a quarry down in Georgia, they recognized that specific stone requires specific stone workers, people who know the ins and outs of that particular marble. People like Ernest Jones. But how did Gilbert and the Butler brothers find these stone workers to hire? This is where those conflicting sources come into play. The answer can vary depending on which source is being referenced. Brian's research has led him to believe that word of mouth played a large role.

Brian Pease:

We do know Casiville Bullard was a stone mason and a pretty well respected, and a really good stone mason, and a worker with stone. And he came in from Memphis because he got word that work was being done here. Some people believe some of these folks were recruited by the Butler-Ryan Company because they had these contacts down in Georgia, and they're working with people down there that... or a lot of those are people who are African-American or black skilled workers. And so if they had a union card, they would be accepted back in St. Paul, and that's where Casiville Bullard did have a union card, so he was working along with all the other bricklayers, and the other stone masons as this project was moving forward. And once again, a lot of this is word of mouth connections. There was another gentleman from Chicago that came up to start working as a bricklayer, and he brought in cousins of his, the Suddaths. And so now you have other folks coming in to be part of this project.

And I don't know if there's enough evidence exactly how they got here. Once again, some people believe that when the Butlers were down in Georgia, they were recruiting, say, "Hey, come up to St. Paul we need skilled people." Because there's a labor shortage, there's not always enough people to do that work, they're looking for the best skilled people.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Parts of this story line up with what Marvin has put together from family stories and his own lived experiences. Marvin believes the hiring choice had something to do with the Butler-Ryan Company's journey down to the quarry in Georgia.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

The story that I heard and we pieced together was every time they got off the train, as the train was going south, and it was the same for me actually, when I went south in 1958, I took almost the same train, leave St. Paul and go to Atlanta, Georgia. And that's the train that Ryan was on, the contractor was on. And once we crossed the Mason, the imaginary Mason-Dixon line, you actually change cars outside St. Louis. You go from an integrated car to a segregated car. And I actually rode that segregated train for two years when I was on my way to Atlanta to Morehouse. But when the train would stop and you stretched your legs, and you walked outside into

the station, I saw, and I'm sure the contractor from Minnesota saw that most of the work that was being done in and around the depot, electricians, pavers, construction people, mostly African-American men were doing work that had only seen the white community perform in the Twin Cities when I was growing up.

And cutting marble is a skill. If you don't get it right, you lose time, and you lose money. And he saw African-American men cutting the marble in slabs to expose the veins to expose how it was constructed. And when he got back to Minnesota, I understand there was a group of Masons, bricklayers and cutters, polishers that wanted more money, and they wanted to go on strike.

And the contractor was under a deadline, he needed to get this State Capitol built. And he said, "Well, if you go on strike, I'm going to have to find somebody to replace you." And when they went on strike, he made the call and Casiville Bullard and 20-some odd African-American stone Masons and cutters said, "Well, let's go to St. Paul."

Chantel Rodríguez:

John Sielaff's research on Emmett Butler's memoir gave him some context about this trip down to Georgia, but verifying this through other sources proved difficult. Here's John again.

John Sielaff:

One of the interesting things was that when they bid the job, they had figured on a certain price for the marble, but it turned out the contractor was not competent to get it for that price, so they had to send their own man down. John Butler went down to Tate, Georgia, and he found a quarry hired people down there. They had to take off, I think 15 feet of what they call overburden, which is dirt, dig that out to get to the marble. And they quarried the marble down there and brought it back to Minnesota in huge blocks, they were required to cut the marble in Minnesota. So they brought it back in enormous blocks, some of them tall enough to turn some of the columns that you see in front of the Capitol, so that was brought on big railroad cars at the time.

Emmett Butler in his memoir said that there were a dozen African-Americans that came. I've only been able to locate five of them. But that's another thing, that kind of research that could not have been done years ago. Now you can search in the census and see African-Americans born in Georgia in 1900, well, then you find out who they are. And that was amazing really, because before that there was a myth that these African-Americans had come to St. Paul to build the State Capitol. And we knew about some of the brick-layers, but they had come from actually not from Georgia, but these other people really nobody knew who they were.

Chantel Rodríguez:

John spent years trying to answer these questions. Where had these African-American stoneworkers come from and how many had there been? It required careful interrogation of public records like the census or the city directories.

John Sielaff:

Okay, so you can go to the census, try to search for either black or mulatto they call them in the census, born in Georgia, there aren't that many of them. And then some of them then you can go in 1900 census it doesn't have their occupations. So then you go to the St. Paul City directories, so you can go to the St. Paul City directories from 1900, 1899, 1898, 1897, those years. And I know it might be hard to believe, but I went through the city directories page by page for years, for many years.

Chantel Rodríguez:

John's work is ongoing, he still doesn't have definitive answers to his questions. The sources we have available can't fully flesh out the details. But what is clear is that there were African-American stoneworkers who helped to build the State Capitol. One of them was named Casiville Bullard, a bricklayer, stonemason, stonecutter, and card-carrying member of the St. Paul Bricklayers Union. Back to Marvin.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

But the family of Casiville Bullard had written that once they saw the skill of the masons, they weren't just people picked up off the street to come in, but they could actually get the job done. And I understand that they had a positive effect on the workers who said, "We better get back to work, or we're not going to, these guys might take over." And they also written that Casiville Bullard became a corner man, which is one of the most highly sought after, highly skilled jobs working with marble. And he taught a few tricks to some of the people that were antagonistic towards them in the very beginning. I like to think that after the initial reactions were exposed, that you recognize a person is just trying to do a job like anyone else. And if you got the skill to do the job, maybe I can learn from you.

Chantel Rodríguez:

John's research offers some insight into what might have encouraged those stoneworkers to move so far for a job.

John Sielaff:

Emmett Butler in his memoirs says when his brother John went down there, they were paying people in Georgia, eight or 10 cents an hour down there. And I know laborers in Minnesota, and the lowest trade was getting 17 and a half cents an hour when they were working on the Capitol at the beginning. But then there was a period of inflation, and a period of really intense union organizing, and then wages were increased. So carpenters got 25 cents an hour. Bricklayers actually got 40 cents an hour, you'd think, "What were they doing that was so important?" But no, they organized their union in 1881, and the carpenters didn't until 1885, and they were far more better organized. And so they were getting paid that. Stone masons, as I described, the guys who were setting the stone were getting paid a little bit less than bricklayers.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Hearing this breakdown of wages. And the unions that advocated for them made me think that there must have been clear distinctions between jobs, between roles on the construction site. I wanted to understand what stonework on the Capitol actually looked like.

John Sielaff:

There'd be quarry workers who would be extracting the stone from the quarry, then it would come to the job site. There'd be stone cutters on the job site generally, even if it was cut to specifications, they would have to trim it somehow, make it fit exactly. Then there's another category would be stone masons. Now the stone masons are the ones who set the blocks of stone with the mortar, to put mortar down, set the blocks in. You might think that that might be not that important, but on that job, the Capitol job, the head stone mason, a guy named Nils Nelson was one of the more important people on the whole job, so that's another category.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Before any stone cutters, stone masons or carpenters could do their work on the site, the quarry workers had to do their part. Brian told me it wasn't simple to get the marble from Georgia to St. Paul.

Brian Pease:

In a quarry they just cut the stone. And so it's just basically a rectangle, a square, whatever the shape may be. And so what they were doing is bringing in 10, 12, 14 foot long rectangular pieces of Georgia marble, and putting those on the train, and then shipping them to St. Paul. So it would be pretty rough cut, they would be tons.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Tons.

Brian Pease:

Because if you look at the columns we have in the rotunda, those are 18,000 pounds and they're 19 foot tall. So you're having really big pieces of stone that have to be shipped to the construction site. And what's interesting too the rail line only went so far, so they had to take all the marble from the train cars at the depot in St. Paul, and then had wagons with horse teams to pull them up the hill to the work site. They would bring that rough stone into that back work area, they had hoists and derricks, boilers that would provide the steam power to move those slabs around. So they would take it, drop it off, move it to wherever it needs to go.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Once these massive slabs of stone made it to the work site, of the northeast corner of where the capitol sits today, it was the job of stone workers to cut them down to size in the mill. Slab size wasn't consistent either. The dimensions of each piece depended on where on the building that specific stone would be placed. Back to John.

John Sielaff:

It would be specified, "We want marble block number 1,247 to be five inches by maybe 60 inches long, 18 inches high." So they'd do all these marble blocks and each one would be tagged with, I don't know what they used to paint, but I suppose they probably just painted on there what number it was. So each block had a number, and so the whole thing was fit together, kind of like a puzzle really.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Each stage of this construction required a high degree of skill and craftsmanship. That level of skill is perhaps most evident in the case of the dome. The dome atop the Minnesota State Capitol building is the second largest self-supporting marble dome in the world. Part of what makes that possible is how precisely each slab of marble has been carved into a curve. Back to Brian.

Brian Pease:

And that's once again, the skill of your craftspeople and your engineers and your architects, and all the people. The trades people were extraordinary in all the work they did just because they had to be a jack-of-all-trades for many of these situations.

And so what you're doing is what they did once the superstructure was completed, they built a tower where the dome is, and then they had to before they put the exterior dome, they had to put the masonry dome. So when you walk into the Capitol today and look straight up into the rotunda dome, that's a masonry dome that's still 40 feet below, or 50 feet below the top of that gold ball and cupola. So that's just a decoration made of hollow tiles. And then above that they had to build a steel brick, and cone structure that's like an upside-down old-fashioned ice cream cone. So that's where the cupola and the gold ball sits on top of that. And then the white marble stone was placed on each other's weight, so self-supported all the way up, and then anchored into that top of that cone. And so it's self-supported.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The dome required more than precise curvature. Workers also had to get the huge pieces of stone up there in the first place. How did they go about that? Using crane-like constructs called derricks. Brian told me they were able to in part because of emerging technologies in construction.

Brian Pease:

And that's what makes this construction pretty intriguing and interesting, it's right at that transition of going from typical manpower, and just horsepower to actual mechanical horsepower. In fact, the stone carvers traditionally you would use your mallet and your chisel chip away piece by piece, but by this time they had pneumatic chisels so they could just like we have today, a mechanical chisel that can speed up that work 10 times more than just taking your hammer, and your chisel to do that work. So those derricks were all over the building on all four corners, they were on top of those platforms, on those little train track things that they were moving the stone back and forth. And there's other types of derricks that were using that were more just a hoist system, would project outside the wall, and then you could just lift it up and slide it over to where you need to. So it was a very busy place those nine years. A lot of activity, as you mentioned, just people moving back and forth, materials getting shipped around.

Chantel Rodríguez:

These precise details about construction made me wonder how Brian learned all this. What about photographs? Were there any photographs taken of Capitol construction during that sort of 10-year time period, and has that produced any good information for learning about construction or even about workers?

Brian Pease:

Oh, absolutely. And it's kind of a really interesting story. Back in 2005 when we were celebrating the centennial of the Capitol, there's a family in White Bear Lake that had

this photo album they found at a garbage dump. And there was an old crate or an old chest that they opened up, and there was this big scrapbook with all kinds of photographs of the construction of the Capitol, a month-by-month account.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Wow, in the dumpster. Okay.

Brian Pease:

That is a huge historical resource because it does show some of the workers doing work. You can see them chiseling, or laying stone, or standing on the edge of the drum before they're laying the stone for the dome precariously looking above them as this beam is swinging over their heads. And so really I think a fascinating part of just understanding the process that took place. And it is remarkable because they were building frames for the archways, all wooden frames, and so they have to get the curve just right. And so once again, all these people have this skill set that probably no one does anymore, but back then it was like, "We have the people, let's get it done the right way, this is what we need to do with that." And so it's an actual testament of them and their forethought, as a record of the building's construction.

So that large photo album, there's a mystery behind it because there was no identification, but it was done really well, had different things. And when I saw it in 2005, it did have a postcard given to Frank Hansen, so he was the secretary for the Board of Capitol Commissioners, so I think it was the official record for the Board of Capitol Commissioners. And then Cass Gilbert also got copies. And so if you go to the New York Historical Society where a lot of his papers are today, you'll see a lot of the same photographs in their collection.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Looking at those photographs, the scale of the whole endeavor is clearer than ever. In one, three men stand on top of an unfinished outer wall. The stonework and wooden derricks towered over the workers. And another, you can see the scaffolding that surrounded parts of the building. It's sparse, no railings, large gaps between floorboards working on that site, balanced on the scaffolding while nine-ton slabs of stone swung through the air could not have been for the faint of heart.

John Sielaff:

It was a time when these guys that were working, even the ones that were skilled, they weren't used to working 20 feet off the ground, 30 feet off the ground, 40 feet off the ground maybe. And doing things that you wouldn't ordinarily do, and everybody just has to watch out for themselves because no workman's comp, no other kind of insurance.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Over the course of the nine-year construction, six workers were killed on the job through falls or other workplace accidents. Building this new Capitol was sounding more and more like a colossal undertaking. The construction alone employed hundreds of workers, many of whom like Ernest Jones, moved to the Twin Cities just for this job. Where did these mostly men live? Did they have families? Here's John again.

John Sielaff:

I meticulously found where that would've been, but it was interesting to me that there was no real neighborhood where black people lived in St. Paul at that time, they could live anywhere. They were scattered around the area. I found that there were several seemingly boarding houses where quite a few, I'm not talking about the African-Americans, but just workers on the Capitol, they all lived in the same house, fairly close to the jobs, so they could just walk over. And I think that was important to be able to just walk to the job. There were people from Minneapolis that worked on the job. Interestingly, there was a stone-cutting tradition in Wales, so there were various Welsh stonecutters from Minneapolis that worked on the job.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I wanted to know about Ernest Jones. What had his home life been like while he worked on the Capitol building? Can you tell me when he worked at the Capitol, did he bring his wife?

Marvin Roger Anderson:

He brought his wife, my grandmother with him, Aura, they were married, they were from adjoining counties in Tennessee. So she traveled with him from Tennessee to Memphis, to Chicago to Minnesota, they had one child. And then they had the rest of the children were born on, the majority of them were born on the east side of St. Paul, on Mississippi Street. And then he found a track of land, and he did something very interesting. He built the home for my grandmother and he put it in her name, so she owned a home.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Wow.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

The plot of land that they built on was the last plot of land right before Lexington Parkway. So there were no homes built from Oxford to Lexington Parkway. And that's where my grandfather found a plot of land, and that's where they built 1021 Rondo for my grandmother. And that's where my mother was born. So they lived there, and when we would go there, there were no other houses around.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This was a time when fewer than 30% of black families in St. Paul owned their homes. The house that Ernest built for his family was eventually joined by more. Their block went on to become a part of the historic Rondo neighborhood. Marvin has fond memories of his childhood there.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

It was just a hop, skip and a jump for us to leave our townhouse, and then go down to my uncle's house who owned a home for pancakes on Sunday morning because my aunt was a great pancake cook. And my cousins lived there, and my oldest cousin would take care of us and walk us all over the neighborhood, so we really got to know that part of town quite well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The fact that Ernest built a home for his family in St. Paul made me think about the rest of the workers. These stoneworker jobs were not long-term. Workers bounced from place to place as new construction sites and opportunities popped up. What happened to the African-American stoneworkers once the Capitol was completed in 1905? Where did they go? Back to John.

John Sielaff:

I found these five black guys that were born in Georgia, worked on the Capitol, verified that by looking in the city directories, they said they'd worked for the Butler brothers. And our jobs were either as a planer, a sawer, or a polisher. So Coy Johnson, Judge Jarrett, John McMurtry, Benjamin Stevens, and Isaac Suddeth, Benjamin Stevens, and Isaac Suddeth both stayed in St. Paul. And I know they raised their families here. The other guys pretty much disappeared after the job except for Judge Jarrett. We traced him down to Casoto where he worked in the quarry down there for a while, and then he became a dining car waiter on the railroad. So he lived in St. Paul. He brought his mother and his sister up here, and they all became members of the churches in the area. And there are several articles about them in the paper, obituaries when they passed away. I think we found at least one of these guys just

seemed like he died young, and the other ones maybe just went back south. The weather appeared to be brutal.

Chantel Rodríguez:

We know that Ernest Jones built that home and put it in his wife's name, but he didn't stay in St. Paul.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

He had a love for Chicago that was undeniable. It was undeniable to the extent that he would leave St. Paul and go to Chicago where he said he could get more work, which was true. And work dried up in the Twin City area, he would go to Chicago. And then I have never heard him say it, but I have heard my older cousins tell me that papa used to say he would rather be dead in Chicago than alive in any other city in the world.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Marvin was able to learn about his grandfather through a journal he left behind.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

I don't think he was a cutter. I think he was a bricklayer. He was able to find a work, a manual, a little manual that my grandfather had that we put on display at the centennial of the State Capitol in which he would list works, did stairs for a person and got so much money, worked on a house and got so much money. He listed the type of work he was doing, and how much that he got paid in a little handbook that he would carry with him. And we were able to demonstrate, or show that at the State Capitol that it wasn't a lot of money back then. But he had a variety of jobs, and I imagine that he picked up the trade as... He could do stairs, he could do houses, he could do all of the foundation work that was necessary to be done.

Because you had to be a jack of all trades in order to work in. Corner men were skilled, they only did that, and they worked on big projects. But my grandfather was the type of person that could do a little bit of everything and did a little bit of everything in order to make money to send back to Minnesota to take care of his family here.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Ernest, like many of the other stone workers, moved on to other cities, other jobs, but some stayed closer to the Twin Cities like Casiville Bullard. He went on to build his own home near Como Park.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

My mother was born in 1910, and she remembers as a very, very young girl going to picnics at Como Park, which was a very popular park, and always being surrounded by masons, men who worked in the construction industry. And she remembers Casiville Bullard because unlike the other ones who stayed here, then drifted back to Chicago or other locations, Casiville Bullard built a home near Como Lake, and that home now is on the National Registry of Historic Homes. So she remembers going by that house, and when we were kids going to Como Park, she would say that's where Mr. Bullard lived.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But Bullard's Mark on St. Paul went beyond his family home. After working on the State Capitol, he became a corner Mason, one of the most important jobs a stoneworker could hold. Their expertise ensured that a building would be straight and true, and not off once it was finished. He went on to serve in key positions in construction of other historic buildings in the city like St. Paul Cathedral, Union Depot, and the Governor's Residence to name a few. The State Capitol was finished in 1905 for the Centennial Celebration in 2005, descendants of those who worked on it gathered together. Marvin worked at the Capitol for more than 20 years, but getting to bring his mother to the Centennial Celebration gave him a new perspective on the space.

Marvin Roger Anderson:

So when I walked through that State Capitol, I felt like I belong there because my grandfather had helped construct the State Capitol, and it's nothing that I would wear on my shoulder, or on my sleeve, but it's an internal sense of pride that you feel that I belong here, and not just me, but it belongs to the whole community, that's what the State Capitol stands for. And I felt an immense sense of pride on my own, but I wanted my mother to feel that pride because she didn't come to the State Capitol. I was there every day. I felt it. I wanted her to feel what I felt, and what I felt was because of her father had worked there, and toiled there and was just as responsible of any other person in any part of Minnesota who worked there. We all felt the same sense of pride, and my mother was just over the top.

She was so pleased to be recognized as the last living descendant of one of the two men from two different sides of the coin, a contractor, and a worker, but both of them got equal... And that's all my mother ever wanted, she wanted to be treated fairly, she was a fierce defender of that. She stood up for her rights and demanded them. It was something that my mother really enjoyed towards the end of her life. And I think that that was the moment for me that I was glad I was able to take my

mother there so that she could bask in the glory that her father deserved, it was a great moment.

Chantel Rodríguez:

There are unique challenges to uncovering this history. The sources are not comprehensive and can sometimes contradict one another, but these stories are nonetheless a vital part of Minnesota history. One of the things I'd love for you to reflect on is we've been talking a lot about all the different workers who contributed to building the Capitol, but thinking specifically about the challenges of learning more about African-American contributions, why do you think it's important to remember and learn more about African-Americans contributions to building the Capitol?

Brian Pease:

To not include their contributions? Now, that's a disservice to the work that they were doing in Minnesota, and they were making this their home. This is their place of residence, their place of employment. This was a place that they were going to spend their lives, and their families were going to be raised here. Like I said before, I think they saw a good opportunity and it's like, "Why not stay here? I can use my skills, my trade to make us a prosperous and successful family here." So I think that's an important part. It's always fun to find information about lesser-known groups and what the work they did. Because 50, 60 years ago, we weren't looking at how many African-Americans or black men were working on the building.

And that's nice to start looking at that story and say, "Oh yeah, they had some important roles they were playing. They're a handful of hundreds of people working here, but they still had an impact on the work that was done." And they had the respect and were considered by the people that hired them as good employees, so it's a good record to establish and to tell people about.

The cool thing about talking about the Capitol, that's one thing. I can talk all day about it, but if you come and see the building, you can see what I talked about in person. So I encourage everyone to come visit your state Capitol. We have free guided tours that the Historical Society provides Monday through Saturday.

Chantel Rodríguez:

From my spot on the Capitol steps, I felt like I was seeing the building in a whole new light. The stone surrounding me was not only intentionally chosen, but cut and shaved with expertise and care. I knew that African-American Stoneworkers had been part of the Capitol's construction, and thanks to a variety of sources, photo albums, personal journals, family stories, city records, I also knew some of their names, and some of their stories. But still, I did not have definitive answers for all my

questions. This kind of open-ended story is one that is familiar to any historian. Sometimes the sources just don't exist, and the ones that do exist can disagree. In spite of this ambiguity, one thing is clear, the impact of these stoneworkers can still be felt today in the buildings and neighborhoods of the Twin Cities.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and Mnopedia articles at our website, mnhs.org/unraveled. Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin. And sound design and editing by Erica Huang. Lead Research by me, Dr. Chantal Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the state of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members. Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.