



Mix's "Old Main," the landmark building of the National Soldiers Home in Milwaukee, designed in 1867. It was built to house nearly 1,000 veterans.

Image from John G. Gregory, *History of Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (1931)

# THE MARK OF MIX

BY CHRIS SZCZESNY-ADAMS

Villa Louis in Prairie du Chien and the Soldiers Home and the Mitchell Building in Milwaukee are just a few of the distinctive buildings designed by architect E. Townsend Mix. The first exhibition of his work is on display through August 16 at the Monroe Arts Center, a building Mix originally designed as a church in 1869.

Edward Townsend Mix (1831–1890) rose to prominence in 19th-century American architecture through his design versatility, keen insight, and personal expression. Mix was a handsome gentleman with cultured tastes, refined perceptions, and engaging manners. He established himself in the Midwest prior to the rise of the Chicago School, the White City, the Prairie style, and their famous architects: Daniel Burnham, John W. Root, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Yet Mix designed more than 300 known structures from New York to Nebraska and revolutionized the Midwest with his sophisticated architecture, creating a reputation as an architect of distinction.



**Edward Townsend Mix**

Photo courtesy Milwaukee County Historical Society



The Monroe Arts Center was built as the First Methodist Church.

E. Townsend Mix descended from an established New England family and began his life in New Haven, Connecticut. The family was supported by the sailing voyages of Captain Edward A. Mix and educated by their mother, Emily Townsend Mix. In 1836, they moved to Illinois, purchasing land in Henry County. The family resided on a farm in Andover until 1846, when they moved to New York, with Mix possibly holding a brief apprenticeship with prominent architect Richard Upjohn. In 1848, at 17, Mix returned to New Haven and began training with the architect and developer Sidney Mason Stone. Upon completion of his training he was offered a position but declined, preferring to relocate to Chicago in 1855. While in Chicago, he jointly practiced with architect William W. Boyington (Old Water Tower on Michigan Avenue) and arrived in Milwaukee in 1856 to supervise two projects designed by the partnership. In 1857, Mix began his solo architectural practice in Milwaukee. In 1881, he created the firm Mix & Company to meet the practice's expanding needs. The last two years of his life were spent primarily in Minneapolis, where he died of tuberculosis in 1890.



"Old Main" tower, National Soldiers Home (detail)

Photos by Chris Szczesny-Adams

It was Mix's professional attitude, adaptable approach, and interest in contemporary architectural aesthetics that enabled him to complete such a widespread assembly of work showcasing his architectural evolution. Mix accepted commissions for many structures from prosperous clients, allowing him to design residences, commercial spaces, churches, and government buildings. They comprised a diversity of styles that included Italianate, Queen Anne, Gothic Revival, Second Empire, and Richardsonian Romanesque. His versatility in terms of style and building type was one of Mix's greatest strengths.

The Old Main, or main domiciliary, the landmark building of the National Soldiers Home in Milwaukee, was designed by Mix in 1867–1868. Mix's receipt of this prestigious commission indicated his rising reputation as an architect of regional and national importance. A federal law in 1866 called for creating several institutions across the nation to serve as "national homes" for disabled volunteer soldiers in the aftermath of the Civil War. Mix's main domiciliary of the National Soldiers Home in Milwaukee was to house nearly





**Villa Louis, built as the residence of Hercules Louis Dousman, is now maintained as a historic site by the Wisconsin Historical Society. Visitors can enjoy everything from breakfast in a Victorian kitchen to a servant's lamplight tour. More information at [www.wisconsinhistory.org](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org).**

Photo by Chris Szczesny-Adams

1,000 veterans along with a dining hall and administrative offices. The large-scale Cream City brick building in Gothic Revival stands on a hill overlooking idyllic landscaped surroundings. The building rises four stories and is marked with a dominant central tower soaring over the entrance, providing a stunning landmark from all directions that is still visible from I-94 today. The building's entry is through a grand Gothic arch articulated with colonnettes at the base of the tower. A steeply pitched mansard roof crowns the building in an elaborate design using traditional dark gray, light gray, and deep red scalloped slate that reflected Mix's eclectic interpretation of Gothic Revival. The picturesque landscape surrounding the building served the community as one of the city's early parks and provided a respite for the soldiers. The Soldiers Home was one of Mix's first grand commissions. Its cost exceeded \$200,000, and it set the precedent for much of his celebrated work in the 1870s and 1880s.

Churches comprise nearly 10 percent of Mix's portfolio. They were built for various denominations across

the region, and in several designs he displayed a distinctive feature that represented his awareness of site, drama, and status: the turned corner tower. For the First Methodist Church in Monroe, Wisconsin (1869–1887)—which now serves as the Monroe Arts Center—Mix's composition expresses a clear understanding of site and status and was praised by a contemporary writer as the “most complete and beautiful property belonging to the Methodist Church in Wisconsin.”

The building is constructed out of Cream City brick with a pitched roof and minimal stone trim. A dramatic rose window with swirling tracery pierces the smooth expanse of the façade and is a keynote in the church's design. The most impressive element of the composition is the corner tower with its swirling rose window. Its thoughtfully designed position acknowledges the town and embraces the visitor as the primary entrance to the sanctuary. The church strongly exemplifies Mix's ability to design a smaller, more simplified form, with elegant lines and an imposing presence that is visually recognizable and eminently functional. It acknowledges the



**"The Pride of Milwaukee": Mix designed the Mitchell Building in 1876.**

Photo by Chris Szczesny-Adams

strength and status of the First Methodist congregation and subsequently the Monroe Arts Center.

Villa Louis represents the continuing growth of Mix's architectural practice beyond Milwaukee's boundaries as well as his escalating reputation. Mix designed the Prairie du Chien residence for entrepreneur Hercules Louis Dousman II in 1870, and it was one of Mix's most significant interpretations of an Italianate country villa. The rural location was a change for Mix—much of his residential work in the 1860s was in urban areas—and offered him the opportunity to create a grand retreat expressing his understanding of estate design. Mix designed the house and laid out the grounds in a popular style with a landscape plan referencing the ideas of Andrew Jackson Downing, including a pond, circulating pathways, and beautiful vistas similar to what he completed at the National Soldiers Home.

The brick residence is perched on a mound on a fertile island delta adjacent to the Mississippi River, reflecting its importance. The façade has a projecting central pavilion capped by a gable with a cornice return. The massive double doors with leaded glass panels create a distinctive

entrance. Ornamental details such as segmental windows, projecting keystones, scrollwork brackets, and jig-sawed grills are utilized to create a cohesive design. The most distinctive feature is an enclosed glass porch that is one of the oldest in the Midwest. Nearly the entire first floor is encased by a stunning glass-paneled veranda. The space functioned as a conservatory and a place for the family to relax and enjoy the spectacular views of the Mississippi River on the west, the gardens, pond, and artesian well to the south, and the town of Prairie du Chien to the east.

In 1876 Mix designed the Mitchell Building, which a contemporary called "the pride of Milwaukee, as well as the whole northwest." This edifice, praised in architectural periodicals of the time, increased Mix's national reputation and served as an expression of Second Empire style interpreted through his own creativity. It was his most expensive commission to date, with the cost reaching nearly \$400,000. The building was designed for the prominent banker, investor, and railroad magnate Alexander Mitchell. The Mitchell Building stood just south of Milwaukee's most important intersection in the growing commercial district where Mix had previously





**One of Mix's most impressive mansions: Fair Oaks, in Minneapolis, represented the power and influence of William D. Washburn.**

*From George W. Sheldon's *Artistic Country-Seats* (1886)*

designed several structures. These buildings dominated the landscape, and the Mitchell Block was most prominent in its physical presence, aesthetic design, and technological features. It set the tone for Milwaukee's commercial structures in the latter 1870s and beyond.

The light gray sandstone building straddles the street corner and rises six stories, including a raised basement with a soaring central pavilion. The Second Empire style, a contemporary European trend seen in the Paris Opera House, is evoked through the traditional five-part French design with the central pavilion elaborately orchestrated in imported granite columns representing the strength of the building, the company, and the proprietor. Carved in the granite spandrels above the entrance are the prow of a ship and a locomotive engine, referencing Mitchell's enterprises. The triangular pediment that surmounts the columns is crowned with a classical female sculpture: the personification of Industry. Mix's originality also is expressed up high with the treatment of two caryatid figures supporting the upper cornice. Rising higher still is a convex mansard dome

with elaborate dormers and oval windows featuring stone carvings, cast terra-cotta, and iron crestings.

With Mix's reputation growing, he formed Mix & Company in 1881. It was a time of many large commissions. Fair Oaks in Minneapolis (1882–1883), built for Senator William D. Washburn, was one of Mix's most impressive mansions. It features an asymmetrical tower, stepped gables, variegated slate roofs, rusticated stonework, elaborate chimneystacks, and decorative crockets. It exemplifies Mix's approach to Gothic Revival design within a residential framework. Fair Oaks rises on a 10-acre site and is built of the local salmon-colored Kasota stone. The house encompasses an area of 15,000 square feet, a size previously handled by Mix in his grand commercial edifices.

Fair Oaks represented the Washburn family's powerful presence in Minneapolis society through its Gothic Revival design, its cosmopolitan interior appointments, its picturesque landscaping (attributed to Frederick Law Olmsted), and especially its grand scale, which reflects the conspicuous consumption of the Gilded Age. The interior was lavishly appointed in the manner of the East Coast Newport cottages, with vari-



**(Above)** The Martha Terry residence was a model of moderate-size Queen Anne beauty.

From *La Semaine des Constructeurs* (1886)

**(Left)** Chimney detail from a much bigger Queen Anne, the Alexander H. Allyn residence.

Photo by Chris Szczesny-Adams

ously styled rooms expressing taste and function. Although the aesthetics were significant, Mix also was interested in modern technology for the house, including a fully electrified design, steam heat throughout, attached baths for many bedrooms (nearly \$20,000 was spent on the plumbing), and an advanced ventilation system.

Fair Oaks was included in George W. Sheldon's *Artistic Country-Seats* (1886), a book of national importance. The book, with its limited run of 500 portfolio-sized copies, showcased nearly 100 residences of importance across the country, primarily highlighting the East Coast and those architects, including a large selection by McKim, Mead & White, Peabody and Stearns, and Bruce Price. Mix's design for Fair Oaks was the most expensive residence in the book, with an estimated value of \$750,000.

Mix was continually experimenting with new architectural trends. The Milwaukee home he designed in 1886 for Mrs. Martha Terry, a widow associated with Yankee society, reveals his interest in the Queen Anne style. It was featured in several journals across the country and

beyond, including *Inland Architect* (Chicago), *Sanitary Engineer* (New York City), and the French periodical *La Semaine des Constructeurs*. The house is constructed of wood on a cut-stone foundation. The moderate size, the Queen Anne style, and the functional arrangement of the house references the owner's social standing and provided for her needs as a widow.

A very different interpretation of the same architectural style is evident in an opulent mansion in the Queen Anne for Alexander Hamilton Allyn, a Yankee-bred wealthy farmer, in the resort town of Delevan, Wisconsin. The scale and luxury of this house, completed in 1885, expresses Mix's ability to transform a single idiom to suit the needs of various clients, expanding elements of the style as needed. The grand three-story residence with its tower, intricately detailed porch, porte-cochere, and diverse materials of stone, brick, and wood creates a lively expression of picturesque design. The interior with its tall ceilings, wide hallways, and elaborately carved staircase creates a stunning impression that is exemplified in the spacious parlors, elegant dining room, and library that, due to the size and finish, could easily be compared to





The Alexander H. Allyn residence in Delavan expresses Queen Anne as an opulent mansion.

Photo by Chris Szczesny-Adams

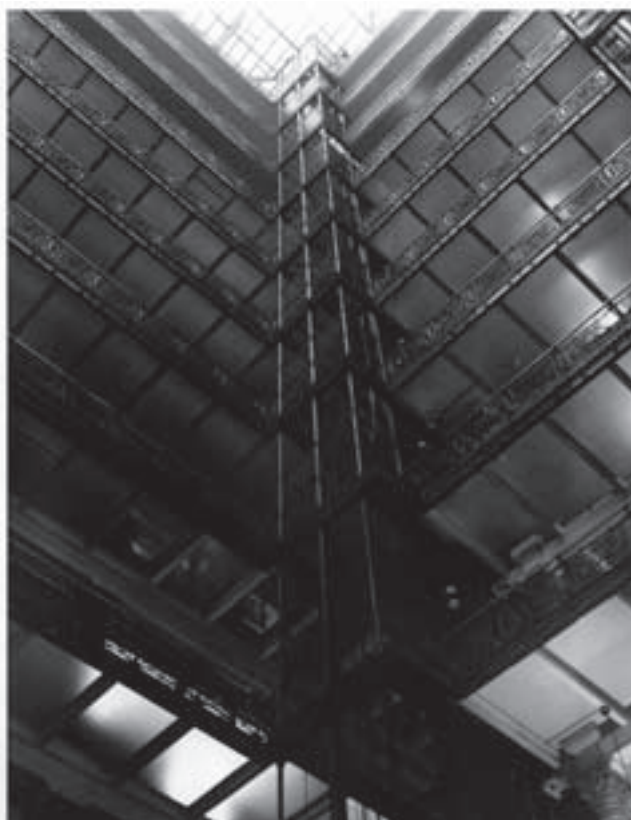
a smaller Newport cottage. The upper floors include 12 bedrooms. Mix meticulously created details throughout the house, as the surviving working drawings illustrate. One of the most distinctive elements was a split-flue chimney inset with stained glass, orchestrating a creative flow of light into the dining room and one of the bedrooms.

The peak of Mix's commercial commissions resulted in one of his most impressive edifices, the Metropolitan building (1888) in Minneapolis. The Metropolitan building serves as a monument to Mix's abilities. It is aesthetically impressive, functionally well designed, and, at 12 stories, the tallest building Mix had constructed. It was to be utilized for a variety of companies owned by Louis Menage as well as provide rental space for other ventures. Menage hired Mix to create a building that illustrated his powerful reputation and his importance to the city of Minneapolis. The building rises to 220 feet, encompasses a half acre, and is constructed of green granite and red sandstone. The materials and the rusticated stonework aid in creating an imposing building. The Metropolitan is designed in a

Romanesque style that, according to the *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, was "a splendid specimen of the latest commercial architecture. The architecture is appropriate, particularly to a building of such huge proportions and diversified character."

The building's exterior is impressive, but the interior surpasses it with a 12-story atrium covered with a clear glass skylight. Iron balconies surround the light court. Mix completed the light and airy feeling with translucent, inch-thick glass for the balcony floors. Crowning the building are the unique features of a viewing tower and a roof garden that served as a social locale for Minneapolis into the 1960s.

The young Mix arrived in Milwaukee in the middle of the 19th century and went on to alter the region's course in architectural design. Although Mix lived only 59 years, he contributed dramatically to the development and aesthetic experience of Milwaukee and beyond. Many of his more than 300 known buildings exist today; he served as the State Architect of Wisconsin from 1864–1867; and he held a longtime membership in the American Institute of Architects, in addi-



(Above) Metropolitan Life Building, interior

Photo by Henry Benbrooke Hall  
Minneapolis Historical Society Library collection

(Left) Metropolitan Life Building, Third Street and Second Avenue, Minneapolis

Photograph collection, postcard, ca. 1900  
Minneapolis Historical Society Library collection

tion to being a founding member of the Western Association of Architects. These professional associations exposed him to East Coast trends and improvements in architecture that were enhanced by his collection of books and periodicals that brought European design to the region. Throughout his distinctive career, E. Townsend Mix continued to expand his architectural and engineering repertoire to create buildings

that were aesthetically and technologically innovative. He left his mark as one of our nation's most important architects. \*

### See His Work

The first exhibition of E. Townsend Mix's architectural work is on display at the Monroe Arts Center through August 16. The exhibition, developed in conjunction with Monroe's sesquicentennial celebration, is housed in the former First Methodist Church (now the Monroe Arts Center) designed by Mix in 1869. The exhibition deepens our understanding of Mix through a contextual history of his architecture and patrons and the progression of his designs. The Monroe Arts Center is located at 1315 11th Street, tel. 608/325-5700. More information at [www.monroeartscenter.com](http://www.monroeartscenter.com).

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