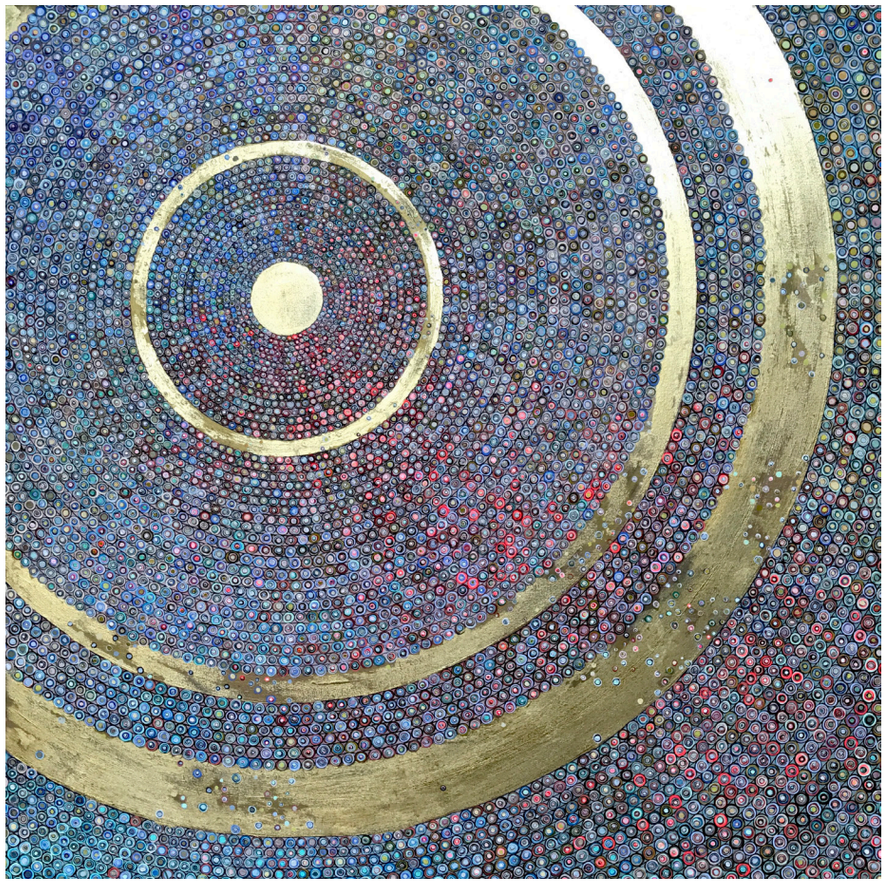
The People's House: A Home Of Heart And Stone

Amy Dvorak



Gardens
Ruth Loveland

THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE: A HOME OF HEART AND STONE

You can't drive through Kansas without seeing it. It envelops our buildings, dots our parks in the form of benches and statues, and appears on the Kansas State Capitol. The common thread: limestone. And it's sourced right here in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

"As we travel across the state, these stone structures provide that connecting link between the past, the present, and even the future. The detail, the carving, the character of the architectural style is all because of that material," said TreanorHL's Historic Preservation Principal Vance Kelley.

Rich with geological and aquatic history, our tallgrass prairie region connects people and places statewide through this one unassuming building material. Limestone's abundance in these parts is matched only by its variety. There are unique limestones, such as post-rock, prairie shell, tuxedo gray, honey-toned, and silverdale.

But the grand dame of all the limestones is Cottonwood. Quarried in the heart of the Flint Hills, Cottonwood can likely be found in every town in Kansas. That's because, according to Kelley, not only is it locally sourced, but also it's durable. "As you're trying to create a shelter or monument, you're looking for materials that will hold up," he said, citing historic wood structures that failed to survive disastrous fires. "Limestone is one of those materials that is fireproof, durable. You could end up shaping it and creating buildings that have character and appeal. It's something that's seen

as a wonderful advantage and utilized throughout the history of Kansas."

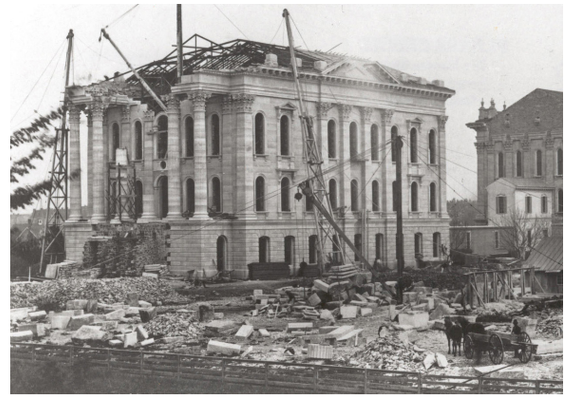
Cottonwood, a light-colored limestone, was celebrated and championed by one of the state's earliest architects, John G. Haskell. Surprisingly, the stone quarried today is as consistent as it was in the 1870s. And while Cottonwood was Haskell's stone of choice throughout his career, from the Chase County Courthouse to the Douglas County Courthouse, it's the Kansas State Capitol that is his claim to fame and put limestone on the map. "This material, as a building resource, has had such a tremendous influence," said Kelley. "Whether or not you're an architect, you see the Kansas Statehouse, and all of a sudden, you're not thinking about what's happening today. You think, 'How did the craftspeople do this?' That goes back to the connection of the history of Kansas today and what we can become in the future."

That connection to history is quite storied, as limestone has served us more than we realize. In fact, thanks to limestone, the Flint Hills are home to the largest intact tallgrass prairie in the nation. That's because outcroppings of limestone made farming impossible in the highlands, so the prairie was spared. According to the National Park Service, 170 million acres of tallgrass prairie in North America have been reduced to just four percent of that today, with the majority preserved here in the Flint Hills.

But where did all this limestone originate? Kansas as we know it today was once the Permian Sea, a shallow body of water rife with sea creatures that absorbed calcium carbonate from the water to form shells or skeletons. These organisms fell to the ocean floor after they died, and with time the decay and calcium carbonate formed the limestone we have today.

Back on dry land, we take a closer look at the Kansas State Capitol and the connection to its diverse landscape. Haskell was responsible for its design and oversaw construction of the earliest portion, the east wing, while the body of the building was built in another lesser-known Flint Hills stone, Junction City limestone. Haskell wanted to use Cottonwood, but the logistics of quarrying and delivering large blocks of stone from Chase County to Topeka were beyond the means of the young state's economy and infrastructure. Only the modillions under the eaves of the newly completed wing were made of Cottonwood because smaller blocks of stone were more easily transported.

Erasmus T. Carr designed the second phase of the Kansas Statehouse, the west wing, constructed entirely of Cottonwood. By the end of the 1870s, when construction began, Cottonwood could be obtained in large blocks, and new transportation networks allowed delivery to Topeka. "The Kansas Capitol was built during a time for healing," said Kelley, speaking of the



Construction of the State Capitol
kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

period after the Civil War. "The founding fathers were looking for a symbol of democracy. That symbol is so important. And if you have natural building materials, like Kansas had limestone, you want to use it with pride."

The Statehouse stone was handcrafted by immigrant stone masons using traditional techniques to shape blocks of rock with chisels and mallets. The evidence of this handwork is the richly patterned faces and edges of even the humblest ashlar stones. Taken as a whole, the stones appear uniform, but upon closer inspection, subtle differences in the angle and rhythm of the tooling reveal the different hands of the makers. Various patterns of fossils form the unique natural palette with which each mason worked.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, repair projects of increasing frequency were failing to address deterioration of the stone on the Statehouse. A comprehensive stone restoration was envisioned, a restoration that would address the causes of deterioration and renew the impressive stone edifice. This undertaking would eventually entail replacement or partial replacement of more than 5,000 of the 26,500 stones on the façade, a project that would take four years to complete.

Limestone, formed by the remains of a prehistoric ocean bed, uniquely grounds the Statehouse. This place was once a sea of water and then a sea of grassland, this place we call Kansas.

This place we call home.

Amy Dvorak is an architectural writer and serves as communications manager at TreanorHL, a Kansas-based architecture firm specializing in historic preservation.