

Minnesota State Academy for the Blind,  
Blind Department Building  
400 6th Avenue Southeast  
Faribault  
Rice County  
Minnesota

HABS No. MN-161-A

HABS  
MINN  
66-FAR,  
2A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Great Lakes Systems Office  
1709 Jackson Street  
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-2571

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MINNESOTA STATE ACADEMY FOR THE BLIND  
BLIND DEPARTMENT BUILDING

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MINN  
66-FARL  
2A-

HABS No. MN-161-A

Location: 400 6th Avenue Southeast  
Faribault  
Rice County, Minnesota  
U.T.M.: 15:479820:4903490  
Quad: Faribault, Minn.

Construction Dates: 1873-1874

Architect: Attributed to Monroe Sheire

Present Owner: State of Minnesota

Present Use: Storage

Significance: The Blind Department Building was the first structure designed specifically for the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind (HABS No. MN-161, previously the Minnesota School for the Blind and the Minnesota Braille and Sight Saving School). Erected between 1873 and 1874, the building served the school's changing needs, housing dormitory rooms, classrooms, and industrial training shops. Originally, the building was the main structure on campus; it later formed a wing of the larger Dow Hall (HABS No. MN-161-B), erected in 1884. In 1914, the Blind Department Building was moved to its current site and became known as the Industrial Building and the Utility Building.

Project Information: In 1996, the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind received funds from the Minnesota State Legislature to undertake several projects on campus, including the demolition of Dow Hall (HABS No. MN-161-B) and the Blind Department Building. Key architectural elements were to be salvaged for incorporation into a commemorative exhibit near Dow Hall's site, which was to be converted into a parking lot. In 1997, Studio Five Architects, with Thomas E. Hunt as principal-in-charge, was hired to complete the project. Studio Five retained Hess, Roise and Company as a subcontractor for the HABS documentation. Charlene K. Roise served as principal investigator for Hess Roise and helped draft and edit the reports. Staff historians Shawn P. Rounds and Cynthia de Miranda conducted research and prepared the reports. Jerry Mathiason, as a subcontractor to Hess Roise, completed the photographic documentation. Gary Paulson oversaw the production of this report for the Minnesota Department of Administration. Elaine Sveen reviewed the report for the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind.

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Blind Department Building is on the west edge of the school's grounds, on the rim of a high bluff overlooking the Straight River. Access to the bluff's steep slope, which is overgrown with large trees and thick underbrush, is restricted by an iron fence. Dow Hall (HABS No. MN-161-B) is northeast of the Blind Department Building; the school's library is directly east, across a driveway that opens into a large parking lot just south of the building. To the north is a single-story, wood-frame, multi-stall garage.<sup>1</sup>

Constructed in 1873-1874 in the Second Empire style, the Blind Department Building was moved to its present location in 1914. The rectangular-plan structure rises two-and-one-half stories from a low concrete foundation and is topped by a mansard roof. Orange-red brick laid in stretcher bond sheathes the wood-framed structure. Two-over-two, double-hung windows fill rectangular openings finished with stone sills and segmental-arched lintels comprised of two courses of header bricks. Several windows are broken; others are boarded. An unornamented wood frieze encircles the building beneath boxed eaves. Metal rain gutters edge the wood-shingled roof. The roof was originally pierced by five arched dormers on the front and rear, and four arched dormers on each side; two large brick chimneys rose from one side. All of the dormers and chimneys have been removed, except for the center dormer on the rear (west) facade.

The second story of the front (east) facade of the Blind Department Building holds five windows spaced at irregular intervals. The same pattern of fenestration is repeated on the first floor, although the center and north-end openings contain wood-panel doors rather than windows. The north door is ornamented by an arched, two-light transom; a similar arched window with a stone sill is positioned high in the wall immediately south of the door. The transom above the central door has been removed and the opening filled with brick. A flat canopy extends from the building to shelter the entrance. Each door is approached by low concrete steps with pipe railings. A line of damaged and discolored brick below the second-story windows indicates the position of the building's original wrap-around verandah, removed during the 1940s.

The north and south sides originally shared identical fenestration, with four windows evenly spaced across both floors. While the north facade appears unmodified, a one-story, shed-roofed wood lean-to presently conceals the first-floor openings on the south side. Four louvered windows line the south side of the addition. Double doors on the east side provide access.

The building's interior is bisected from east to west by a central hallway. A staircase occupies the hallway's north side. On the first floor, the staircase's south side was once enclosed, but now only wood framing remains. Wood-baluster railings edge the stairwell on the second and

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<sup>1</sup> This description is based on a site visit by Shawn P. Rounds on March 7, 1997.

third floors. Much of the original wood flooring, trim, and wainscoting survives throughout the building. Likewise, many of the doorways still hold wood-panel doors, several of which are topped by transoms. Original light fixtures were at some point replaced with overhead fluorescent units. Several rooms with shelving and cabinets appear to have been fitted for industrial-training activities or storage. On the second floor, an interior room with windows opening into a hallway may have once served as an office.

## HISTORY

The Minnesota State Academy for the Blind was originally a department within the Minnesota Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb. When established by the state legislature in 1858, the institution was charged with educating deaf children in the care of the state. The legislature added a department to teach the blind in 1864, but failed to allocate funding for its operation until two years later. Beginning in 1866, the Blind Department held classes in various Faribault homes due to a lack of space in the commercial building that temporarily housed classrooms and living quarters for the deaf students. When the institution moved to its own campus in 1868, the two programs were brought together in a single building. Overcrowding was a constant problem, however, leading the state to purchase a site for a separate campus for the Blind Department in 1873.<sup>2</sup>

The land had belonged to Alexander Faribault, founder of the town, and the school moved into Faribault's old home, which still stood in a grove of evergreens on a high bluff overlooking the Straight River. Officials immediately had plans drawn up for a 40' x 60' wood-frame building to adjoin the house's south side. The building may have been designed by Monroe Sheire, a Saint Paul architect who had just built a handsome stone house for Alexander Ramsey, the state's first governor. Sheire's work was also known locally through another of his buildings, Faribault's First Congregational Church, dating from 1867.<sup>3</sup>

A local construction firm, Waite and Kingsley, won the contract to build the new school structure for \$9,000. By July 1874, the Second Empire-style building was complete, and the Blind Department moved in immediately. From a high basement, the brick-veneered structure rose two-and-a-half stories to a mansard roof pierced by round-arched dormers and two large brick chimneys. Light-colored, diamond-shaped shingles formed two decorative bands around the roof. A verandah supported by piers encircled the building's raised first floor. Young trees dotted the surrounding grounds.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See HABS No. MN-161 for a history of the evolution of the Minnesota School for the Blind.

<sup>3</sup> No architect is named in documentation dating from the time of construction. A decade after the Blind Department Building was erected, however, school officials implied that Monroe Sheire had designed it: "Monroe Sheire of St. Paul, to whom we are indebted for the working plans, drawings and specifications of all the buildings which have been erected for the use of this institute . . ." Sheire is well known for his combined Italianate-Second Empire buildings, including the Alexander Ramsey House, built between 1868 and 1872 and listed in the National Register in 1969, and the Anthony Yoerg, Sr. House, constructed in 1875 and listed in 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Minnesota Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, *Eleventh Annual Report* (Saint Paul, 1874), 10; *Faribault Republican*, December 24, 1873, 3; "Building," *Faribault Republican*, May 6, 1874, 3; Minnesota Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Director and Officers* (Saint Paul, 1875), 9.

In 1875, James J. Dow became superintendent of the Blind Department and began developing a strong curriculum to improve student abilities in three areas: intellectual, musical, and industrial. The program was successful, and by the 1882-1883 school year, thirty-six students filled the facility to the point of overcrowding. In response, a new main building (HABS No. MN-161-B) was erected between 1883 and 1884, with Monroe Sheire serving as architect. The 1874 building became the north wing of the new brick structure. The combined facility nearly doubled the school's capacity to around sixty students.<sup>5</sup>

The newer structure, later christened Dow Hall, was subsequently altered and expanded. The Blind Department Building, however, was little changed until 1914, when the school planned a new north wing for Dow Hall. The Blind Department Building was separated from Dow and moved southwest to its current site. Known as the Industrial Building or the Utility Building, it became an industrial training center and workshop with facilities for piano tuning on the first story and woodworking on the second. A Braille print shop filled the top floor. A few years later, Dow proudly reported that "the industrial department has never been stronger. . . . I think I may say without the charge of boastfulness that the industrial department of this School both in equipment and in teaching force stands well towards the head among the Schools of the country of this kind. The new Industrial Building . . . has greatly facilitated the work in these directions."<sup>6</sup>

Karsten Ohnstad, a student at the school between 1930 and 1933, remembered the building as "a busy place, filled with the bang of hammers, the rasp of saws, the clatter of boys. The air smelled pleasantly of pine lumber." The activity stopped abruptly in 1941, however, when the building was declared a fire hazard and unfit for use by students. A new single-story industrial building was erected that year housing six shops. The older structure was later found adequate to shelter the Talking Book Library until a new library facility was completed in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "The State Institutions," *Faribault Republican*, February 14, 1883, 3; "Report of State Institutions," *Faribault Republican*, February 21, 1883, 3; "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of March 1883" and "Report of the Superintendent to the Board of Directors for the Month of April 1883" in "Record Book of Minnesota Institution for the Blind, Opened February 1883: Personal Property of J.J. Dow," at Minnesota State Academy for the Blind, Faribault; "The New Building for the Blind," *Faribault Republican*, May 2, 1883, 3; Minnesota State Board of Corrections and Charities, *First Biennial Report* (Saint Paul, 1884), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Minnesota School for the Blind, *Twentieth Biennial Report* (Faribault, 1919), 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Karsten Ohnstad, *The World at My Fingertips* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1942), 125; Minnesota Braille and Sight Saving School, "One Hundred Years of Sight and Sound, 1866 to 1966," 12; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report for the Period Ended June 30, 1942* (Stillwater, Minn., [1942]), 144; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions *Biennial Report for the Period Ended June 30, 1944* (Stillwater, Minn., [1944]), 132.

By the mid-twentieth century, the Industrial Building had experienced some major alterations, including removal of the wrap-around verandah, Second-Empire-style dormers, and decorative roof tiles. Despite these changes, however, the historic integrity of the structure remained reasonably intact. Because of the building's historic and architectural significance, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, along with Dow Hall. The honor, however, did not ensure that the building would find yet another use. In 1997, the administration proceeded with plans to demolish the Blind Department Building in the following year.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "One Hundred Years of Sight and Sound," 12; Minnesota Division of Public Institutions, *Biennial Report for the Period Ended June 30, 1942*, 144.

## **SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

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**Archival Collections**

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