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of the Journal Star**

Posted Apr 10, 2010 @ 10:00 PM

Last update Apr 11, 2010 @ 10:17 AM

GALESBURG —

Symbolism that eluded detection for more than 150 years has become a modern-day Knox College version of “The DaVinci Code.”

Philosophy professor Lance Factor recounts how he cracked the code and deciphered the messages in his new book, “Chapel in the Sky: Knox College’s Old Main and Its Masonic Architect” published by Northern Illinois University Press.

Just months after hitting store shelves, the book has gone into its second printing.

“We felt positive about this book, but we didn’t expect we’d go into the second printing so fast,” said Linda Manning, assistant director of marketing and sales manager at Northern Illinois University Press.

The mystery at Knox started presenting itself to Factor almost subconsciously. He has taught at Knox for 40 years, and walking to his office in Old Main, he’d wonder why the building’s windows spanned multiple stories. He wondered why there were precise triangular grids in the transoms above doors, what purpose the niches in the corner towers served and what the patterns on the floor meant.

The building was designed by architect Charles Ulricson, a Swedish immigrant who was living in Peoria and was commissioned to design the Knox College building which was completed in 1857.

Old Main is unlike other collegiate architecture and has been described as Collegiate Gothic with characteristics of Greek Revival and Gothic Revival, but that didn’t quite satisfy Factor.

“There were things that were atypical. I’d think about it and tell myself someday I’m going to figure that out,” Factor said recently from his third floor office in Old Main, a national landmark and site of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

By the summer of 2006, Factor found the irregularities and mysteries insuppressible. He climbed a ladder and started measuring all the windows, niches, hooded moldings, foundation stones, mullions and bell tower. He counted the bricks and traced the source of the limestone.

He started calculating ratios. He researched the life of the architect.

“It would keep me awake at night. Most architectural historians don’t measure buildings and count bricks. They look at features,” Factor said. “But my field is Greek philosophy and logic. Once I started measuring, the whole thing cracked open.”

Ulricson grew up in Sweden, son of an architect for the royal family. When his father, who was probably a Freemason, died relatively young, Ulricson and his brother tried to support their mother in ways that angered the royal family, and the brothers were forced to leave Sweden.

His brother went to Australia, and Ulricson came to America in 1835 and worked for the New York City architectural firm Town and Davis. The firm’s partners were not Masons, but they believed in the notion that geometry could be an expression of metaphysical and spiritual truth.

In his book, Factor wrote that the New York architects used special Masonic ratios thought to transform a building into a “talisman suffused with the creative and protective energy of God, the Divine Architect and Geometer of the Universe.”

Ulricson moved to Peoria and worked on Jubilee College from 1845 to 1847. Some time later, he was asked to take over from another architect for design and construction of the Knox Chapel which has come to be known as Old Main.

Factor notes the irony that an architect with ties to Freemasonry and esoteric architecture was offered a commission by Knox College’s anti-Masonic fundamentalist founders who deplored secret societies and hidden symbols.

Ulricson risked his career with the commission and could have destroyed his future as an architect if the symbols and talismans in the building were discovered. But the secret codes remained hidden in plain sight for over a century.

“An ethical issue . . . was Ulricson a scoundrel for not telling? The Knox Trustees were feuding at the time, and they gave him complete carte blanche to finish the job,” Factor said. “Yes, he was secretive, but he had deep convictions about academic buildings, faith and reason, and this building is his masterpiece.”

Ulricson left no notes and no account of his goal to create a Greek-Gothic synthesis that reflected his beliefs in esoteric geometry and its power to unify opposites like faith and reason.

“It’s a delicious irony. The founders of Knox College were staunch anti-Masons from upstate New York,” Factor said.

They and many other fundamentalists at the time believed Freemasons had loyalty to foreign powers in part because of their secrecy.

“It was like the McCarthy red scare, and it became virulent,” Factor said. “The Catholic Church cracked down on Freemasons.”

Yet Freemasonry embraced principles of democracy. Inside Masonic lodges, differences were not recognized between wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated, Factor said.

Freemasons believed God was the ultimate architect and if the ideals of God could be expressed in a building, God would be in the building and the structure would become a magical charm.

Factor discovered formulas in the design of Old Main such as the Golden Ratio and the Masonic cubit used to symbolize these Masonic beliefs that rationality, reason, piety and faith were compatible.

Among his discoveries were the pattern in the floor of Old Main symbolizing the “Pavement of Moses” representing choices between good and evil. The 16 steps represented the steps to the temple of Solomon. The pattern in the building’s transoms is a unity square, designed to reconcile differences . . . as in faith and reason.

“This is a unique building, and I hope it is recognized for more than the site of the Lincoln-Douglas debate but as a unique example of Town and Davis and Ulricson architecture,” Factor said.

Mystery still follows Ulricson. He died in 1887, but his obituary made no reference to his buildings. He is buried in Springdale Cemetery but there are no Masonic marks on his gravestone.

As far as secret symbols built into Old Main, there may be more.

“I’ve had so many surprises, I’m not confident I’ve discovered everything in this building,” Factor said. “I dream that the state will recognize this building not just as the site of the Lincoln-Douglas debate but as a unique example of fantastic architecture expressing the belief that church and culture can coexist.”

Factor said the book spells out formulas that can be applied to decipher Masonic codes in other buildings designed by Ulricson, including Easton Manor and Pettengill-Morrison House in Peoria.

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