

# Muskego Chapel

A Treasure Trove of American Folk Turning

Terry Martin

One of the most exciting things about being a woodturning writer is discovering relatively unknown examples of this ancient craft. Often it takes serious research, even detective work, to track down such treasures, but the best finds are those you don't expect. In July of 2008, on the way to the AAW Richmond conference, Kevin Wallace and I traveled to Minneapolis for an exhibition of work by artists from our book, *New Masters of Woodturning*. In one of those moments of pure serendipity that light up our lives, we stumbled upon one of the true woodturning treasures of the United States.

The exhibition was held at Nina Bliese Gallery in downtown Minneapolis. Nina's husband, Richard Bliese, is president of one of the largest Lutheran seminaries in the United States, and he kindly offered to let us stay in guest accommodation there. When he drove



The Muskego Chapel on the grounds of the Luther Seminary.

us to the seminary, we were delighted to see that it was set in beautiful park-like grounds and tidy streets lined with cozy homes and educational facilities. It has a real village atmosphere and we felt right at home.

Because of our interest in wood, Richard offered to show us "the old wooden chapel" on the grounds. It sounded interesting, so the next day we drove the short distance to the chapel. At first it looked like an impressively large log cabin surrounded by trees. A plaque on

the outside told us that it was built in 1844 in Wisconsin, then moved to the seminary in 1904. This was surprising because it didn't look so old. Closer inspection showed that the logs were very weathered, but it had all been well maintained and was in good condition.

We stepped in at Richard's invitation, still thinking we were going to see a space inside just like the rough exterior. What we found left us open-mouthed with surprise. In contrast to the rough log walls, there were two rows of stately turned columns that supported an upper floor. Further in, the altar was decorated with large split turnings, the altar rail was supported



The memorial plaque.

by turned banisters, and the baptismal font was mounted on a large turned base. It was a treasure trove of old turning.

The size of the columns was impressive—at least seven feet tall and quite thick. My first thought was that they must have been hard to mount on a lathe, and I wondered what kind of lathe would have been used. When I looked more closely, they appeared to have been turned very badly. The tool marks were still quite evident and there was a lot of deep tearout on the detailed work. It appeared as if the turner had an idea of what was to be achieved, but the apparently clumsy work made me think that he had never done it before.

When I stepped back again and looked down the row of columns, I could see that they varied in shape and line. I asked myself, “Who was this turner? What tools was he working with? What kind of lathe did he have?” I asked Richard but he didn’t know. Later inquiries confirmed that nothing much was known about the turnings. As I stood in the quiet atmosphere of this old building, I wondered, “Why did they turn such classical-style columns in a log building?” Much of what I have found out since then has given me the deepest respect for the craftsmen who worked so hard to produce this work.

The chapel was built by Norwegian settlers in Muskego, Wisconsin, a town named after the Potawatomi people’s name for the area, Mus-kee-Guaac, meaning sunfish. The first permanent European settlement was in 1836. It helps to know that the chapel was built only eight years after the first settlers arrived. In *The Saga of Old Muskego*, author N.N. Rönning talks of “building a church in the wilderness.” We learn that the “Rev. Clausen was along in felling the trees for the logs, that Halvor Lohner, a house builder from Telemark, took a leading part . . .

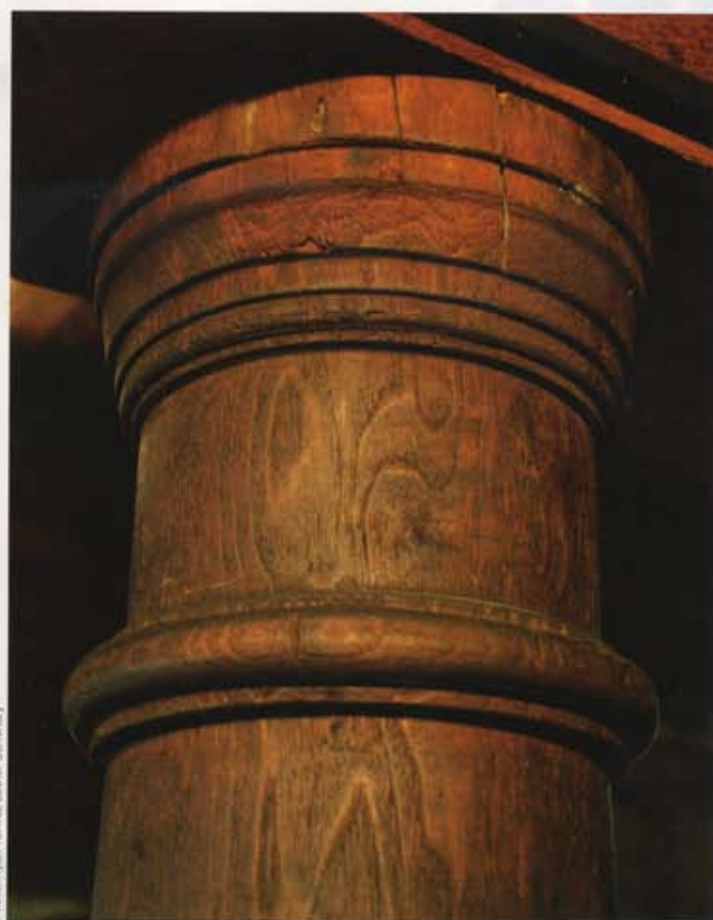


Photo: Ryan Tomasi, Luther Seminary

Detail of a column showing tool marks and grain tearout.

[and that] Peder Jacobson . . . was the one who by use of a lathe turned the pillars inside the church. Ole Spellum is said to have turned the balusters of small pillars of the altar ring.” These men, with the help of the other men and women of the community, built what was to be the first Norwegian Lutheran church in America.

We need to remember how tough these settlers were. They arrived in a part of America that was still pioneer territory where daily survival was a continuing challenge. They only had simple tools to work with and were used to doing without basic facilities, which is shown by the fact that the chapel was not heated until five years after it was completed, although it was in constant use during all that time. Looking at the hard wooden benches and knowing how cold it must have been, I can’t help but wonder how long

Reverend Clausen’s sermons were during the coldest winter months.

By 1869, the chapel was too small for the growing community so it was pulled down and parts of it were used as a barn for pigs. Fortunately, by the early twentieth century, the church community realized how important this piece of their history was and rebuilt it on its present site, preserving not only a piece of church history, but also a remarkable example of turning history.

We know that the columns were turned from black walnut. What we don’t know is how Peder Jacobson did it or how much he knew about turning. When you look closely, it appears the details may have been turned “uphill,” or against the grain, which could account for the tearing of the grain. However, Peder may not have had proper turning tools. All of this ▶



The altar rail.

is speculation, but my guess is that he was not a trained turner. He may have been a wheelwright or perhaps a blacksmith who repaired wagons when required. He probably had to forge his own tools and may not have known how to use them properly.

Then there is the question of the lathe. Norway has a long history of turning, and turned work was probably familiar to most of the settlers, but the lathe used to turn these columns must have been very large. It may have been a rough wooden bed with wedged head- and tailstocks. But how was it driven? Large logs like this are very heavy and even mounting them on the lathe would have required some help. It must have taken a lot of power to start them turning and to maintain any kind of speed. The most likely power source was human hand power, probably through a great wheel. It would have been good winter work to keep warm. Once we picture the enormous logs turning erratically and not very fast on a rough lathe, the tool marks and inconsistent shapes are understandable. Also, there would have been no way to sand these columns so, with this in mind, the finish is quite impressive.

The detail on the decorative elements looks as if the turner had seen such work, but was not sure exactly how it should be. Some of the beads are well formed, but the stepped portions at the top of the columns look rough. The altar rail banisters by Ole

Spellum are a little more consistent, and if we look at what is obviously a later replacement spindle, it is clear that although it is not fine work, Ole knew what he was doing. I have to ask myself if I could produce such work under those conditions, and I am sure I could not.

When I sat quietly in this old building and thought about those turners, I was quite moved. Their work was part of a community effort to make a new home for themselves, both physical and spiritual. The addition of the columns to the rough building was clearly an attempt to elevate their place of worship above the commonplace. If I was impressed when I walked through the door, I can imagine how it must have seemed to the farmers of the region when they first saw it and

thereafter when they gathered there every Sunday. These humble turnings are a testament to the ingenuity, hard work, community spirit, and faith of those hardy settlers. I like to think of Ole and Peder sitting beside their work on Sundays with their families. Photos of the settlers in the region from that time show that they were a pretty dour lot, but I am sure they permitted themselves a moment of pride. What would they have thought if they had known we could still admire their work more than 160 years later? How many of us will leave a turning legacy that can still be admired in 2168? ■

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The interior of the chapel with rows of columns turned in the classical style. The altar and high pulpit are decorated with split turnings.



Photo: Courtesy of ELCA Luther Seminary Archives, St. Paul, MN