

*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

**April 24, 2013**

**THIS WEEK:**

**Iowa State Capitol and the Library of Congress Feature Artist's Work**

**BACKGROUND:**

Elmer Ellsworth Garnsey was primarily a muralist who painted on the East Coast from a studio in New York City. He was born in Holmdel, New Jersey, and took art training at the Art Students League and Cooper Union. Affiliations included the National Society of Mural Painters and the American Federation of the Arts.

His work is in the Library of Congress, Boston Public Library, Memorial Hall at Yale University, City Art Museum of St. Louis, U.S. Custom House in New York City, and the State Capitol in Iowa.



**Elmer Garnsey**  
1862-1946

## **Iowa State Capitol and the Library of Congress Feature Artist's Work**

When the Capitol was completed in 1886, there had been 15 years of construction and nearly \$2,900,000 invested. But the public areas had not been finished because funding had run out. In 1902, the Capitol Improvement Commission was created to carry out the original plans for the building. The commission needed to plan for the color and ornamentation for the public hallways as well as oversee the hiring of artists to fill empty frames with oils, murals, and fine mosaic work. The Capitol Improvement Commission contracted a highly respected artist to oversee the project. Elmer Garnsey had been responsible for all the painted ornamentation for the Library of Congress.

In the book, *The Library of Congress: Its Architecture and Decoration*, Herbert Small wrote the following:

It fell to Garnsey's lot to supervise every inch of the setting of tiles, the gilding of the rosettes, the assembling of the mosaics, the lettering of mottoes and monograms, the laying on of acres of flat hues, and the invention and execution of the painted panels that are the chief features of the entire undertaking.

The Capitol Improvement Commission looked to Garnsey to produce the same beautiful results for the Iowa Capitol. There are many similarities between Garnsey's work in the Library of Congress and the Iowa Capitol. The Pavilion of the Elements in the Library of Congress contains a band with the signs of the zodiac created by Garnsey. Garnsey created the same zodiac symbols around the ceiling of the first floor rotunda. The Pavilion of the Seals in the Library of Congress contains a domed ceiling designed by Garnsey. Around the dome is a narrow border on which is inscribed the following from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

In the narrow band around the base of the dome in the Iowa Capitol, Garnsey used the same inscription.

Elmer Ellsworth Garnsey also has works featured at Yale and Columbia universities and the Minnesota and Wisconsin state capitols.



**Garnsey's Zodiac Signs, Second Floor, Southeast Pavilion in the Library of Congress**



**Garnsey's Zodiac Signs, First Floor Rotunda area in the Iowa State Capitol**

**Iowa State Capitol Signs of the Zodiac Painted by Elmer Garnsey**



**Libra, The Scales**



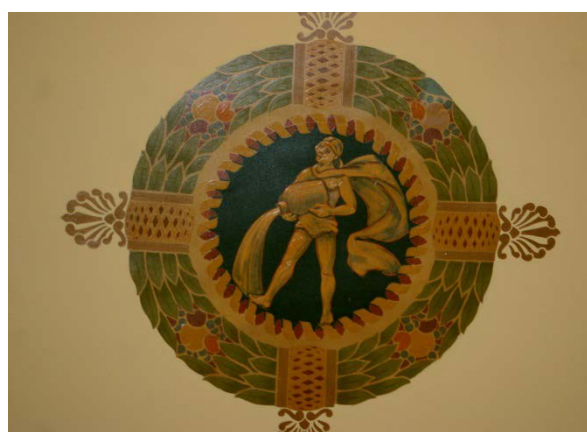
**Scorpio, The Scorpion**



**Sagittarius, The Centaur**



**Capricorn, The Goat**



**Aquarius, The Water Bearer**



**Pisces, The Fishes**



**Aries, The Ram**



**Taurus, The Bull**



**Gemini, The Twins**



**Cancer, The Crab**



**Leo, The Lion**



**Virgo, The Maiden**