"Det norske hus" på udstillingen i Chicago i 1893.

Architect's rendering, ground plan and elevation for the Norway Building.
From "Teknisk Ugeblad" (Technical Weekly), Norway, 1895, p. 167. Little Norway Collection.
In May of 1892, after Norway had decided to take part in the World's Fair, a committee was established to plan representative exhibits. It corresponded with the Fair's governing body at Chicago to work out the details regarding Norway's entries. The Norwegian representatives originally had hoped for a large "Norwegian Building" which would house a number of its exhibits under one roof. After considerable negotiations, however, this plan was scrapped. Time was running short, and Fair officials in Chicago did not allot enough space at the Exposition site for such a sizable structure. According to an 1895 committee report:

The Norwegian commission opted instead to permit the erection of a meeting hall in the style of a stave church, which at the same time could serve as the office for Norway. Applications were sent to firms who exported prefabricated frame houses, inviting them to submit bids for the creation of such a building, which then could serve as a sample of their work. A sketch of the building was submitted by architect W. Hansteen, who later also furnished complete drawings with estimates of construction costs. M. Thams and Co. was the firm chosen to execute the work according to the drawings. Negotiations were closed by contract in November 1892, whereby the Thams company promised to complete the building in Chicago in February 1893, for a price of 6,000 Kroner—freight from Norway and setting up in Chicago at the committee's expense.¹
Photo by Randy Winner. Little Norway Collection. Drafting tools courtesy of the Mount Horeb Area Historical Society.

ARCHITECT AND BUILDER
The firm of M. Thams & Co. was located at Strandheim Bruk in Orkanger, near Trondheim, Norway. It was established in 1867 by Wilhelm A. Thams. Mr. Thams was an industrious, ambitious fellow, anxious to compete with Norway's already well-established sawmills. In 1869 he added the first planing mill and crate factory in the northern part of the country. The crate business exceeded all expectations, and the company soon expanded. When a fire destroyed the firm in 1872, Thams, who was then 60 years old, took this opportunity to create the kind of mill he had always envisioned. After rebuilding, Thams turned the mill and its operations over to his son, Maurentius Thams, who became the principal shareholder. Maurentius started production of crates on a large scale, used not only for the transport of salmon, but also for shipping tomatoes from the Canary Islands to Europe.
Christian Thams (right), with his wife Eleanora (center) and father Maurentius Thams (left) at the Exposition Universial of Paris 1900. (Man with hand on hat unidentified.) Photo courtesy of Rene Philipp, Oslo, Norway.

Trondheim, Norway c.1910. Orkanger is located a few miles southwest along the Trondheim Fjord. Little Norway Collection.
The M. Thams & Co. factory, c. 1890, Strandheim Bruk. Maurentius Thams is on the bridge on the left, and his living quarters are in the background. Photo courtesy of Meldal Bygdemuseum, Norway.
A shift of Thams & Co. millworkers, 1893.
From Orkanger Boka (the Orkanger Book), State Archives, Trondheim, Norway.
Detail of the Norway Building's left porch railing, bearing the architect's credit.
Little Norway Collection.

Detail of the Norway Building's right porch railing, bearing the builder's credit.
Little Norway Collection.
Christian Thams, one of the two sons of Maurentius Thams, was an architect who was educated in Zurich, Switzerland. He established his own office at Nice in France. After an earthquake at Nice and Menton in 1888, he conceived the idea to construct earthquake-resistant houses at his father’s factory at Orkanger. Following the traditions of his family, the business was a major success, and by 1900 employed over 300 highly qualified draftsmen. The firm utilized a high degree of electrification and mechanization. Houses were exported to Europe, Africa, India, South America and the United States. In ensuing years the firm became well-known throughout the world.

M. Thams & Co. was the ideal choice for representation of Norway and its portable buildings business at the Fair. The bustling company employed carpenters and craftsmen with first-class handwork and woodworking skills. Just four years earlier, the company’s talented crew had shown off their abilities at the World’s Fair of Paris in 1889. Other big exposition buildings were to follow—in Stockholm (1897), Trondheim (1908) and Oslo (1914).

Albert Waldemar Hansteen¹, the architect who submitted the original drawings for the Norway Building, was the head teacher at the evening technical school at Skien, Norway, and had an established architectural practice there. He also worked simultaneously as an architect for the Thams company. Most of Hansteen’s projects were constructed in Skien and Christiania (now Oslo). Hansteen had also participated in the restoration of the Gol Stave Church during the 1880’s. We can assume that this project was inspirational to his design of Norway’s Pavilion Building for the 1893 exposition.

The Norway Building was completely crafted and assembled at the Thams company mill site between the signing of the contract in November of 1892, and early in 1893, when the building was dedicated and opened for inspection by the public.


² Hansteen used his second name, Waldemar, as his professional name.