



Ramsey County Historical Society  
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Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.  
St. Paul, MN 55102

# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# Ramsey County History

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*ON THE COVER: The corner of Fifth and Wabasha streets photographed in 1873. On the left is the United States Customs House and the Post Office where Patrick O'Brien worked before moving to the Old Federal Courts Building in 1902.*

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St. Paul in 1861, photographed by Upton.

## Letters to Fannie Higgins The Courtship of Patrick O'Brien

*By Michael Maher*

**T**he letters of Patrick O'Brien, who was assistant postmaster in St. Paul from 1870 until his retirement in 1924, were recently donated to the Ramsey County Historical Society by his grandson, George Rea, a long-time member of the Society. The letters provide an interesting perspective of daily life and some of the social activities of St. Paul's residents in the years after the Civil War. The

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letters were written to Fannie Higgins, a Hudson milliner whom O'Brien finally married in 1877 after a nine-year courtship.

Fannie Higgins was an active, and independent-minded businesswoman. She had left her Xenia, Ohio, home just before the outbreak of the war, and settled in Hudson, Wisconsin, where she opened a dressmaking shop in the building occupied by the town's newspaper. At one point she employed seventeen girls, and besides designing hats, sewing gloves, and selling fur coats, hats, and muffs, she also had the Hudson agency for Howe sewing machines. She traveled to Chicago at least twice a year, usually around Halloween and Valentine's Day, to look at women's styles for the fall and spring seasons.

In his letters to her, Patrick O'Brien often enclosed ribbons, buttons, or fabric samples

for Fannie's evaluation. He chided her frequently for the long hours she worked, but when they decided to marry, she sold the shop and moved with Patrick to McBoal Street in the Irvine Park neighborhood of St. Paul. The Society now holds Fannie's letters as well as those of Patrick O'Brien.

THE O'BRIEN LETTERS, particularly, reveal a St. Paul in transition from a growing town on the frontier to a major rail center of the Northwest. Some of the great figures of the day appear in the letters — the formidable Ignatius Donnelly and the rising young priest, John Ireland, whom O'Brien had known as a young student in the public schools of St. Paul.

Patrick O'Brien was born in Ireland on

October 2, 1841. He moved with his parents, Ann and Stephen O'Brien, to Kalamazoo, Michigan, at the age of 2. When his father died in 1850, the family moved to St. Paul where Mr. O'Brien's sister lived. They arrived by steamboat from Galena in May of 1852, and Ann O'Brien moved into a house on Harrison Street near the Post Road, now West Seventh Street. She earned a living as a seamstress, but as the eldest son in a family with four children, Patrick went to work soon after completing grammar school in order to help support the family. His uncle, Lewis Galvin, a city policeman, served as a second father to the O'Brien children.

By the time the letters to Fannie Higgins were written, Patrick O'Brien had been self-

Bridge Square, St. Paul, 1871. Photograph by W.H. Illingworth.



supporting for twelve or thirteen years. He still lived with his mother, but although she lived until 1912, she is seldom mentioned in the letters. Surprisingly, he still retained some attachment to Kalamazoo, and had relatives there whom he visited in 1873. He was more detached about his Irish heritage, although he was quick to resent any defamation of the Irish. As his grandson recalls, he was busy working and growing up in the United States and Ireland was far from his thoughts. He considered himself an American, not an Irish-American, and was particularly proud that his only son, John Charles O'Brien, was a lieutenant in the United States Army during the First World War.

**AFTER LEAVING SCHOOL**, young O'Brien worked for a time in the law firm of Rice, Hollinshead, and Becker before joining the firm of Johnson and Thornton in work on a government survey. In May of 1865 he went to work in the counting room of the *St. Paul Daily Press*, one of the newspapers later merged into the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. In 1870 he began working for the Post Office at the money order desk. It is possible that he was appointed to the post because of his acquaintance with the assistant postmaster, Fred Driscoll, *Pioneer Press* editor. The postmaster from 1870 to 1875 was Joseph Wheelock, the publisher and editor of the *Pioneer Press*.

One of the advantages of the egalitarian spirit of the frontier was the opportunity it gave to young men with only a few years of education to establish themselves in careers by diligence, hard work, and scrupulous honesty. These were more than sufficient recommendations for O'Brien's work in the Post Office. But he always regretted having to leave school early. He was an avid reader and encouraged Fannie's younger brother, James, to continue his schooling. The letters also hint at O'Brien's self-consciousness about his height, five foot six.

On October 24, 1870, he wrote Fannie: "I well remember the first time that I asked a young lady to a concert with me. I turned all colors and stammered, and how ashamed I was. I had an idea that everybody was looking at me. I haven't got over it yet. I am very shy in the presence of strangers. I have but little to say. It is a feeling that I am unable to overcome, however hard I try."

**BUT THE RESPONSIBLE POSITION** he held at the Post Office may have helped him overcome any feelings of inadequacy he had as a young man and he seems to have

become dependent on his work as a reinforcement to his own sense of self-esteem.

During his long courtship of Fannie Higgins, that courtship and his career at the Post Office occupied most of his attention. His letters reveal that he enjoyed picnics, fairs, raffles, the theater, and minstrel shows, and attended them regularly, but such entertainment was always incidental to the affairs of the office or his next visit to Fannie.

O'Brien was not an ambitious man, but he did want to impress Fannie with his seriousness about making the most of his opportunities at the Post Office. There is an interesting balance in the letters, then, between the serious, and the light-hearted, with Patrick discussing his postal work, and then worrying in mock alarm about the playful pulling of his ears and hair by Fannie, or lamenting, after a meeting with her that his lips are still sore.

Both his ambitions and his pride at having surmounted many obstacles and hardships in life are expressed in a frank and revealing letter written to Fannie on November 16, 1871:

"I have had a hard row to hoe during my life. My father died when I was ten years old leaving four children for my mother to raise without any help or assistance from any one. She had to work hard and long striving to keep us together and bring us up respectable and make something out of us. I left school when I was twelve years old and began working so that I could be of help to her. Had I been addicted to strong drink or vicious, I never would have succeeded in working myself up to a position where I could command the respect and confidence of my acquaintances.

"I have worked hard and long to secure it. I am not foolish enough to throw away what it has taken long years of my life to accomplish, or bring disgrace upon my family through strong drink. I am too ambitious for that — I intend to show the people that a man can succeed by his own exertions if he only perseveres and is honest in all his dealings.

**"YOU MUST NOT THINK** me foolish in saying what I have. I am and have been striving to win what I consider the most sacred thing on earth — that is the love of a woman.

"I find that I have got the disposition of a mule, can't be coaxed or drove, and you are the cause of it by pulling my ears. The next time that I find out that you are coming over I will get them half-soled like a pair of boots."

On September 26, 1876, he wrote: "My lips are well again, but I must tell you that I enjoyed the luxury of an earache for a couple



Volunteer Firebarn Minnehaha #2, located at Third and Jackson streets.

of nights. Did I catch that from you?"

O'Brien enjoyed his work and turned down at least one offer of a better paying job in order to remain in the more responsible position at the Post Office among companionable associates. It would be two years before he would reach the salary of \$1,800 per year that the *Pioneer Press* offered him in 1870. By that time, the work had grown to the point where he could boast that the older man he had replaced would no longer have been able to manage the office.

The continued expansion of work at the Post Office eventually required him to add an assistant to the money order office. On January 1, 1875, O'Brien was joined by a Mr. Kelly, whose cheerful disposition and readiness to learn greatly eased O'Brien's burden. Unfortunately, in the summer of 1876 Kelly fell under suspicion of embezzlement. In September he was caught with marked money, convicted, and sentenced to two years hard labor at Stillwater. The letters show that O'Brien visited Kelly in prison regularly, taking him tobacco as well as shirts and clothing that was more comfortable than the "zebra suits" of prison garb. This incident occurred at the time of the Northfield robbery, and O'Brien refers once to the Younger brothers who were imprisoned also at Stillwater.

O'Brien's loyalty toward Kelly is a good example of his sympathetic character and his

attachment to his co-workers. His letters show that beneath his brisk, frolicking, confident exterior, he had sound judgment, common sense, a capacity for friendship, and an unquenchable appetite for fun. Those qualities apparently won him a wide circle of friends and made him a much-esteemed member of fraternal societies. He belonged to the Hope Fire Engine Company, one of St. Paul's early volunteer fire companies, and it was at the home of John Misson, the captain of the company, that he first met Fannie Higgins. When the volunteer companies were disbanded in 1867, O'Brien was given the Hope Company's silver fire trumpet, a signal honor. For many years, he continued to attend picnics, balls, and parades of the St. Paul firemen. One of these gatherings was marked by tragedy, as O'Brien reported to Fannie on September 27, 1868:

"I RECEIVED A special invitation from the Cataract Engine Co. for the members of Old Hope which was disbanded some eighteen months ago. I gathered twenty six of them and got up badges such as I enclose and embarked with the Fire Department of this City. Just as we got off the cars a cannon that the citizens of St. Anthony were firing a salute with went off prematurely and shot off the hands of two men that were loading the gun and put out the eyes of one of them also. It was a sickening sight to see the poor men hop

round like chickens with their heads wrung off. I never had anything affect me so before. The accident marred the pleasure of the day to a great extent."

The O'Brien-Higgins correspondence resembles a tug-of-war. Patrick playfully prods his coy, business-like young lady to consider his suit, while Fannie warns repeatedly that she will probably end a spinster, too busy with her shop to attend to courting. O'Brien was never deterred, either by Fannie's reticence or by the appearance from time to time of rivals. He seems to have loved her as much for her audacity — she once smoked a cigar with him — as for her good sense and companionship. The correspondence was thus not only an insistent ploy to keep him in her mind (she, by contrast, was an infrequent writer), but a useful way to introduce himself to her while sending her news from St. Paul. So, along with newspapers, clippings, and occasional buttons or fabric samples Fannie had requested for her shop, Patrick sent small distillations of his philosophy of life.

"Don't scold James [her brother]," he warned. "Scolding has the effect of making a body hide a little fault at first and a larger one afterward."

"Run away marriages," he commented disapprovingly, "like run-away horses, usually end in a smash-up." Elsewhere, he concludes that "a bad temper is injurious to health."

AS THEIR FRIENDSHIP grew more serious and attracted the notice of their co-workers and friends, the couple resorted to all the evasions they could manage to avoid being teased about their romance. Fannie avoided picking up letters from the cheeky young clerk at the Hudson office who had learned to recognize Patrick's hand. To the rib-poking associates who slyly asked if he was not married yet, O'Brien answered with a straight face that people had been spreading such rumors for years, but he had no wife then, and none now. In a May, 1873, letter, however, he seemed almost resigned to the incessant baiting of his coworkers. He wrote that:

"The boys in the office are going to pay me off for the jokes that I have been playing upon them, so if you see any nonsensical notice in the paper you can know where it came from. They think that I am going to get married, or something else as ridiculous, it is no use to deny it to them for they won't believe it, so the best way is to let them think what they like and find out the truth."

When it came, their marriage was almost

secretive, with few references to the coming event in the surviving letters, and only vague hints to their associates at work. The teasing, which they both so dreaded and yet employed so mercilessly themselves, provides an interesting insight into the means by which Victorian morality was imposed on that generation.

O'Brien's letters indicate that they were written at his desk, usually on Sunday mornings, and perhaps reflected the slack work routine on that day as the clerks awaited the arrival of mail stages or trains.

MOST OF THE STAFF seems to have spent the morning lounging around the stove, filling in their time with joking or teasing the victim of the day. Bent over his desk writing his weekly letter, O'Brien tried to avoid the attention of these idle minds.

In general, he was on good terms with both the assistant postmaster, Fred Driscoll, and the other office staff. Only once does he mention the risk of losing his job. That was in 1876 when the wires from the East brought news that Samuel Tilden had defeated Rutherford Hayes in the presidential election. The Republicans retained the presidency, however, and O'Brien's job remained secure.

Despite this political vulnerability, or perhaps because of it, O'Brien was not politically active, and there are disappointingly few remarks in his letters about the political

Patrick O'Brien and his granddaughter, Marjorie Rea, on his front porch, 1917.



issues, campaigns, and candidates of the period. One undated letter written during the great Donnelly-Sibley campaign of 1872 for governor reveals that O'Brien was no admirer of Donnelly, expected him to lose the primary, and was generally "verninst' him as the Irish say." Yet, in another letter, he does admit to having fallen enough under Donnelly's spell one evening at Ingersoll's Hall to conclude that "he is a smart man."

In 1869 he had expressed his views about Donnelly even more strongly in his report to Fannie on the Republican convention. "We had a big convention here last Thurs. for the nomination of state officers on the Republican Ticket—it was composed of two hundred and thirty nine delegates, the largest number that ever assembled here before. Donnelly was not nominated by a long shot. He did not have so many friends as he supposed. He was the worst man that you ever saw receiving only some sixty odd votes out of 239. He is not so popular as what he wishes people to believe — he is deader than a nail now — to tell you the truth I am not sorry for it."

IN A LETTER dated October 20, 1872,  
**Winter mail delivery in St. Paul, 1903.**

O'Brien described a torchlight procession for Ulysses S. Grant. He noted that it was the first political parade O'Brien had participated in since 1860, so presumably he once had marched for Lincoln or Ramsey. Another letter recounted O'Brien's adventure at a political rally where a rival group tried to break up the meeting and turn it into a rally for its candidate. O'Brien extinguished the lights, causing the crowd to disperse in confusion into the night.

From the few comments he does make about politics, he seems to have opposed any form of demagoguery against the wealthy, and had a preference for politicians of conventional views. This is not to say that he favored the "Establishment," for in several letters he insisted to Fannie that money means little in itself, and is in fact usually a liability when it leads people to put on airs or think themselves better than others. He disapproved of a friend's habit of looking down on people less favored than himself. The friend had married one of the great belles of the day, and employed a domestic servant. He censures another man, a bank cashier, for his





pride, writing that he feared that the simple Irish Catholic girl to whom the cashier was engaged would not be comfortable in the high society to which she would be introduced.

In another letter, he enquired about the social success of a couple who recently had come into some money:

"Fanny, if her parents were poor would she be in such demand — no, there are many girls as good and who are hardly noticed. It seems to be a disgrace to be poor. If [her father] was still a clerk would the doors of [that] home be thrown open to him. I rather think and know that they would not. Such people as them Fan it would do me good to grind under my heel."

BOTH PATRICK AND FANNIE were Catholics, and O'Brien seems to have attended nine o'clock Sunday Mass fairly regularly at St. Paul's Cathedral. He admitted to missing some Sundays, but when he did attend, he would try to tease his favorite sister, Kate, until she laughed. In general, he judged church music to be good and the instruction poor. From time to time, however, a sermon caught his attention, and he would compliment the preacher without discussing his subject. He was always sympathetic to sermons on temperance, and applauded the work of the Fr. Matthew Temperance Society. Indeed, he declared, he hoped everyone would take the pledge so as to leave more liquor for himself. At more serious moments, however, he reassured Fannie that he was not a heavy drinker, and seldom took more than a beer or a glass of ale. He was acutely aware of the dangers of drunkenness, and always commented on whether the crowd at the St. Patrick's Day celebrations at the Opera House was sober or not.

On March 20, 1870, he wrote: "We went to the Opera House on St. Patrick's evening. I enjoyed the flags and the singing very much. John will perhaps give you his opinion about it when he writes. There was as usual a very large crowd. We were fortunate in getting a good seat, and those that came in later did not fare so well. Some of the songs were well sung. Miss Maggie Sweny did not sing as well as usual, she seemed embarrassed. The two flags were splendid and a great deal better than many theaters that I have attended. The actors were young boys and they were well up in their parts ... The turnout was a credit to any nationality. All were well dressed and *sober*."

"THE WORKINGS of the Father Matthew Temperance Society could be seen among them. Men that need to look ragged

and never could be seen without the signs of liquor were in the procession clean, sober, and well dressed for laboring men. I hope that the good work will be kept up until all become members except me. I can drink more then."

O'Brien was well aware of the existence of some bigotry against Catholics and the Irish in St. Paul, but his letters indicate that this was rare and, if the term had been coined, un-American. It seems that one or two of Fanny's other suitors tried to disparage O'Brien because of his religion and nationality. Fannie's report of this put "his Irish up" and drew incensed comments on how nationality and religion were no bar in the United States. There was evidently a degree of parochialism, however, among St. Paul Catholics, for O'Brien mentioned a long procession of Catholics of all nationalities in January, 1871, at the time of the unification of Italy and the promulgation of the doctrine of papal infallibility.

In general, O'Brien was a tolerant man. He enjoyed "Irish" characters in the plays and comic skits of the day, despite their stereotyped portrayals of simple, talkative characters with a streak of craftiness. He also enjoyed the German and Scandinavian characters who were usually portrayed in these skits as being rather slow-witted. Indeed, he seems to have come upon the real characters in the Post Office. He wrote Fannie about the little Irish woman who came cautiously to his desk and instructed him to carry a letter to her husband in Illinois without letting anyone else see it. O'Brien told her to put it in the blue box at the General Delivery desk and he would carry it down in the morning.

HE HAD FUN watching the toll-taker argue and bark at the "Swede" immigrants who crossed the toll bridge to come into town and did not understand that they must pay a toll. Blacks always appeared as stereotypes in his letters, slow-witted, lazy, but entertaining in their taste for minstrel music.

All of these stereotypes are quite inadvertent, and uncalculated, and it would be wrong to conclude that O'Brien was a bigot. He attended Scandinavian picnics, the German Turner's Festivals, the Negro Emancipation balls, and Protestant charity bazaars, contributing as generously to all of these as he did to Irish or Catholic entertainments and charities.

These entertainments played a large role in O'Brien's life, for his letters regularly report not only the shows at the Opera House, the orphanage charity fairs, and the minstrel shows that he has attended, but anticipate



Kraupt Hotel and rental boats on the shore of Lake Como, ca. 1870.

those he expects to see the following week. If the show was poor, he reported on it anyway, declaring that it was fun just to watch the audience. He loved theater, and if pressed to defend or justify his attendance, would reply that a play improved us by showing people their faults.

In the course of the ten years covered by this correspondence, Patrick O'Brien saw fat ladies weighing 700 pounds, a Japanese troupe of jugglers, performances of Handel's "Messiah", numerous minstrel shows, a tight-rope artist crossing the Mississippi, magic lantern shows of Irish landscapes with an Irish comedian as guide, Barnum's General Tom Thumb and another midget, Commodore Nutt, who was "a hard nut, very drunk, no bigger than a pint of cider," and apparently numberless performances of *The Union Spy*, a hardy perennial melodrama of the period. Less frequently, he attended public lectures. He heard Frederic Douglass in 1869.

APART FROM THESE entertainments, the common diversions of St. Paul in the 1870s were weekend excursions into the country, to Lake Como, or more rarely, to picnic spots downriver on the Mississippi by steamboat. O'Brien corrects our nostalgic impressions of what was entailed in these trips, however, by describing the difficulties of driving balky horses on and off the St. Croix ferries, the frustrations of arriving at some picnic spot by steamboat to find no food or the discomforts of hot weather.

On July 10, 1870, he wrote: "The excursion that was to go to Hudson did not go. The Dubuque did not arrive in St. Paul until the morning of the Fifth. The man that had her chartered did not have money enough to hire another boat to take her place. There were a great [many] people disappointed at the failure. Quite a number got on the Sucker State and went down to Lake City where they met the up river boat and came back on her. They did not get a mouthful to eat on the boat, consequently came home more like bears than human beings."

Lake Como seemed to be the most reliable pleasant destination for a Sunday picnic, although O'Brien also mentioned several trips to Minnehaha Falls. He seldom traveled farther west, however, and was not favorably inclined toward the "self-styled 'seat of destiny' located on the St. Anthony Falls." He did make a sentimental return to Kalamazoo in 1873 and returned to St. Paul by way of Chicago, which he found remarkably recovered from the fire. Fanny Higgins had traveled to Chicago only a short time before the great fire in 1871 and made other trips there to copy the latest Eastern fashions.

That both O'Brien and Fannie could make such journeys, he for a holiday, she for business purposes, testifies to the routine efficiency in transportation that settlers in what had once been a frontier area had come to expect by the 1870s. Less than ten years earlier they would have had to make the journey

O'Brien recalled his early years with the post office in this excerpt from the *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press* for May 4, 1902, published as postal employees were moving into new offices in the Old Federal Courts Building.

*"When I first entered the service there were but six clerks, while now we have 128. In 1864 the receipts were \$13,140.80 while this year they were \$505,279.13.*

*"I was sworn in and began work in the office which was then located in the room now occupied by the detectives in the police headquarters on West Third Street between Washington and Market. Letters were brought to the post office, the stamps cancelled and distributed into the pigeon holes. Then, just before the departure of the mail the letters were postmarked and billed to the office of destination, showing the number of letters with 8, 6, 9 cents or any amount of postage. The letters were wrapped with paper and directed to the office of destination. The cancelling and postmarking stamp that is now in use was introduced shortly after I entered the service. The packages of letters were thrown into the proper pouch, locked up and dispatched. Registered letters were wrapped by themselves and placed in the same package with the regular letters and in one column of the bill the letter 'R' was written showing that there was a registered letter.*

*"When a mail was received at the office the packages were opened and the letters compared with the bills. Any shortage was noted, and if there were any underpaid letters the amount underpaid was noted on the bill and the deficiency was collected and charged up. A transcript of these bills was forwarded with the quarterly account to the auditor of the post office department. Postage was collected on newspapers and periodicals before the paper was delivered from the office. The postage on a weekly was 5 cents a quarter; a daily, 30 cents a quarter if published six times a week, or if seven times, 35 cents a quarter. An account had to be kept showing the number and the name of each paper upon which postage had been collected. This list and the amount collected was a part of the postmaster's account rendered quarterly to the auditor.*

*"The mails were carried by stage, or by boat during the season of navigation. Pouches were made up, I think, for some twelve offices on the eastern run. New York, Chicago and Detroit were locked with a brass lock. In addition one pouch was made up with the way mail, which was opened by the smaller offices on the route and the mail taken out. The stages left here on schedule time, but the boats depended upon the state of the water in the river. The arrivals were another proposition; they arrived when they got here. The eight hour law was not heard of then, and consequently when the mail arrived it was worked up, and there was no kicking from the clerks. The routes that we made up and locked out were up the Minnesota valley, another toward the Iowa line by way of Owatonna, one through St. Cloud, one to Stillwater and another to Hudson, Wis. (Duluth was not on the map then), a tri-weekly to Pembina taking in Fort Abercrombie, a daily mail to St. Anthony and Minneapolis, and another route to Fort Snelling."*

to Chicago by steamboat to Prairie du Chien or Galena, and thence to points east. In the winter, they would have made the journey by stage, or perhaps by sleigh. Nor was it merely travel to the East that had become easier. O'Brien occasionally mentioned co-workers at the Post Office, or friends in the city who had moved to Montana or elsewhere in the West to find new employment, to follow a sweetheart, or to escape one.

Patrick O'Brien lived among a population that knew the lingering death of consumption, the sudden death of fevers, and a rate of mortality among young people which we would find very high today. Toward it he maintained an equanimity that seems remarkable. In a letter of January 25, 1871, he reported: "Mike Fitsch is in his death bed — quick consumption brought on by hard drink

has about completed its work. Nothing like keeping a regular life, it will pay in the long run." What did affect him more was the effect of drinking on his friend, Mr. Brown.

THROUGHOUT THE correspondence, O'Brien and Mrs. Brown contend with this affliction. One letter recalled a long walk around the hills of St. Paul that O'Brien took with Brown, trying to sober him up before he went home. In an almost Dickensian narrative, O'Brien records Brown's decline through several years of correspondence. He loses several jobs, is reduced to hard circumstances, reforms, and falls again, and throughout the years, the reader expects his health to collapse completely. But Brown endures, while O'Brien's abstemious, and virtuous young friends and acquaintances die off from the diseases of their day.



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### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm house of the mid-nineteenth century period.*

**T**he Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. Its chief function is to collect and preserve the history of the city and the county and share that history with the people who live here. The Society is the county's historian. It preserves those things from the past that are the community's treasures — its written records through the Society's library; its historic sites through establishment of the Irvine Park Historic District and its successful efforts to help prevent destruction of the Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. It shares these records through the publishing of its magazine, brochures, pamphlets, and prints; through conducting historic sites tours of the city, teaching classes, producing exhibits on the history of the city, and maintaining its museum on rural county history. The Gibbs Farm Museum, the oldest remaining farm home in Ramsey County, was acquired by the Society in 1949 and opened to the public in 1954 as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler. In 1966 the Society moved onto the property a one-room rural country schoolhouse dating from the 1870s. Now restored to the period of the late 1890s, the school is used for classes, meetings, and as the center for a summer schoolhouse program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains the center's only permanent exhibit, a history of the building during the seventy-five years it was the federal government's headquarters in St. Paul.

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