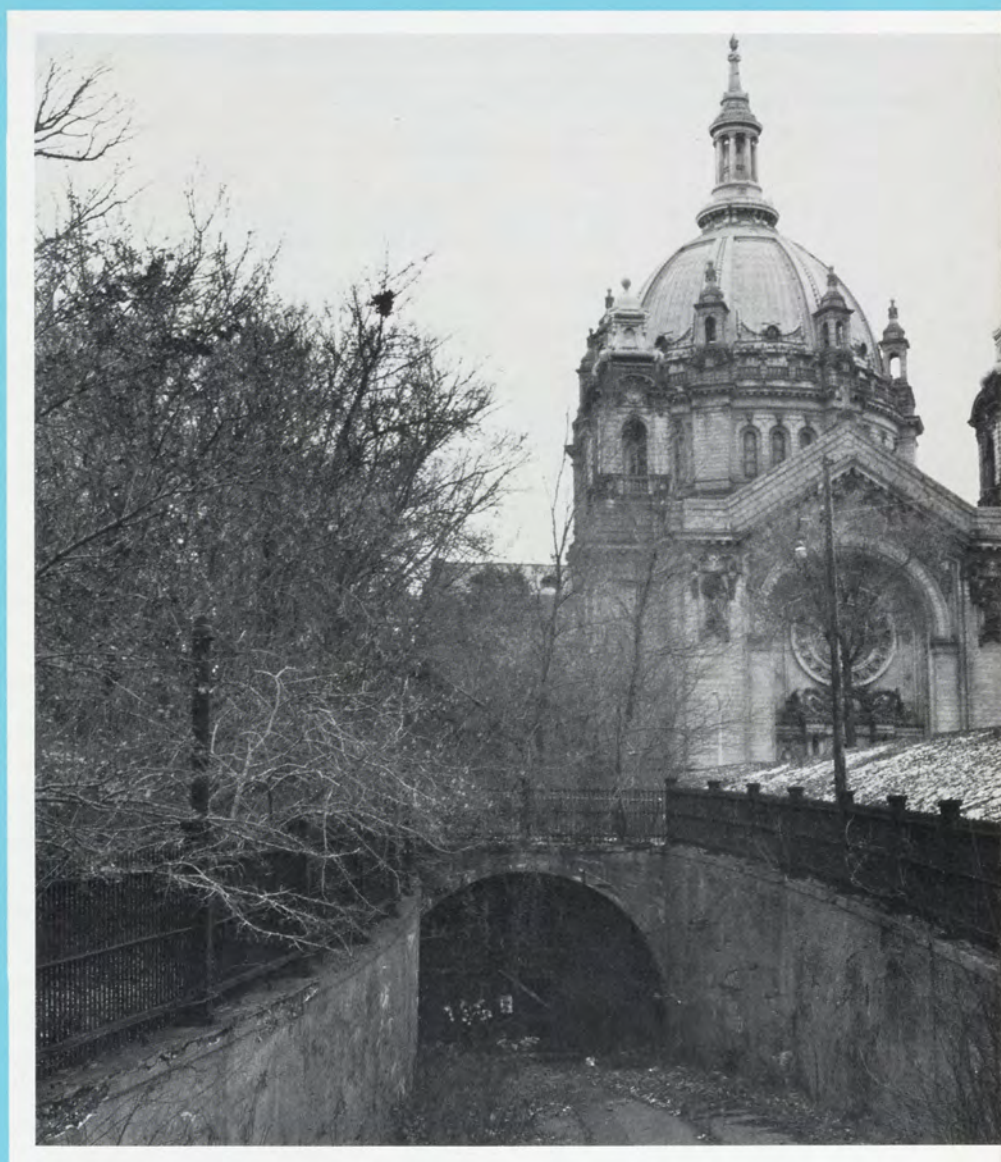




Ramsey County Historical Society
"History close to home"
Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.
St. Paul, MN 55102

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Volume 18

Number 2

Ramsey County History

Published by the
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

Contents

Volume 18
Number 2

Tom Lowry and the Launching
Of the Street Railway System

By Goodrich Lowry Page 3

Colorfully Critical: Newspapers
And the Horsecars of the 1870s

By Denis Murphy Page 11

St. Paul's Fire Insurance Patrol —
Gone But Not Forgotten

By John Sonnen Page 19

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted 1983 by the Ramsey County Historical Society, Landmark Center, 75 West Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55102. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to *Ramsey County History*. Single issues sell for \$3. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published if accepted as space permits.

ON THE COVER: The eastern end of the Selby Avenue tunnel was photographed by Ramsey County Historical Society staff member Tom Mega in 1982. The tunnel had been abandoned since 1953.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Photographs on pages 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 17, and 18 are from the Minnesota Historical Society's collections. The advertisement for Moline-Knight's New 1917 Model "G", also from the Minnesota Historical Society's collections, originally appeared in the June, 1916, issue of *American Motorist*. The photograph on page 20 of the St. Paul Fire Insurance Patrol is from the St. Paul Company's archives. Photographs on pages 7, 11, and 13 are from the Ramsey County Historical Society's photographic collection. Lithographs on pages 3 and 14 are reproduced from the *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota* published in 1874 by A. M. Andreas, Chicago, Ill. The photograph on page 21 of the Fire Patrol's old station house was taken by Pat Swifka.



A St. Paul horsecar, photographed during the early 1880s.

Colorfully Critical: Newspapers And the Horsecars of the 1870s

EDITOR'S NOTE: One of the most colorful sources a historian can draw upon is an old newspaper. What a news account might lack in perspective, it makes up for in immediacy, in the report of an event by those who actually participated. The following article is drawn from a 200-page manuscript on life in St. Paul during the 1870s which was developed by Denis Murphy as an independent study project under the direction of Professor Thomas Buckley. The project was part of Murphy's work for his baccalaureate degree program at the University of Minnesota. Murphy spent many months reading the microfilmed copies of the St. Paul newspapers for those years. In this article, Murphy reports on how St. Paul's newspapers viewed the familiar problem of urban transportation during the 1870s.

In searching for a common bond between the urban transportation of the 1870s and that of the 1970s, the phrase that best seems to describe it is "great expectations."

A century has passed since a private group of St. Paul men built a street railway. Their risks, dreams, and plans have formed an important backdrop to St. Paul's history. Each of these two separate decades saw the beginning of a new urban transportation system — one a private venture, the other a public one. But the "great expectations" of a system that would be timely, inexpensive, accommodating, and cost-effective found their first expression during the 1870s and are still present today.

Historically, the growth of a city has been closely related to the access of its residents to transportation. From the earliest times, urban centers were based on or around rivers and river transportation systems. The invention of the wheel made overland travel inevitable, including the rather unique form it took

out on the western prairies of the United States. Well-known to St. Paul residents during the 1850s and 1860s were the Red River ox carts, slow, cumbersome, and squeeling their way through the downtown streets. The carts, however, served the hinterland, rather than the burgeoning city, and so did the railroads which had begun, after the Civil War, to open up the frontier to settlers.

It was the iron rail technology, adapted to the streets of eastern cities, that made street railway systems possible, and in St. Paul enterprising businessmen were laying down the rails for the city's first transit system even before the railroads had reached western Minnesota. The city already had a transportation system of sorts. During the 1850s Russell Blakeley and James C. Burbank operated omnibuses as well as stage lines that linked the city with various points in the state. Blakeley was among several operators of livery stables that also provided taxi hacks.

BY THE 1870s, however, St. Paul had become one of the major urban centers on

America's western frontier. While on the one hand a witness to some of the frontier's most colorful events — the Northfield bank robbery, the Black Hills gold rush, the grasshopper plague — the city on the other hand was seeing the introduction of such urban developments as the telephone, electric arc lighting at Como Park concerts, central steam heating for some buildings, an expanded gas street lighting system, and the construction of the street railway.

Beginning in 1872 and continuing for the next eighty years, a privately owned street railway system would serve St. Paul. The announcement of the formation of the company was heralded in the *St. Paul Pioneer* and for the remaining years of the decade the newspaper faithfully reported the progress of mass transit's beginnings.

One reason for the development of a street railway system was the dramatic increase in the city's population during the early 1870s. In 1869 the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce had reported a population of about 10,000, but by 1873 this had grown to some 37,000. Another reason for the system's growth was that it filled a need for quick mass transit for St. Paul's workers.

Before 1872, St. Paul was basically a "walking city." Omnibuses had served the few, not the many, and most of the city's residents, except for the well-to-do who owned horses and carriages, walked to their destinations. Now all this was about to change. On April 27, 1872, the *St. Paul Pioneer* reported that a group of St. Paul businessmen had formed the St. Paul Street Railway Company. Their intention was to build a horsecar line that would run . . .

*"From lower Seventh Street to Jackson, down Jackson to Fourth Street, up Fourth to Wabasha Street, down Wabasha to Third Street, up Third Street to Fort, and out Fort to Ramsey."*¹

The line was completed and in operation by July, 1872. It served the central business district which stretched along Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) from Seven Corners to the Lower Landing at the foot of Jackson Street. This encompassed the established industrial areas of the city at that time, as well as the old residential section around Irvine Park and what is now Mears Park.

Even before its completion, however, the

St. Paul Pioneer was urging the company to extend its service to other areas of the city.

"It can hardly be doubted," the newspaper declared, *"that an extension of the lines through Broadway and Mississippi Street to the St. Paul and Pacific railroad shop and through Carroll Street to the western suburbs of the city would largely and profitably increase the Company."*²

During the 1870s, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, which today is the Burlington Northern, was just beginning to tap the fertile regions of the northwest. The growth of the railroad's maintenance shops and classification yards in the Midway district was accompanied by the commercial and residential development of the area between downtown St. Paul and old St. Anthony, now East Minneapolis. Because of this development, both the *Pioneer* and the people living in the area proposed that the horsecar line be extended to the Midway to give that neighborhood better access to downtown St. Paul and the growing industrial and mercantile district surrounding the Lower Landing.

Great optimism had accompanied the opening of the horsecar line. During the first weeks of operation the *Pioneer* discussed the traffic along the line and predicted financial success:

*"[The line] ought to pay from the number of passengers the street cars are carrying . . . it looks as though they would pay from the beginning. They were all well filled yesterday."*³

Even at five cents a ride, the paper felt, the company should make money, for each street car "has an average daily income of \$25.00."⁴

The *Pioneer* also reported the hours of service and the number of cars during this first year of operation. Service began each day at 6 a.m. and continued until 11 p.m.

*"At the outset the company will run four cars, thus making the round trip over the line in fifteen minutes. This accommodation will be doubled as soon as the company sees that the wants of the public demand it and instead of four [trips] making eight round trips in an hour."*⁵

Such traffic apparently strained the street railway's capacity and after less than a month the *Pioneer* turned critical. Improved service had not materialized, despite what the news-



Downtown St. Paul in the 1870s still had small frame dwellings interspersed with business and government buildings. Domed structure is the old state capitol which burned down in 1881.

paper saw as a clear public need for it:

*"That the Street Railway is a success . . . is an admitted fact and the constantly increasing travel taxes the energies of management to provide accommodations to the public . . . Street cars . . . have already become a necessity in St. Paul and the inexorable demands of the public must be complied with . . ."*⁶

Management problems led to the re-organization of the company in November of 1872. That winter of 1872-1873 the company forsook the use of horsecars for sleighs. It seems evident, however, that the company did not increase its runs, so sleighs, operating on a fifteen minute schedule, did nothing to boost revenues. During the spring thaw, mud from St. Paul's unpaved streets completely covered the unused rails, making the task of preparing the track for the return of the cars extremely expensive.

On March 13, 1873, the *Pioneer* reported: *"Men engaged in digging out the Street Railway track. It has been so long since the track has been seen that many doubted if it will be found."*⁷

Stockholders of the St. Paul Street Railway Company followed the practice of other street railways in the 1860s and 1870s by issuing speculative bonds to purchase equipment and to make a profit for themselves. In 1873 the company attempted to float a bond issue to finance additional equipment and provide some working capital.

However, the Financial Panic of 1873 severely limited the amount of capital available for investment and the issue was less than successful. By May of 1874, the *Pioneer* was again critical of the service the company was providing for St. Paul:

"The only trouble with our present Street Railway is that the service is so infrequent as to make it of little practical account. Were the service to be doubled there is no question that the patronage would be doubled. People do not like to sun themselves on a corner for ten minutes with the thermometer at zero, nor do they like to be

*kept waiting in this way however the conditions. The American temperament is impatient. It can't abide delay . . ."*⁸

The *Pioneer's* comments could not have come at a more inopportune moment. The effects of the Panic were just reaching Minnesota and the nation-wide economic problems restricted the flow of investment, trade, and people from other parts of the country. Storefronts became deserted, and the city experienced the loss of both people and jobs during 1874 and early 1875.

The economic difficulties created by the Panic did not deter the *Pioneer* from continuing its attack on the street railway:

*"The larger part of the utility of the Street Railway is lost by lack of sufficient number of cars to perform the service . . . It can hardly be doubted that an extension of the lines through Broadway and Mississippi Street to the St. Paul & Pacific railroad shop and through Carroll Street to the western suburbs of the city would largely and profitably increase the patronage of the Company."*⁹

By this time, however, the company had again reorganized and now it could respond to some of the criticism. On April 25, 1873, the *Pioneer* happily reported that:

"The Street Railway are now looking

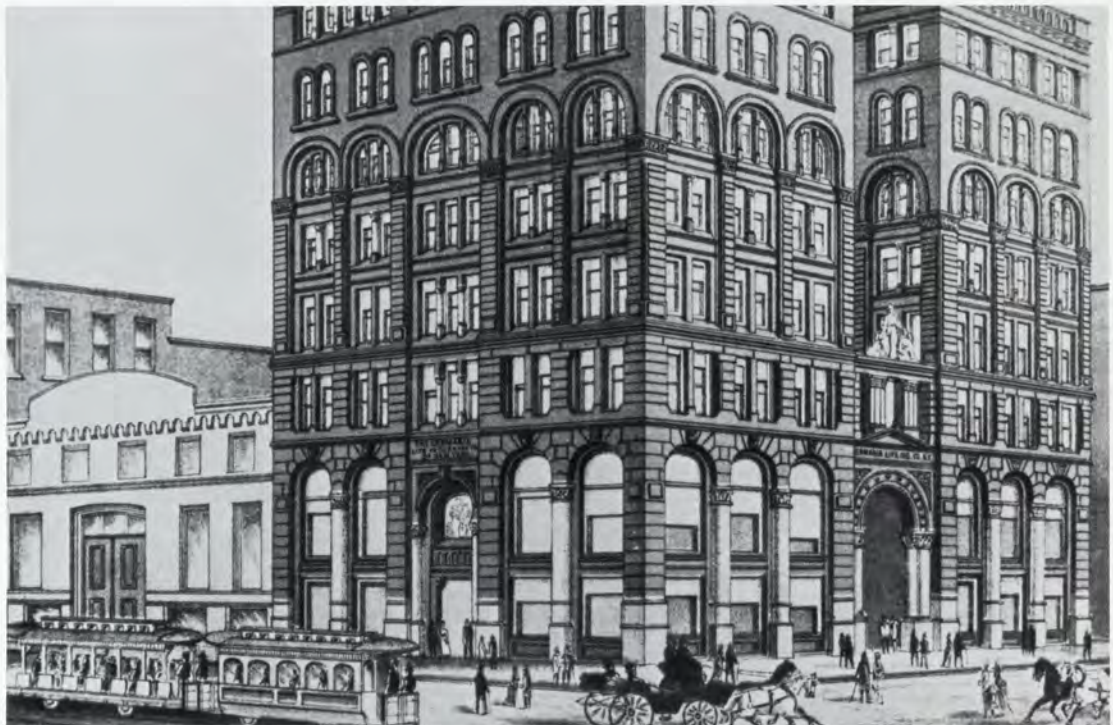
*for their new cars, which are expected to arrive within a week after which service . . . will be doubled. The number of cars to be employed this summer will be 18 to 20."*¹⁰

In May of 1875 the company had been leased to the firm of Shaw and McComb (McComb had been a foreman with the old company.) The new firm owned fifteen horse-cars and had improved service to the point where cars were running every five-and-a-half minutes. During the three years Shaw and McComb operated the company, service not only was increased, but fares were reduced from five to four cents per ride. The *Pioneer*, however, was not satisfied. The newspaper continued to call for extensions of the lines, with most of these demands appearing during 1877 and reflecting the renewed growth in the city's population and in its industrial areas.

Still, the *Pioneer* commented approvingly on a number of issues:

"It is pleasant to hear that the prospects are good for the extension of the Street Railway lines from Wabasha Street along Twelfth and Pearl to Mississippi Street and thence to the St. Paul &

A cable car with a trailer runs alongside the old Germania building which stood on Fourth Street between Robert and Cedar.





New 1917 Model "G"

Seven-Passenger Touring Car—50 H. P.

Moline-Knight

No carbon trouble

No valve grinding

More power than you will ever demand

Moline-Knight's 1917 Model "G" was one of the new-fangled motor cars that cast their shadows across the future of the streetcar.

Pacific machine shops. The more the route is examined, the stronger becomes the conviction that it could at once prove the most profitable railway line in the city of St. Paul. It is hoped the enterprise may at once be carried forward."¹¹

Even the service left nothing to be desired:

"The Street Railway is now running systematically by timetable. The first cars leave the junction on Wabasha Street going each way at 6:03 in the morning, and every twelve minutes thereafter until 10:03 in the evenings. Six minutes is allowed between each turnabout, making the time from the junction to each terminal eighteen minutes. By the above the public can readily calculate exactly when to expect a car, a convenience they will certainly appreciate. The usual arrangements will be made to accommodate the people after entertainments."^{12*}

*The company provided extra service during late evening events such as stage shows and concerts.

Despite these improvements, the *Pioneer* continued to campaign for extension of the lines, indicating that the areas east and north of downtown St. Paul felt by-passed by the rail system. The paper declared:

"Parties residing in the northern sections of the First, Second, and Fifth Wards of St. Paul are clamorous for an extension of the Street Railway to the Pacific roundhouse and Rice's addition, and appeals are made to the Council to compel the Street Railway company to lay down its iron and run its cars through the section of the city. The question with the city is, 'Will it pay?' If it can be made to pay, the lines ought to be built without delay..."¹³

(ED. NOTE: Old newspapers often tell readers and researchers more than is immediately apparent. In this case, the reference to "iron rails" reveals something about the technology of the street railways in the 1870s. Because iron rather than steel was used, it seems apparent that it was less expensive to produce large quantities of iron than of steel, a fact that suggests that by the 1870s large

steel mills had not yet come into existence in the United States.

(But this old news account also is a commentary on the regulatory power of local government in St. Paul at that time. The *Pioneer* indicates that the people of the First, Second, and Fifth Wards were appealing to the City Council for help in extending the line. This means that the Council must have had the authority to force the company to do certain things. Research in sources other than the newspaper reveals that the company was operating under a franchise that gave the city the power to regulate the company's routes and fares.)

During that fall of 1877, a news item painted a rosy picture of financial health for the company:

*"The street cars in St. Paul are doing a swimming business these days, and are making more money than ever before."*¹⁴

In November, 1877, the St. Paul City Railway Company announced a new fare structure, as reported in the *Pioneer*:

*"All 4-cent fares will be abolished. Hereafter, single fares will be six cents; 21 tickets will be sold for \$1.00; 10 tickets sold for 50 cents; 5 tickets for 25 cents. Contrary to previous usage of the company, half fares will be established for children under 12 The additional cent is put upon single fares from the necessity of the case, the choice seeming to be between that and the reduction in wages of the employees of the company, which already seem low for services rendered."*¹⁵

(ED. NOTE: Once again it is necessary to read between the lines. First of all, the *Pioneer* did not criticize the decision to raise fares. In fact, the newspaper, usually a critic of the company, actually endorsed the fare increase, perhaps perceiving that the company's need for additional revenue was real. More important, however, was the fact that the paper apparently did not believe the increased fares would be a burden for the public, indicating, perhaps, that St. Paul's economic condition had improved markedly since the dark days of 1874 and 1875.

(Then there is the matter of the drivers' wages. The *Pioneer* declared that the choice was between higher fares and a "reduction in wages of the employees . . . which already seem low . . ." If the *Pioneer* was asking the public to bear an additional expense so that

employees of a private company could maintain their already low wages — and the paper was, in fact, doing so — the wages must have been low indeed.

(More than that, the *Pioneer*, in effect, was arguing that the increase was fair because the alternative was lower wages. The paper did not suggest that if wages were lowered the workers would strike. If the drivers were unionized and the company had proposed lower wages (which the newspaper seems to indicate) there would almost certainly have been talk of a transit strike. Yet the *Pioneer* does not mention such a possibility.

(This leads to the conclusion that in 1877 the street railway company's workers were not unionized, and again, research in other sources confirms this. Thus, old newspaper stories can be as important for what they do not say as for what they do say.)

Despite the increase in fares, the St. Paul Street Railway Company continued to have financial problems. On October 8, 1878, the *Pioneer* reported:

*"Judge Wilkin yesterday signed a decree in a foreclosure suit against the St. Paul Street Railway. This transfers the property to the holders of the bonds issued by the company, who have organized a new company to operate the road under the name St. Paul City Railway Company."*¹⁶

Thus ends the story of the St. Paul Street Railway Company. Within a few years the horsecars were supplanted by cable cars and by electric streetcars as the St. Paul City Railway Company served a city of 47,000 people. By 1880 the Twin Cities, now part of a new industrial and commercial center of the Northwest, had a combined population of almost 100,000. It was an era of dynamic entrepreneurial capitalism that was giving way to finance capitalism as exemplified by James J. Hill.

Although it went through various mergers and name changes, the St. Paul City Railway Company existed from 1878 until 1953 when it disappeared from the urban scene, to be replaced by buses and automobiles.

THROUGHOUT ITS EXISTENCE, the system had mirrored the rise and decline of the city center as a centralizing power in urban history. While it lasted, the system also had succeeded in creating a feeling of community by concentrating trade, economic power, and residences in the city center, as well as distributing those elements along the routes it built.



This view of an idyllic, tree-shaded Selby Avenue at Western in the 1890s pictures the streetcar era much as many still remember it.

The death of rail transportation, however, did not create a vacuum because bus lines and freeways supplanted the rail routes. From 1953 until 1968 privately-owned bus systems formed the major mode of mass transit in the Twin Cities. These firms had to achieve profitability and still deliver increasing service to a more widely dispersed population. As revenue and profits from inner city routes declined, it became obvious that the transit company must tap the growing suburban market. However, this was impractical because the company lacked capital for expansion.

Eventually, metropolitan area governments were faced with the need to either take over the system or lose a privately-owned company that was unable to serve the core cities adequately. In the end, the state legislature created the Metropolitan Transit Commission which, in turn, bought the bus company.

In 1970 the M.T.C. authorized a survey of customer attitudes. Its results mirrored expectations similar to those of the 1870s:¹⁶

"91% agreed that 'A good bus system is essential to the growth and prosperity of the area'."

In the 1870s a good transit system also was linked to general prosperity.

"91.4% rejected the idea that 'The bus system should be fully supported by tax revenues and no fares charged to anyone'."

Motoring along the East River Road near the Town and Country Club was an activity that by the early 1920s was beginning to eclipse riding along in a trolley.





Trolley lines extending across the old Robert Street bridge linked the east and west sides of the Mississippi. In this photo taken about 1916, the only vehicles are the streetcar and horse-drawn wagons.

While the 1870s system was partially supported by users, there were suggestions that parts of the system be supported through neighborhood co-operative building and ownership.

"About 84% believe that improved bus service would greatly reduce the demand for downtown parking ..."

Downtown congestion was also a concern in the 1870s, especially on Third Street:

"More than three-fourths of those interviewed feel that continued planning and construction of both automobile and transit facilities was needed. At the same time, they revealed that transit improvements should have first priority."

In the 1870s there were constant calls for more construction and increased service by the street railway:

"70% of bus riders agreed that transit needs require more attention, while only 52% of those who use the car agreed."

During the 1870s there were continual proposals that more should be done to improve transportation within the city (including sidewalks, crosswalks, and water fountains for horses) to meet the growing population needs during that decade.

A century has elapsed since the introduction of mass transit in St. Paul. M.T.C.'s

survey demonstrates that some of the great expectations of recent years existed a century ago and perhaps have become fixtures in America's urban history.

Footnotes

1. April 27, 1872, "Street Railway," St. Paul Pioneer.*
2. June 28, 1872, "Street Railway."
3. July 2, 1872, "Street Railway."
4. July 18, 1872.
5. July 23, 1872.
6. August 2, 1872.
7. March 13, 1873.
8. May 28, 1874, "Double-up Service."
9. April 14, 1875, page 2, col. 1.
10. April 25, 1875, page 4, col. 5.
11. March 23, 1877, page 7, col. 5.
12. May 20, 1877, page 7, col. 4.
13. June 5, 1877, page 7, col. 4.
14. Oct. 6, 1877, page 7, col. 3.
15. Nov. 22, 1877, page 7, col. 2.
16. Oct. 8, 1878, page 7, col. 3.
17. "The People Look at Transit" by H.R. Orth and Walter Cherwony, American City, June, 1970, page 126.

*NOTE: Most of the Pioneer articles can be found within the A.A.T. (All About Town) column and are most frequently found on the fourth page of the newspaper for 1872, 1873, and 1874.



Ramsey County History
published semi-annually by
the Ramsey County Historical Society
Landmark Center
Room 323
75 West Fifth Street
St. Paul, Minn. 55102

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.

The 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, 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 school-house program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains exhibits on the history of St. Paul and its surrounding communities.

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989