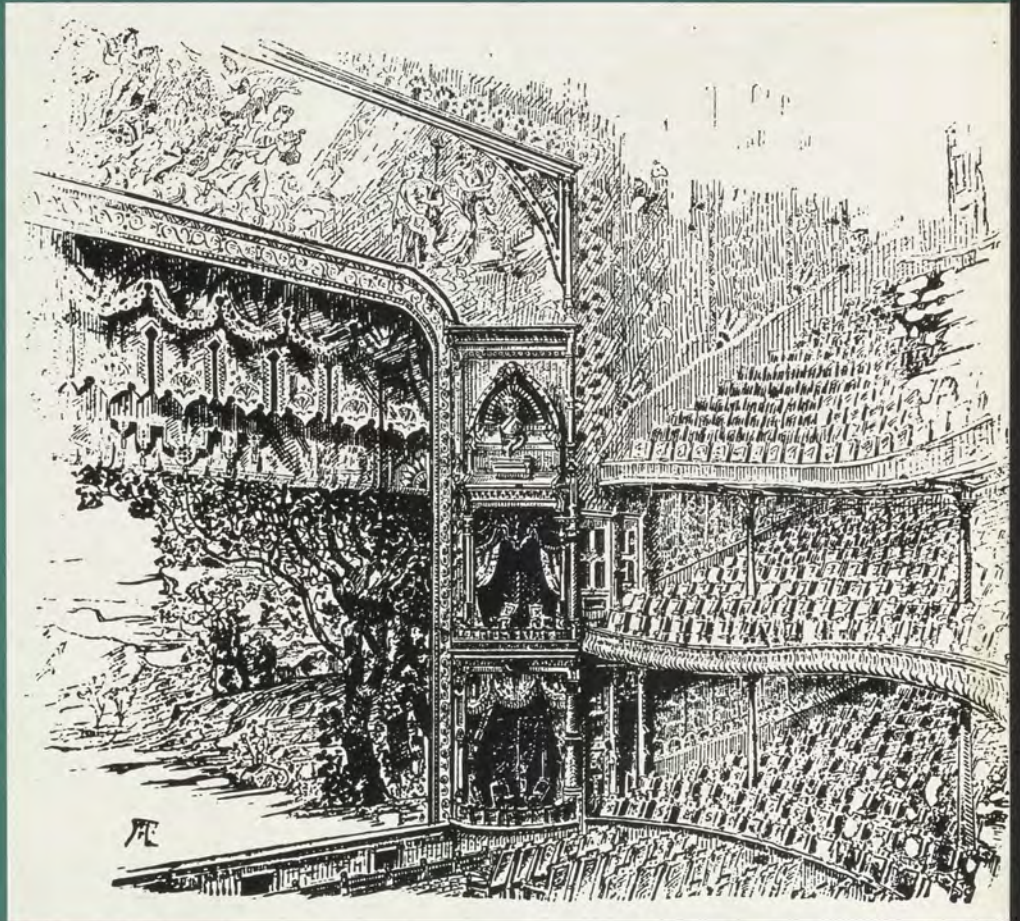


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: Interior view of the Grand Opera House, St. Paul.

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Highland-Groveland-Macalester Park

The Old Reserve Township

By Donald Empson

The history of what is today Highland Park¹ began 169 years ago when Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, age 26, acting under orders from President Thomas Jefferson, ascended the Mississippi River to select a site for a fort.

One of the sites chosen was at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. For \$200 in gifts, and sixty gallons of liquor,² Pike purchased from the Indians a tract of land nine miles on each side of the river. This, the first land transaction in what is now Minnesota, marked the beginning of a fifty-year association between Fort Snelling and the area known today as Highland Park.³

The proposed location of the fort proved to be excellent. The land was set aside as the military reservation, and construction of the fort was begun in 1819. The surrounding area provided wood, water, fuel, game, and general sustenance for soldiers at the fort.⁴

BECAUSE OF A quirk of government jurisdiction, the first marriage between whites in Minnesota took place in the Highland Park area in 1820. Lieutenant Green and Amelia Gooding had to row across the river from Fort Snelling to Highland Park (then in Michigan Territory) to be married.⁵

In 1821, as construction continued on the Fort, five Swiss families, disillusioned with settlement in the Selkirk colony at Pembina, came south to the protection of Fort Snelling. Having no legal land claim, they were allowed to "squat" near the Fort on the military reservation.⁶ Two years later, more Swiss came, until by 1839, there were between 150 and 200 Swiss, French Canadians, and Indians on the reservation.⁷

MOST OF THESE families lived in what is now south Minneapolis, but at least six

settled in the area of today's Highland Park. Their houses were placed along the river bluff between what now is known as Elsie Lane and Ford Parkway.⁸ Another map shows a collection of four houses near Elsie Lane labeled as "Old Rum Town," a reference to the availability of liquor at these settlements, and the source of eventual problems for Fort commandants.⁹

In 1838, the ownership of the reservation came into question. The land between the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers had been purchased from the Indians, and many of the squatters were prepared to establish claims on the reservation. However, the Fort's commander, Major Joseph Plympton, was uneasy about such claims, disturbed by the easy access to liquor an occupied reservation would offer, and annoyed at the use of the timber, pasture, and other resources by the squatters. Thus he sought to have the reservation boundaries redefined. The survey was completed by 1839 and the boundaries enlarged. The reservation on the east bank extended north from the Mississippi to Marshall Avenue, and east of the river to the area of what is now Seven Corners in downtown St. Paul.¹⁰

On May 6, 1840, after much fruitless maneuvering by the squatters, Ira B. Brunson, United States deputy marshal, forcibly ejected the squatters from the military reservation, and burned their houses. These families spread out north and east and became the earliest settlers of Little Canada, St. Paul, Stillwater, and St. Anthony.¹¹

Thus, the first inhabitants of Highland Park were forced to evacuate the area. They were among the first residents of St. Paul but, had they been allowed to remain, there might have been only one city, instead of two, with a downtown spread between Highland Park and south Minneapolis.¹²

In the summer of 1848, eight years after the eviction of the squatters, William Finn, an Irishman, and a veteran of the Mexican

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Donald Empson is assistant reference librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, he has taught at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. His special interest is in early real estate transactions and how street names reflect the history of an area.

War (who incidentally had shot off his index finger while cleaning his gun at Fort Snelling), became the first permanent settler of Highland Park. By reason of his military service, he was granted a section of land extending from Marshall south to St. Clair, and from Fairview west to the river. He built his home on what is now the St. Thomas College campus.

FINN CAME to Minnesota in 1844 and married Elizabeth Reynolds in 1848. He later sold his farm, moved to downtown St. Paul, and died in 1889. He had no children.

In 1849, anticipating that the reservation might soon be opened for sale, the area was surveyed according to the township system established by the Ordinance of 1785. Because of the curve of the Mississippi, there were only eight full sections (each one mile square) and several fractional sections. Most of the major streets in the area now follow these early section lines, including Marshall, St. Clair, Highland Parkway, Cleveland, Snelling, and Lexington. Summit, Randolph, Montreal, Fairview, and Hamline follow half-section lines. At the time of the survey, however, there were two important roads through the area. One extended from St. Paul to Fort Snelling somewhat along the course of today's West Seventh Street, and the other ran from Fort Snelling to Little Canada, somewhat along the route of Snelling Avenue.

By 1853, St. Paul had grown beyond a trading post and steamboat stop. It had a population of more than a thousand, and there was considerable pressure to sell the reservation lands on the river's east bank. In anticipation of such a sale, settlers had been staking illegal claims on the reservation land since 1849. Finally, the United States Congress set the date of the land sale for September, 1854, with all land to be sold by auction. In July the settlers gathered to decide who should bid on what property, so there would be only one bid per piece of land. The minimum price was \$1.25 an acre. The auction was held at Stillwater.

"The claimants dressed in red shirts, all armed, and having clubs in their hands, were arranged in a circle so large as almost to prevent outsiders from being heard, even if disposed to bid. One outsider only made an attempt to bid, and he was soon disposed of." The sale took only forty-five minutes; in that

time, approximately 5,000 acres were sold. The government investigation of the obvious collusion lasted more than a year. However, the bids were allowed to stand. Thus it was that Highland Park land first sold at \$1.25 an acre.¹⁵

ONE OF THE MEN buying land that day was John K. Ayd who, with his brothers, had come to Minnesota from Germany by way of Illinois. Ayd bought a quarter section between Lexington, Victoria, St. Clair, and Randolph, and here, in 1860, he built the only mill in Highland Park. Today more than forty descendants of his family live in St. Paul.¹⁶

Another land-buyer that day was William Brimhall who had a farm with twenty-five acres of apple trees near St. Clair and Snelling. In 1886, "having outlived the climate," he platted his farm for sale and moved to California. His son, John B. Brimhall, became a prominent St. Paul physician.¹⁷

Another early settler was William Davern who claimed 160 acres near St. Paul Avenue and the Jewish Community Center. He was a lifelong resident of the area and his house, built around 1870, remains (though it was greatly enlarged in 1929) at 1173 Davern.¹⁸

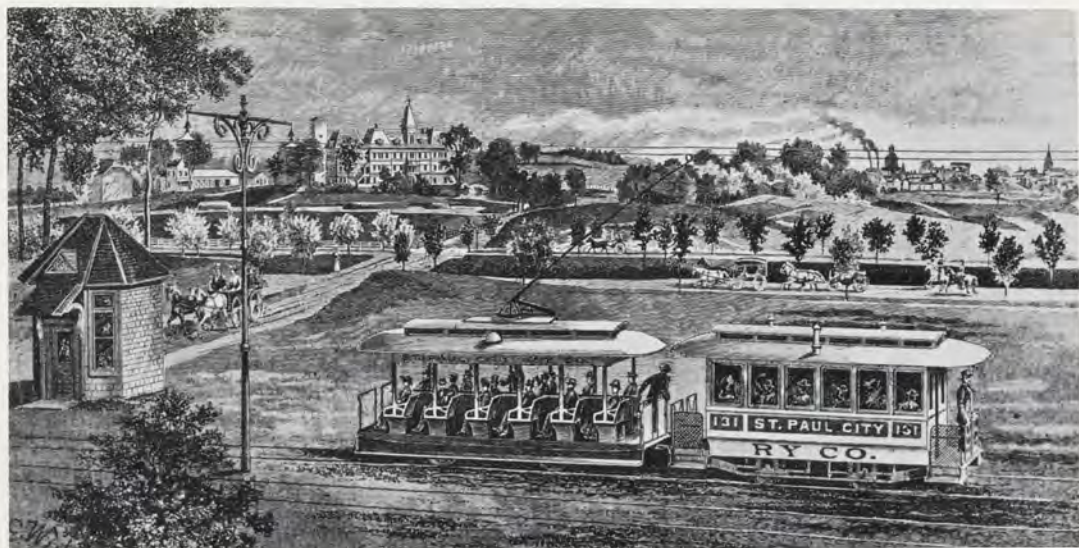
Friedrich Rudolf Knapheide settled near Randolph and Cleveland in the early 1850's. He was a progressive farmer, active in the affairs of the township. Born in Germany in 1821, he died in 1905 at his family home which still stands at 2064 Randolph Avenue.¹⁹ It is the oldest house in the area, although it, too, has been extensively remodeled.

One of Knapheide's farm workers, Frederick Spangenberg, bought property from Knapheide. During the 1860's, he built a substantial limestone house which stands today at 375 Mt. Curve. Descendants of both families live in the area.²⁰

Joseph and Mary Wessinger also arrived about this time. They settled on a twenty-acre farm northeast of Jefferson and Prior. The Wessinger home remains at 1875 Jefferson, and their descendants live only a few blocks away.²¹

Other early settlers were Thomas Crosby who farmed around Crosby Lake, which was named for him, and the Bohland brothers whose descendants still live in St. Paul.²²

After the auction of the reservation land, efforts were directed toward the political



organization of the area. In May of 1858, the voters met at the house of William Niven, near Ford Parkway and Cleveland Avenue, to organize Reserve Township, so named because it had been part of the Fort Snelling reservation.²³

Having organized, the initial order of business was planning the construction of roads and schools. The first township road, today's St. Clair Avenue, was surveyed in December of 1858. The road ran from Dale, the city limits, west to the river.²⁴

THE NEW TOWNSHIP had two schools. One, built around 1860, stood on the southwest corner of Randolph and Snelling. That building was replaced with the limestone building, the "Old Mattocks School," which now rests on the grounds of the Highland Park Senior High.²⁵ The township's second school was built in 1861 and later was moved to the northwest corner of Montreal and Snelling. This building was replaced, in 1881, by a brick structure later known as the Quincy School. It remained opposite the present-day school complex until it was razed in the 1930's.²⁶

In 1860, just before the Civil War, the area had a total of 123 school pupils; they were supported by \$591 in taxes, and \$225 in state funds.²⁷ That same year, the township had a population of 249 people; it was rural in nature with an average crop per acre of fifty bushels of corn, forty-five bushels of oats, twenty-two bushels of wheat, and 200 bushels of potatoes.²⁸

In the 1870's, change came to this pre-

New electric line, Groveland Park station, and St. Thomas College.

dominantly rural area. In 1874, the Catholic Industrial School, organized under Thomas L. Grace, bishop of St. Paul, purchased from William Finn, the area's first legal settler, 452 acres of property for \$56,500. The property included nearly all of Finn's original section.²⁹ The land was to be used for the construction of a school for delinquent boys, many of them victims of family disruptions during the Civil War.

Two years later, a large three-story building, built with limestone quarried from the river bank, was finished. The school, however, was not successful and by 1879, it was apparently disbanded. The building remained to form the beginning in 1885 of St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, later St. Thomas College. Part of the remainder of the property was subdivided into building lots by Archbishop Ireland in 1890, and named "Groveland" from whence the area takes its name.*

In the 1870's, William Nettleton, founder of Duluth, bought a 130-acre dairy farm near Randolph and Lexington. In the 1880's, he platted the farm, named Nettleton Avenue for himself and Juliet Avenue for his youngest daughter, Julia, sold the townsites and moved to Spokane where he died.³¹

*The name "Groveland" had, in the 1850's, referred to what is now known as the Midway district. The Archbishop apparently shifted the boundaries to the southwest.³⁰

BY THIS TIME, Leberich and Carolina Otto had acquired a forty-acre farm in the area now covered by the Highland Park Shopping Center. Otto was a German immigrant and farmer; however, he also was a highly skilled musician and band leader prominent in the musical circles of early St. Paul.³²

Also during this time, Samuel M. Magoffin, son of the Civil War governor of Kentucky and a member of the Kentucky aristocracy, purchased extensive land in the Highland area.³³

In 1878, \$75 was collected by township citizens for the purpose of erecting a fifty-foot observatory in the vicinity of today's Highland Water Tower, the highest point in the area. It was said that five counties were visible from the tower, as well as Hamline and Macalester colleges, the University of Minnesota, the state fairgrounds, Pilot Knob, Minnehaha Falls, and Mendota. People from all over the county visited this "lookout." The observatory was short-lived, however. It was destroyed during a wind-storm the next year.³⁴

In the 1870's and 80's, residents of Reserve Township began to adapt to the rapid growth of St. Paul. Farmers turned from grain to dairy farming to supply milk for the growing city, and by 1900, there were at least twenty-six dairy farms in the area.³⁵ Other farmers turned to truck farming, selling their produce in the city.³⁶

However, as farmers began to change their farms to suit the urban markets a new element emerged in the township. Starting at the east side, around Victoria and Summit and moving west to Lexington, Snelling, and then south, people began subdividing their land into building lots. In a short time residential houses began to spring up where cattle once grazed.

In 1881, a syndicate was formed by the trustees of Macalester College who bought the Thomas Holyoke Farm, a quarter-section of land bounded by Snelling, Fairview, St. Clair, and Summit. They paid \$150 an acre, offering forty acres as a gift to Macalester College. The college accepted the property fronting on Snelling Avenue; the remainder was platted in 1883 as Macalester Park. The following ten years, a number of houses were built in the Park and many remain today, making it the oldest residential area in

Highland Park.³⁷

MACALESTER PARK was served at Macalester Station (Marshall near Snelling), by the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroad, otherwise known as the "Short Line." This was a commuter railroad also serving Ridgewood Park, Hamline, Merriam Park, and other suburban communities.³⁸

By 1890, however, with the co-operation





Reprinted from the 1867 Bennett Map of Ramsey County, Minnesota.

of Archbishop Ireland, Thomas Cochran (who owned property in Macalester Park), and other speculators, the electric streetcar line was extended out Grand Avenue to the Mississippi, and also along Randolph Avenue to the river.³⁹ Unfortunately, the disruptive financial conditions of the 1890's

hindered what might have been an early settlement of Highland Park. It was not until the 1910's and 1920's that the mile-upon-mile of houses were built that characterize the area north of Randolph today. The area south of Randolph, however, remained in small farms and large estates through the



mid-20's. It was not until the 1940's and 50's that it was truly developed into the residential area it is today.

This growth of urban lots and residential homes brought an end to the colorful earlier history of Reserve Township. On February 8th, 1887, St. Paul annexed the remainder of Reserve Township, and it became part of that growing city.⁴⁰

Footnotes

1. For purposes of brevity, we are taking a liberal interpretation of Highland Park, which includes Macalester, Groveland, King's Maplewood, Rosedale, and other real estate plats within an area from the Mississippi north to Marshall Avenue, and from the river east to Lexington Avenue.
2. Cash payments were added later, at the insistence of the Indians.
3. Marcus L. Hansen: *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*. Chapter 1. Iowa City, 1918.
4. *Ibid.* Chapter II and III.
5. "Journal of Stephen Watts Kearny" in *Missouri Historical Society Collections*, 3:107. St. Louis, 1908.
6. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*. 1:216-217. St. Paul, 1920.
7. M. M. Hoffmann, "New Light on Old St. Peter's and Early St. Paul" in *Minnesota History* 8:27-51. March, 1927.
8. Map: *Ft. Snelling & Vicinity* drawn by E. K. Smith, October, 1837. Original in National Archives, Records of the Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Military Reservations File — Ft. Snelling. The Historic Sites department of the Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies.
9. Map: *Map of the Military Reserve embracing Fort Snelling, May 6, 1853* by James L. Thompson. Original in National Archives, Records of the Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Military Reservations File — Fort Snelling. The Historic Sites department of the Minnesota Historical Society has photostatic copies.
10. J. Fletcher Williams: *A History of the City of St. Paul and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*. 77-83. Minnesota Historical Society Collections, volume 4, St. Paul, 1876.
11. Folwell: *History of Minnesota*, 1:213-223.
12. Joseph A. Corrigan. *The History of St. Marks and the Midway District*, 22. St. Paul, 1939.
13. *Ibid*, page 34.
14. The original survey notes and map are in the Secretary of State's office, State Office Building, St. Paul. Section lines are also indicated on United States Geological Survey maps.
15. *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul . . .*, page 195-198. Minneapolis, 1881. There is a list of the original purchasers of the reservation land in: 35th Congress, 1 session. *House of Representatives Report* no. 351 page 431-432 (serial 965).
16. Research material gathered by the author for his history of the Ayd mill.
17. William Brimhall's autobiography in *The Minnesota Horticulturist*, volume 25, page 253-255. July, 1897.

18. *History of Ramsey County* . . . page 257. Photographs of the enlargement are in the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
19. Information from Mrs. Frances Bonney, 507 South Cleveland, St. Paul.
20. Howard F. Koeper, *Historic St. Paul Buildings*, page 64. St. Paul, 1964.
21. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 16, 1938, page 14. Obituary notice of Joseph's son, William.
22. Other biographies of early pioneers appear in *History of Ramsey County* . . . pages 256-258.
23. *Ibid.* page 252.
24. There is a "Road Release" book for Reserve Township in the vault, Register of Deeds office, Ramsey County Courthouse.
25. *History of Ramsey County* . . . page 255; *Historic St. Paul Buildings*, page 50.
26. *History of Ramsey County* . . . page 255; St. Paul

- city directories; plat maps of St. Paul.
27. 1860 Census of Population. Social Statistics. Reserve Township. Volumes in Manuscript Department, Minnesota Historical Society.
28. *Ibid.*
29. The property which the Catholic Industrial School bought began at Cretin and Marshall, extended from Cleveland to Summit, from Summit to Fairview, St. Clair to Cretin, north again to Princeton and to the river. Along the river, the boundry went north to Laurel, east to Cretin and north again to Marshall.
30. Joseph A. Corrigan. "The Catholic Industrial School of Minnesota" in *Acta Et Dicta*, volume 7, pages 3-25. October, 1935.
31. General C. C. Andrews, *History of St. Paul, Minnesota*. Part II, page 121. Syracuse, 1890.
32. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 20, 1924, page 4. (Much of this is rather fanciful, I believe.)
33. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 4, 1934, page 9.
34. *History of Ramsey County* . . . page 256. Also in *The Geology of Minnesota*. The Geological and Natural History Survey of Minnesota, 1882-1885, Volume II, page 348. St. Paul, 1888.
35. R. L. Polk & Co.: *St. Paul City Directory*, 1901.
36. "St. Paul's New Suburban Electric Lines" in *Northwest Magazine* volume 8, page 28-31. July, 1890.
37. Henry D. Funk: *A History of Macalester College*, page 82. St. Paul, 1910.
38. R. L. Polk & Co., *St. Paul City Directory*, 1890.
39. *Northwest Magazine*, page 28-31. Also Andrews: *History of St. Paul*, page 433-437.
40. *Special Laws of Minnesota, 1887*. Chapter 366, page 991.



William Davern house before remodeling in 1929 and as it looks today.





THE GIBBS HOUSE

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

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.