

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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To The **N**th Degree™

Fall, 1995

Volume 30, Number 3

The 108-Year History of Norwest St. Paul—

Page 4



A portion of Ta-coumba Aiken's mural for Norwest Bank St. Paul. See pages 3 and 17.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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Ta-coumba Aiken and "The Spirit of St. Paul"

St. Paul painter, sculptor and muralist Ta-coumba Aiken painted the mural, a portion of which graces the cover of this issue of *Ramsey County History*, for Norwest Bank St. Paul's sparkling new retail banking superstore. On page 17 he speaks of how he envisioned his work, "The Spirit of St. Paul—Now and Forever."

Growing Up in St. Paul

A Boyhood Resting on the City's Seven Hills —But Once Upon a Time There Were Eight

John S. Sonnen

Being a native St. Paulite, having been born and raised practically in the shadow of the “new” state Capitol, I, at an early age, became well aware of the wonders of the city’s prominent hills.

In winter nothing was more exciting than clutching a Flexible Flyer sled and getting a running start with it for a thrilling ride five or six blocks farther down Cedar Street almost to the back door of the “old” Capitol at Tenth Street. Traffic? Not to worry, for in winter all traffic, horse drawn or motorized, patronized Wabasha Street one block west, which was plowed by the streetcar company.

During other seasons there was much fun flying kites from “the Look-Out,” the cul-de-sac source of Sherburne Avenue on Capitol Hill’s eastern edge—now Cass Gilbert Park. From this overlook on windy days we children would peel out our kites as they tugged and pulled their course above St. Paul Hospital and Mechanic Arts High School at the north end of Robert Street. With changing gusts of wind they would dip, dive, swerve, then climb eastward over Jackson Street and the old Bass Hill and Mount Airy Street. Williams Hill rose beyond, but we never had enough string to reach it.

On days with strong southern winds, we would launch from Capitol Hill’s north promontory on Como Avenue and Capitol Boulevard. From that vantage point the kites worked their way over Winter and Arch Streets. Some days, if one of us had a “double-ball” supply of string on, a well-made kite would climb, undulate, and pull its way over the Great Northern Railway’s trackage and shops. The kite, catching that rising, smoky, hot air in its ribs, would take off like a rocket and tug itself northward to fly over Oakland Cemetery. Sad to write, it was over



St. Paul in 1866–1867 from Mount Airy, one of the city’s seven hills. Whitney’s Gallery photo, Minnesota Historical Society

that last, serene resting place that many of our best kites broke loose, fluttering free to their own demise in the waiting oak branches below.

In 1924 my parents, satisfied that I was old enough to walk the distance four times a day, transferred me to the Cathedral School at the foot of Cathedral Hill on Third Street at College Avenue. It was there, in the fifth grade, that I and the class became aware of the fact that our city, being founded and built on and among several distinct hills, was indeed

blessed. That geographic oddity placed us on a parity with Rome.

This news, delivered to us in an exalted and exhilarated manner, came from our teacher, a nun of the St. Joseph of Carondelet order. Newly transferred, not only to our class but to St. Paul, she was absolutely overjoyed with the assignment. I remember her exuberance and her excited voice telling us: “Oh! To be here in the American city that truly, purely is comparable to Rome because of matching seven hills, historic bisecting rivers

and monumental cathedrals." We, in the fifth grade, had one happy dedicated teacher.

Once home that day I still carried the good feeling our new nun had generated in me concerning hills, rivers, and St. Paul. Mother was pleased with my reaction. Brothers and sisters (I was the baby) "yah-yahed" me, shrugging off my report about Rome and us. Dad, the last one home for the day, politely heard me out, then said, as was his usual thoughtful wont, "Sounds to me that your new Sister was born and raised a prairie girl."

Needless to say, with my enrollment in Cathedral School I became well acquainted with Cathedral Hill—originally St. Anthony Hill, until 1914. Also, I became well versed in trodding different routes to and from, up and down, another neighborhood with a great St. Paul hill.

Mississippi river waters first brush St. Paul at the city's western boundary, flowing south in a beautiful, high-banked channel that separates St. Paul from its twin, Minneapolis. Here, upstream from Federal Lock and Dam No.1, navigable Pool No.1 is formed at an elevation of 725 feet above sea level. At the Lock and Dam below the Ford Plant, the river steps down to thirty-eight feet to proceed through St. Paul at an elevation of 687 feet. It flows at this level for the rest of its nineteen-and-a-half-mile passage through the city.

Keeping in mind the 687-foot factor, we find that Highland Park and other corners of St. Paul are the highest neighborhoods in the city. But are they hills? Highland Park certainly is, if you start walking to it from the intersection of West Seventh Street, Lexington and Montreal Avenue, which is at 800 feet above sea level. The Montreal and Hamline Avenue intersection is at 950 feet, as are the first-hole tees on both of the Highland golf courses.

It's all uphill from there, for the Highland water tower at Ford Parkway and Snelling Avenue rises from 995 feet above sea level. Catacorner across town, this height is surpassed by five feet. In the Hillcrest area at Hoyt and Winthrop, the water reservoir is at a 1,000-foot elevation. The Hillcrest Golf Course right next door has a 1,050-foot elevation contour

NAME	ABOVE SEA LEVEL ELEVATION	LOCATION
DAYTON'S BLUFF Includes Mounds Park	914'	Mounds Blvd S.E.- 194 through Mounds Park
CATHEDRAL HILL Formerly St. Anthony Hill	922'	Summit & Selby Avenues
CAPITOL HILL	874'	Aurora Avenue, between Wabasha & Cedar
CROCUS HILL Includes Ramsey, Pleasant/ Grand Hills	900'	S. end of Dale, Crocus Pl. cul-de-sac Ave./Crocus Place
PROSPECT PARK Includes South Wabasha Hill	815'	West Side at Hall Ave., Prospect Blvd.
WILLIAMS HILL Now being "mined" for sand and gravel	800' as of 1967	N. of University at Mississippi St.
MOUNT AIRY Formerly Bass Hill	865'	N. Jackson & Mt. Airy

looping inside its boundaries.

About ten blocks west at White Bear Avenue and Larpenteur, the elevation is 938 feet. Like Highland Park, the St. Paul neighborhoods of Hillcrest, Cherokee Heights, and Highwood/Battle Creek are simply elevated sections of St. Paul. In deference to traditionalists, children of old settlers and, possibly, folklore, the listing above of St. Paul's traditional hills is offered, along with their above-sea-level heights and, where applicable, their former names, plus other notes of interest.

Originally, during St. Paul's pioneer years, an eighth hill existed, but it became an impediment to the expansion of the town's Lower Landing area and the northward extension of Jackson Street beyond Third (now Kellogg Boulevard), Fourth and Fifth Streets. This was Baptist Hill, "a huge pile of rocks and boulders, and gravel and sand," evidently residue left from St. Anthony Falls' retreat upstream during the glacial drainage age. It was then that the wide valley we now look upon from Indian Mounds Park or Cherokee Heights Park was roiling and rushing with the combined waters of River Warren and its Mississippi tributary.

Baptist Hill's final gasp was probably in the early 1880s when St. Paul was a city in the grip of massive change. Is that what St. Paul is undergoing 100 years

later with the demise of Williams Hill? If so, we may gain another park, for what remains of Baptist Hill is a lovely square block in St. Paul's Lowertown, once known as Smith Park but now Mears Park. We shall see.

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John S. Sonnen is a lifelong resident of St. Paul and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.



Sister Annette Relf who founded the Episcopal Church Home of Minnesota, now beginning its second century of service. See article beginning on page 22.

R.C.H.S.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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