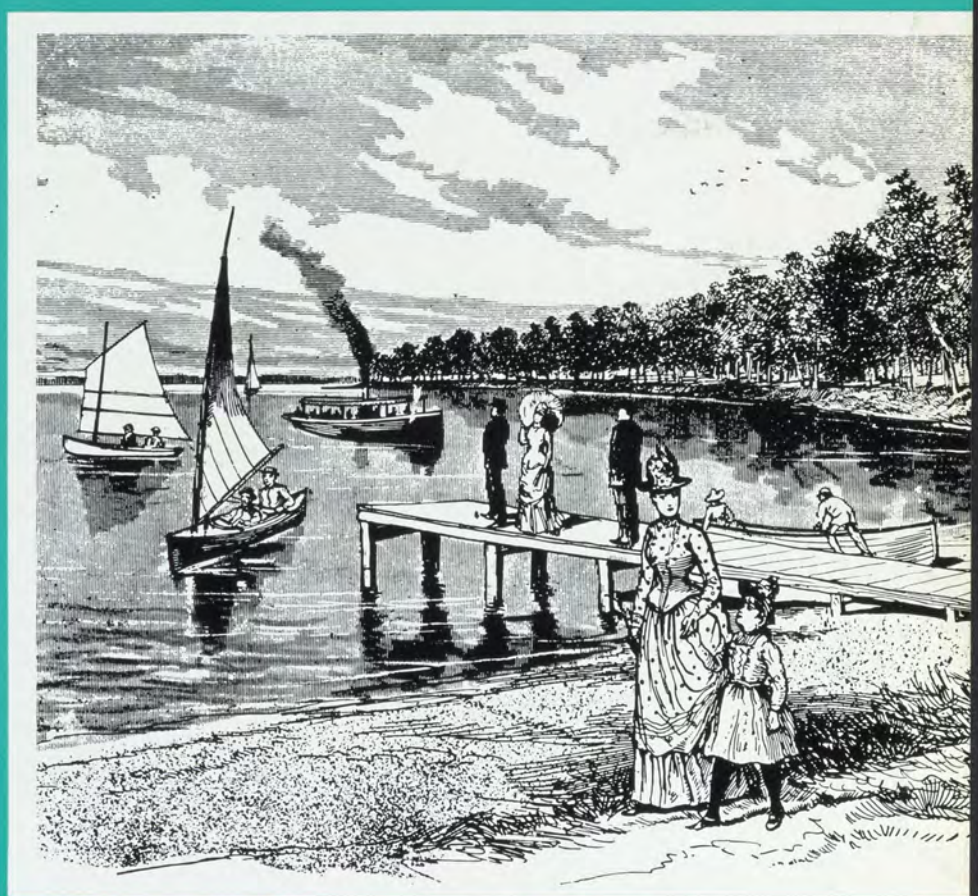


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: During the 1880's, a steamboat took Sunday visitors to North St. Paul on a trip around Silver Lake. Price was 25 cents a person. This tranquil scene of the lake appeared in the March, 1888, issue of The Northwest Magazine and is reproduced here, courtesy of the Picture Department, Minnesota Historical Society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Unless otherwise indicated, pictures in this issue are from the Picture Department of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker, picture curator, and his assistant, Dorothy Gimmestad, for their help.



North St. Paul and the view on Seventh Street looking west. This and other pictures with this article were copied from the March,

1888, issue of *The Northwest Magazine* by the Minnesota Historical Society's Picture Department.

In North St. Paul

Boom, Boom, Bust, Come-back!

BY EDWARD J. LETTERMANN

BORN in the boom of the 1880's, nurtured through the depression of the Nineties, North St. Paul did not come of age until the 1940's and 1950's, when it joined the ranks of the swelling residential communities surrounding the Twin Cities. A life-long resident, the late Ernest R. Reiff, summed up its history in 1954: "Hit by the 1895 depression," he said, "it was a bust. Lots, like mine that at one time sold for fifteen hundred to two thousand dollars were selling for taxes. It took many years for the town to come back."¹

North St. Paul "came back" in a different guise, however, than it originally was envisioned. Founded as a great manufacturing city and destined, in the opinion of its organizers, to outstrip St. Paul itself in

manufacturing, it is today primarily a residential community.

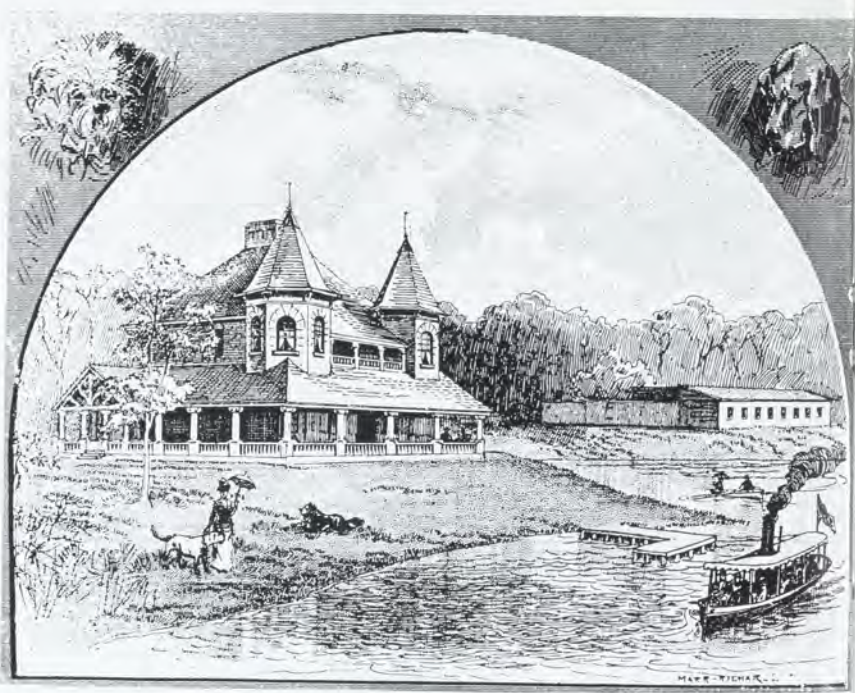
EIGHTY YEARS AGO, in the spring of 1887, a visitor attracted to Silver Lake in eastern Ramsey County, some six miles northeast of St. Paul, would have noticed only a few farm houses in the broad stretch of rolling and partly wooded landscape. A few men were plowing in neighboring fields. Near the gravelly beach of Silver Lake's southern shore stood the summer home of a St. Paul resident—and little more. Nothing would have indicated that a great change was at hand which in two years would convert this quiet rural scene into a beehive of industrial activity.

The summer home was the lake-side retreat of an erstwhile Civil War captain, Henry Anson Castle, soon to become the principal founder of North St. Paul.² A practicing lawyer at Quincy, Illinois, and an editorial writer for the *Quincy Daily Whig*, he had come to Minnesota in July of 1856. He at first made his home in Anoka and later, for a time, in St. Cloud.

In 1868, he settled permanently in St. Paul, opening a wholesale stove depot for

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Henry Castle's North St. Paul



Top: Houses erected by the North St. Paul Cottage Company. Right: St. Paul Kennel Club's headquarters on Silver Lake. Above: The R. C. McKinney residence built in 1888 and still standing. Below: Captain Castle's own residence.





Wisconsin Central Railroad depot at North St. Paul.

Comstock, Castle, and Company of Quincy, of which he had become a member. After six successful years in the stove business, he returned to his first love, the practice of law.

Two years earlier, however, in 1872, he had begun buying land in the Silver Lake area. He bought his original tract of 520 acres from William R. Marshall, a former governor of Minnesota. As the 1870's passed, Captain Castle steadily increased his land holdings around Silver Lake, known then as Folsoms Lake. In 1874, he hired Ernst F. Blase to build a small farmhouse for him on the southern end of the lake. That year, Blase himself bought 160 acres of land east of the lake at ten dollars an acre, moving there in 1876. Blase, like Castle, had served in the Union Army, and after his discharge had resumed his trade as a journeyman carpenter. He helped build the first railroad turntable and the first freight station in Minneapolis.³

MANY YEARS LATER, Blase's daughter, Amelia, recalled that when Captain Castle hired her father to go out to Silver Lake, he drew a trail on his business card to show Blase how to get there from St. Paul. The trail "left Seventh Street in St. Paul and went north to Lake Phalen, circling around Phalen Creek, skirting the lake, and coming in a northeasterly direction" to what is now the corner of White Bear Avenue and County Road C. From there, it passed east to Charles Street in present North St. Paul.⁴

But the Blase family were not the first permanent residents in the Silver Lake area. Hugh Casey had arrived nearly a quarter of a century before them—in 1850—and had built a farmhouse on his 160-acre tract north and east of Casey Lake.⁵ The Conlins, too, were early residents of the region. Their original cabin was on property that Captain Castle bought. Later, they took up

land south of Blase's place, across the present county line. Other families which dated from these early days, Reiff recalled, were "the Daltons, the Eberlys, the Bachstroms, the Bernholtz families and the Ruefenachts." Early employees on the Castle farm were Peter Schneeweis and A. P. Wright. To the northwest of Silver Lake lived William Gall and his son, Fred.

SCHOOL DISTRICT Number 2, the second in the township of New Canada, had been organized in 1861, and the first schoolhouse built at about the corner of present County Road C and Bittersweet Lane. In the summer of 1880, the district erected a new schoolhouse on Hugh Casey's land. This was the first school within present North St. Paul, and stood at the corner of what is now Fourth Street and Seventeenth Avenue Northwest.

During the latter half of the 1870's, Captain Castle's farm became one of the first of its kind in Minnesota. In 1875, McCartney and Bush established there a seed raising enterprise and the firm became known as Hollister, Castle, and Company. The farm was called North Star Seed Farm. In connection with the farm, a seed store, an imposing three-story brick structure, was opened in St. Paul at Fourth and Robert Streets.

The April 1, 1879, issue of the *Independent Farmer and Fireside Companion* describes the farm as consisting of "nearly a thousand acres," with "trial grounds" where seeds were tested "to ascertain not only their qualities, but habits, growth, vitality, adaptability and other peculiarities." The most attractive feature of the farm was the "long rows of thrifty looking peas." Fancy beans, sweet corn, tomatoes, melons, squash, and new varieties of potatoes were

listed as being under cultivation. The company's sales were reported at \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year.

AFTER THE END of the 1880 season, however, the seed raising project was abandoned, and Captain Castle purchased the entire interest in the farm. The next year he was reported to have had about four hundred acres under cultivation, presumably in general crops.

When the Wisconsin Central Railroad (now the Soo Line) laid its tracks across his farm in 1886, Captain Castle platted a suburban townsite on the shores of Silver Lake. He named the town "Castle." He hoped that the beauty of the spot would attract summer residents and eventually cause it to become a favorite suburb for permanent homes. Some lots were sold, but few improvements were made.

Henry Castle was years ahead of his time. The day of easy commuting between his new town and St. Paul was not yet at hand. It quickly became evident to him and his friends that a different approach was called for in developing the Silver Lake area.

"There is one important line of growth," they reasoned, "in which St. Paul has made but a scanty showing, namely that of manufactures. Trade and transportation have absorbed the best energies of the people and the field of manufacturing is substantially neglected."

So they set about creating a new manufacturing town.

IN MARCH of 1887, the North St. Paul Land Company was organized, with Henry A. Castle, Lane K. Stone, Frederick Driscoll, W. S. Morton, and George A. Sexias as its leading stockholders. The capital stock of the company was fixed at one million dollars. Stone and Morton were members of one of the most successful real estate combinations of the day, and Driscoll was the owner of the *Pioneer Press*, quite possibly the most powerful newspaper in the Northwest at that time.

As soon as the frost was out of the ground, work was actively begun on what might be called the framework of the new city. More than twenty-four miles of streets were graded, including a broad boulevard running entirely around Silver Lake; five miles of wood sidewalk were laid; five de-



Captain Henry A. Castle

pots were built, and the construction of two hotels and of numerous dwellings begun. The houses or cottages, as they were called in those days, were advertised for sale, "at moderate prices," on easy terms. Sought was "a permanent population of thrifty people, interested in the success of the place."

Providing places for this population to earn its livelihood was not left to chance. Manufacturers were systematically recruited to move to the new town and build their factories there. The cheapness of land was stressed, as well as the proximity of rich "crude material for manufacturing . . . hard woods and pine, limestone, granite, sandstone and valuable clays."

By August of 1887, thirteen manufacturing concerns were in the process of building factories in North St. Paul. By 1890, there were thirty established manufacturing concerns, and there seemed to be no end to the rise of sudden prosperity in Captain Castle's converted farmland.

AT THE END of little more than six months of activity in the Silver Lake area, the North St. Paul Land Company issued the following report for the latter part of 1887:

"The two business streets show many improvements. The business concerns comprise two hardware stores, four groceries, two dry goods stores, one book and stationery store, three meat markets, four saloons,

two drug stores, and there are two hotels, a lumber yard, a brick yard, and six boarding houses . . .

" . . . Up to December first, there had been sold by the Land Company, of lots and blocks, 212,000 dollars, and the value of improvements made was 630,000 dollars . . ."⁶

Part of the old North Star Seed Farm had been devoted to the culture of vines and ornamental shrubbery, forest trees and evergreens sufficient, it was advertised, "to supply every claim in the Northwest." These did not go to waste. "Captain Castle set out white ash and also quite a few pines", to line the streets, according to E. R. Reiff.⁷

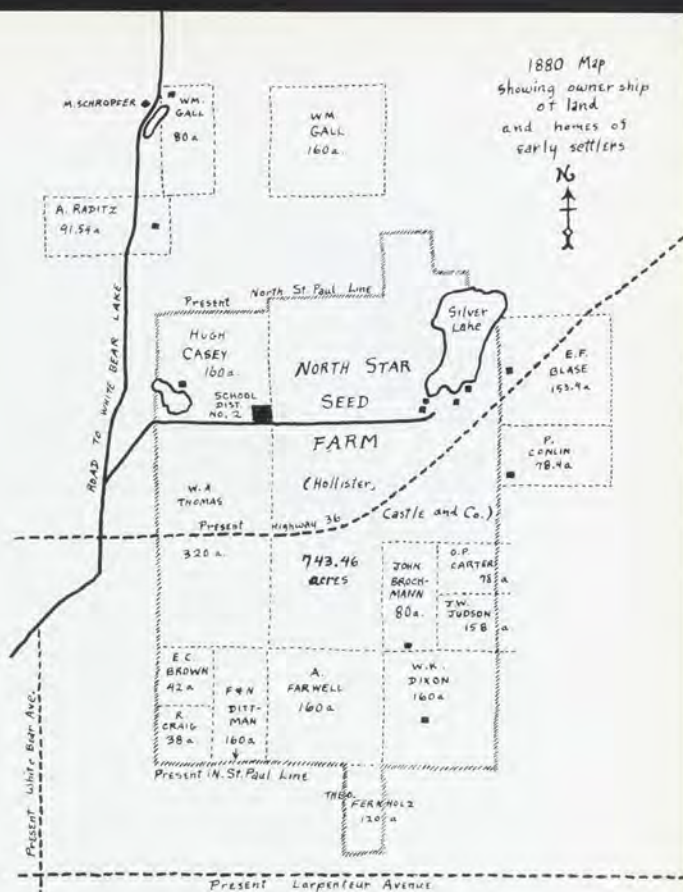
As the village grew, Castle converted the entire southern shore of the lake into a park which soon became a favorite spot for villagers and visitors from St. Paul to spend their Sundays. At first the only means of public transportation between St. Paul and the new village was the Wisconsin Central with its five passenger stations, but very early a "steam motor company" came into being, Reiff remembered, which ran from Duluth Avenue at East Seventh Street in St. Paul to Silver Lake.

"Two little steam engines dragged two cars and when they went over the grade at the Omaha tracks in cold weather, when it was hard to keep up the steam, the men passengers would have to get out and walk . . ."

"ON SUNDAYS," Reiff continued, "they would bring crowds out to Silver Lake to picnic. The *piece de resistance* was the balloon ascension . . . They would perform all sorts of hazardous tricks in the air, then cut loose . . . On the lake was a steamboat that made a circle of the lake for twenty-five cents . . . [There was] a row of bathing houses and a toboggan slide for summer swimming . . . an ice toboggan slide for winter sliding . . ."⁸

Many of the elite gentlemen of St. Paul gathered at the Northwestern Kennel Club's plush club house on the north shore of the lake. The kennel building, located east of the club house, provided accommodations for more than one hundred dogs.⁹

But the year 1893 ushered in a period of hard times that affected the entire country. The causes of the business depression were not local, but values fell off sharply in Minnesota, as elsewhere, and all investments were adversely affected.



"Again the sound of the sheriff's hammer was heard in the land. Hundreds of financial, industrial, and mercantile corporations failed," Castle wrote.

Most of the manufacturing concerns in young North St. Paul succumbed to the Panic of 1893, and those that weathered the storm were severely hampered for years to come. Captain Castle doggedly persisted in advertising his lots and the advantages to be derived from suburban residence until his death on August 16, 1916.

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

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 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.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.