

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

**Spring, 1998**

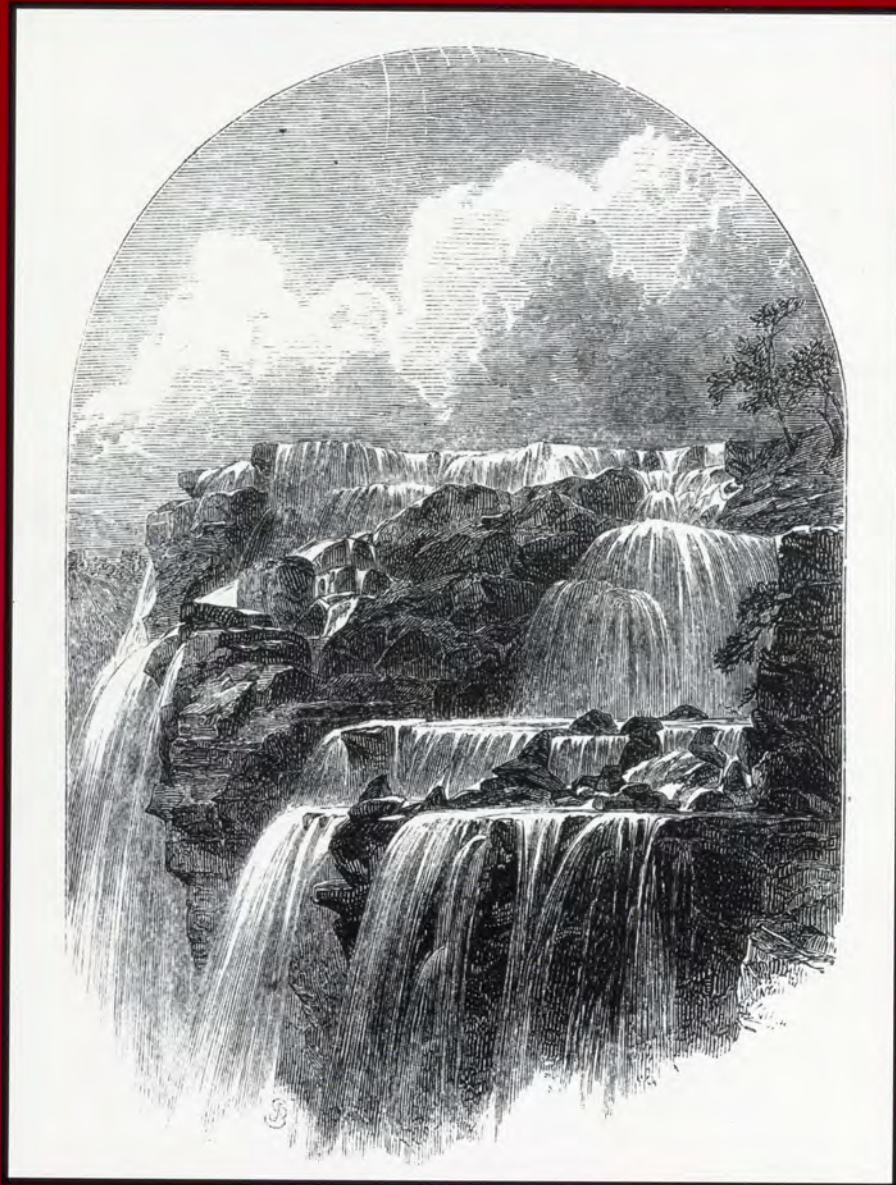
Volume 33, Number 1

Westminster Junction—  
Turn-of-the-Century  
Railroad 'Highway'

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*Stairway to the Abyss—*

*The Diverting Story of Cascade Creek—Page 4*



*Cascade Creek, from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, in 1860. The creek was named after a waterfall that was described in early travel literature about the St. Paul area. This engraving probably depicts the namesake cascade. The waterfall, now dry, can be seen today along the Mississippi bluffs near Colborne Street. See the article beginning on page 4. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**wo themes run through this spring issue of *Ramsey County History*. One theme is engineering; the other is people. Greg Brick's lead article, which tells the story of Cascade Creek, is another in our St. Paul Underground series, which was suggested some years ago by the late Reuel Harmon. Both this article and that by Andrew Schmidt on the local railroad area known as Westminster Junction represent historical research into little-known sources of St. Paul engineering and transportation history

The theme of people plays a secondary role in the stories of Cascade Creek and Westminster Junction, but this theme is foremost in Jean Hanna's account of her mother, Rose Hanna, and her journey from Palestine to St. Paul in the 1950s; in Joe Lepsche's article on the history and people of the Upper Levee; and in Charlotte McKendree Wright Lewis's reminiscence of the Fourth of July Extravaganza on Grand Hill. These writers convey vividly the enduring diversity of the area's people and how their individual stories are today a part of the larger story of St. Paul and Ramsey County.

*John M. Lindley*  
Chair, Editorial Committee

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# The Upper Levee: Memories of Its People And Its Place in St. Paul History

*Joe Lepsche*

St. Paul's Upper Levee, the land stretching along the Mississippi from near the present day Civic Center parking ramp to beyond the High Bridge, has played an important but almost forgotten role in the city's history. St. Paul actually had two levees or steamboat landings, both of them at the foot of clefts in the eighty-foot bluffs that created easy landing places for steamboats and other craft that plied the river. The Lower Landing, now known as Lambert's Landing, lies at the foot of Jackson Street, the Upper Landing at the foot of Chestnut Street.

Past these landings once traveled, in 1763, the English explorer Jonathan Carver, who would spot the cave that still bears his name, and the American army captain Zebulon Pike who in 1805 identified the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers as the best site for a fort that came to be called Fort Snelling.

With the establishment of a small community known first as Pig's Eye downriver from the fort, the first settlers at the Upper Landing or Levee arrived. They were a mix of discharged soldiers and squatters on government land that belonged to Fort Snelling. In July, 1838, Edward Phelan and John Hays, recently mustered out of the army, built a log house at the foot of today's Eagle Street. Though both were Irish-born, they apparently were very different men. Historian J. Fletcher Williams wrote of Phelan that he "was reported to have been immoral, cruel, revengeful, and unscrupulous. By his own boasting, he had led a lawless and criminal life before entering the army." Hays, on the other hand, Williams praised as "an honest, good, courteous and clever old gentleman."

A little more than a year after building their cabin, Hays's body was found in a

creek below Carver's cave, his head bashed in. Phelan was charged with murder and hauled downstream to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, for trial. Released finally for lack of evidence, Phelan returned to the tiny community and made a new claim near the eventual site of Hamm's brewery and on the creek that bears his name. He did not remain long in the community. In 1850 he set out for the California gold fields but reportedly, according to Williams, died a violent death en route.

Another early resident of the Upper Levee neighborhood was the infamous Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant. Frequently in trouble with the command at Fort Snelling for illegal sale of liquor from his saloon at the mouth of Fountain Cave, as well as for "squatting" illegally on the military reservation, Parrant also eventually left the area for Sault Ste. Marie. He, too, died mysteriously en route, but he had bestowed, briefly, his name on the little settlement and more permanently on the lake and marshy area downriver from St. Paul that is the site today of the Pig's Eye Sewage Treatment Plant.

In the early 1850s, entrepreneur James C. Burbank docked his St. Paul wharf boat at the Upper Landing and converted it into a general wholesale, retail, and commission store. He carried everything from a steamboat engine to a harmonica. It was a successful venture, and Burbank went on to bigger things, eventually building the Summit Avenue mansion that, still standing, is known as the Burbank-Livingston-Griggs house.

When Minnesota became a state in 1858, the Upper and Lower Levees combined were among the busiest ports in the country, with more than 1,090 steamboats putting in at their landings. Four years later, however, the outbreak of the Dakota Conflict in western Minnesota

put a damper on steamboat traffic on the Minnesota river. Landings at the Upper Levee grew fewer as river traffic became concentrated at the Lower Landing.

In 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, a moving historical event involved a parade of troops through downtown St. Paul. On June 22, 1861, the First Minnesota Infantry Regiment left Fort Snelling aboard two steamships, the "War Eagle" and the "Northern Belle." Landing at the Upper Levee, the troops, clad in their new uniforms of red flannel shirts, black pantaloons, and black slouch hats, marched up the bluff and along Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) while crowds of townfolk cheered. At Jackson Street they turned toward the Lower Landing where they embarked again for the East. Two years later, the First Minnesota led a famous charge against Confederate forces at Gettysburg in one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Of the 262 men in action that day, only forty-seven survived.

The Upper Levee had begun to mature into a commercial and residential neighborhood. In 1848 a German immigrant named Anthony Yoerg established the first brewery in Minnesota near Eagle Street on the Upper Levee. Yoerg had been born on October 5, 1816, in Gundelfingenn, Bavaria. According to Mrs. William Yoerg, widow of his great great grandson, after emigrating to America Yoerg worked first as a butcher in St. Paul. Among his customers was Governor Alexander Ramsey, whose account books list payments to Yoerg for meats. In 1871 Yoerg moved his brewery across the Mississippi to the West Side. The Yoerg family continued to brew "Yoerg's, the Cave Aged Beer" for three generations, ceasing operations only during Prohibition. Anthony Yoerg died on July 5, 1896. His brewery went out of



*"Little Italy" in 1952, photographed from the High Bridge. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*



*The Upper Levee area at the foot of Chestnut Street as it looked in the 1870s. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

business in 1952.

Another business associated with the Upper Levee also met with success, at least over the short term: Prostitution. St. Paul historian Jim Sazevich has estimated that at one time or another no fewer than twenty-five brothels operated in the Upper Levee area. "Long Kate" and "Dutch Henrietta" (actually Mrs. Henry Charles) were just two of the madams who managed bawdy houses in the years after the Civil War. "Dutch Henrietta" and "Long Kate" operated houses a block apart on Washington Street. Both died at an early age; Kate was only thirty-five when she was shot by a jealous lover; Henrietta died of syphilis at the age of thirty-eight.

Then there was Nina Clifford, whose real name was Hannah Steinbrecker. She was born in 1851 in Chatham, Ontario, to British-Irish farmers. Hannah eventually moved to Michigan where she married Conrad Steinbrecker. After his death in 1886, she moved west to St. Paul and changed her name to Nina Clifford. Two years later she built her house at 147 Washington Street at a cost of \$12,000. Her personal residence was next door at 145 Washington. Another colorful addition to the neighborhood was the old "Bucket of Blood" saloon at 222 Eagle Street.

At the turn-of-the-century, Nina Clifford was considered by many—perhaps tongue-in-cheek, perhaps not—as the third most powerful person in St. Paul after James J. Hill and Archbishop John Ireland. Myths built up around her—a se-

cret tunnel from the Minnesota Club to her house of ill fame, a portrait hanging in the club. Neither is true. The so-called tunnel stemmed from the fertile imagination of the club's president during the early years of the Depression some years after Nina Clifford's death in 1929 in Detroit. The portrait does exist, but it is titled "Miss Pierce" and the artist who painted it died in 1872 when Nina Clifford was twenty-one and was living as Hannah Steinbrecker in Michigan.

Nina Clifford does seem to have been an astute businesswoman and her house was the city's best-known and most notorious. The 1900 census lists her as employing nine prostitutes between the ages of eighteen and thirty-eight, a cook, a housekeeper, three chambermaids, one porter, and a maid. After her death her house was sold for non-payment of taxes. It was demolished in 1937. The Bucket of Blood survived longer. It reopened briefly as the LaBongo Club, but closed for good in 1961. A colorful era of Upper Levee history had come to a close.

\* \* \*

Before the Mancinis, Cossettas, and Marzitellis moved to the Upper Levee neighborhood from southern Italy, the Yoergs and Mandels from Germany, and the Sobczaks, Gamas, and Kaszubas from Poland already had established homes there. By 1880, 40 percent of the Levee's population were Germans, most of whom had emigrated from the Rhineland and southern Germany. They were Catholics, as were the Poles, and the Levee presented an attractive place

for the church to thrive. From its beginning, St. Paul had been a Catholic community, but by the 1880s the city's forty congregations reflected a diversity of faiths and cultures. This caused a split in the Bohemian-Polish parish of St. Stanislaus. In 1881 the Poles left to form the parish of St. Adalbert's.

Seven years later, when Italian immigrants began to arrive, Most Holy Redeemer was built. By the turn-of-the-century, the Upper Levee's four major ethnic groups—Germans, Italians, Poles and Slavs—were served by four different parishes.

Archbishop John Ireland, who more than any other church leader helped the Catholic church flourish in the Upper Midwest, followed the path of realistic compromise. He favored teaching in the mother tongue to win the support of parents and maintain the integrity of the family. Those who went to Assumption church spoke German; those attending St. Adalbert's spoke Polish. It was well into the twentieth century before the use of native languages in church liturgy ended on the Upper Levee.

In the 1880s, as the Italians began to join the Poles, Germans, and Slavs on the Upper Levee, they, too, built modest homes next to the river. The Upper Levee community was an example of a process known as "chain migration." In this process, an older male member of the family, often the father, emigrates to America, lives frugally, sends for the son, the rest of the family follows and, finally, part or all of the village. With the exception of a few families, the Levee's Italians emigrated from the province of Campobasso in the Molise region, and particularly from the villages of Ripabottoni and Casacalenda. An 1889 photograph shows their houses as clusters along a road, not much more than a trail, winding through the small neighborhood. In the background the High Bridge arches over the neighborhood, waiting for it to grow.

The High Bridge was if nothing else, huge. Its span across the river and the flatlands was 2,770 feet; its average height 150 feet. Built in 1889, and overseeing the multitude of changes in the neighborhoods it helped define, it wasn't replaced

until 1984. Gary Spiess and his "Yankee Girl" had sailed under it, as had the late Jacques Cousteau's "Calypso," and barn-stormer Speed Holman flew under it. In 1904 a disastrous tornado ripped through the area, strewing pieces of the bridge all over the Levee.

Some incidents concerning the High Bridge ended tragically. Eleanor Muccio Hughes remembers the drowning of one of the Levee's children. In the summer of 1933, twelve-year-old Perrina Mancini's friends were swimming off a sandbar underneath the bridge. They called to Perrina to join them, and she did. The current carried her into a whirlpool that had formed under the bridge. She went under and never came up.

A small but significant number of people leaped to their deaths from the bridge during the Great Depression of the 1930s. There were four or five such deaths every summer, a problem considered serious enough for the police to assign Patrolman Dominic Fabio to water patrol. His assignment was to keep the Levee youngsters from swimming in the river, and drag the river after every suicide drowning.

Eleanor Hughes has other memories of growing up on the Levee. She loved St. Anthony's Day when, every June 13, the Levee, Italian and non-Italian, celebrated the Feast of St. Anthony of Padua. Shortly after dinner, families met on Mill Street and built a bonfire in the middle of the street. Hymns and Italian songs were sung while bottles of red wine were passed around.

By the early 1900s, and with the Poles, Slavs, and Germans moving to other St. Paul neighborhoods such as the East Side, the Levee had become known as "Little Italy." In the 1930s, Alice Sikels of the International Institute did a population study of the Upper Levee community. She found that of the nearly 100 families then living there, 80 percent were Italian and owned their own homes. The men worked in railroad section gangs, as laborers on city or county works, or at the J. T. McMillan Company and other meat packing plants.

The Muccio's family home on Levee Road had a "Ma and Pa" store in its two front rooms. Grandpa and Grandma

Muccio, who lived upstairs, ran the store for some fifteen years. Mike Sobczak's grandson Raymond lived in his grandfather's house from 1932 to 1939 and remembers that his uncles, Jackie and Bill, who also lived there, worked in meat packing plants. Bill Sobczak would join other neighborhood men in riding the streetcar to Newport every day to work at the Cudahy plant. Jackie worked for Swift's in South St. Paul as a general laborer. Both jobs were hard, with little chance of advancement, but it was the Depression and they were glad to be working.

Living on the Mississippi had its advantages. Every summer from 1925 to 1940 Roy Streckfus brought his steam-powered paddlewheeler, the "Capitol Steamer," north from New Orleans. This was a 200-passenger excursion boat, white with red trim and a whistle. Jeanne Villaume, who attended Visitation Convent High School with Streckfus's daughters, Mary and Lilly, has fond memories of dining and dancing to a live Dixieland jazz band as a guest of the Streckfus sisters. The "Capitol" made three trips daily, including one in the evening, but it didn't always reach its destination. Like so many of those Depression-era summers, the summer of 1933 was one of drought. The Mississippi's water level was so low that in August the "Capitol" had to dock at the Upper Levee and send most of its crew home. The boat tied up next to the Muccio house; an electrical wire was run from the house to the boat and the two Muccio children had the run of the steamboat, deciding who of the neighborhood children would be allowed on board. It was an exciting summer—until it rained, and the "Capitol" could shove off for New Orleans.

The Upper Levee meant different things to different people. To Eleanor Muccio Hughes, it was both comforting and exciting. To Raymond Sobczak it was a place to leave. He remembers sitting around a coal-burning stove on Christmas Eve singing Christmas carols. It was 1937 and his father had died of a heart attack the previous July. The Levee was not a comforting place for Ray. He remembers a hobo "jungle" at the end of

Mill Street where homeless men camped. Raymond, Freddie Narducci, and Ray Muccio would spend summer afternoons listening to the men's stories of the road. Raymond remembers them as kind men, average men who were victims of the Depression. They drank canned heat, begged for food, and then moved on to be replaced by other boxcar-riders.

The Upper Levee of the first half of this century has been gone for many years. By the new millenium, the \$100 million Science Museum of Minnesota will stand where Nina Clifford's bawdy house served St. Paul's upper class and the Bucket of Blood saloon served the working class.

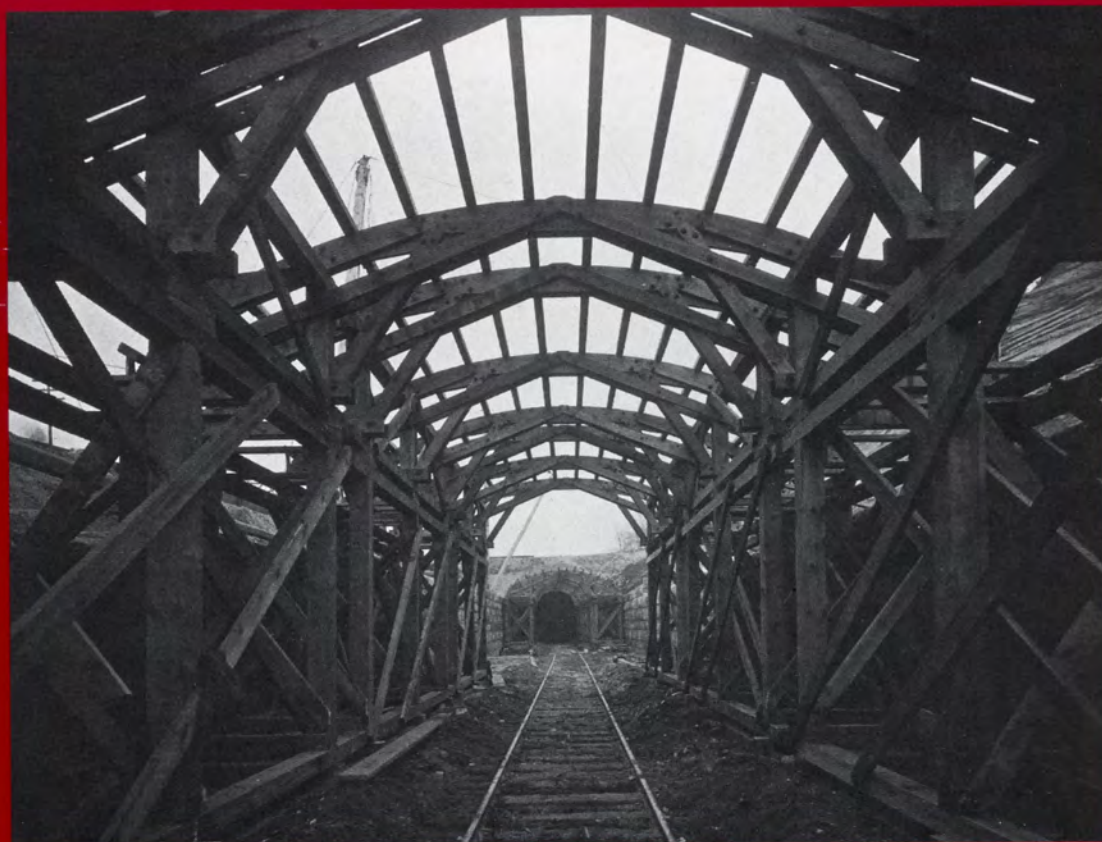
The Northern States Power plant remains a tenuous link to the past. It was built in 1923. Today NSP's High Bridge plant sits on seventy acres of the old Levee.

Some businesses survived by moving. In the late 1800s, Michael Cossetta emigrated to St. Paul from Calabria, Italy. By 1911 he had opened a food market in a tiny building at the corner of Ryan and Chestnut Streets, just above the Levee. As the store flourished, more space was needed. In 1979 Cossetta's moved into its present location at 211 West Seventh Street. But for most, when the neighborhood died, so did its commerce. The St. Paul Milk Company, Mandel's Bar, Vanelli's Grocery, and Lalondes Grocery all closed.

The neighborhood that Edward Phelan, Nina Clifford, and Mike Sobczak called home is gone. Those who once lived on the Upper Levee have moved on, taking their memories and the Levee with them.

Today St. Paul's leaders hope that with the construction of the new Science Museum and comprehensive riverfront revitalization, the Upper Levee will play a new role in the city's civic and cultural life.

*Joe Lepsche wrote this paper, titled "An Architectural and Social Study of St. Paul's Upper Levee—1885–1940," as a 1997 summer session student at St. Cloud State University. It has been adapted for this article.*



*Centers for the flat arch of the Westminster tunnel. This view, taken on April 9, 1886, is looking toward the south. Photo courtesy of the National Railway Historical Society, North Star Chapter. See article beginning on page 9.*

**R.C.H.S.**

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