

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Irvine Park in 1854:
*Its Homes and the People
Who Once Lived There*

See article on page 20

Spring, 2004

Volume 39, Number 1

'High and Dry on a Sandstone Cliff'

St. Paul and the Year of the Chicago and
Rock Island's Great Railroad Excursion

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This postcard dated 1909 shows St. Paul's Lower Landing where the Great Railroad Excursion came ashore 150 years ago. From historian Robert J. Stumm's collection and used with his permission. See articles beginning on page 4 and page 20.

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Volume 39, Number 1

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County Historical Society is celebrating two major events this spring. The first is the sesquicentennial of the Great Railroad Excursion in June of 1854 that heralded the completion of the railroad to the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois, and the opening up of the trans-Mississippi west to settlement. In the lead article in this issue, historian Steve Trimble deftly reports what the historical record tells us about St. Paul in 1854. Then Robert Stumm, an avid collector of historic postcards, takes us on a tour of present-day homes in Irvine Park that have their origins in the era of the Grand Excursion and explains what those buildings tell us about the people who lived in them.

This issue of *Ramsey County History* completes forty years of unbroken publication. Begun in 1964 under the editorship of its founder, Virginia Brainard Kunz, our magazine has won two awards for excellence from the American Association for State and Local History. *Ramsey County History* has also demonstrated that local history, especially when it concerns the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul, can be a rich source of materials for authors, historians, and readers. Given the pleasure and enlightenment that this magazine has provided to all who have read it over the years, we thank the many authors who have contributed the fruits of their research and writing to RCHS. In addition Virginia Kunz deserves special thanks for her sterling editorship of this history magazine for the past forty years.

John Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Irvine Park in 1854: Its Homes and the People Who Once Lived There 150 Years Ago

Robert J. Stumm

The Grand Excursion of 2004 commemorates one of the seminal events in the history of St. Paul. Like any important anniversary, it evokes an ingrained longing to reconnect with the past. This longing is not surprising in a city that takes great pride in its historic architecture. The most tangible link remaining that we have to that long-ago steamboat odyssey, (known in its time as the Great Railroad Excursion), is the remarkable collection of pioneer homes that in 1854 clustered around Irvine Park and are still standing. Others might exist, but the houses in the Irvine Park district are representative of a part of St. Paul that might well have been seen by those excursionists who set foot at the Lower Steamboat Landing a century-and-a-half ago. Carefully preserved, they exist today as the core of the Irvine Park National Historic District, the city's first such historic district, which was created in 1973.

The Irvine Park neighborhood actually dates from 1849, the year Minnesota became a territory when pioneers John Irvine and Henry Rice donated land for parks now named for them. At the time, the fledgling community had two steamboat landings, one at the foot of Jackson Street in what is now Lowertown in downtown St. Paul and known variously as the Lower Landing or Lambert's Landing. The other steamboat landing, upriver at the foot of Chestnut Street near present-day Seven Corners, was known as the Upper Landing. The neighborhood was then called Upper Town and was clustered around its own business and residential district.

This article, arranged as a tour of the Irvine Park neighborhood, describes its early homes, their owners, and their passage through the past 100 years.

The Symonds House

234 Ryan Avenue

The tour begins at the city's oldest sur-

viving structure, the Symonds house. Situated at the eastern edge of the park, this deceptively large frame structure was built in 1850 by Charles Symonds on a site on Ryan, between Chestnut and Eagle streets, and facing the Mississippi River. An enterprising Scottish immigrant skilled in the art of scale-making, Symonds was St. Paul's first ice dealer. He sold this house in 1883 and three decades later it was moved to its present site.

Its style is vernacular with elements of the Federal style. Resting on a stone foundation, this two-story house has a three-bay façade, a gabled roof, an end-wall porch, and an entrance flanked by sidelights. As part of the renaissance of the Irvine Park district, the house was meticulously restored and modernized in the mid-1970s and, like many of the larger houses in this district, recast as a duplex.

The Wright-Pendergast House

223 Walnut Street

Next on a tour of Irvine Park is the Wright-Pendergast House sitting majestically on the bluff overlooking the river. The original version of the house was built in 1851 by Isaac P. Wright, a carpenter who dabbled in local politics. It was at the time an ordinary box-like structure devoid of ornamentation, and Wright's descendants lived there until 1906 when James Joseph Pendergast purchased it. He added a large front with fluted columns that transformed the small house into a modestly-scaled, southern-style mansion. Still owned today by a Pendergast descendant, the house is



Shown on its original setting in this photo from an 1860s panorama, Charles Symond's house (center) then faced the river. All images with this article are from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.

a uniquely hybrid structure that has retained much of its architectural integrity.

Stilwell-Hankey House

310 Sherman Street

Next is the Stilwell-Hankey House with a decidedly different story. Located at the west end of the neighborhood and now the only home on its block, this house was built in 1853 by Hiram Stilwell, a master carpenter. It was originally a petite Italianate residence, but its appearance was drastically altered in 1885 by its second owner, Frank Hankey, who installed a front bay and built a large rear addition. After a succession of owners, it was enlarged again in 1915 and it became, over the passage of time, a rental property. Restored in the 1980s to its present pristine condition, the Stilwell-Hankey house features a beautifully crafted enclosed porch, a low pitched hip roof, and an interior distinguished by its handmade hardwood flooring.

The Matheis House

307 Walnut Street

One block to the east is a pioneer house



The Wright-Prendergast house, a family home for most of its life.

that has been transformed into a grand Victorian lady. Like other 1854 houses still standing in St. Paul, this structure originally was a plain Greek Revival house built in 1853 by Charles Fillmore, the brother of President Millard Fillmore. Its fourth owner, John Matheis, apparently wanting a more contemporary look for his home, added in 1874 an ornate three-story tower and an Italianate-style porch.

By the 1930s the house had fallen prey to the malaise of the surrounding neighborhood and became a distressed property in the guise of an apartment building. Rescued from the abyss in 1980, the house was painstakingly restored as a six-unit condominium, indicating the intrinsic merit of historic preservation.

Eaton-Myler House

53 Irvine Park

Three 1850s houses now are part of the square surrounding Irvine Park. The Eaton-Myler House, a handsome house built in the Federal, style once stood on the corner of Forbes and West Seventh Street. Like so many of St. Paul's handsome, pre-Civil War structures, this house was built

by another one of those skilled craftsmen who settled in the growing community. Alonzo Eaton, a highly re-garded carpenter, built this house in 1853 and it always has been a single family dwelling. From 1882 to 1922, it was owned by James Myler, proprietor of a nearby hotel.

In 1881, local preservationists lobbied intensely to save this landmark. The house was placed on skids and moved half-a-mile to its current location. Remarkably intact and exuding a great deal of charm, the Eaton-Myler house is a compact, two-story brick structure with a low pitched roof surmounted by an unusually tall set of chimneys, lintel window heads and a period-style end porch.

The Simpson-Wood House

32 Irvine Park

Down the street the Simpson-Wood house with its brick façade presents a similar architectural style. It once stood one block north on Sherman Street and was built in 1853 by James Hervey Simpson, a prominent civil engineer. Eleven years later, it was purchased by Charles Wood, a railroad agent, who

build a sizeable addition to the rear of the house. Gradually losing its middle-class status but still scrupulously maintained, the house finally was converted to rental property in the 1920s.

Rescued, thanks to an infusion of government money in 1976, the house was transplanted to its present location and faithfully restored. The house has floor-to-ceiling windows on the first floor, a three-bay façade, crown molding, and an interior chimney.

Rodney Parker House

30 Irvine Park

Next door, the Rodney Parker House is a beautifully crafted example of Greek Revival architecture. A native of New Hampshire and manager of the American House Hotel at Seven Corners, Parker built this home in 1852 and lived there as a renter. However, the house is often associated instead with William R. Marshall who lived there in the late 1870s, Marshall was a pioneer newspaper publisher, a dairy farmer, a banker, and the governor of Minnesota from 1866 to 1870.

At the end of the nineteenth century,



The Eaton-Myler house on the move.

the house was owned by another well-known pioneer, Joseph L. Forepaugh, a wealthy and influential businessman. As the neighborhood slipped into decline, this house became a decaying rental property that eventually was subdivided into a four-plex. After a long period of neglect, in the 1970s it was structurally restored piece-by-piece to its original mint condition. Richly detailed, the Parker House is a two-story white frame structure with a pediment roof, an entrance flanked by sidelights, a two-story porch, and a magnificent walnut staircase.

Humphrey-Willis House

240 Ryan

On a corner lot next to the Symonds



James Hervey Simpson in 1857.

house, the Humphrey-Willis house is something of an oddity. The original portion of this clapboard frame structure was built in 1851 by James K. Humphrey, a lawyer and first clerk of court for Ramsey County. In 1853 Charles L. Willis bought the house and in 1886 built a rather incongruous two-story addition to Humphrey's diminutive one-story house. The house was vacated and sold by the Willis family in 1903 and, rather predictably, it became a ragged-looking rental property. Luckily, it managed to defy the odds, and after years of bandaid repairs, it was restored in the 1970s, a process that included the addition of a new porch. Sitting on a limestone foundation, the house is an unpretentious pioneer landmark featuring a hipped roof, two interior chimneys, and a rectangular transom over the door.

Avery Adams House

454 North Smith Avenue

Lying outside the Irvine Park neighborhood but still within the National Historic District are two small houses that date from 1854. A tiny brick cottage stands just down the street from a modern architectural marvel, the Smith Avenue High Bridge. Designed to serve as the kitchen wing of a house that never was completed, this house was built in 1854 by Avery Ward Adams, a great nephew of President John Quincy Adams. It was occupied by a succession of renters from an early date until 1874 when a one-story addition was



Abigail Langford Marshall, whose husband, William R. Marshall, was governor of Minnesota from 1866 to 1870.

attached to the north façade of the house to make it more liveable. Long relegated to an anonymous existence, it was rediscovered by an architectural historian who restored the interior and is the present owner. The house is simple and unspoiled, a one-and-a-half story Greek Revival composition with a gabled hip roof, stone lintels, and two-bay façade.

282 Harrison Street

This is a mammoth Greek Revival house



Charles L. Willis

built in 1853 by an unidentified Upper Town resident. An elongated composition, the house is the end product of several late nineteenth additions that accommodated more renters. There are gaps in the historic record, but we do know that in the 1880s the upstairs wing was home to an artist's loft. Benefiting from the rebirth of the surrounding neighborhood, this structure was restored and modernized in the 1990s and is now an apartment building featuring a three-bay façade, an entrance flanked by sidelights, and distinctive end gables.

A tour of the historic Irvine Park district would beg an obvious question: How did these pioneer structures that are concentrated in this one district manage to escape the unstoppable advance of urban progress? Central to this issue is that in the nineteenth century, Irvine Park was spared the intrusion of the large-scale commercial development that doomed its one-time

rival, the Lowertown neighborhood, to extinction. Just as important is that, while initially a fashionable address, it never attracted the showplace mansions which would have eliminated, by their sheer size, the neighborhood's pioneer homes.

Robert J. Stumm is a 1970 graduate of the University of Minnesota where he majored in history. A postcard collector, he is the author of A Postcard Journey along the Upper Mississippi and A Postcard Journey back to Old St. Louis at the 1904 World's Fair.

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The Stilwell-Hankey house as it looked about 1905 before remodeling.

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R.C.H.S.
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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
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