

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Essay by Richard Moe:
'Landmarks Reborn:
Channeling Past Into Present'

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Summer, 2001

Volume 36, Number 2

Can History Come Alive?

A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites

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Watercolor "Landmark Center," painted by artist Lou Roman, formerly of St. Paul, in 1988 and reproduced with her permission.
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A Message from the Editorial Board

In 2002 Landmark Center will be 100 years old. Because the Ramsey County Historical Society has been in the forefront of efforts to preserve historic sites in St. Paul and Ramsey County since the 1960s, the Editorial Board decided to honor Landmark Center by devoting this issue to the topic of historic preservation.

Your Society helped to establish St. Paul's Historic Preservation Commission in the 1970s and has been represented on the Commission since its inception. RCHS played a leading role in creating the Irvine Park Historic District and contributed to the work of many to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building, today's Landmark Center. Although the Ramsey County Historical Society was not alone in these efforts, few of us today understand or may remember how difficult it was to make a case for historic preservation in the face of the federal, state, and local governmental programs of the 1960s and '70s that supported a "tear-it-down" approach to urban renewal.

Richard Moe, a Minnesota native and president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has written a brief introduction that gives a national perspective to historic preservation. Moe's message—how far our nation has come since the 1960s in its acceptance of the goals of historic preservation—sets the tone for the four articles that follow, the first three of which were previously published in this magazine. Writing in 1965, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen sets out the local issues of historic preservation as he saw them then and the need for a "sense of urgency" in addressing them. In the next essay, Georgia Ray DeCoster stresses the importance of historic preservation in the revitalization of St. Paul and its economic value to the city. Eileen Michels follows with a specific example of how this might work in a 1972 article about the need to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building. Charles W. Nelson concludes the discussion with an account of his experiences in the early 1970s with the efforts to create the Irvine Park and Historic Summit Hill National Historic Districts.

The Editorial Board hopes that readers of our magazine will enjoy learning more about the work of the many people and organizations that have made historic preservation a vital and guiding part of civic planning in St. Paul and Ramsey County.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Can History Come Alive?

A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites

Elmer L. Andersen, Former Governor of Minnesota

In 1950, our family decided to make a pilgrimage to Nininger, the home of Ignatius Donnelly who has been described as “the most colorful, many sided, and paradoxical personality ever to figure in the state’s history.” I long had been attracted to Donnelly, onetime Minnesota lieutenant governor, representative in Congress, author and promoter. Nininger was the site of the community that Donnelly projected, and in fact, had developed to a considerable degree until the panic of 1857 reduced the dream to a shambles.

We had been told that his home still was standing. My wife and I thought our children should see this home as a background for understanding a chapter and a personality of Minnesota history. We packed a picnic lunch and drove to Hastings and then, by side roads, to what was supposed to be the site. We saw a cornfield and, up a path, a farmhouse. Some few hundred feet beyond the farmhouse we saw the outline of a stately dwelling which we immediately recognized as the Donnelly house.

As we approached we were dismayed to see the dilapidated condition of the house. It was a specter. Windows were knocked out, shutters dangled—what once had been lovely red velvet drapes were in shreds, shades were torn and flapped in the breeze. We stepped on the creaky porch and entered the open door. We saw books strewn on the floor. What once had been a fine old grand piano literally was falling apart from exposure to the elements.

Our joyful pilgrimage wound up as a deeply stirring lesson in what can happen when historic buildings are neglected. We returned to St. Paul and tried to arouse interest in restoring the house but it was much too late. While we were in the process of our futile try, the house was torn down, the rubble was carted away and nothing now remains.

In contrast was an experience of

some years earlier. I was invited to have tea with Laura and Anna Furness at the Ramsey House in St. Paul. The Furness sisters were the granddaughters of Alexander Ramsey, first territorial governor of Minnesota, and they had lived all their lives in the home. This graystone structure with its iron rail fence was much as it had been during the life of Alexander Ramsey.

When I was ushered into the spacious hall and then into the great living room, I stepped over the threshold of time into the past. The furniture, the

decorations, the books, the pictures, the mementos, they all were there—all that one might have imagined would be in the home of an early governor of the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. Clearly, the Furness sisters had a sense of history and were preserving this home for posterity. With their passing, it has been revealed that they made provision for the permanent maintenance and care of this great historic home. One cannot visit that house without having an historical experience to be gained in no other way.

Benjamin Franklin once said, “I wish it were possible to invent a method of embalming drowned persons, in such a manner that they might be recalled to life at any period, however distant; for having a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence, I



The Sibley House at Mendota, the home of fur trader Henry H. Sibley who was Minnesota’s first governor. In a state of decay when this photograph was taken in 1904, the old stone house was still a favorite gathering spot for such groups as the Native Sons of Minnesota who posed for their picture during their first annual picnic. Minnesota Historical Society collections.



Sibley's house after restoration by the Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

should prefer to any ordinary death, the being immersed in a cask of Madeira wine with a few friends, 'til that time. . . ." Although no one has yet solved the problem of projection into the future, it is possible in restored historic buildings to transport ourselves to an earlier time and almost reexperience life as it was then.

We can be thankful we live in a time of great interest in restoration and preservation of historic buildings and sites. Yet, this satisfaction must be qualified by the fact that every day opportunities are being lost as freeways bite their way through historic treasures, as promoters with no sense of history tear down the old to make way for the new, or as well-meaning people indulge in restorations or adaptations without the gift of taste or the discipline of historical integrity.

Walter Muir Whitehill, librarian of the Boston Athenaeum, has recalled that buildings in America always have

been imperiled by those who covet the land on which they stand. In 1808 when the first church of Boston, during the pastorate of Ralph Waldo Emerson's father, sold its "old brick" meeting house at 1713 Washington Street to move to Chauncy Place, the following lamentation appeared in the *Independent Chronicle*:

"If a proposition had been made in London, Paris or Amsterdam to the society owning the First Church of either of these respectable cities, to sell on a principle of speculation their ancient edifice, it would have been spurned with indignation—the trifling profit anticipated by the sale would never have led the proprietors to have razed a house of worship so well repaired as the Old Brick to gratify the rapacity of a few men who trouble society both in Church and State. After the demolition of the Old Brick, there is scarcely a vestige of antiquity in this town. We hope 'Old South' will re-

main in its original ground. Even the British troops, though they attacked other places of worship, never dared meddle with the Old Brick, for Chauncy was there."

"Nevertheless," Whitehill reports, "the Old Brick came down and 68 years later the Old South of 1729, a few blocks down Washington Street, came within an ace of doing so. That congregation, unable to resist \$400,000 offered them, also sold their meeting house for demolition. This time there was a clamor too great to withstand. The Boston Tea Party had been brewed in the Old South Meeting House. The anniversary orations commemorating the Boston Massacre were delivered there. Poets and orators mounted the stump to such purpose that the Old South Association in Boston was formed to preserve the building as an historic monument. This was the first instance in Boston and, indeed, the first of such magnitude in the United States, where respect for the historical and architectural heritage of the city triumphed over a consideration of profit, expediency, laziness and vulgar convenience."

It was a South Carolina woman, Ann P. Cunningham, who saved Mount Vernon. According to Professor Thomas J. Wertenbaker, professor emeritus in history at Princeton University, Miss Cunningham heard that the property had been offered for sale to the United States government and then to the state of Virginia and both had declined to buy. Recognizing that the home and tomb of Washington might be lost to the nation, she organized the Mount Vernon Ladies Association which raised \$200,000 by public subscription, secured the property and has held it in trust for the American people for nearly a century. The vigilance of the ladies is undiminished as they currently are fighting to preserve the view by resisting wrongful use of the opposite bank of the Potomac River. It is an interesting sidelight that one of the Furness sisters was on the board of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association for many years.

We all owe much to the individuals,

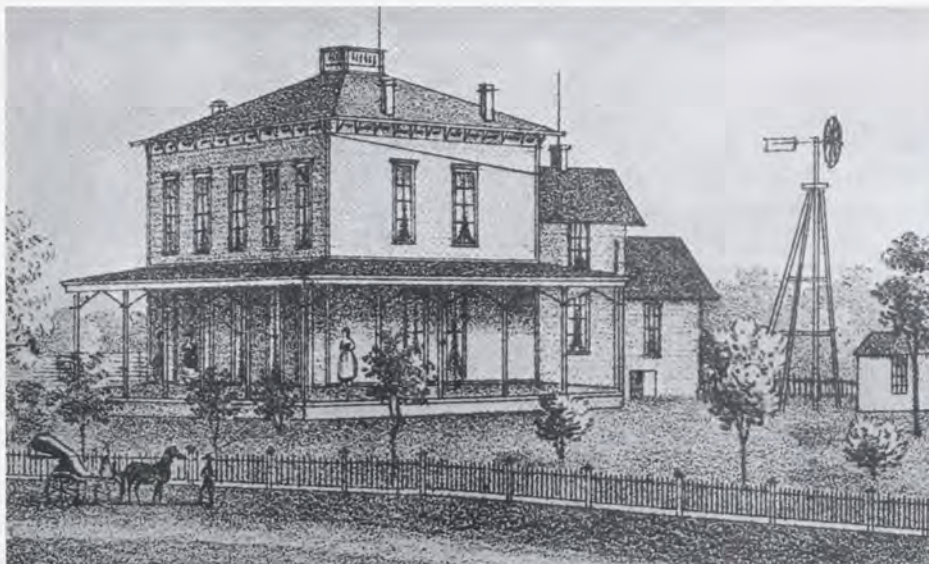
the organizations, the governmental agencies that have preserved the Starbuck and Coffin Houses on Main Street, Nantucket; the McIntire houses and stables of Chestnut Street in Salem; Jefferson's Monticello; the river plantations on the James; Beacon Hill in Boston; the gardens and mansions of Charleston, and a great many more that could be mentioned.

Thoreau's Walden Pond would be a public swimming resort were it not for an embattled group of Concord patriots who fought the Massachusetts Supreme Court. The Chalmette National Historical Park, the battlefield where Jackson stood off the British at New Orleans, would be a sewage treatment plant save for the efforts of a citizens' group.

The most impressive and comprehensive restoration is that of Colonial Williamsburg. Here is demonstrated the true purpose of historical preservation: to recapture the life of the people of other days. Nothing can be more vivid than watching the pewterer carrying on his trade under the sign of the golden ball, the cordwainer repairing shoes, the baker withdrawing loaves of fragrant bread from the great ovens and the housewives busy with household tasks.

The study of history must shed light on the spirit that motivates man, for this is the element of greatness in every society. How better can history be understood than in the preserved or restored buildings in which people lived and worked? Here, indeed, history comes alive and quickens the sensitivity of every visitor. Colonial Williamsburg is more than a rich experience. It probably has been the single greatest stimulant to historical preservation and interpretation in our nation.

One of the recent great victories and significant revelations of public support for historic preservation appeared in the Connecticut industrial and commuting town of Norwalk. *Time Magazine* of November 23, 1962, reported the story. In 1867 a Civil War profiteer, LeGrand Lockwood, spent one-and-a-half million dollars to build a 60-room chateau that is perhaps the



Preservation that failed. Ignatius Donnelly's house at Nininger as it appeared in the 1874 Andreas Atlas. Ramsey County Historical Society photo from the Atlas.



The Donnelly house in 1937. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

finest example of Victorian architectural extravagance still standing. The Panic of 1873 ruined Lockwood, and in 1876 he sold the mansion to Manhattan soft drink magnate Charles D. Mathews. It remained in the family until 1938 when title passed to the city of Norwalk. For years the city used it for offices but when time came to build a new office building, the council did agree to submit to the voters the question of restoring and preserving the Mathews mansion as an historic site. The vote was eight to six in favor of the proposal.

Carroll Calkins, who organized the citizens' committee, commented: "What happened on election day showed that



Donnelly's study, with his portrait above the desk. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

Americans have a far livelier sense of obligation to the past, and to posterity, than many have realized."

How recently the national interest in preservation has gained momentum is indicated by the fact that it was not until 1947 that the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States were formed. We also can be grateful for the many committees for preservation of historical buildings that local



Foundations of the buildings at Fort Ridgely as they looked in this 1959 National Park Service photograph.



Alexander Ramsey's "mansion house," as he called it, in the Irvine Park Historic District in St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

chapters of the American Institute of Architects have established, and the great many local organizations supporting particular projects.

Some of the reasons for this surging interest can be found in the fact that we are becoming an older nation. There is a desire by more Americans to get

closer to their roots and traditions. Museums and historical societies are orienting their activities to popular education. Vacationing Americans are discovering, indeed as are all Americans, that history adds understanding and enjoyment to their lives.

In the June, 1960, issue of *Minnesota*

History, Russell Fridley, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, reviews the Minnesota record in preserving historic sites. It was in 1864 that Edward D. Neill made the first study of Fort Snelling as a historic site. He urged its preservation and expressed the fear that within a generation not one stone would be left on another.

It was during the 1885 to 1915 period that the most extensive and successful preservation took place in our own state, carried on by the now defunct Minnesota Valley Historical Society. Great public interest was aroused in important sites connected with the Dakota War of 1862. Monuments were erected, markers and tablets were placed, two memorial parks were established, and interest created that continues today. And although that society is gone, there are county historical societies doing great work in that part of the state.

In the late 19th century, J. V. Brower and the Minnesota Historical Society successfully urged the legislature to save an extensive wilderness area around Lake Itasca, the source of the Mississippi River, and to establish Minnesota's first state park in 1891. It amazes me how recently we have become aware of the importance of our natural heritage, the importance of our historical heritage, and have taken steps to preserve them. Mendota, once the headquarters of the American Fur Company and home of many notables, including Minnesota's first state governor, Henry H. Sibley, is one complete community which has been preserved in the state. Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution have been dedicated and persistent in their efforts in this work.

The National Park Service has done a fine piece of work in preserving the Pipestone Quarry and restoring the fort at Grand Portage on the north shore of Lake Superior. Much more needs to be done in Minnesota to accelerate public interest in preservation and to tell the state's history effectively.

Two important recent developments are most encouraging. In 1958 the Minnesota Historical Society ac-

cepted the gift of the Le Duc house at Hastings and now has several other properties of great interest and significance, including Kathio State Park, one-time capital of the Dakota nation.

Then there is the beautiful place along the Mississippi River near Elk River where Oliver H. Kelley went about his farm chores feeling that something ought to be done to organize the farmers. He felt they were being victimized and that they were helpless in the face of great economic power. Offered a job in Washington he seized the opportunity and, while there, formed the National Grange, the first farm organization in the country. Later he returned to his farm at Elk River to guide the destiny of this new organization.

We are indebted to the Grange for preserving the Kelley house and making it possible for the Minnesota Historical Society to acquire it. Now it can be preserved for all time as one of the significant agricultural historic sites in the country.

The second development is the recognition of historic site acquisition and development as a proper part of the long-range natural resources program adopted by the 1963 legislature. This provides financial support, and encourages sound planning. Minnesota is the first state to give historic preservation this important status.

Legislation is needed in Minnesota, as in other states, to protect the public interest in historic sites in private ownership or about to be destroyed by highway expansion or other public activity. We take so for granted the exercise of the public interest by condemning property to build a road, to preserve the public health, or to do many other things in the public sector. But we haven't yet become equally conscious of the similarly compelling reason why the public interest in a cultural and historic heritage should be considered above anyone's personal interest in property. The interest of all parties must, of course, be considered, but our laws should recognize the need for preservation of important historic sites.



Brigadier General William G. Le Duc's house in Hastings, another Minnesota home preserved as a historic site. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

We must not permit any more of our heritage to be plundered and destroyed.

More attention needs to be given to the importance of adequate research and concern for detail in our restoration activities. As Professor Wertebaker has said, there are only too many instances in which there has been a minimum of research and a surplus of imagination. The donor does not know what the original was like, the builder does not care, the public accepts anything. So, some so-called restorations are unlike anything that ever existed in any place or at any time and remain through the decades as monuments of misinformation. Historians, legislators, planners, architects, and many other specifically qualified individuals, all working together, are excellent insurance against inferior work in Minnesota.

Most of all we need a sense of urgency. The solution to some pressing public needs, when deferred, is not totally lost. A highway not built this year can be built next year. An important historic site available today will be irretrievably gone tomorrow.

My hope is that Minnesota will preserve and restore Fort Snelling and other valuable sites, interpret them through re-creation of the life of their day so that, as Conrad Wirth has said, a visitor to one of these places may "stop time at a great moment of history and look with increased understanding into the past." And I may add, face the future with pride refreshed, confidence strengthened and spirit uplifted through an experience with history that has come alive.

Elmer L. Andersen was Minnesota's 30th governor, serving from 1961 to 1963. A former member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society and of the Minnesota Historical Society, he long has been interested in both history and politics. He was elected to the Minnesota State Senate in 1949 and served until 1958. A 1932 graduate of the University of Minnesota, he received the University's Outstanding Achievement Award in 1959. He is the retired chairman of the board of the H. B. Fuller Company, St. Paul.



The restored Irvine Park with its gazebo, as it looked about 1989. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 21.

R.C.H.S.

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