

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

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

Page 4

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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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 36, Number 2

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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*

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## *St Paul's Stately Old Buildings* —Going, Going, Almost Gone

*Georgia Ray DeCoster*

The funeral of Sir Winston Churchill, televised in London, gave millions of Americans an opportunity to view a scene for which there are scant and fast-disappearing parallels in the United States today. What they saw were historic streets, lined with stately old buildings still in active use, in the heart of London through which the funeral procession passed.

Most of that scene's old buildings, venerable and well-maintained as they are, do not qualify as landmarks, shrines or monuments as do Westminster Abbey, Number 10 Downing Street or Christopher Wren's famous 17th century St. Paul's Cathedral. If they stood in an American city, they would be marked for certain demolition as "inefficient" or examples of "bad taste."

Yet, London's accumulation of old, middle-aged and youngish buildings, representing the city's architectural and historic development over several hundred years, as much as do her world-famous landmarks, accounts for the city's distinctive personality. Equally important, this mixture of all kinds and ages of buildings in the heart of London has provided diversity of use, the key to keeping a city's center economically strong as its perimeter grows.

Undoubtedly new buildings gradually are replacing worn-out structures in London today, just as they have throughout the past, but it is clear that urban renewal, in its cataclysmic American form, has not struck at the center of London as it has struck cities all across the United States in recent years.

American cities are threatened by a steady dilution of historic character and architectural personality over the years ahead. Instead, they could be enriched by this character and this personality if clear-



*The Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center, viewed from across Rice Park about 1905. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

ance programs were more carefully selective. In the legitimate attempt to revitalize old urban centers, public renewal programs are sweeping too heavy-handedly through downtown areas, removing too many economically useful buildings and destroying the diversity that nurtures economic health.

More and more Americans are concerned by a host of related urban problems: our diminishing heritage of architectural history, the growing tendency of all Amer-

ican cities to look alike and the resulting loss of each city's continuity with its distinctive past, the increasing frequency of poor architectural exchanges (good old buildings being replaced by mediocre new ones), and the loss of downtown's magnetism as old landmarks topple.

Outstanding progress has been made in historic preservation in the United States recently; many individual national shrines such as Mount Vernon, isolated architectural landmarks such as Louis

Sullivan's auditorium in Chicago, and historic communities such as Williamsburg and the Vieux Carré in New Orleans have been spared from demolition. In addition, renewal programs in old city neighborhoods today stress conservation and rehabilitation rather than total redevelopment, a trend applauded by historic preservationists.

Nevertheless, no means to stem the casual destruction every year of hundreds of well-designed, sound and economically healthy older buildings in downtown areas has been found. A newsmagazine's article early this year stated: "Despite encouraging trends, public pressure to preserve remains diffuse and sporadic while the commercial pressure to destroy remains focused and continual."

"In Manhattan," the article pointed out, "builders have relentlessly razed every single seventeenth-century building and all but eight eighteenth-century buildings."<sup>1</sup>

A report called "Architecture Worth Saving in Onondaga County," recently compiled by the New York State Council on the Arts, put special emphasis on commercial buildings in downtown areas since "these areas are undergoing the greatest disruption and change."<sup>2</sup> Preservation of old buildings often is defended and on the basis of their historic or architectural merits alone. These considerations, however, may be matters of individual opinions, and thus not only suspect but open to debate.

Therefore, it is time to establish once and for all the economic merits of the case for preserving older buildings where they are paying their way, providing needed space and returning tax revenues. In fact, historic and architectural arguments should be saved for noteworthy landmarks that may never fully pay their way and may have to be subsidized. Today, almost everybody agrees that landmarks must be preserved but it is not generally recognized that many of the more ordinary older structures have a useful role to play in revitalized urban centers of America.

Thoughtful writers are beginning to point out that compelling economic reasons do exist for saving a good portion of

older structures, if downtown areas are to remain healthy and vigorous.

"Flourishing diversity anywhere in a city means the mingling of high-yield, middling-yield, low-yield and no-yield enterprises," contends Jane Jacobs, a critic of "cataclysmic" renewal programs and author of the best-selling book, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. The essential message of Mrs. Jacobs' book is that diversity in land use, in rents, in ages of buildings, in population groups and so on is the key to vitality of city districts and not sameness.

In discussing the need for older buildings, she points out that, "Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean not museum-piece old buildings, not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation—although these make fine ingredients—but also a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown old buildings. If a city area has only new buildings, the enterprises that can exist there are automatically limited to those

that can support the high costs of new construction. . . . Over the years there is, therefore [in healthy city districts] constantly a mixture of buildings of many ages and types. This is, of course, a dynamic process, with what was once new in the mixture eventually becoming what is old in the mixture."<sup>3</sup>

It is no secret that in one downtown renewal project after another across the country small businesses have been forced out of the redeveloped loop areas, probably permanently, because of inability to pay for space in new buildings and the growing lack of suitable and less expensive space in older buildings in the same areas. Typical of these small businesses are neighborhood bars, bookstores, antique dealers, foreign restaurants, studios, galleries and specialty shops and businesses of all kinds.

Carroll L. V. Meeks, professor of architectural history at Yale University, advances other economic arguments for retention of old buildings. He mentions "the high cost of demolition, the impossibility of providing so many cubic feet of sound . . . and the far greater cost



Map showing location of seven buildings in downtown St. Paul, all products of the city's building boom of the 1880s and 1890s. Although preservationists struggled to save the New York Life Insurance Company building and the Guardian building, both were razed. However, the McColl, Endicott, and St. Paul buildings have survived. Map drawn for Ramsey County History by Edward J. Lettermann.

of the present day rates of providing so many cubic feet of sound, durable, useful space elsewhere."<sup>4</sup>

Another architectural historian, Dr. Theodore M. Brown of the University of Louisville, writes that, "Obviously there is not enough capital in the most monumental renewal program to even start to eliminate all existing architecture in order to begin over again. The use of existing physical elements is now recognized as a practical necessity and as a cultural asset. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

A common economic argument for historic preservation was restated in concrete terms by Senator Ralph Yarborough, who observes that "luring just 25 tourists a day to a town, says the U. S. Department of Commerce, is equal in income to establishing an industry with a \$100,000 payroll." He goes on to say that "a part of our national character and strength will be forever lost if we bury our past in our plans and projects for the future."<sup>6</sup>

Special attention should be directed to several high-quality older buildings in downtown St. Paul that are threatened by demolition, abandonment or gradual attrition. These buildings are the Guardian Building (formerly the Germania Life Insurance Company Building), the New York Building, the Federal Courts Building, the St. Paul Building, the McColl Building (formerly the First Merchants Bank), and the Pioneer and Endicott buildings.

If prevailing attitudes continue, all seven buildings are in eventual danger of being torn down but of immediate concern are the first three. Of these, the Guardian and New York buildings are slated for clearance as part of the Capital Center project, a 12-block redevelopment project just getting underway in the heart of St. Paul's old financial and retail district. The future of a third, the Federal Courts Building (the old post office), a monumental city landmark on Rice Park, is clouded by the certain loss of its tenants who will move into a new \$11,500,000 Federal Building to be built in the loop. All seven of these works of the Victorian era were constructed in the decade of St. Paul's biggest building boom, between 1888 and 1898. This was a lavish period



*The New York Building, showing a distinctly "Hanseatic" or northern Germany influence in its design. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.*

in which New York, Boston and Chicago architects often were commissioned to design St. Paul's most ambitious buildings, and James J. Hill imported Swiss and Italian artisans to work on his \$200,000 Summit Avenue mansion.

The seven buildings in question all were designed by leading architects and constructed with the finest materials and workmanship available. All attracted much favorable comment, locally and nationally, at the time they went up. Typical are the following comments about

the Guardian Building (the Germania Building) from an architectural magazine of the period:

"The Germania Life Insurance Company, of New York . . . has just erected in St. Paul one of the finest, most solid and costliest office edifices in the world. . . "The walls of the basement are about five feet thick and twenty-three feet deep down to a boulder formation. On top of this formation is placed a bed of concrete, composed of small stones and Portland cement fourteen feet broad and three feet



*The Guardian Building, once known as the Germania Building. The statue of "Germania," shown in this pre-World War I photograph, was torn down during the anti-German frenzy of the war years. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.*

thick, upon which rest large footings—stones battering on an angle of sixty degrees to the thickness of the walls. This formation is built strong enough that at any time the building can be carried to the height of twelve or fourteen stories. The superstructure is built to the top with granite and Portage Entry stone. This building is strictly fireproof, with iron beam construction and tile floor arches. The entrance halls are finished in Italian marble and all stairs, flooring and casings are of the same material. All doors are made of fire-proof material and the eleva-

tors are finished in old brass. Every room is provided with a vault and fireplace, and heated and ventilated by steam in the most approved manner, and one feature of this building is that every room has outside light and air.

"The entrance on Fourth Street is flanked on each side with large polished granite columns supporting an arch richly decorated. This arch extends into the second story. The entrance on Minnesota Street is flanked on each side with clustered columns, supporting arches richly carved. These columns are red pol-

ished granite throughout, and rest upon large blocks of red granite seven feet high, which extend around the two street fronts. . . .

"The building may be described as palatial, without the least exaggeration. In fact there are few royal palaces in Europe that could be compared with it for solidity and beauty of construction. . . . This superb architectural monument . . . adorn[s] one of our principal business streets."<sup>7</sup>

In the same magazine, the praises of the New York Building are sung by Conde Hamlin, then managing editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and later business manager of the *New York Tribune*.

"New York Life," he wrote, "has built [in St. Paul] a towering structure whose divided front bespeaks a Hanseatic model. Here, too, money has been used with lavish hand and the rich coloring of the entrance, lined with marble and mottled pillars from the quarries of Italy, is thoroughly in keeping with a mahogany woodwork which add to the finish of one of the finest buildings of the west."<sup>8</sup>

All recognition of the quality of these Victorian buildings, however, does not date from the period of their construction. As recently as 1960 the New York Building was singled out for its architectural significance by the National Park Service and included in that agency's Historic American Buildings Survey.

The Federal Courts Building also has attracted favorable comment in recent years from two men nationally prominent in the fields of city planning and architecture. Victor Gruen of Victor Gruen Associates and Pietro Belluschi, dean of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, upon independent visits to St. Paul within the last decade, have called attention to the monumental significance of this old civic building and its fortunate location on the square across from the St. Paul Public Library.

It is undeniable, however, that mid-20th century taste in architecture generally calls for far sleeker lines, rather than the ornate detail of these late 19th century buildings. Consequently, such Victorian structures, in St. Paul as elsewhere, nowadays have fallen into "the trough of disregard," as one author puts

it. Buildings 50 to 75 years old, he says, are too old to be thought "modern" and too young to be thought "picturesque."<sup>9</sup>

This shifting of architectural taste, with an accompanying lack of maintenance, dooms fine old buildings to the wrecking ball far more often than does their supposed obsolescence.

In an article written to defend the preservation of the Richmond County Courthouse, built at the height of the High Victorian Gothic period in Virginia, Carroll Meeks expresses a far-sighted point of view. Reminding his readers of the "mutability of taste," Meeks emphasizes the fact that Thomas Jefferson intensely disliked the architecture of Williamsburg and that Lillian Russell would not be thought beautiful today.

"The fact is," says Meeks, "High Victorian Gothic is a style as characteristic of the nineteenth-century English-speaking world as the works of Dickens or Tennyson. . . . The crux of the matter is that the generation of the eighties and nineties of the last century had a character, vigor and self-confidence lacking today in people, and that there was something admirable about it for all its crudities."

Meeks goes on to quote E. B. White in *One Man's Meat*, that what is one generation's "architectural gem" becomes the next generation's "crude, bulbous work, repugnant in detail, awkwardly handled and grossly executed," and very likely will become the following generation's "magnificent expression of self-confidence, pride and ambition robustly handled with remarkable vigor and invention."

It is unlikely that architectural qualifications alone could save these threatened buildings. Of more importance to their combined fate is the gathering of evidence that they could be economically useful in a revitalized downtown St. Paul.

From information made available by those managing the buildings today, it can be concluded that all three structures are in comparatively good condition with the Guardian Building in somewhat better shape than the other two. All are at capacity or near-capacity occupancy, and all offer space at approximately half the rate it is estimated will be charged in new buildings going up in the same area.

While the New York Building is 85 per cent occupied, the Guardian and the Federal buildings are 100 per cent occupied. Rental fees for space in the New York Building are \$2.25 to \$3 per square foot, and at the Guardian Building they are \$2.50 to \$3.50. This compares with \$4 to \$6 for space in the First National Bank Building and \$5 in the new Degree of Honor Building. Anticipated rents in the new office buildings to go up in the Capital Center project will be \$5.50 to \$6.50. (No rent is charged to government agencies currently occupying the Federal Courts Building, but if commercial tenants were to replace them, rents comparable to those of the Guardian and New York buildings undoubtedly would be charged.)

The Guardian Building is fully air-conditioned, its exterior recently has been sandblasted and it has had extensive remodeling and a new lobby in the last five years.

As for the Federal building, considerable sums ("more than \$40,000") have been spent on it in the last eight years by the General Services Administration of the federal government for new wiring, a new roof and paint and plaster repairs. It is a fire-resistant building, has all 123 rooms in use today and has a sub-basement air raid shelter completely ready to accommodate 8,000 to 9,000 people. Twenty-five per cent of its windows and roof drains need repair.

These seem to be compelling reasons why the demolition of useful buildings should be avoided.

As a justification for the total block or cataclysmic approach in currently accepted urban renewal planning, it often is stated that although certain older buildings do have architectural merit or "flavor," their dated appearance would clash with the new buildings around them. Therefore they must be sacrificed. One wonders what magic wand, unavailable until now, will render the "new" buildings anything but "old" themselves in a few years.

Those who fight cataclysmic urban renewal in America today run the risk of being thought sentimental and ill-informed. Among their severest critics often are architects who think that his-

toric preservationists confuse the architectural significance of ordinary 19th century buildings with that of monuments like the Parthenon or Chartres Cathedral. Such critics fail to understand that historic preservationists, taking a long-range, broad-minded point of view, carry their respect for high-quality architecture of all periods beyond landmarks.

Doing battle on the historic preservation front in America today is like fighting a many-headed monster that grows a new head in place of each one that is cut off. Some of the "heads" historic preservationists must lop off include:

—A belief that anything new, no matter what its quality, equals "progress."

—Lack of knowledge of and pride in local history.

—Poor maintenance standards and poor remodeling schemes for older buildings.

—Efforts of city planners and highway engineers for the past 25 years to satisfy the needs of automobile owners for driving and parking space, bringing about the loss of many fine old buildings.

—Unfamiliarity with successful past solutions to urban problems, with the result that most modern American cities are more expensive and less convenient places to live in than most modern European cities which are much older.

—Increasing availability of public money for renewal programs that make it possible to clear out whole sections of built-up areas at once, possibly reducing tax revenues for several years as well as diminishing the historic character of cities.

In their zeal to save the best of the past, however, historic preservationists would do well to remember what the problem is *not*. It is not "renewal" itself, for renewal is a constructive force without which St. Paul, as well as other American cities, still would be a collection of dugouts and shanties, strung out along dirt roads. Without renewal, the city would not have magnificent landmarks such as the Cathedral of St. Paul, and highway improvements such as Shepard Road along the Mississippi River.

Urban renewal, then, is only a new name for the historic process by which cities upgrade their land use and buildings. Whether it is handled as a publicly-



*The Italian marble stairs, flooring, and casings in the entrance hall of the Guardian Building. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

financed program or on a private basis, it must be guided so that the best results are achieved, economically, architecturally and functionally. One way is to make sure that clearance is selective, removing poor quality buildings and replacing them with better quality buildings.

As Minouru Yamasaki, an architect of renewal and designer of the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company's new building in the Gateway district of Minneapolis, said when visiting the area in April of 1963: "All civilizations of the past have expressed themselves in their architecture . . . we in America haven't reflected ourselves very well. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

*Georgia Ray (DeCoster) Lindeke (Mrs. Albert W. Lindeke, Jr.) is a 1948 graduate of Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, with a bachelors degree in art history. She was a member of the St. Paul City Planning Board (1960-1969); founder and chairman of the board's historic sites committee (1960-1964); and recipient of awards from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the American Association for State and Local History, the Minnesota Society of Architects and the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce for leadership in historic preservation activities.*

## End Notes

1. *Newsweek*, January 25, 1965.
2. *New York Times*, March 14, 1964.
3. *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, by Jane Jacobs.
4. "Character, Ugliness, Beauty and Time," by Carroll Meeks from *Arts in Virginia*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1964, reprinted in *Historic Preservation*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1962.
5. "Report on the Henderson County Courthouse, Kentucky," by Theodore M. Brown, reprinted in *Historic Preservation*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1962.
6. "Our National Shrines," by Senator Ralph Yarborough, reprinted in *Coronet* magazine.
7. *Northwest Builder*, 1890.
8. *Northwest Builder*, July 1890.
9. From a speech by Professor Patrick Horsbrugh, University of Nebraska.
10. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Thursday, April 25, 1963.





*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.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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