

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

Summer, 2001

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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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# *Preservation Before the Preservationists:* The Beginnings of Preservation in St. Paul

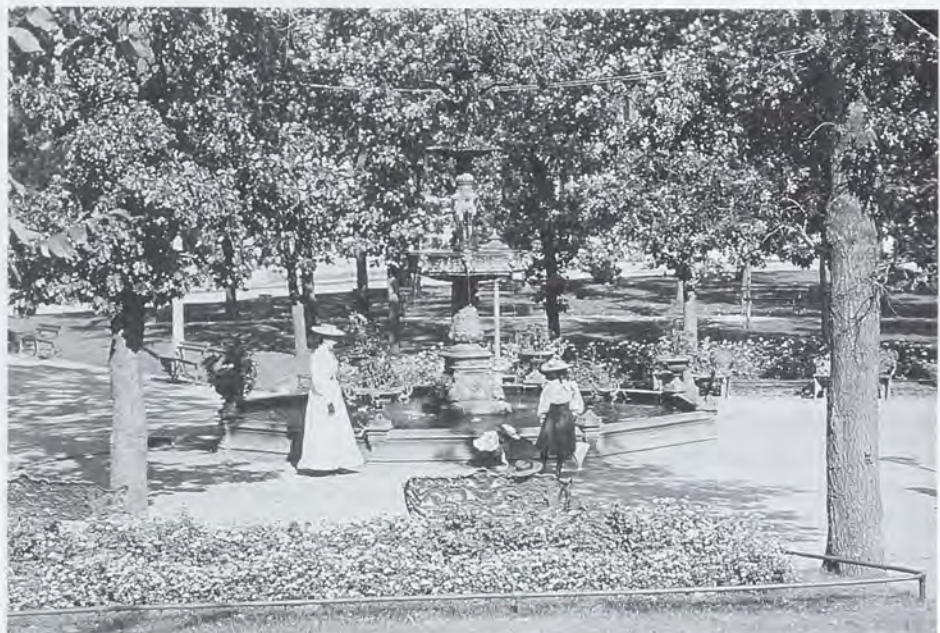
*Charles W. Nelson*

*EDITOR'S NOTE:* Following is the transcript of a talk which author Charles Nelson gave on May 16, 2001, at Landmark Center, St. Paul, in observation of National Historic Preservation Week. Nelson is historical architect for the State Historic Preservation Office of the Minnesota Historical Society.

I am often asked about the criteria by which historic properties are judged. I always respond that the National Register sets an age limit of fifty years as the threshold for such judgment. Fifty years is an easy number to remember, and it seems a bit arbitrary, but I think I have discovered the underlying justification. Fifty years is approximately two generations in the span of time. It is a period during which the critic may be disassociated from intimate connection with a particular work. It reminds me of a common occurrence in which we tend to revere the lives and times of our grandparents, but tend to rebel against those of our parents. These times are too much a part of our own lives for us to be objective in our opinions. It would then appear that a criterion for establishing credibility is that those with first person association with a building or event are long dead and cannot tip the balance of justice in their favor.

Time also tends to sanctify oral history. I am asked now to recall the events and attitudes that prevailed nearly thirty years ago. I am honored to be considered a credible witness. And, as such, I consider it a privilege to tell you about the "old days" of preservation before the preservationists in the historic hill area of St. Paul.

The story actually begins a bit before the magic fifty-year mark. The preservation of Summit Avenue began as the preservation of a social status rather than the preservation of various piles of brownstone and brick, each tending to outdo the other in grandeur and exuber-



*Irvine Park as it looked around 1895.*

ance. What the avenue "stood for" was in itself a chronicle of the history of St. Paul and of Minnesota. The area of influence emanating from the avenue extended well beyond it to the surrounding neighborhoods. As generations were replaced by others, their legacy remained, to be built upon by those who followed, passing down to us what F. Scott Fitzgerald so basely condemned as a "museum of American architectural failures."

There was no question that Fitzgerald's "museum" held something special. Its monuments were the creations of Minnesota's most prominent architects and represented the wealth and aspira-

tions of Minnesota's empire builders. The sheer size of these monuments made them impractical for modern families of the post-war years. The proliferation of throwaway architecture decried the woes of maintaining the aging behemoths. And the decline of the inner city neighborhoods enhanced the lure of the commuter suburbs. As a consequence, neighborhoods like Irvine Park and Ramsey Hill found themselves as prime candidates for urban renewal panacea programs. In an attempt to usher in the new programs, neighborhoods were given planning designations and numbers. Acronyms like PUD [Planned Urban Development] and



*Before restoration: the house J. Jay Knox and his brother Henry built in 1860. After 1910, the house was covered with stucco. Photos are from the Minnesota Historical Society and the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

PRD [Planned Residential Development] became commonplace as drawings of sprawling complexes of cookie-cutter houses filled the walls of the offices of the Housing and Redevelopment Authority. The incentive for such developments was sweetened by what appeared to be a limitless flow of government dollars. Words like "demolition" and "redevelopment" were commonplace; words like "rehabilitation" and God forbid, "restoration," when uttered at all, were mere whispers.

The proving ground for the effort which would lead to the creation of the Historic Hill District was Irvine Park, a community which preceded Summit Avenue as the home of St. Paul's early "movers and shakers." It was from here that many aspired to and reached the Summit, not only the namesake avenue, but of the prestige becoming the empire builders.

One morning, in the fall of 1971 Virginia Kunz, director of the Ramsey County Historical Society, walked into my office with the announcement that "They're tearing down Irvine Park." Although Irvine Park had been identified as an historic area in the Minnesota Historic Districts Act of 1971, it was a legislative recognition with little clout. As a community of derelict houses, the neighborhood had become a haven for transients. The grand dowager of the area was the Alexander Ramsey house on Exchange



*After restoration: the Knox house at what is now 26 Irvine Park.*

Street, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and listed on the National Register in 1969. [In those days, the National Register was little more than a "who's who" list of the monuments to prominent dead rich men.]

After much deliberation, it was determined to pursue nomination of the Irvine Park Historic District to the National Register. As I recollect, it was a battle all the way. It was a battle to convince the HRA that renewal monies could go into rehabilitation and relocation of historic buildings rather than replacement. It was a battle to keep vigilance to thwart the midnight devastation of a neighborhood arsonist whose activities resulted in the loss of more than a half dozen buildings. In meeting the criteria for historic designation, the various properties in the district were extensively researched and documented. As a result, Irvine Park was

listed on the National Register on November 27, 1973.

The Minnesota Historical Society was fortunate at the time to employ a recent graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, Tom Lutz. Lutz was a diehard historian, spending evenings and weekends in addition to his 40-hour week immersed in history. His fondness was for the development of the early settlements along the Mississippi River, especially St. Paul. It was Lutz who tackled the initial research of Irvine Park, tracing the genealogy of its houses to the founders of Minnesota Territory. He would not tolerate the urban renewal schemes and attended countless neighborhood meetings, at some of which he was bodily carried from the room during his impassioned and unyielding stance for preservation.

Through Lutz's persuasion, what probably was the first architects' SWAT team



*Before restoration: the Humphrey-Willis house, built by lawyer James K. Humphrey in 1851.*

was formed in 1972. Charter members of this elite force were Bill Scott, Foster Dunwiddie, Brooks Cavin, and myself. It was our duty to walk through selected buildings, give an assessment as to their preservation potential, and provide guidance to prospective urban pioneers who would be offered these "derelicts" for as little as a dollar.

Up on Ramsey Hill, a grassroots effort had already made significant headway to introduce the word "preservation" into the planning vocabulary. Lessons learned in Irvine Park proved beneficial in calculating a strategy for the next historic district. Little did I know when I met with Ted Lentz and Dick Reed [and later, Alma Joseph] of Old Town Restoration, a non-profit neighborhood corporation formed in 1967 by local residents to buy, restore, and resell old homes in danger of demolition, that the proposed Historic Hill District would turn out to be the most complex district ever tackled. The early date of the formation of Old Town Restoration is indicative of the foresight and dedication of this neighborhood in setting the preservation wheels rolling. A formal system for the recognition and preservation of historic properties had only been established a year before as a result of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Old Town Restoration was instrumental in convincing the state legislature in 1973 to designate the Hill area of St. Paul as a State Historic District. This designation was the impetus to pursue further designation of the area on the National Register of Historic Places as "one of the



*After restoration: the Humphrey-Willis house at 240 Ryan. A romantic story from St. Paul's pioneer past involves this house. Humphrey was engaged briefly to Harriet Bishop and built the house for her as their honeymoon cottage. The two did not marry, however, and in 1853 Humphrey sold the house to Charles L. Willis.*

most important living historical inner-city residential neighborhoods in the nation." The Minnesota State Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts provided partial funding. In addition, another neighborhood group, called the Ramsey Hill Association, committed to supporting the formation of this new district.

What was naively envisioned as a simple strip of historic mansions along Summit Avenue from the Cathedral to the Burbank-Livingston-Griggs House at the top of Ramsey Hill soon grew into a multi-component district of more than 450 individual properties. The survey began in late 1973. Also, another player was introduced into the game: the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The proposed right of way for Interstate 35E was to follow Pleasant Avenue, impacting the Cass Gilbert Church at the foot of Ramsey Hill, the James J. Hill greenhouse ruins [nicknamed the "Cyclopean Wall" for its massive stonework], and the mouth of the Selby Tunnel. On the north, I-94 had recently leveled the Rondo neighborhood and now several blocks were being cleared for a multi-family housing project to the west of Western Avenue and north of Marshall.

It was also at this time I had the fortune to meet the late Ernest Sandeen, a history professor at Macalester College. Dr. Sandeen and Dr. David Lanegran had

recently formed a program called the Living History Museum, at Macalester, which in 1974 undertook an intensive survey of all properties fronting Summit Avenue from the Cathedral to the Mississippi River. [Sandeen's book on Historic Summit Avenue, produced as a result of this survey and published in 1978, is still one of the most sought-after resources on the neighborhood.] Dr. Sandeen invited me to speak to his class about historic preservation. I could not refuse and suggested that Summit Avenue was an ideal candidate for recognition. It came as no surprise to me when Dr. Sandeen stated that he had already thought of that idea and that he had devised a project for his class to research the history of the avenue and its eminent residents. Over the next two years, Old Town Restoration, Macalester College, and the Minnesota Historical Society spent countless hours in research, at neighborhood meetings, and on the streets of the area.

Other meetings were held by neighborhood groups to explore private and public attitudes, especially when it came to dealing with the HRA. Concerns extended far beyond preservation of historic houses to land use for parks and recreation, disposition of vacant parcels, compatible commercial uses, half-way houses, crime prevention, traffic, and services including schools, churches,

libraries, and facilities for the elderly. Of course, design concerns for infill construction, landscape, and rehabilitation were emphasized at every occasion.

Although it appeared that there was a groundswell of support for the concept of a Historic Hill District, the determination of its boundaries was no easy chore. When it appeared that a logical boundary was evident, further research opened other avenues. The district grew from a single avenue beyond the Cathedral Hill area, to Selby and Dale, to Crocus Hill, and even seemed to extend to encompass Woodland Park north of Selby.

To the south, the proposed construction boundaries of 35E seemed easily supportable, until two vocal property owners who opposed the inclusion of their properties on Ramsey Hill retained the services of attorneys to introduce a fly that remained in the ointment for more than a year.

A major step forward occurred in June of 1974. Councilman Dennis Hozza presented an ordinance to the St. Paul City Council establishing the Historic Hill District Board. The ordinance also suggested the future creation of the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission that would succeed the Hill District Board in overseeing the district. The duties of the Board included review of demolition and building permits, and the creation of Standards of Review which would take into consideration economic viability, compatibility of alterations to properties, architectural design and significance, impact on natural features, and definition of the overall character and well-being of the Historic Hill District.

A landmark year for the Hill District was 1975. Old Town Restoration produced an historical overview of the district, design guidelines and an architectural style guide in the form of a superb

publication titled *Building the Future from Our Past*. With the Ramsey Hill Association, it hosted the second national Back to the City Conference. Informational meetings at the Cathedral drew capacity crowds to the Hall of Angels. The St. Paul Planning Department issued a publication featuring the architectural heritage of St. Paul's neighborhoods. And, the final draft of the National Register nomination for the district was nearing completion, as boundary issues had been resolved. We could finally see the light at the end of the proverbial Selby Tunnel.

When 1976 came to a close, we had celebrated the nation's Bicentennial, the Historic Hill District could claim its position on the National Register of Historic Places, the City of St. Paul finally had its Heritage Preservation Commission, and the rest is history. I could go on for pages listing all of those who labored so diligently to make preservation a family word again, but for this short commentary, they will have to be satisfied that *I know that they know* so well who they are, and that they are well deserving of the pride that so rightfully is theirs.

I would like to end with a statement from one of the Historic Hill's most stalwart advocates, Lucy Fricke:

But recently young people are "discovering" the tired old neighborhood and in what appears to be a quixotic reversal of the laws of physics, what went down, is going up. Whether it is, as some cynics claim, a pocket-book decision (more space for less money in today's inflated real estate market) or an emotional, aesthetic decision (appreciation for the quality of construction and unique detail) or a social decision (to live in a mixed, diverse community), dozens of families are moving into houses just one step ahead of the wrecking ball. Their energy and commitment is astonishing. The hours and hours of messy hard work add up to a gruesome total. But the rewards are significant and satisfying: a sense of shared accomplishments; friendship and admiration for the older residents who have lived through the worst and refused to move; and the experience of recreating a neighborhood that works together.



*The German Presbyterian Church designed by Cass Gilbert at the foot of Ramsey Hill. Ramsey County Historical Society photograph.*



*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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