

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Lynching in St. Paul?
Almost—in 1895, an Era
of ‘Vigilante Justice’

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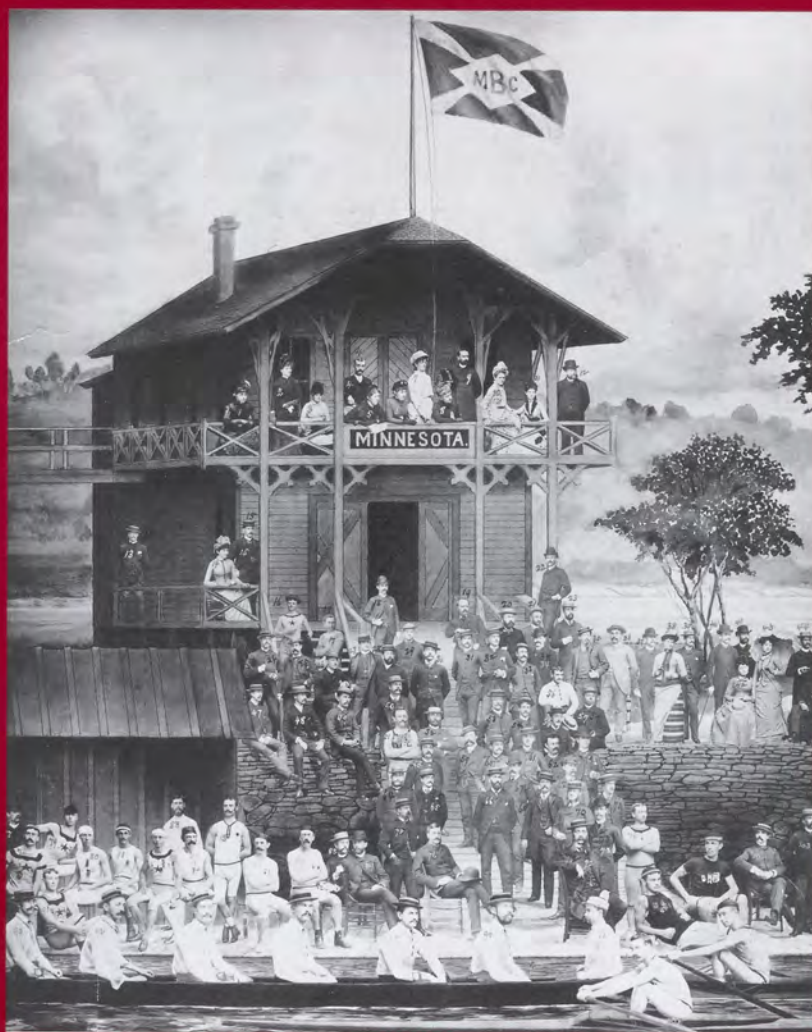
Summer, 2002

Volume 37, Number 2

Life on the Mississippi:

Singles, Doubles and Pairs, Fours and Quads—
The Minnesota Boat Club’s 132 Years

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The home of the Minnesota Boat Club, circa 1880s. This photograph by C. A. Zimmerman “was one of the most remarkable pieces of photography ever accomplished,” according to an article in a 1903 issue of *The Razoo*, a Boat Club publication, adding that it “and has been commented upon by photographers all over the country. . . . In order to get it, Mr. Zimmerman had to keep a sketch of the boat-house in his mind while he took photographs of the members and the ladies. These he afterward arranged in groups so that they appear in the completed picture to be all posing together.” From the Minnesota Historical Society archives. See article on the Minnesota Boat Club’s history beginning on page 4.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Given this summer's 90-degree temperatures, Jim Miller's history of the Minnesota Boat Club provides a refreshing glimpse of an early St. Paul athletic enterprise. Founded in 1870 by a number of the city's leading men, rowing at the MBC was strictly for amateurs. It also afforded an opportunity to attend social events on the Club's yearly calendar. In addition, Miller's research greatly increases our understanding of the value of Raspberry Island, where the MBC is located, to the city's cultural heritage and riverfront beauty.

In contrast, Paul Nelson's account of the near lynching of an African American, Houston Osborne, in St. Paul in 1895 is tense and suspenseful. Nelson not only explains what happened in 1895, he also shares the steps through which he went in uncovering this shameful and forgotten piece of the city's history. Unlike the Houston Osborne saga, the existence of the Selby Tunnel is well known today. What's less well known is its origin and how its construction changed the neighborhood around it. With words and photos, Virginia Brainard Kunz provides a brief history of this St. Paul landmark. "Growing Up in St. Paul," about boxer Johnny Salvator, is written by an avid promoter of St. Paul boxing history, Paul R. Gold. After Minnesota legalized boxing in 1915, St. Paul became the second largest center for training and supporting boxers in the United States. Johnny Salvator was one of the many St. Paul boxers who contributed to the city's athletic prominence in the first third of the twentieth century.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Which One is Houston Osborne?

Research Fails to Provide the Answer

Paul D. Nelson

In my research for my biography of Fredrick McGhee, I found among the Minnesota Historical Society collections some photos of Stillwater Prison inmates from more than a century ago. Because these were fragile glassplate negatives, not prints, they are available only to MHS staff. In the notebook that describes the collection, the photos are listed not by name or even individual inmate numbers, only inmate numbers within a range.

I hoped to find photographs of some of McGhee's clients, so I found their inmate numbers in Stillwater Prison registers and asked the MHS staff to check the negatives themselves to see if photos of these particular men were among them. Two of the prisoners I hoped to find were Philip Rice, McGhee's first murder client, and Houston Osborne.



Which is which? Osborne (on the left?) or Rice, in these photos of Stillwater inmates from the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society.



THE DEFENDANT.

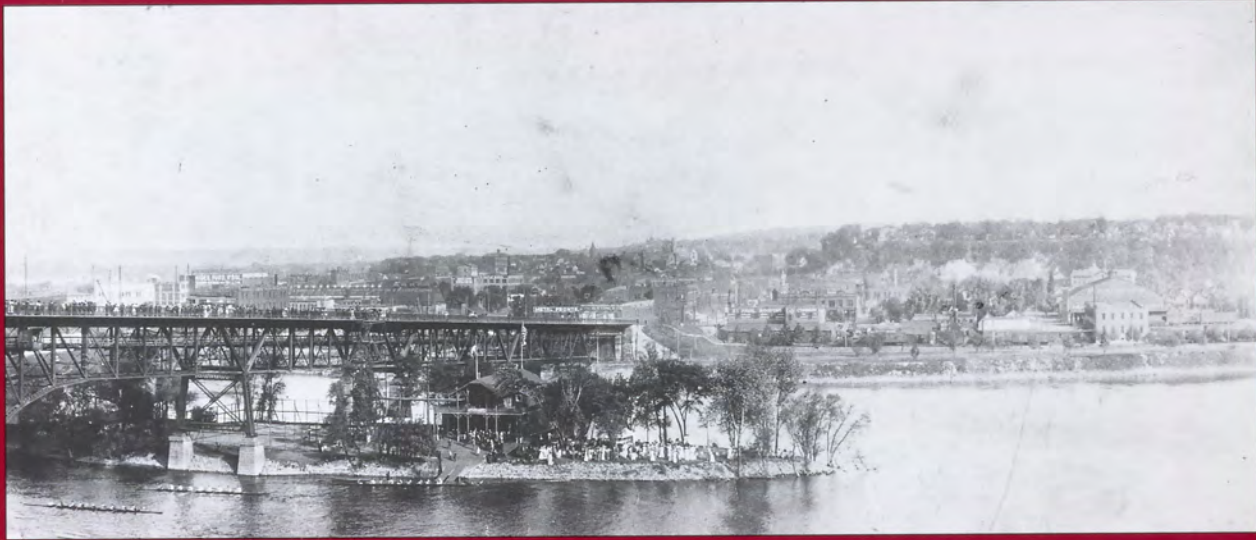
Courtroom sketch of Philip Rice from the June 21, 1894 issue of the *St. Paul Globe*, Minnesota Historical Society.

In due time I learned that several of the photos I sought did indeed exist, among them those of both Rice and Osborne. I was thrilled, about Osborne especially because I thought his image would be great for the book, but what I found among the prints surprised and perplexed me. The man identified as Houston Osborne was white; the man identified as Philip Rice, black. The inmate numbers in the photos matched the correct prison records; everything fit except the faces.

I had read all of the newspaper accounts of both men's crimes and legal proceedings, and there could be no doubt: Rice was white, Osborne black. What's more, a newspaper sketch of Rice very much resembles the man identified in the prison photo as Osborne. The descriptions of Osborne were less detailed: "He looks younger than twenty-

eight, and has a perfectly smooth face with regular features. His color is that of a mulatto . . ." wrote the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, but they fit the "Rice" photo too.

MHS Press photo editor Deborah Swanson and I never could figure out what had happened; how could the inmate numbers be correct but the photographs wrong? For this reason we did not use the Houston Osborne photo in the book. I am convinced, however, that the photo identified as Houston Osborne shows the face of Philip Rice. I am less sure that the other picture shows Osborne, but I think it likely. By some odd coincidence the photos—or, more precisely, the inmate numbers—of the two men were switched. The dark young face looking at you from the pages of this magazine probably belonged to the unfortunate Houston Osborne.



The Minnesota Boat Club on Raspberry Island below the Wabash Street bridge in 1908. Across the river: St. Paul's west side. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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