

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

Winter, 1995

Volume 29, Number 4

The Boys from  
the Adams  
School

Page 16

*St. Paul Underground—  
What Happened to Fountain Cave?—Page 4*



*Fountain Cave, pencil and watercolor by unknown artist, about 1850. This is the oldest known graphic depiction of a Minnesota cave. Much of the story of Fountain Cave could have been reconstructed merely from the names inscribed on its walls. Interspersed with the graffiti are the arm-length nesting holes dug by swallows. The natural ledge in the cave wall allowed explorers to stay above the water. Is the squared timber, seen straddling Fountain Creek in the foreground, a remnant of one of the cabins destroyed in 1840 by soldiers from Fort Snelling? Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

*Executive Director*  
Priscilla Farnham  
*Editor*  
Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Joanne A. Englund  
*Chairman of the Board*  
John M. Lindley  
*President*  
Judge Margaret M. Marrinan  
*First Vice President*  
Laurie Zenner  
*Second Vice President*  
Richard A. Wilhoit  
*Secretary*  
James Russell  
*Treasurer*

Arthur Baumeister, Jr., Alexandra Bjorklund,  
Andrew Boss, Thomas Boyd, Mark Eisen-  
schenk, John Harens, Marshall Hatfield, Liz  
Johnson, Richard Long, Laurie Murphy,  
Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Thomond O'Brien,  
Robert Olsen, Vicenta Scarlett, Evangeline  
Schroeder, Jane Thiele, Anne Cowie Wilson.

### EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chairman; Thomas H.  
Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Laurie M.  
Murphy, Dr. Thomas B. Mega.

### HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Coleman Bloomfield,  
Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William  
Finney, Clarence Frame, Otis Godfrey, Jr.,  
Ronald Hachey, Reuel D. Harmon, Robert S.  
Hess, Ronald M. Hubbs, Fred T. Lanners, Jr.,  
Don Larson, George Latimer, Lewis Lehr,  
David Marsden, Robert B. Mirick, Samuel  
H. Morgan, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome  
Plunkett, Peter S. Popovich, James Reagan,  
Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

### RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Hal Norgard, chairman  
Commissioner Susan Haigh  
Commissioner John Finley  
Commissioner Rafael Ortega  
Commissioner Warren Schaber  
Commissioner Brenda Thomas  
Commissioner Richard Wedell

Terry Schutten, manager, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quar-  
terly by the Ramsey County Historical Soci-  
ety, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth  
Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in  
U.S.A. Copyright, 1995, Ramsey County  
Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-  
9758. All rights reserved. No part of this pub-  
lication may be reprinted or otherwise repro-  
duced without written permission from the  
publisher. The Society assumes no responsi-  
bility for statements made by contributors.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 29, Number 4

Winter, 1995

## CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** St. Paul Underground—  
What Happened to Fountain Cave?  
*Greg Brick*
- 16** The Obscure Plaque on the Wall—  
Who Were the Boys from the Adams School?  
*Paul D. Nelson*
- 21** Money—And How They Fared When There  
Wasn't Any Out on Minnesota's Frontier  
*Ronald M. Hubbs*
- 23** Growing Up in St. Paul  
'Grandfather Was a Crusty Gentleman'  
*Reuel D. Harmon*
- 25** Books, Etc.
- 27** What's Historic About This Site?  
B. P. Durkee's French Empire House

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.

## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**his issue of *Ramsey County History* celebrates the memory of Reuel D. Harmon, a supporter of history in Ramsey County. He had long encouraged the Editorial Board to publish something on St. Paul's caves and tunnels. Our lead article here explores Fountain Cave's history. Written by geologist Greg Brick, the article includes research never previously published and is the first in a projected series on "St. Paul Underground". The issue also contains Reuel Harmon's memoir of growing up in St. Paul and a brief history of his grandfather's house in our "Historic Sites" feature. Reuel Harmon made no secret of his abiding interest in history. This issue is a way of expressing our gratitude for his support and encouragement of the practice of history.

*John M. Lindley,*  
chairman, Editorial Board

# What's Historic About This Site?

## *B. P. Durkee's French Empire House Survivor of an Elegant West Side Neighborhood*

*Editor's Note: This is the fourteenth in a series of articles on Ramsey County's historic sites.*

Sometime during the 1870s, St. Paul merchant B. P. Durkee built this French Empire style house at 58 Prospect Terrace (now West Prospect Boulevard) on the city's West Side. One of the oldest houses still standing on the West Side, it is a survivor of an elegant upper class neighborhood where local merchants and manufacturers erected large, ornate houses that overlooked the Mississippi River, confidently expecting that theirs would become one of St. Paul's best addresses.

According to the Historic Sites Survey of Ramsey County, conducted by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, Durkee's house predates 1883, the year building permits were first issued in St. Paul. A subpermit was issued in 1889.

B. P. Durkee was a member of the mercantile firm of Durkee and Emerson in 1888 and 1889. The house was occupied from 1880 to 1923 by Reuel A. Durkee, also a member of the Durkee and Emerson firm and grandfather of Reuel D. Harmon, who was born there in 1904 (see *Growing Up in St. Paul*, beginning on page 23).

Although much altered, the house retains several of its original French Empire features, including a two-story square entrance tower topped by a bracketed cornice and a Mansard roof. Slightly projecting gabled dormers with bracketed pediments are surmounted by decorative cast iron cresting. Behind the house is an old one-and-a-half story outbuilding with clapboard siding and a



*B. P. Durkee's house in 1980. Ramsey County Historical Society photo.*

gable roof. Once a carriage house, it now serves as a garage.

The West Side is one of St. Paul's oldest neighborhoods. Although it lies across the Mississippi south of downtown St. Paul, it derives its name from its location on the west bank of the river. From 1851 to 1874 the West Side was technically part of Dakota County. Its first settlers were French Canadian, Irish and German immigrants, many of whom farmed there. Ferry boats and the woodframe Wabasha Bridge (then known as the St. Paul Bridge), which opened in 1859, linked the West Side to what was then the tiny settlement of St. Paul. A year earlier the West Side community had been granted a charter and had become the city of West St. Paul. The charter was revoked four years later, however, due primarily to finan-

cial problems.

In 1874 the West Side was annexed by St. Paul and became part of Ramsey County. With the building of the High Bridge in the 1880s, the area began to flourish, in part because, while the Wabasha Street Bridge was a toll bridge, the High Bridge was not.

Historically, the West Side has been divided into two very distinct neighborhoods. The Upper West Side on top of the bluffs has remained a residential district. The Lower West Side, known as the Flats, is the northeast portion of the district along the river. It was originally a working class and industrial neighborhood and frequently devastated by flooding of the Mississippi.

It is now the site of Riverview Industrial Park.



*The old Adams School, 615 S. Chatsworth Street, around 1900. For the stories of three young men from the school, and their experiences during World War I, see Paul D. Nelson's article beginning on page 16. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Paul, MN  
Permit #3989