

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Euphoria Dimmed:
X-Rays' First Victim

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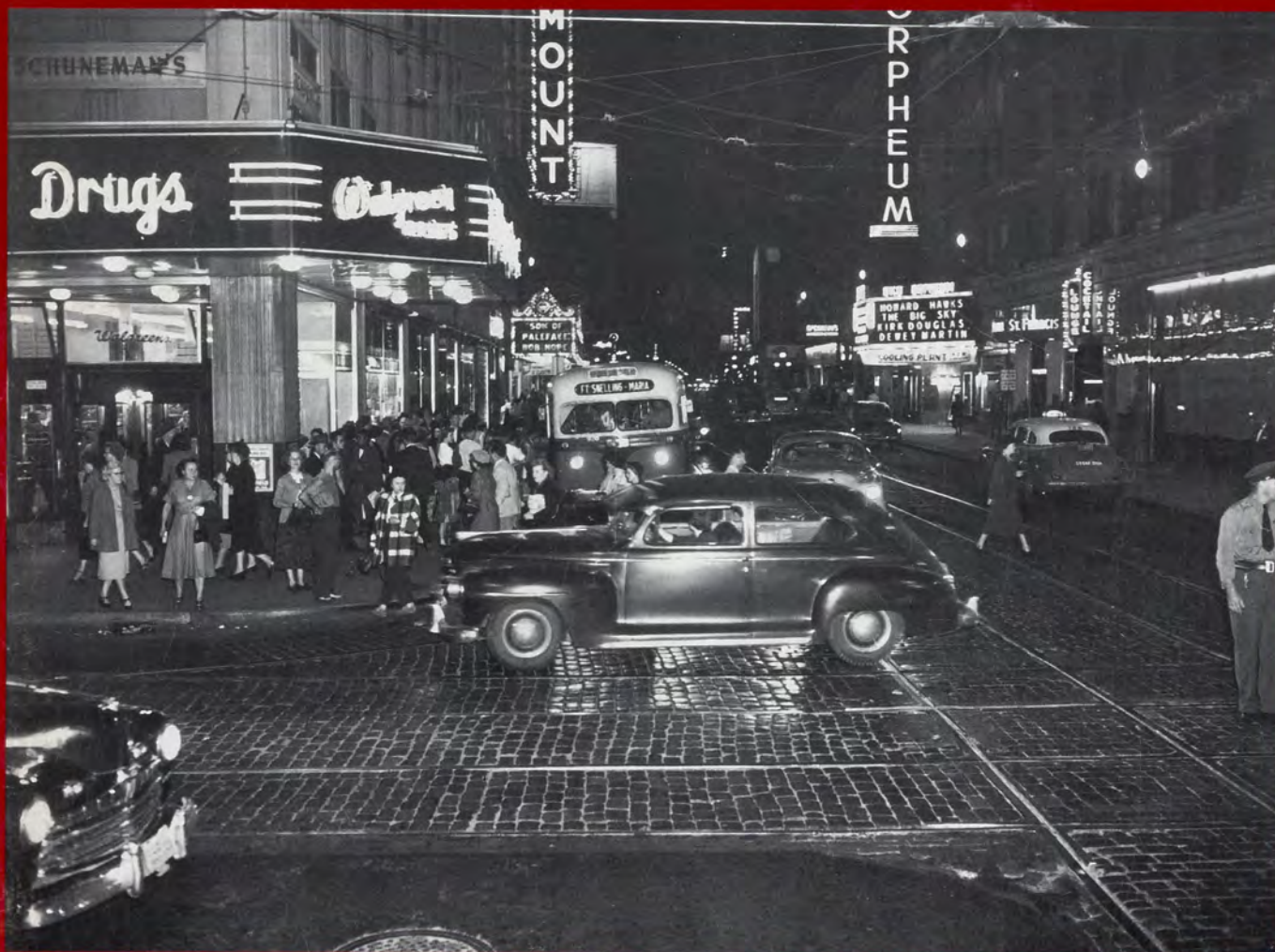
Winter, 1997

Volume 31, Number 4

Rats, Politicians, Librarians

Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel

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A brightly lighted downtown St. Paul was photographed on the night of September 4, 1952. This view looks west along Seventh Street from Wabasha to St. Peter. The St. Frances is on the right. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Toward the end of 1996, Ronald M. Hubbs, a long-time supporter of history in Ramsey County, died. Ron not only had contributed a number of fine articles that were published over the years in *Ramsey County History*, but he also was unfailingly enthusiastic in his support for the Ramsey County Historical Society's publication program. The Society dedicates this issue to his memory and to the great value he placed on history. In it we feature a building—the St. Francis Hotel—and a location—Seventh Place—that many residents and visitors know but little understand in terms of their historical significance to St. Paul. A companion piece tells the story of the Saint Paul Building.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

What's Historic About This Site?

The Saint Paul Building And Its 108-Year History

Deanne Zibell Weber

Once towering over its neighbors at the corner of Fifth and Wabasha in downtown St. Paul, the elegant Saint Paul Building, built in 1889, is now nearly hidden amidst the modern office buildings nearby. Yet a closer look at the structure's fascinating history not only reveals the unique personalities behind its various professional offices and retail establishments, but also provides a vivid snapshot of the changes that have transformed the downtown commercial district. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 and recently renovated to its nineteenth-century appearance, the Saint Paul Building stands as the only surviving multi-story brownstone in downtown St. Paul and remains one of the best commercial examples of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture in the Twin Cities.¹

The Saint Paul Building was constructed during the late 1880s, an exciting and prosperous time in St. Paul. Waves of European immigrants had come to settle in the new transportation hub of the Upper Midwest, courtesy of James J. Hill's Great Northern railway. This rapidly growing population sparked an economic expansion and fueled an unprecedented building boom in the Twin Cities.

The Germania Bank, which had been chartered in 1884 to serve some of these new immigrants, was not immune to the construction fever. In September, 1887, its directors approved the purchase of property at the southwest corner of Wabasha and Fifth streets.² This prime location was near the heart of the rapidly developing central retailing and banking business district. Former Minnesota governor and U.S. senator Alexander Ramsey, then president of

the bank, appointed a three-man building committee to oversee a design competition for the new building, and evaluate the preliminary architectural plans.³

"No less than eleven architects are represented in the competition," reported the *St. Paul & Minneapolis Pioneer Press* on April 29, 1888.⁴ The illustrious list of contributors featured some of the city's best young architects, including recent emigres Emil Ulrici, known for his fine houses; Albert Zschocke, who would go on to design the "splendid" Hotel Barteau in 1889; and J. Walter Stevens, who already had produced several elegant residences on prestigious Summit Avenue, utilitarian warehouses in the Lowertown area of St. Paul, and institutional structures such as the People's Church (now gone) and the Goodsell Observatory at Carleton College in Northfield.⁵

The task of selecting a single design was not an easy one. "There is great variety, both in the style of architecture and in the estimated cost," the newspaper noted, "and unless the directors have already decided about the sort of building they want, they will have a high old time trying to reach a conclusion now."⁶ At a special board meeting on May 9, 1888, the building committee reported that although none of the plans was "exactly what we want . . . We believe the plan submitted by J. Walter Stevens to be the best, and the architect is of such known reputation as to warrant us in having full confidence in his supervision of, and expediting the construction of the building."⁷

Stevens's reputation was not built on any exceptional skill he had as a designer; instead, it was due largely to the work of the draftsmen employed in his busy and talented office.⁸ Though

Stevens is credited as the architect of record, he was undoubtedly assisted by the "legendary" Harvey Ellis, a gifted artist and draftsman whom Stevens employed sporadically in the late 1880s. Ellis was known locally for the exquisite pen-and-ink and charcoal drawings he produced for some of the best-known architects in the Twin Cities, including Mould & McNicol and LeRoy Buffington. His artistry was so brilliant, in fact, that some architectural historians have credited the Saint Paul Building (among others) wholly to Ellis.⁹

The final product of their collaborative effort was an eight-story brownstone "skyscraper," one of four tall office buildings constructed in St. Paul in 1889.¹⁰ Though buildings more than four stories in height had quickly become the norm in Chicago and New York after the implementation of technological developments in fireproof construction and elevator safety, these lofty structures only began to proliferate in the Twin Cities after 1880. The Saint Paul Building also followed the popular and common style for all types of "modern" construction at this time, Romanesque revival. It was also known as Richardsonian Romanesque, after its early proponent, Henry Hobson Richardson.

Many of the style's characteristic elements have been incorporated into the Saint Paul Building's facade.¹¹ The massive masonry courses of reddish-brown sandstone, used here to give the building a weighty, permanent appearance, easily and quickly identify this as a Richardsonian structure. Carved capitals top both the polygonal columns spanning the lower floors and the colonnettes separating the doubled and tripled round-headed windows on the upper

floors. Stevens and Ellis infused these typical decorative elements with intricate detailing that is reminiscent of Byzantine design. A less common but still distinguishing Richardsonian motif is the polychromatic checkerboard pattern above the round-headed windows which pierce the sixth floor.

The Lauer Brothers Construction Company provided the skilled craftsmen to carve all of this decorative stonework.¹² The company was a young, but already successful St. Paul firm which specialized in masonry work and stone-cutting. Before erecting the Saint Paul Building, the company had previously worked on West Publishing Company's original structure on Kellogg Avenue (now the Ramsey County Government Center-West) and Summit Avenue residences for businessmen A.B. Stickney and D.R. Noyes.

At the time of the construction of the Saint Paul Building, Lauer Brothers employed 225 people, some of whom worked sawing stone at their steam mill at the foot of Chestnut Street near what is now Shepard Road. Besides quarrying their own stone from a pit on West Seventh Street, the company was a registered dealer in various other building products, including "Bayfield brown stone," from which the Saint Paul Building was probably constructed.¹³

The Germania Bank Building was completed in late 1889 or early 1890 for an approximate cost of \$165,000.¹⁴ The initial reviews of the building's design were uniformly positive: "The carver's chisel has been used with luxurious results on the lower story and arabesques are woven in intricate designs as endless as the durability of the surface in which they are traced," *The Northwest Magazine* artfully wrote in 1890.¹⁵

Four years later, the magazine's praise had not diminished: "The beautiful proportions of this building, together with the rich tone of the material and quiet but effective ornamental features, are admired by every one who sees it. It appears to be pretty well occupied, and with a very desirable class of tenants. The bank itself has always enjoyed exceptional popularity."¹⁶



The Saint Paul Building. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The Germania Bank occupied the entire second story of the new building. If its interior was even partially completed according to Harvey Ellis's rendering, it was as beautiful and decorative as the exterior. Ellis's pen-and-ink drawing, printed in a 1904 magazine retrospective of his work, featured coffered wooden ceilings, intricately carved moldings and recessed arches, marble floors, and elegant iron grillework at each ornate teller window.¹⁷

The bank's wood trim was to be of either black birch or mahogany. According to the minutes of the bank's board of directors, and a preliminary description on file at the St. Paul Building Inspector's Office, original interior features in much of the rest of the building have remained relatively intact. The six floors above the bank were to have white pine trim, while the corridors and retail areas were finished in white oak. The original floors were either clay tile or marble. A central iron stairway with an iron newel, ornamental railings, and slate treads was probably built and installed by the St. Paul Foundry Com-

pany, at the same time as the bank's iron grilles.¹⁸

The original tenants included physicians, lawyers, and other professionals.¹⁹ The building's first floor (street level) was reserved for retail enterprises and was separated into four or perhaps five storefronts: one each at the corner and along the Wabasha Street facade; two or possibly three stores had Fifth Street addresses. Like its counterpart and rival, the National German-American Bank, the Germania Bank sold steamship tickets out of the corner storefront on the first level for a few years.

But the assets of the Germania Bank were liquidated in 1899, after a failure at the neighboring Savings Bank of St. Paul prompted an unrecoverable run on deposits.²⁰ The structure's name remained the same until late 1901 or early 1902, when it was rechristened the Ernst Building after new owner Caspar Ernst. The name changed again in 1907 to the Pittsburgh Building, possibly because the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company held the note on the mortgage.²¹

Prior to World War I, tenants ranged from the ordinary to the amusing. Pinkerton's National Detective Agency occupied offices on the third floor; their advertisement in a 1903 directory admonished, "No divorce cases undertaken, nor any work that will interfere with the marriage relation." Replacing the steamship ticket office was Myers & Co., specializing in watches, diamonds, and jewelry; "Breen the Jeweler" moved in after 1902. The Louvre Glove Co. rented the Wabasha Street storefront. The building also housed ten dentists, an equal number of physicians' offices, a dressmaker, and the law office of Lovely & Edgerton.

The bank's former quarters on the second floor were rented by Sperry Realty Company, founded as the Dale & Selby Realty Company in 1900. A biography of the company's founder indicates that he was "one of the most influential factors in the real estate activities of this city When he sold the Pittsburg [*sic*] building [c. 1910],

the highest mark in the real estate values of St. Paul up to that time was reached."²² Sperry Realty and Investment Company, as it became known, expanded to give its clients "Fire Insurance, Real Estate, & Loans," according to its prominent signs on both sides of the building. It was a tenant until the 1930s, when the company moved to a Selby Avenue office.

From World War I to the Depression, the building continued to serve as office space for various medical and legal professionals. A trend was developing among the retailers who rented the storefronts: during these years, the building was seldom without a cigar store or confectionery. H. Mandehr's Cigar Store was followed by Bernard Skalowski's establishment (c. 1904), the H.W. Johnson Cigar Store (1911–1917), and then the United Cigar Store (1922–1928). Replacing the Colonial Fruit and Confectionery Store (1910–1911) was Pearson's Confectionery Store. Pearson's moved in 1926, but the legendary Wood's Chocolate Shop would remain in its home on Fifth Street until 1984.

The building was renamed the Saint Paul Building in 1934. From World War II into the 1950s, the building suffered from wartime vacancies; many of the medical professionals had long since moved out. The most visible tenants, of course, continued to be the retailers. According to the abstract of title, Florsheim Shoes rented the entire, consolidated Wabasha Street storefront in 1939 "for the purpose of retail selling of shoes, hosiery, spats, rubbers, slippers, shoe-trees, garters, belts, suspenders, shoe findings, handkerchiefs, ties, and other items."

Gabbert's Furniture Store rented the same space for a short stint in 1969 or 1970. In the meantime, the Boy Scouts of America and Bausch & Lomb glass and plastics laboratories reportedly rented office space. The aptly-named Fifth Street Bootery took over the large retail space by 1980. According to a longtime St. Paul columnist, some of the more recent and less visible, but no less interesting, tenants have included a justice of the peace, a music teacher, ar-

chitects, law firms, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and "the "Mason Jar Lady," whose shop on one of the upper floors was filled with her collection of Mason jars and glass insulators."²³

A renovation in the mid-1980s restored the Saint Paul Building to its nineteenth-century beauty, while still insuring its commercial viability. Thus, it is perhaps fitting that the building embarks on its second century with The Bank of Saint Paul as its most visible tenant, establishing a distinctive historical connection with the building's original owners.

Deanne Zibell Weber, a St. Paul resident, has a master's degree in Medieval and Renaissance history from Duke University. She has researched and written several building nominations for the National Register of Historic Places.

Footnotes

1. Charles W. Nelson and Susan Zeik, National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form for the Germania Bank Building, 1 April 1977, in the files of the State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

2. Minutes of the Germania Bank Board of Directors, 14 September 1887, Manuscripts Division, Minnesota Historical Society.

3. *Ibid.*, 15 February 1888.

4. "Realm of Real Estate," *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, 29 April 1888, p. 15.

5. Minutes, 19 June 1888; Larry Millett, *Lost Twin Cities* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992), 134; David Gebhard and Tom Martinson, *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 84, 86, 299; "John Walter Stevens," n.a., n.d., typed ms. in folder "John Walter Stevens," architect's files at Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

6. "Realm of Real Estate."

7. Minutes, 9 May 1888.

8. The information about J.W. Stevens is from Millett, 133.

9. Roger G. Kennedy, "The Long Shadow of Harvey Ellis," *Minnesota History* 40 (Fall 1966): 101; Millett 134–35.

10. Millett 112.

11. For more information about the

Richardsonian Romanesque style, see Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), 133–40.

12. Minutes, 20 March 1889.

13. Andrew Morrison, *The Industries of St. Paul* (St. Paul: J.M. Elstner & Co., 1886), 155. (At Ramsey County Historical Society, St. Paul)

14. Minutes, 16 October 1889.

15. Conde Hamlin, "St. Paul," *The Northwest Magazine* 8 (July 1890), 14.

16. "Solid St. Paul. A View of the Present Business Situation in Minnesota's Capital City," *The Northwest Magazine* 12 (November 1894), 21–22.

17. "Sketch for interior of bank by Harvey Ellis," *Western Architect* 3 (February 1904), n.p. Although the drawing does not identify the bank, it does identify J.W. Stevens as the architect. Three other pieces of evidence suggest strongly that this is a sketch of the Germania Bank. First, in "Catalogue of the Etchings and Architectural Exhibit of the Loan Exhibition St. Paul October 1890," located in the LeRoy Buffington papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, entry #76 is identified almost identically to the caption on the drawing in the magazine. Furthermore, entry #60, also by Harvey Ellis for J.W. Stevens, Architect, is labelled "Preliminary design for entrance to Germania Bank." Secondly, the Germania Bank is the only bank building J.W. Stevens is known to have designed. Third, the coffered ceilings evident in the drawing were present in the bank as late as the 1980s.

18. Minutes, 20 March 1889 and 19 February 1890; "Detailed Statement of Specification for the Erection of Buildings," n.d., on file at the St. Paul Building Inspector's Office, St. Paul.

19. All information for the tenants was found by cross-checking the photographs (c. 1895–1970) at the Minnesota Historical Society, all titled "Germania Bank," against R.L. Polk & Co.'s *St. Paul City Directory* for the years 1890, 1895, 1903, 1904, 1910, 1911, 1915, 1920, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1935, and 1942.

20. Minutes, 19 July 1899.

21. Abstract of Title for Lots 1 & 2, Block 21, St. Paul Proper, in possession of Art Baumeister.

22. Entry for "James Farrell Sperry," in Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul & Vicinity*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1912), 959.

23. Gary Hiebert, "St. Paul Bldg. Has a Historic Foundation," *St. Paul Skyway News*, 21 November 1989, 6–7.



St. Paul's first public Market House at Seventh and Wabasha, about 1870. It was built by Vetel Guerin, a French-Canadian who was the first settler on this tract of land. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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