

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Architect to Kings:
Wigington and His Ice Palaces

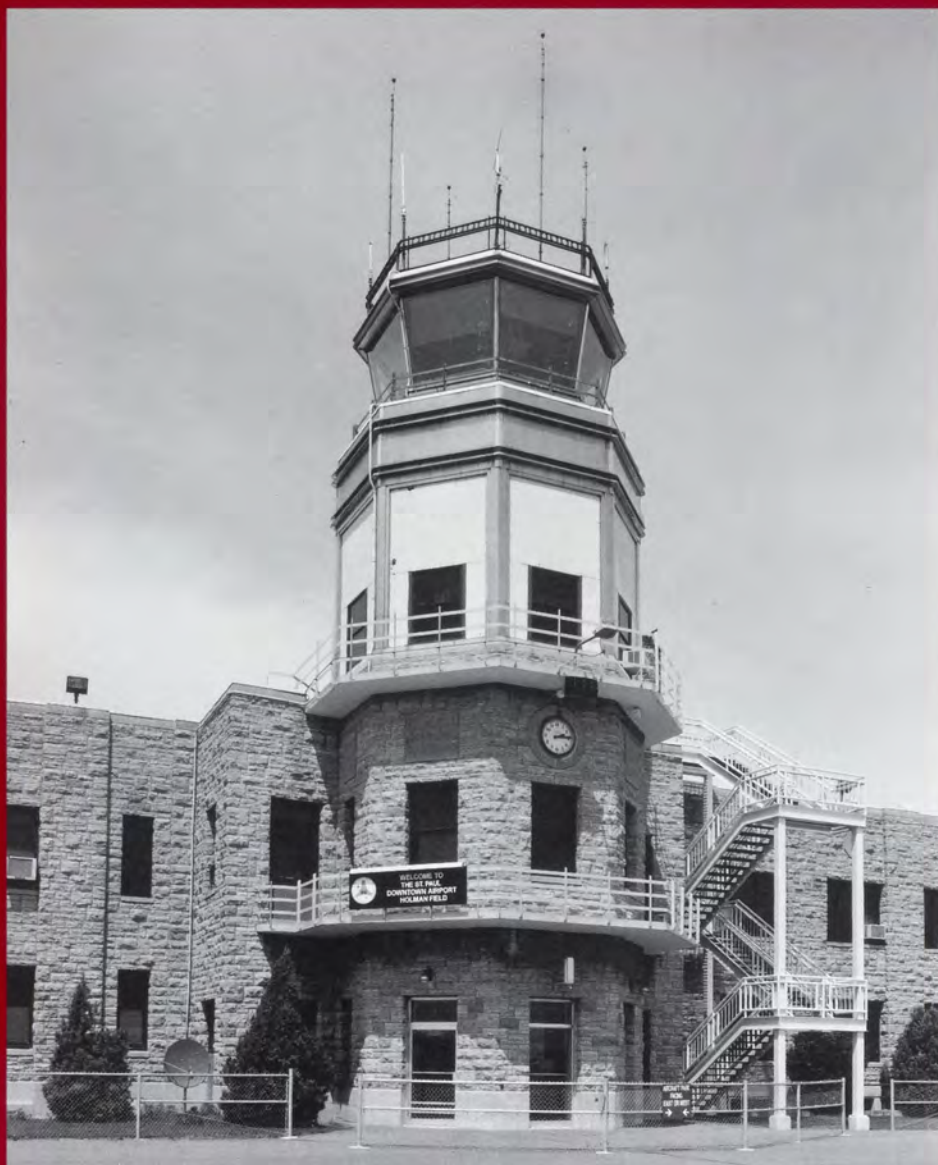
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Three National Historic Sites
Clarence Wigington's Architectural Heritage

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The Holman Field Administration Building designed by Clarence W. Wigington in 1939 and built with resources provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This is one of the three Wigington buildings that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photograph by Don Wong, Don F. Wong Photography, Bloomington, Minnesota.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 34, Number 4

Winter, 2000

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Message from Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* is delighted to publish in this issue two fine articles on St. Paul's Clarence W. Wigington, who is believed to have been the first African-American municipal architect in the United States. Dr. David Taylor, dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, is currently working on a biography of Wigington. His article gives us a sense of Wigington as an architect and as a pioneering civil servant at a time in this country when African-Americans faced many obstacles and handicaps to achieving professional careers. Wigington not only rose to a leadership position within the city's Office of Parks, Playgrounds, and Public Buildings, he also was a leader in the local African-American community throughout his working career.

Expanding upon David Taylor's discussion of Clarence Wigington's accomplishments as an architect of many St. Paul buildings, Bob Olsen, the author of our second piece on Wigington, examines the architect's work as a designer of St. Paul Winter Carnival Ice Palaces between 1926 and 1942. Both articles feature photographs of buildings Wigington designed. Olsen's article includes photos drawn from the author's own collection of Ice Palace memorabilia.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Transplants from Europe

Germans, Poles, Italians—Settlers on the Levee

Greg Schach

On the downtown side of the Mississippi River, between the shadow of the High Bridge and the foot of Chestnut Street in St. Paul, sits a slice of land. To the city's residents it might be known as "that flat land that's always under water during the big flood years," if it is identified at all. But for a few folks, this little slab of nothing land near the river remains the Upper Levee—the spot where steamboats once landed and where their grandparents and parents settled; where they were born and raised; and which they still remember as being home.

Some years after Pierre "Pigs Eye" Parrant built his house whisky shack at the mouth of Fountain Cave near there in 1838, squatters settled on the Upper Levee. They built a single row of dwellings along the edge of the river. Because goods and passengers were unloaded at the Lower Landing near the foot of Jackson Street in downtown St. Paul, the Upper Levee was a convenient location for early settlement. In those early days the squatters were mainly German, Irish, and Polish. It wasn't until the last two decades of the nineteenth century that their neighbors down the river joined these transplants from northern Europe.

The first Italians on the Levee were cold and poor—looking for any kind of shelter against the frigid winters of Minnesota. Eventually they bought title to the land, built houses, and raised families. By 1910, sixty families were living on the Levee and the little triangle of land began to take on the unique characteristics and vibrant flavor that would identify it for the next half century.

Italian Immigration

For more than a century Italy has been among the foremost countries of emigration in the world. According to an essay written by Rudolph J. Vecoli in *They Chose Minnesota*, published in 1981 by the Minnesota Historical Society Press,

more than 25 million Italians left their native land between 1876 and 1980. Initially, those from its northern regions went to northern Europe and South America. By 1900, however, migration patterns had shifted. In the first ten years of the twentieth century more than 2 million Italians entered the United States. However, only a small portion of these Italian immigrants chose to settle in Minnesota. As Vecoli noted, in 1910 the state's Italian-born population peaked at 9,668 and then fell while other Midwestern states were still registering increases.

Most of the Italian immigrants to America hoped to work in the new land until they had saved enough money to return and purchase land in their native villages. The vast majority were employed in the hardest, dirtiest, and lowest-paying jobs. But the \$1.75 they could earn each day in America seemed like a fortune to these able-bodied men. According to Vecoli, with the notable exception of the Iron Range, most Italians who selected Minnesota as their destination settled in the urban areas of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth. After 1900, St. Paul became the single largest center—with about 20 percent of the total. Distinct Italian neighborhoods were formed in two St. Paul locations: Swede Hollow, near Payne Avenue, and the flats of the Upper Levee. A 1938 University of Minnesota master's thesis by Alice L. Sickels entitled "The

Upper Levee Neighborhood," noted that in 1937, of the 410 inhabitants of the Levee, 80 percent were Italian.

According to Sickels, the early Italian settlers on the Upper Levee came almost entirely from two small towns in the province of Campobasso of the Molise region in south central Italy. The villages of Ripabottoni and Casacalenda—located less than ten miles apart—accounted for nearly 70 percent of the Italian-born residents in 1939. In 1904, the Upper Levee was described as "a village of southern Italy transported as if by magic from the wild mountains of Abruzzo and Molise and placed on the banks of the Father of Waters." Most of the Campobasso immigrants had fond childhood memories of their homeland. They remembered stucco houses built into the hillside, gardens and olive trees, grape arbors and wine cellars, spaghetti, and large families there to share everything.

Times were not always so idyllic in the old country. In this area of Italy, years of dividing family-owned land among succeeding generations produced plots too small to support a family. In some years when there was no rain for many months, the clay ground cracked open in large squares and nothing would grow. During these times people suffered greatly. Young Campobasso men began to look for work in other areas.

News of the "fortunes" to be made in America caused a near stampede from villages like Ripabottoni and Casacalenda. Vecoli found that most of the young Campobasso men chose St. Paul because of the demand for labor to build and maintain the railroads running west from the city to the Pacific. The Upper Levee settlement quickly grew by a process of chain migration. The first men



The Italian community as seen from High Bridge in 1952. Ramsey County Historical Society photo.

The Early Days

The first Italian settlers on the Upper Levee built shacks from scraps of lumber, tin, and tarpaper, setting them on piles of refuse to keep them above the spring floods. Gradually, as the Italians dealt with obstacles such as low-paying jobs and a scheming, rent-charging mailman, they had accumulated enough money to purchase title to their lots.

August 20, 1904, was an exciting day for dwellers on the Levee. That was the day when winds were so strong that frightened residents evacuated their houses for fear they would collapse. As people gathered on the street, gusts caught the High Bridge hanging overhead. "It was waving like a bird," Natal Tallarico told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in April, 1959. The giant bridge eventually gave way, tumbling down into the river and onto the Levee. Two of the big timbers crashed through the roof of the Tallarico house.

Vecoli wrote that by 1910 sixty families were living on the Levee, with an average of five children to a home. By this time the little community was distinctly Italian, making it somewhat unique in a state with so few Southern European immigrants. The neighborhood had a rural flavor, with its population of ducks, chickens, goats, and even a cow or two. In fact, it was not unusual to see the women in their housedresses carrying their market baskets into downtown shops, as if they were in a country village. In the January 2, 1910, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a reporter described his adventure in "Little Italy":

An American is almost a curiosity down there and dogs sniff suspiciously, and sometimes noisily announce his approach to the women who watch from their windows as he passes. The children are used to seeing these strange people and sometimes even greet them with a friendly smile and a cheerful "Hello." The home life is almost as it is in Italy, and Italian is the only language spoken in the home. The children as a rule can speak English, but their parents are not able to talk it freely.

One straight street parallels the river. Back of it order leaves. Houses—the majority small and crowded—are built on every con-

to arrive often sent back money or pre-paid steamship tickets for relatives and friends, who in turn, eventually sent for more acquaintances. Father Nicola Carlo Odone, a long-time priest at St. Paul's Holy Redeemer Church, described the Italians' migration pattern in 1909: "First the father comes; then the father calls the son; then the rest of the family follows; and then part of the village or perhaps the entire village follows."

Natal Tallarico was a typical example: Her father came to the Upper Levee from Italy first, leaving his wife and daughter

at home. In 1903 he sent for them. After their grueling journey across the ocean and then half of America, expectations were high. A dirty, one-room shack with the river in front and a swampy area in back greeted the weary travelers. The young Natal remembered her mother's dismay when she saw where they were going to live. "We came out of the water and my mom said, crying, 'Now we are going back.'" It was so cold inside the shack that the little girl's hair froze to the wall when she leaned against it.

ceivable location and set down every which way. The yards are kept fairly clean, many of the front yards being paved with old pieces of sidewalk and whatever else affords a level surface. The houses are kept in a moderate state of repair, although most of them need paint. One thing evidently is indispensable—a fence. Each has been built of whatever material has been thrown in the householder's way and assembled with a clever knack, and the care that is bestowed on these fences is just as interesting as the structure itself. Every kind of board ever sawed is worked into the scheme. These people seem to take as much pride in their fences as Americans do in their lawns.

Every house has a garden even though it be but a few feet square and every garden is fenced. In these are grown a few cabbages and an occasional hill of corn or potatoes. Some of the housewives devote their limited space to the growing of flowers. The interior[s] of the houses are not elaborate. Some are decorated with strings of garlic and the smell of it is all pervading. They import food in large quantities—cheeses, spaghetti, pressed meats, dried and salted fish form the bulk of the imports. Several local Italian bakeries supply them with the bread and cakes they relish.

An important activity of early Levee settlers was the gathering of driftwood. Thirty-foot bamboo poles fastened to the river banks with wire and cords were lowered into the river and angled upstream. These poles stopped the driftwood, bark, and other timber floating down from the lumbering mills and trees upriver. Women and children often spent the entire day collecting this wood, piling it into bundles, and carrying it to their houses. They dried and piled the wood in neat stacks. "That was our firewood. We never used coal," Victoria LaManna remembered.

In 1908 a dispute between the remaining Upper Levee squatters and neighboring landowners drew headlines in the October 15th *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Rights to the river driftwood, of all things, ignited this controversy. The homeowners accused the squatters, living in huts along the riverbank, of taking the driftwood before the homeowners could get to it. The

two sides argued and fought for weeks over land rights and the mighty river's spoils. The landowners swore vengeance against the squatters. The squatters defied them. The City Council finally sided with the landowners, and even though the squatters were determined to remain—"I would yet die before I go," declared squatter Joe Josfeoppto—they eventually were removed.

Conditions on the Levee during these early days reflected the state this group of immigrants found themselves in—proud of their self-sufficiency and possessions in this new land, but extremely poor. Indeed, poor enough to fight for driftwood possession. The *Pioneer Press* writer who visited the Levee in 1910 could not avoid reporting telltale signs of poverty:

The street, the straight one, is full of all kinds of trash—the trash that has dropped on its way to the river. One might imagine that the housekeepers stand at the doorways and try to throw the refuse into the stream and all that falls short remains where it drops. The riverbank is covered with an admirable collection—as a collection—of bones, tin cans, dead cats, feathers, worn-out clothing, children, and hungry dogs. The children are none too clean, but comfortably dressed and seem to be well fed. The dogs look as though they had a hard time to eke out an existence from the garbage.

In November, 1910, a team of health inspectors visited the Upper Levee as part of their tour of some of the poorest areas of St. Paul. The streets smelled so bad that one of the inspectors "wrinkled her nose the moment she came into the district."

"I remember a case worker coming into our house and asking us to lift up our feet so they could check for holes in the bottoms of our shoes," said Josephine Maurizio McCormick, who lived on the Levee from 1919 to 1958.

A 1917 city planning study, *Housing Conditions in the City of St. Paul* by Carol Aronovici, described the principal characteristics of housing on the Levee as "shacks close together." The study reported statistics regarding Upper Levee building conditions, persons per room, and number of garbage receptacles to be amongst the worst in the city. Because

the Upper Levee still had no sewer connections, up to twenty families shared the same source of water supply, making the Levee neighborhood "one of the worst that has come under our observation."

The Glory Days

A neighborhood can be no greater than the sum of its parts. In the forty years following the city planning report that declared the Upper Levee neighborhood one of the worst in St. Paul, the parts slowly improved. These rural folks from the hills beside the Adriatic sea became more comfortable with the dramatic change to life in urban America.

Men secured better and more stable jobs. J.T. McMillan and Northern States Power located their plants near the Levee, adding opportunities for residents. Women continued maintaining their households, but with more modern tools to help. Children, in many cases, became liasions with the "outside world" as they learned English at their new schools, while speaking Italian at home. Running water and a city sewer system actually became available.

But as much as assimilation, technology and education guided the Upper Levee into "modern" America, what made it such a special place to live, through the middle years of the twentieth century, didn't change. Old World customs, traditions, and way of life remained through the bad and better times on the Levee even as "progress" slowly descended upon it.

In 1957 *St. Paul Pioneer Press* writer Oliver Towne visited the Upper Levee home of Mrs. Rose Fritz (short for Fratangelo)—a sixty-three-year resident of the neighborhood. She insisted that to truly understand life on the Upper Levee, one needed to begin with a meal. This does seem appropriate, as so much of Levee life revolved around the dinner table. On that day in 1957 Mrs. Fritz served the journalist as much spaghetti and meatballs as he could eat. It is safe to report that no meal sat on more Upper Levee dinner tables, ready to be devoured, than spaghetti. "We had some kind of noodle and tomato sauce every day except on Friday—the day we couldn't eat meat," Josephine McCormick recalled.

Now urban dwellers in St. Paul, the Italians on the Upper Levee never lost their love for living off the land. "Often we'd go down by the river to pick dandelions before they flowered and make a salad," she said. Despite small yards, a garden full of vegetables and herbs accompanied nearly every Levee home. Unfortunately, the daily menu demanded many more tomatoes than these small gardens ever could grow.

"We would go out to a farm on the West Side and pick our own tomatoes for \$1 a bushel," said McCormick. "In order to make the puree for spaghetti sauce, we had to remove all the skin and seeds from the tomatoes and boil them for hours. After they were cooked we would squeeze them and can them. Neighbors would help neighbors. Every fall we would can anywhere from 200 to 400 quarts of tomato sauce in our home alone."

Something else certain to be found on a Levee dinner table was a large, heavy loaf of bread baked in the big, brick ovens outside almost every home. Each loaf weighed almost eight pounds. "My mother would bake twelve of these big loaves at a time every week," McCormick remembered. "We must have eaten a lot of bread in our lives." One can only imagine the delight an outsider must have felt if they happened to visit the Levee on bread-baking day.

The dinner table meant more to Levee families than just a delicious meal. Family members met at the table to discuss their days, exchange ideas and dreams, and maybe argue a little. Somewhere between seconds on spaghetti and thirds on bread, certain values were passed down from the experienced to the learning. These ideals of respect and consideration for others began with a close-knit family, led by disciplined parents, and extended into the community. To insure proper behavior among the young, popular disciplinary methods of the day may have been used.

According to the June 5, 1957, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Sheriff Tommy Gibbons once addressed a group of Levee youngsters. "I have never had any trouble with any of you boys and girls down here and do you know why?" he asked. "No,"



"Stan's Lemon Line, five buddies on the Levee," Stan Stodora among them. This is the Upper Levee's Mill Street around 1937. Stodora was a "big brother" to the Italian boys there. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

chorused the young voices. "It's because," said the Sheriff, "your fathers know how to use their belts."

Because of dinner table values and their isolation, both ethnically and physically, from the rest of St. Paul, the people of the Upper Levee enjoyed a unique closeness. They canned tomatoes together, walked to church in groups, and no one locked their doors. "My mom would go to church every day," recalled McCormick. "If it rained when she was gone, neighbors would take our things off the clothesline, take them in, even fold them if they were dry." They even protected each other.

"They used to have dances over there on the East Side," long-time Levee resident Dominic Alfonso remembered, "We'd monkey around with their girls—first thing you know there'd be a fight. Then we'd have a dance on this end of town, there'd be a big fight here, too. If we walked a girl home to the East Side we knew to stop at Rice Street. If the East Side guys were bringing a girl back to the Levee, the grain elevators on Chestnut Street was as far as they'd go. There were

always some Levee kids waiting there, like guards. When you came down here, everyone knew if you were a stranger. If you didn't know anybody, there'd be trouble."

At its peak about 500 people inhabited the Upper Levee. The three main streets—Spring, Loreto, and Mill—ran parallel to the river, while several unnamed cross-streets sliced the neighborhood into eleven or twelve oddly shaped blocks. Neat lawns, gardens, grape arbors and pigeon cotes became the mark of the neighborhood. For many years there were no parks, schools, or churches. There was a small grocery store, two taverns—one served Hamm's beer, the other Schmidt's. Cahoots Pond, a small swamp behind the houses, doubled as an ice skating rink.

Despite their modest circumstances, Upper Levee residents managed to have fun. "My mother was always having parties at our house," McCormick reminisced. "One of the men always played the accordion. The older people and the kids all danced. In the 1930s and 1940s we used to go on the Capital Steamer

[steamboat] down to Hastings and back every Sunday. It left at 9 and came back at 5. Then we would come back, take a bath, and go back on it from 9 to 12. We danced the whole time. The only time we sat down was when the orchestra took a break."

Dominic Alfonso thought back to the fun Levee youngsters had fishing and the thrills that came with living beneath St. Paul's tallest bridge. "We'd catch those little crabs in the rocks. Then we'd boil them in a can over a fire. After they turned real red we'd eat the inside of the tails. One time while we were fishing for carp with bamboo poles, we heard a guy out in the river yelling 'Help! Help!' He'd jumped off the High Bridge. We swam out and got him. It turns out he was a big shot from St. Paul. He owned a clothing store. Next time he jumped off in the wintertime onto the ice. He made it that time. God knows how many people we saw jump off the High Bridge."

Nearly everyone participated in church and religious ceremonies. Nothing was more important. All walked to church, held first in the basement of the old Cathedral at Sixth and St. Peter, later at Holy Redeemer Church. At funerals, the men, members of the St. Anthony Society, walked behind the hearse as a band played funeral songs. Wakes always were held, regardless of the home's size.

Annual Feast days—as one might expect—centered around the Levee dinner tables. On the eve of St. Joseph's Feast, bonfires blazed near the river as adults and kids sang songs through the night. In one of the homes eleven children dressed as angels sat at the dinner table with an older couple dressed as Joseph and Mary. The feast had many courses and could include anything but meat. The other celebrants were allowed in to eat only after the "first table" was served. Upper Levee folks also observed the feast days of Sts. Anthony of Padua, Assunta, and Carmel.

Of all the annual events, none was more delightfully celebrated than the Carnivale season which ran from January through the eve of Ash Wednesday. Participants dressed in costumes and masks

paraded from house to house singing joyfully. Homeowners gave them food, wine, spaghetti, and bread. At the end of the evening, all of the celebrants gathered at one home to prepare the food.

One fabulous Carnivale remembered through the years by Levee residents featured a group of masqueraders dressed as a saint, a priest, the devil, and a policeman. In a pantomime the policeman ejected the devil from each home they visited. On the final night of the season, an effigy of Carnivale, who had come to his end, was placed in a cart and drawn through the streets by the men. Carnivale was spontaneous. There might be two masqueraders or there might be ten. It might be done once a week during the season or several times. Adults enjoyed Carnivale. Children were thrilled by it.

The Final Days

The people of the Upper Levee loved the Mississippi River. First the flowing water invited settlers and then it swept them survival treasures, all the while offering excitement, recreation, and sparkling beauty. Thus it is sadly ironic that the very natural wonder that brought folks to the Upper Levee forced them to leave it forever. The river's presence so near the flat land of the Levee constantly threatened its inhabitants.

The flood of 1952 was the last straw. "The real problem was water actually seeped in through the floors," said William Maurizio, who was born on the Levee in 1915. Considering that most of the Levee homes were built on the fill used to dry up the original swampy area, this probably was an inevitable problem. The 1952 flood damaged many houses beyond repair.

Soon after this disaster, Levee residents, seeing what the river had wrought, asked the city to acquire their homes for redevelopment. In 1957, the St. Paul City Council approved a plan to purchase all the houses, raise the ground above flood level, then sell the land for industrial use. Construction also began on Shepard Road. The exodus from the Levee to higher grounds lasted about a decade. By 1965 there were no houses still standing. In some ways, Levee folks were lucky that

the floods forced evacuation when it did.

"If the people had stayed, their homes would have been swept down the river in the flood of 1965," Upper Levee native Frank Marzitelli told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1978. If not in 1965, surely in 1993 or 1997 when the big river again spilled over its edges.

As the years roll by and as floods or development swamp the area, fewer and fewer people will remember that a neighborhood once existed below the High Bridge. That's unfortunate, because life there was special—special because of the time and place and the unique situation in which the people who lived there found themselves. "On the Levee, you'd better say 'hello' to your neighbor, or your father would kick you," Maurizio recalled with a smile. "The camaraderie was beautiful."

So was the Upper Levee.

Greg Schach, an accountant and freelance writer, was born in St. Paul and lived in the West Seventh Street neighborhood, not far from the now-vanished Upper Levee community.

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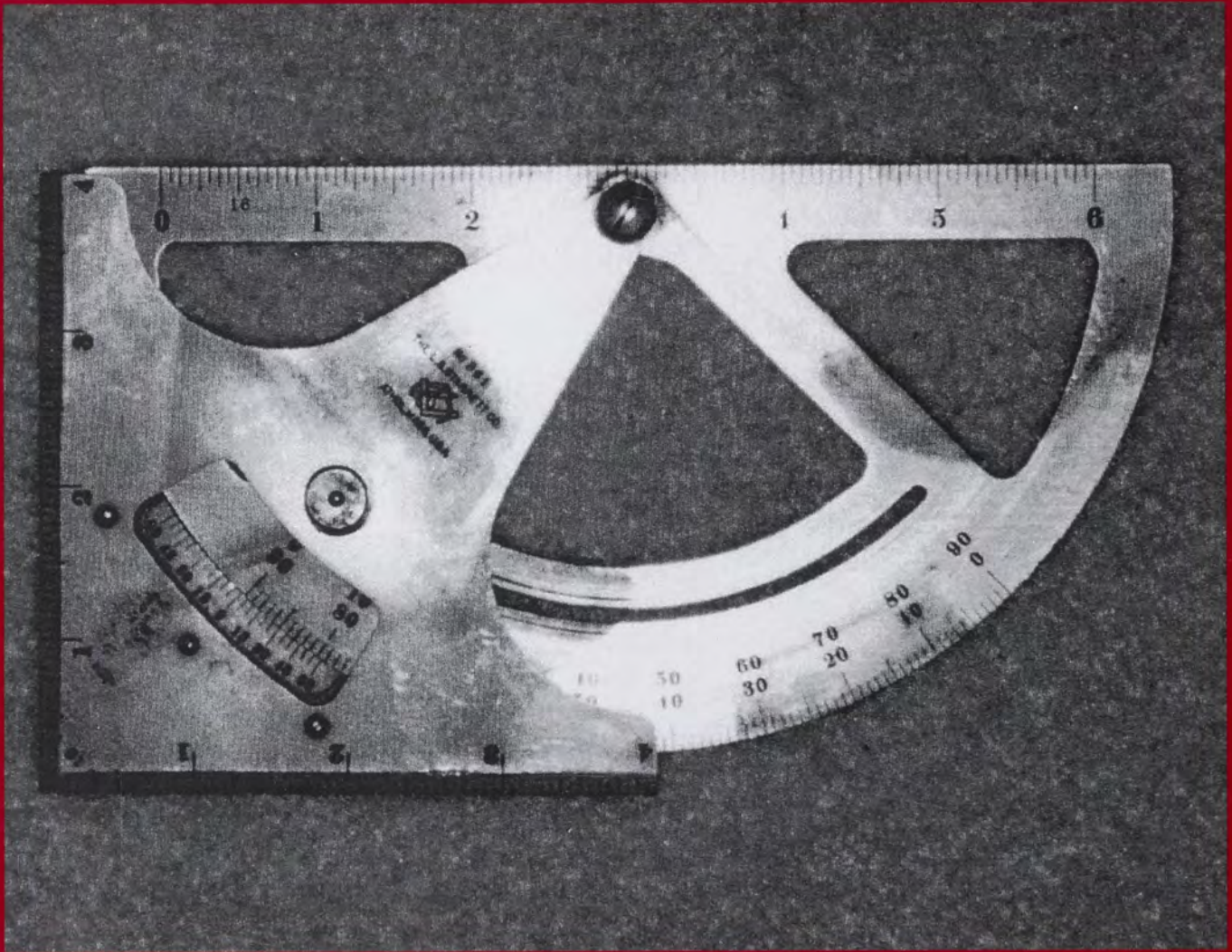
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An architectural drafting instrument owned and used by Clarence W. Wigington, the first licensed African-American architect registered in the State of Minnesota. See the article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.

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