

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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James J. Hill and
His Oriental Rugs:
A Practical Millionaire

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Winter, 2001

Volume 35, Number 4

Attacked by a Starving Wolf
Four Sisters of St. Joseph and Their Mission to St. Paul
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U.S.P.R.R. EXP & SURVEYS - 47 & 49 PARALLELS.

GENERAL REPORT — PLATE I.



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SAINT PAUL M. T.

St. Paul as it looked in 1853, two years after four Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in St. Paul. This colored lithograph was produced as part of a United States government survey of Minnesota Territory. Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Our Winter issue presents three diverse articles ranging in time from Minnesota's Territorial period to the turn-of-the-century and on to the 1930s. In our lead article, Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson recounts the story of how four Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet came to St. Paul in 1851 and began their missionary work at this lonely outpost high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. Through her access to the details found in the records of the Order and other sources, Sister Ann provides a compelling portrait of these four female pioneers, their religious loyalty and faith, and their persistence in the face of great hardships. This is the story of the enduring influence of these devoted missionaries on St. Paul in its earliest years.

From the poverty and hardships of the four Sisters of St. Joseph, the issue moves on to the opulence and splendor of the mansion that James J. Hill built on Summit Avenue between 1887 and 1891. Writer and historian Lou Ann Matossian focuses on the Oriental rugs that Hill purchased to furnish his splendid home. By examining the available records, Matossian shows that Hill, who could easily have afforded Oriental rugs of any cost, bought many medium-quality rugs that impressed visitors but showed that Hill was what she calls "the practical millionaire." The James J. Hill that emerges from her research is a man who spent only what he needed to on his rugs and avoided any that might have qualified as works of art.

In our third article, John Larson's "Growing Up in St. Paul" tells how he and his family dealt with the serious eye ailment he had in the 1920s and '30s. He also recalls with detail and good humor his experiences as a member of the Vision Class at Webster School. Within the St. Paul Public Schools of that time, the Vision Class consisted of all the students at a particular school who were blind or had other serious vision problems. Although Larson tells his story matter-of-factly, his account is an understated tribute to the caring and well-qualified teachers who helped him (and by inference other students) succeed in their studies in spite of their medical problems.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

The Practical Millionaire

James J. Hill and His Oriental Rugs

Lou Ann Matossian

Massive stonework, elaborate woodcarving and luminous stained glass never fail to impress visitors to Hill House, the lavish former home of railroad baron James J. Hill (1839–1916). Yet historical evidence of Hill's long-vanished Oriental rug collection reveals a surprisingly frugal side of the self-made millionaire.

James J. Hill's Romanesque mansion in St. Paul, now a National Historic Landmark owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, was designed in 1887 by the Boston architectural firm of Peabody, Stearns and Furber and constructed over a four-year period at a cost of \$552,854.38. Interior decorations and furnishings by Irving and Casson, also of Boston, amounted to another \$219,535.82, for a total of \$772,390.20—or more than \$14.6 million in current dollars.* By the time of its completion in 1891, the Hill House was the most expensive residence on St. Paul's stylish Summit Avenue.

It was also the largest. Measuring 187 feet long and 94 feet wide, the house enclosed 36,000 square feet of living space, including forty-two rooms, thirteen bathrooms, and twenty-two fireplaces. Covering this expanse of floor, in 1921, was a collection of 147 rugs, 116 of them Orientals.

In a 1997 article on the Hill House as "a symbol of status and security," historian Barbara Ann Caron described the sumptuous effect of its furnishings:

The interior decoration clearly reveals that the house was meant to be a showcase. The first-floor entertaining rooms were lavishly



James J. Hill's mansion at 240 Summit Avenue, St. Paul.

carved and furnished, and the Rococo floral scrolls, neoclassical columns and pilasters, exotic Islamic motifs, and Renaissance paneling were typical of the Victorian era.

The main hall, staircase, and alcoves, at more than \$32,000 the most expensive area in the house, were cited as "a good example of Hill's no-holds-barred approach . . . clearly intended to make an impression on visitors." The dining room and the picture gallery also were cited as embodiments of Hill's sumptuous style.

Certainly no guests of the Hills could fail to wonder at the hand-tooled woodwork and walls, the custom-made finishing, and the furniture chosen by prestigious design firms. Yet the rugs the Hills used in those same rooms, and indeed throughout the house, qualified any impression of lavishness. Where one might have expected a connoisseur's selection of Oriental rugs as works of art, there was instead a preponderance of large but medium-quality rugs, both domestic and Oriental, along with a great number of factory reproductions from India. If everything about the house was calcu-

lated to impress, the rug purchases also suggest that despite their fabulous wealth, Jim and Mary Hill—a former clerk and waitress—still knew the value of a dollar.

Following Mrs. Hill's death in 1921, some of these rugs were dispersed to the heirs, and the rest were donated, along with the residence itself, to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul in 1925. Portions of the floor are visible in the historic photographs now on display, yet of the original 147 rugs, just two sections and one entire rug remain.

Account Books and Invoices

Reconstructing the Hills' Oriental rug collection began with a close inspection of family papers at the Hill Reference Library in downtown St. Paul, including James J. Hill's domestic account books, invoices, and payment vouchers from the early 1890s through 1916, as well as two inventories of Mrs. Hill's estate. A total of 266 rug purchase and maintenance records were then matched to the 147 rugs listed in the estate inventories, based on approximate dimensions, name, and place of manufacture. Historic photographs,

*One dollar in the period 1884–1893 is equivalent to \$19.07 today. "Consumer Price Index (Estimate) 1800–2000," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

including those at the Hill House, were consulted for rug placements within the rooms. Evidence of Hill's rug-buying strategy for various areas of the house can be traced in the rugs' suppliers, regional origin, value when purchased, and value when appraised for the estate.

Rug Suppliers

Payment vouchers from the early 1890s account for the purchase of about fifty Oriental rugs, or about one third of the Hills' collection. These covered the first-floor and second-floor hallways, the first-floor west wing, the main staircase, and most of the family bedrooms.

Most of the Hill family's rugs came from three major suppliers: Arnold Constable (1891); Finch, Van Slyck, Young (1891); and W. & J. Sloane (1892). The New York-based Sloanes' sole contribution seems to have been the showy first-floor hall and main staircase rugs, of which two sections have been preserved. Three additional rugs were purchased from M.M. Yacoubian, probably an itinerant vendor, and from the family firm of Bedros A. Keljik in St. Paul. Hill also relied upon Keljik for expert cleaning and repair.

Finch, Van Slyck, Young, a St. Paul company, provided large rugs for the den, dining room, breakfast room (now preserved) and most of the bedrooms, as well as a set of small Chinese rugs for the music room. A silk rug that hung opposite the stained-glass windows on the second floor landing also came from this firm.

Arnold Constable, another New York firm, supplied the large hallway and room rugs for the alcoves on either side of the main staircase, the library and adjacent east room, the second-floor hallway, Mrs. Hill's room, and the third-floor billiard room. By 1921, two smaller rugs from Arnold Constable apparently had been relegated to the servants' rooms.

Regional Origin

The Oriental rugs in the Hills' collection were of six regional types—Caucasian, Chinese, Indian, Persian, Turkish, and Turkoman. There were also a number of domestic rugs, particularly on the first and third floors.

Caucasian rugs, all in the smallest

sizes, were used mainly as doorway and sometimes as closet rugs on every floor of the house. Cabistan, Daghistan, Ganji, and Kazak are typical names. Similar in placement was the set of small Chinese rugs purchased originally for the music room but later dispersed throughout the residence.

Indian rugs were placed in all but two of the family bedrooms, as well as in the breakfast and reception rooms. A smaller one lay in front of the gallery fireplace, covering part of a large domestic rug. According to a contemporary source, Indian rugs were typically factory copies of old Turkish or Persian designs. This suggests the Hills' desire for economy coupled with visual effect.

The high reputation of Persian rugs made them an appropriate choice for public first-floor areas such as the main entrance and the dining room, as well as private retreats such as Hill's library and den. However, most of these rugs were relatively inexpensive per square foot, allowing the Hills the satisfaction of displaying authentic Persian rugs at moderate cost.

A type of large Turkish rug known as Kirman, Oushak, or Ushakh covered the first-floor hallways, the alcoves on either side of the main staircase, and the staircase itself. Another was placed in Mrs. Hill's bedroom. Mary Beach Langton, writing in 1904, called this the best of the modern Turkish rugs made for export, adding that they were "usually of good wool, often of permanent dyes, and of a moderate price."

Small Bokhara rugs, generally found in closets, hallways, and doorways, were typical of the Hills' Turkoman collection. Of special note were the two larger "Royal" Bokharas in the second-floor hall. Anchoring this area was another Turkoman rug, a large Bashire.

One might wonder why two domestic rugs were placed in the first-floor gallery and drawing room, the largest public spaces in the Hill residence. Perhaps the bold designs of Oriental rugs would have detracted from the Western paintings in the first room and the décor in the second; however, the Hills did not choose European rugs for those large spaces either. More than likely, Oriental rugs of

the required size would have cost more than the Hills were willing to spend on floor coverings, and American-made furnishings were consistent with decorating decisions for other areas of the house. Domestic rugs also predominated on the second-to-third-floor stairway, the third-floor hallways, and the smoking lounge on the third floor.

Original Value

When purchased in the early 1890s, the rugs in the Hill House ranged from less than \$1 to about \$5.50 per square foot in 1890 dollars, with a median value of about \$2.25. The one exception was the silk hanging on the second floor, purchased in 1891 for \$900, or \$30.95 per square foot. Because of wide variation in rug sizes throughout the house, comparisons of rug values are made here and below in terms of square-foot cost.

Although purchase records are incomplete, available evidence indicates that the first-floor and second-floor hallway rugs and those on the main staircase were slightly below median value. A further step down were the two large alcove rugs on either side of the main staircase, the library rug, and—somewhat surprisingly—the dining-room rug. All of these were, of course, in public areas of the house, once more suggesting a desire for maximal visual effect at minimal expense. In contrast, one of the most valuable rugs in the collection was hidden away for private appreciation in Hill's own sanctum, the den.

The second and third-floor rugs varied in price relative to the median figure. Most expensive were the rugs in Mrs. Hill's, Clara's, and Charlotte's bedrooms, with those in the two guest rooms one step lower in price. At the next price level, yet still above the median, were the rugs in Rachel's and Ruth's rooms.

One step below the median value, just over one third the square-foot cost of Clara's and Charlotte's rugs, were the two major rugs in Mr. and Mrs. Hill's rooms. At the same level were the main rugs in son Louis's room and the "gymnasium" (schoolroom) or billiard room. Just why there should be such a discrepancy in cost remains unclear.



The Great Hall with its original rug. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

Estate Value

Compared to the partial records of rug purchases in the early 1890s, the appraisal of all 147 rugs in the 1921 estate inventory allows for much better comparisons of value per square foot. Although 1921 dollars are cited here, those values once again reflected the original purchase price range of less than \$1 to about \$5.50 per square foot, with a median of about \$2.25.

Depreciation to well below median value was especially apparent in the rugs on the first-floor and third-floor hallways and on the stairs, which presumably were high-traffic areas. However, in the main entrance and the third-floor billiard room (formerly the schoolroom), appraisal fig-

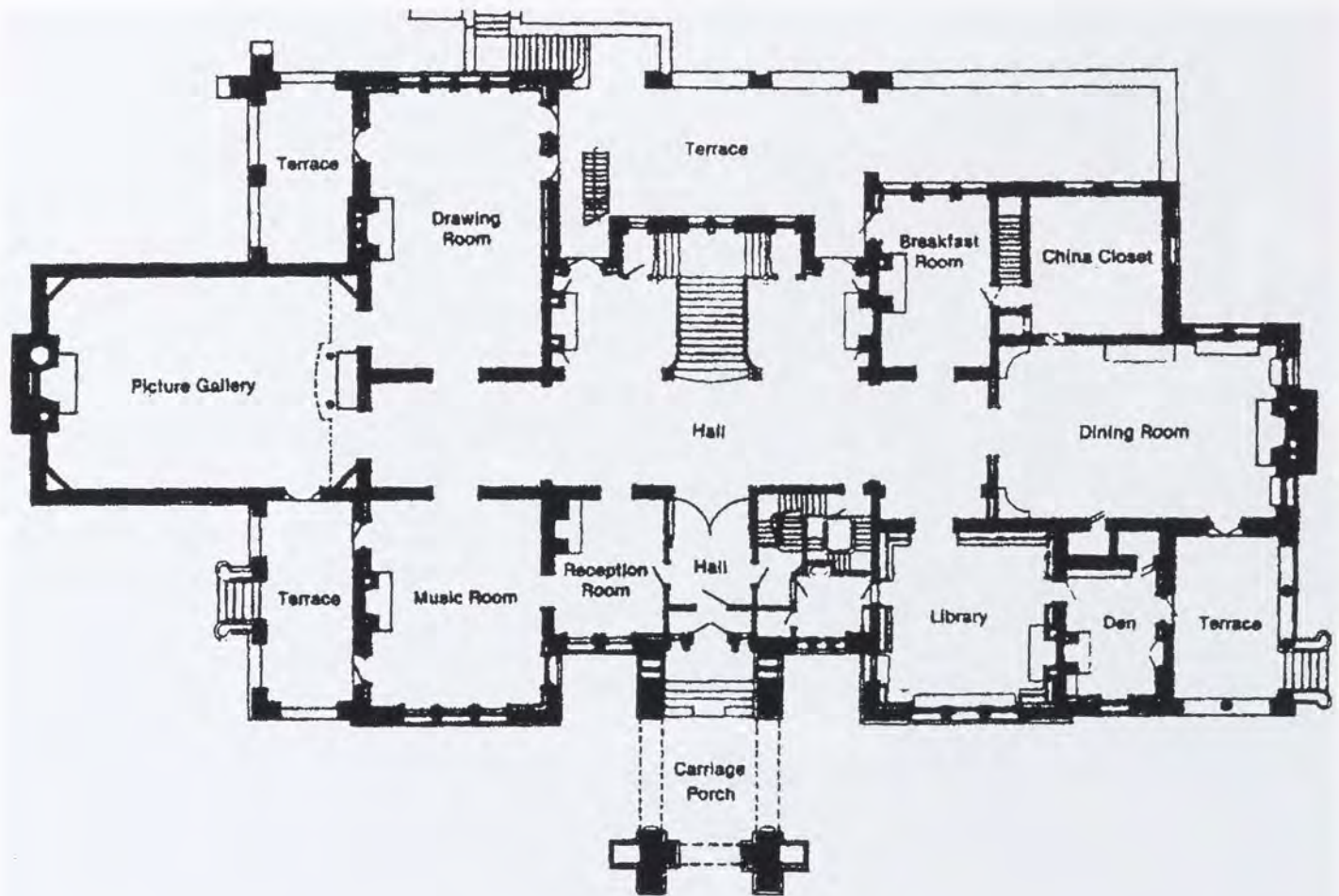
ures suggest that newer rugs had replaced the worn-out originals.

Also appraised at a low level, not surprisingly, were all the domestic rugs. Yet the Persian silk hanging, which in 1890 had cost nearly fourteen times the median value, was later appraised at only \$13.98 per square foot, a little more than six times the median level. Most likely this was due to thirty years of uneven southern light exposure. Except for a single rug in Mrs. Hill's chamber, the Indian rugs placed in the bedrooms also seem not to have aged very well.

A few rugs did hold their value or even appreciated relative to the median. In addition to the main entrance rug, the most valuable were found at the doorway

and hearth in the gallery, in the dining room and den, and in two small rooms flanking the second-floor landing. These probably were low-traffic areas, although it might not be chance that four of these rugs were Persians.

The average rug value on each floor was just what one would expect of a residence a century ago, with its public showrooms on the ground floor and servants' quarters at the top. As one entered the house and proceeded upstairs, the average rug value per square foot decreased from \$1.51 on the first floor and \$1.26 on the second to just 73¢ on the third. Similarly, the combined value of rugs at each level dropped from \$6,645 to \$5,710 to \$1,790. At Mrs. Hill's death, the entire



Plan of the first floor of James J. Hill's mansion. Most of Hill's expensive and sumptuous Oriental rugs were placed here, "clearly intended to make an impression on visitors." From the Minnesota Historical Society collections.

collection was appraised at \$14,145.

In a guide published by the Minnesota Historical Society, site manager Craig Johnson comments on home decorating at the James J. Hill House:

At a time when Hill's East Coast contemporaries were building mansions that lavishly flaunted their wealth, the interiors of 240 Summit, by comparison, exhibited restraint and fine craftsmanship, appropriate to a hard-working family living in what had been until recently a frontier town.

Evidence from the Oriental rug collection is consistent with this view. Although Hill's expenditure on all his furnishings far exceeded that of an average family, his rug purchases reflected a decidedly practical sensibility.

Lou Ann Matossian, Ph.D., is program officer of the Cafesjian Family Foundation and immediate past president of the Armenian Cultural Organization of Minnesota. Her translation of a Bedros Keljik short story and her introduction to Keljik's correspondence with Alice Stone Blackwell have appeared in Ararat, an Armenian-American literary quarterly. The author wishes to thank Craig Johnson, site manager, James J. Hill House, as well as Eileen R. McCormack, archivist, and W. Thomas White, curator, Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library, all of St. Paul, and Kristine L. Hoover of Minneapolis for their assistance in the preparation of this article. A fully annotated report has been placed at the Hill Papers and at the James J. Hill House.

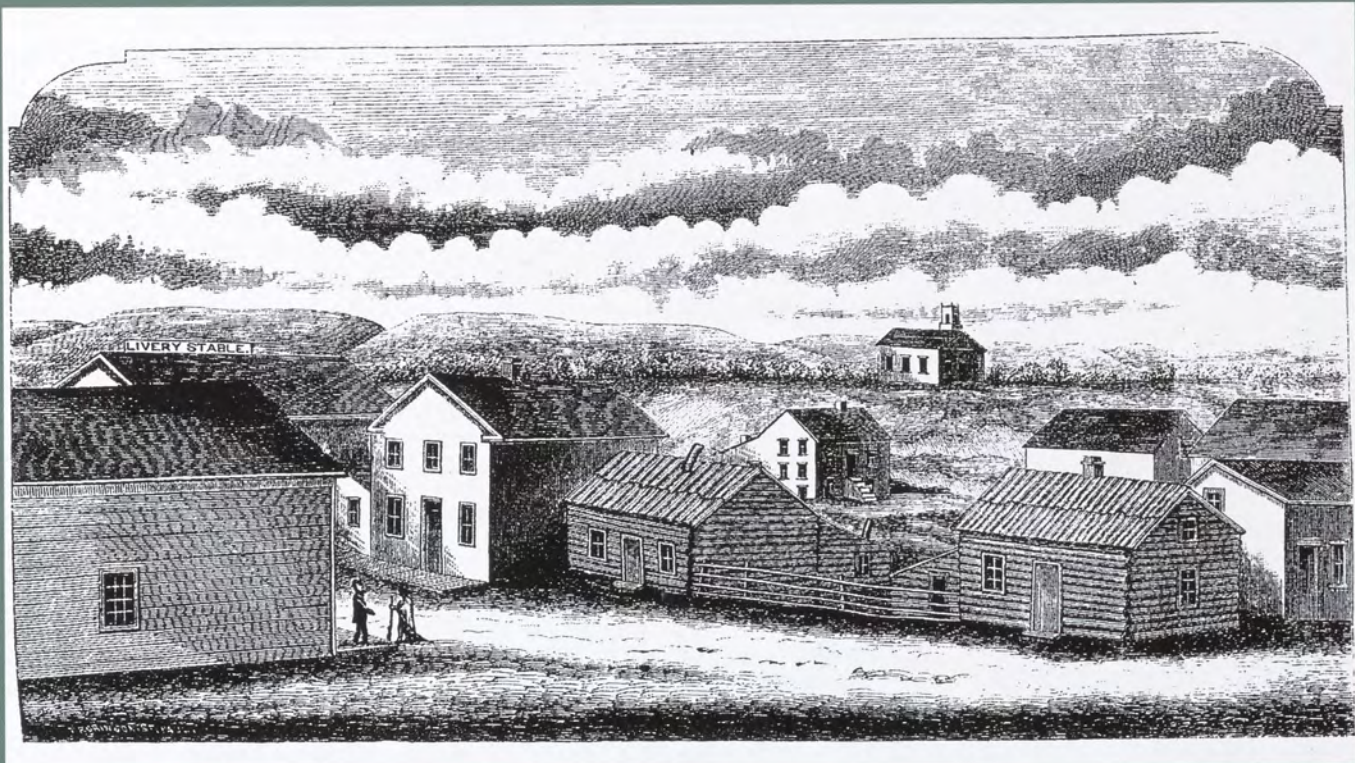
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A sketch based on one of the oldest photographs of pioneer St. Paul as it looked in 1851 when the Sisters of St. Joseph arrived there. The log house on the right stands at Third and Robert Streets. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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