

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Growing Up in St. Paul—
Diamonds, Gravel Roads,
And a Little Chevrolet*

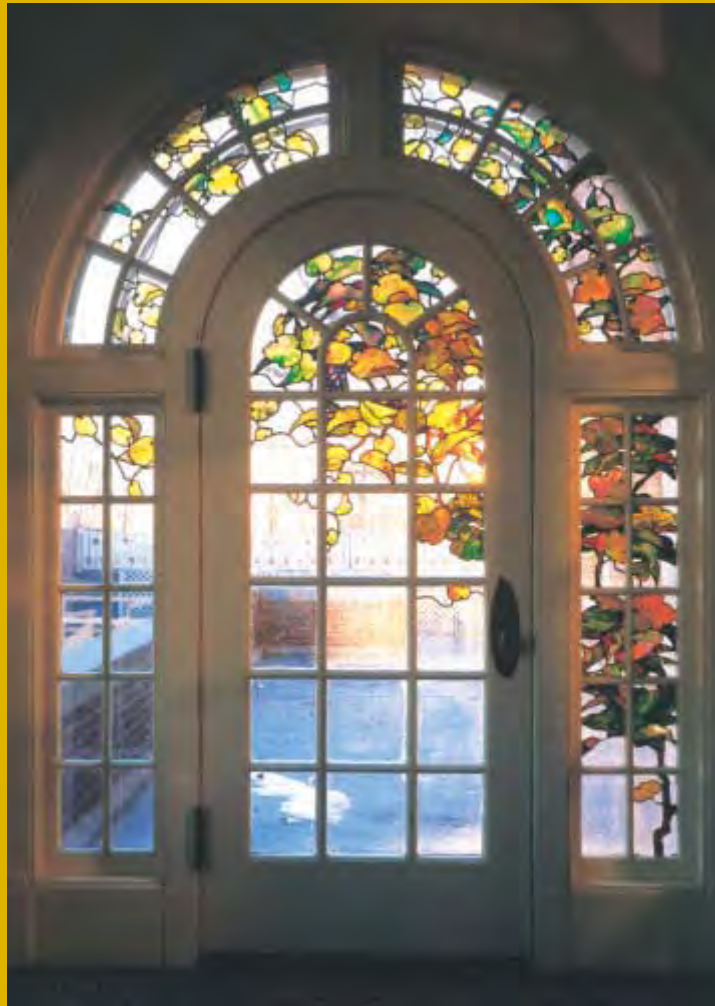
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Winter, 2003

Volume 37, Number 4

The History Behind the Louis Hill House

New Settlers, Real Estate Boom, and Speculation
—Page 4



The stained glass window Louis J. Millet designed for James J. Hill's house on Canada Street in Lowertown and later installed in Louis W. Hill's house at 260 Summit Avenue. See article beginning on page 4. This beautiful window was photographed for Ramsey County History by George Heinrich.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 4

Winter, 2003

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Our winter issue opens with Eileen R. McCormack's fascinating account of the history of the house that stands at 260 Summit Avenue, known to many St. Paul residents as the Louis Hill House. Today Richard and Nancy Nicholson and their family live there and have restored the house to the splendor that it had in the days when the Hills lived in the house, while also adapting it to the conveniences of contemporary living. What emerges from Eileen McCormack's research is a glimpse of a bygone era of St. Paul's elite and of the personality of the home the Hill family built.

Moving from an elegant residential property to a modest commercial and manufacturing part of the spectrum of St. Paul buildings, historian Matt Percy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recounts the history of the building at 333 Sibley Street. This commercial structure is today's Corps of Engineers Centre, which has its origins in the history of Gordon & Ferguson Company, a famous St. Paul furrier. Alan R. (Buddy) Ruvelson, a well-known St. Paul entrepreneur, contributes a "Growing Up in St. Paul" story that begins with his maternal great grandfather's home at 545 Sibley, in Lowertown, not far from the Corps' present headquarters. Publication of an old photo of the rabbi's house in David Riehle's article in the fall issue of *Ramsey County History* prompted author Ruvelson to trace his family's roots to Rabbi B. Rosenthal's home in the area that the plat maps called "Borup's Addition." Fortunately for us, Ruvelson has had a varied and unusual life as a dealer in diamonds, an entrepreneur, a venture capitalist, and public citizen. Whether elegant like the Hill home or modest like the home of Rabbi Rosenthal, St. Paul's built environment can tell us much about who we are and how our city has changed over the years.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

The 146-Year History of the Louis Hill House

New Settlers, a Booming Real Estate Market, and a Summit Avenue Site Acquired on Speculation

Eileen R. McCormack

The Louis W. Hill house at 260 Summit Avenue in St. Paul has once again become a family home, after spending close to half its life occupied by institutional owners. The activities surrounding the purchase, in 2001, of the home by Richard and Nancy Nicholson have been fully documented in local newspapers, but the history of the site, the homes built there, and the people who lived at 260 Summit are not as well known. The story did not begin with the construction of the Louis Hill house in 1901, nor did it begin with the purchase of the lots by James J. Hill in 1898. That piece of land had a prior history, a history that, from the early days of white settlement in St. Paul, in many ways mirrored the history of the avenue it stood on and the city surrounding it. The story of 260 Summit Avenue started long before the Hills' ownership of the land began.

In 1857, the date the first home was built at 260, Minnesota was nine years into its territorial status and one year from becoming the thirty-second state admitted to the Union. Situated just upriver from the confluence of the Minnesota River, on a bluff above the Mississippi, St. Paul was a rough frontier town, much like many others at the time. Settled beginning in 1840, between the upper and lower river landings (present-day downtown St. Paul), the location on the Upper Mississippi's head of navigation was a distinct advantage and one that guaranteed the city's growth and success. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this site in an age when water transport was the lifeblood of the country. The rivers carried settlers and commerce in good times and military assistance in troubled times.

By the late 1850s, St. Paul had grown from the original handful of buildings to a city with a population of close to 10,000 citizens. The business district remained clustered around the lower and upper steamboat landings, and elegant residential neighborhoods formed in Lowertown, Dayton's Bluff, Irvine Park, and particularly Lafayette Park with magnificent homes that stretched along

the fashionable Woodward Avenue. By the 1880s, although still vibrant, the increased commercial activity and growing transportation systems gradually had their effect on those neighborhoods. Railroad expansion with its attendant tracks, warehouses, and other industry began to encircle the downtown business district and encroach on the surrounding residential areas. During the decade between 1880 and 1890, the city's early merchants and transportation, financial, and real estate business owners began to relocate. The majority of St. Paul's elite looked toward the Summit Avenue bluff when planning their new homes, and by the mid 1880s, Ramsey Hill was on its way to becoming the city's most fashionable residential area.

After the influx of new settlers when Minnesota Territory was organized in 1849, the real estate market boomed, and speculation ruled the day. The abstract for the Summit Avenue piece of land where the future Louis W. Hill house would one day stand, listed no less than twenty-six owners/mortgage holders from the initial December 1, 1848, entry ("The United States to James McBoal") to the August 2, 1870, entry ("Louis Hargous to George Palmes"). Included were

such prominent St. Paul figures as Henry Rice, Alexander Ramsey, John Irvine, Henry Sibley, Lyman Dayton, Charles W. W. Borup, and D. W. Ingersoll.

In November 1854, this Summit Avenue piece of real estate was platted as the Dayton & Irvine Addition to St. Paul, Block 69, Lot Number 1. The present property at 260 is comprised of this lot on the Summit Avenue side and Lot Number 30, behind it, facing Irvine Avenue. Lot Number 30 of the Dayton & Irvine Addition, platted in 1854 as well, also had numerous owners; however, it was not owned in common with Lot Number 1, until December 19, 1881, when Palmes purchased the property from Mary Ann Woodward (widow of John Woodward). James J. Hill bought the entire Palmes property in 1898.¹

Home construction on Summit Avenue began in 1855 with Edward Duffield Neill's home at number 242, on the eastern edge of the bluff. Later that same year, Henry Rice built his home at number 288. In 1857, William Noble and Henry Masterson added their residences to the avenue, at number 260 and number 266 respectively. William Noble had the unfortunate fate to build his new home in the same year that a devastating depression hit the nation. Fully half of St. Paul's residents moved away and many that remained were left in serious financial straits. From 1857 until 1881, only twenty-two homes were constructed on Summit Avenue, a testament to uncertain economic times. Noble lost his property at 260 to foreclosure in December 1859, although he is still shown in the 1863 *St. Paul City Directory* as boarding (renting?) the house. The new owner of 260, Louis Hargous, is not listed in the city



The Noble-Palmes House at 260 Summit Avenue in 1902. James J. Hill bought the Palmes property, next door to his own home at 240 Summit, in 1898. From a private collection.

directories for the years between his purchase and 1870 when he sold the property to Georges Palmes, so it may be surmised that he was a non-resident owner.²

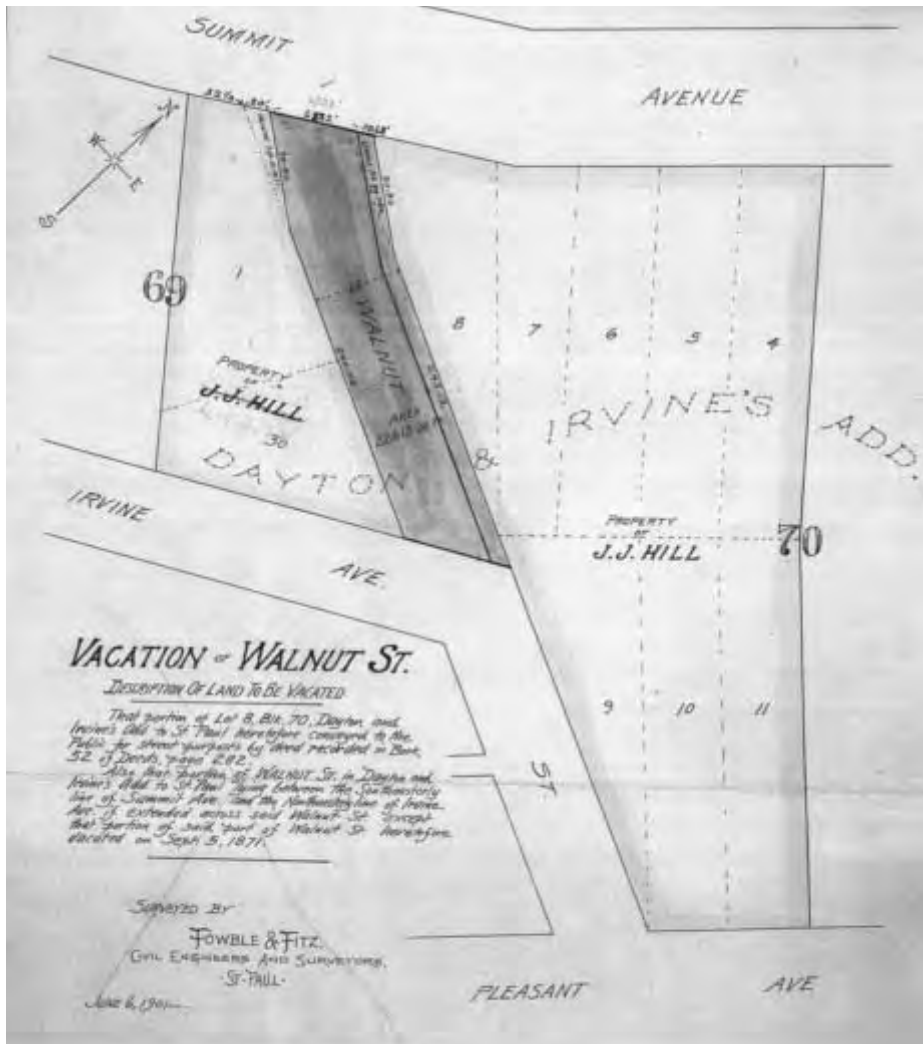
Although not much information on George Palmes is available, he was at least ten years ahead of the mass exodus of residents from the Lowertown area of the city. In the 1867 *City Directory* lists him as living at the corner of Pine and Seventh and owning a tailor shop on the corner of Minnesota and Third, the heart of the city's retail trade district. His business was long-standing and no doubt successful; from his firm's invoices in the James J. Hill Papers, it is evident he served at least *one* of the city's elite. The location of his home was only seven blocks north of the Mississippi River and one block east of Broadway, an area that

by 1870 was fairly commercial with most residents living in flats or apartment accommodations. Instead of moving farther north, as many did only to move again in a few years, Palmes chose to go directly to the bluff area on Summit. When he purchased the home at 260 Summit, it was one of only fifteen standing on the avenue. In 1891, Palmes purchased Lot Number 30, the property behind 260 Summit (267 Irvine Avenue). The family lived in the home built by William Noble until Palmes retired in 1897 and moved to Waukegan, Illinois. Prior to the sale of the property to James J. Hill in December 1898, Palmes rented the house to William P. Abbott, who owned Abbott Manufacturing, a factory that built doors and windows.³

The 1857 Noble house was, by 1897,

very unlike its neighbors on Summit Avenue. It was a two-story brick building with a shingle roof and no cellar, designed on the center hall plan, with four rooms on each floor. The house was heated by stoves and by 1898 was in need of a new roof and gutters, interior repairs and painting. The only photograph found, probably taken in 1901 shortly before its demolition, shows the Noble home in a state of some disrepair. The modest home must have been completely dwarfed by the mansions on either side of it; James Hill's immense home at number 240 and the impressive home of Frederick Weyerhaeuser at number 266.

Hill's appraiser, in determining how much rent to charge, certainly took into account the real estate maxim, "location, location, location" when he wrote, "The



Map showing the vacation of Walnut Street. From the Louis W. Hill papers at the James J. Hill Reference library.

rental value of the house lies entirely in its location, as the same house in any other part of the town would not bring over \$10.00 per month in its present condition. Considering its location, however . . . it is well worth \$35.00 as it stands." Although Summit Avenue had grown since the first homes were constructed in the late 1850s, it was not until after 1881 that it experienced tremendous building activity. From 1855 to 1881 only twenty-six homes were built on Summit and fifteen of those were torn down after 1880 to make way for new homes. Between 1882 and 1891, with economic good times and the relocation of the elite neighborhoods previously mentioned, St. Paulites constructed seventy-two new

homes on the avenue.⁴

Hill, a Summit Avenue resident since 1891, received a letter from C. E. D. Olmsted, dated October 31, 1898, informing him of the availability of the George Palmes property at a cost of \$23,000. Hill did not reply to Olmsted but on November 4th his secretary sent a note to Frederick Weyerhaeuser where, speaking of the property, he wrote, ". . . and as he [Hill] did not want to purchase it, he directed me to advise you of the same, as you might wish to take advantage of it." On December 12th of the same year, Hill was again approached by Olmsted who told him that Weyerhaeuser had agreed to purchase the Palmes property for \$20,000, however,

". . . afterwards withdrew it as his wife was opposed to it." Hill now evidently decided that the price was right and on December 20, 1898, agreed to terms. The warranty deed was recorded in Ramsey County on February 21, 1899. Whether lowering the price was the main consideration, or not, Hill was now the new owner of 260 Summit, and a step was taken which would result in the avenue becoming home to several members of James and Mary Hill's family. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Hill and five of his nine children had homes within a few blocks of each other, all on Summit Avenue: James and Mary at 240; Louis at 260; Clara at 251; Charlotte at 251 and later 435; Rachel at 505, then at 421 and finally at 366; and Walter at 465.⁵

In the two-and-a-half years prior to the start of construction on the house for Louis Hill, the old Noble home continued to be rented out. William P. Abbott remained until November 1899, when records show the home was rented to Charles C. Whitney, listed in the *City Directory* for that year as "State Expert Printer, Capital bldg." Whitney continued to rent at \$25 to \$30 a month, through March 1901. William C. Jaeger [Yaeger] rented the home only for the months of April and May of 1901, with a monthly rent of \$20. As Louis Hill's engagement to Maud Van Cortlandt Taylor was announced on April 10, 1901, Jaeger, no doubt, knew his residence at 260 would terminate when construction plans for the new home were in place. In a May 23, 1901, memo to W. C. Toomey, James J. Hill's secretary, Louis writes, "Please ask the President [James J. Hill] if it is his intention to give me the Palmes property, and if so take up with him the question of closing the street and advise me as soon as you can whether the city will agree to this or not as it would be useless to think of building there without the street being closed." James Hill must have informed Louis quickly on both points; by late May, Louis engaged architect Clarence Johnston for his new home and asked Toomey for an estimate of the total cost of the proposed house, broken down as follows: "1st estimate of excavations and foundations—2nd including

house walls, floors, partions (*sic*)—fire-proof and roof. 3rd including rooms all plastered and wood finished as Johnston [Louis' architect] and Brodie [the Great Northern architect] know I would want it—that is good but plain—and please let me know what the president said about closing the street and how far have you got on this?"⁶

Walnut Street up the hill from Irvine Avenue ran between 240 Summit and 260 Summit. Louis Hill wanted the city to close the street to the public and turn over the sixty feet of land that would then be added to the lot at number 260. The original lot was irregularly shaped and had only some thirty-two feet of frontage on Summit Avenue. In 1871, George Palmes had petitioned for and was granted the vacation of a triangular section of Walnut Street that added twenty feet to the frontage; however, that evidently was not sufficient for the house planned by Louis. James Hill, as owner of the properties, petitioned the City of St. Paul in early June 1901 as follows:

The petitioner has placed valuable and extensive improvements upon the premises on the Northerly side of Walnut Street (number 240) with a frontage on Summit Avenue, and it is his desire to improve the premises on the Southerly side of Walnut Street (number 260) . . . That although the portion of Walnut Street above described is dedicated upon the map to public use it never has been in fact used by the general public as a street or otherwise and it has never been opened or maintained as such, except that a stairway for the accommodation of foot-passengers has been for some years maintained by the city upon the Southerly side thereof; that the character of the ground is so precipitous that it never can be conveniently used for a public highway, and that it is and always will be unsuitable and useless for any public purpose . . .

And if that were not reason enough, Hill included a not-so-subtle threat:

. . . that for the purpose of utilizing the property of petitioner upon the South in any way it will probably be necessary to build a large and high retaining wall on the Northerly side of said property, which will add to the undesirability of said portion of said street for any



Louis W. Hill at the time of his marriage to Maud Van Courtland Taylor in 1901. Louis Hill papers, Hill Reference Library.



Maud Van Courtland Taylor, photographed in New York City around 1901.

possible public uses . . . to allow it to be suitably improved would be a great improvement to Summit Avenue and to the appearance thereof.

On August 1, 1901, the Board of Aldermen "recommended the adoption of an appropriate resolution declaring said vacation." However, Hill did not get his way entirely, as the resolution had some conditions that would result in Hill paying \$7,218.28 to construct a public walk and steps on ten feet of the former Walnut Street. The resolution read:

That there shall be and is granted and reserved to the public for all time, the right to travel on foot upon and over the portion of said Walnut Street . . . and that the said Mary T. Hill and James J. Hill at their own cost and without any expense to the city, immediately upon the passage of this resolution shall build a suitable stairway, ten feet in width, to be used for the accommodation of foot passengers . . . the said stairway to be

constructed of stone, iron or such other suitable and durable material as the commissioner of public works of the city of St. Paul shall direct and to be built according to a plan or design therefore to be prepared and approved by said commissioner.

Hill was also directed to pay \$1 ". . . in consideration of said vacation." Hill was more than likely happy with the result, as he gained most of what he wanted, although at perhaps a higher cost than he had anticipated.

Clarence Johnston was perhaps the most sought after St. Paul architect when commissioned by Louis Hill in 1901. By 1901, Johnston's work already was evident in thirty homes on Summit; he eventually would design forty-two buildings, beginning with the 1882 carriage house for Griggs and Foster at numbers 476—490 Summit. He also designed new homes for both men the following year, and in 1926 he directed the remodeling of the Gordon house at 378 Summit. In addition to residences, Johnston designed

numerous public and private buildings in the state. In his post as Minnesota State Architect from 1901 to 1931, he designed almost all of the state buildings constructed during that thirty-year period, including major buildings for the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses of the University of Minnesota and other state schools, state hospitals and institutions, as well as some of the structures at the Soldiers' Home and The Minnesota State Fairgrounds.

Johnston's residential work, during his fifty-four-year professional career, showed varied design styles. The houses he designed on Summit Avenue, ranged in style from Queen Anne to Romanesque and from homes built in the Beaux Art tradition of historical designs to ones "based on the simple geometry of rectangle, square, and triangle." He was trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the Beaux Art tradition, emphasizing classical design and monumental structures. He traveled to Europe, a requirement for architectural students of his day, and emerged as an architect who, while he appreciated the classical European buildings, was able to grow and expand his design ideas and produce wonderful homes within the restraints of his clients' space and budget considerations as well as their desires.⁸

In the Louis Hill house, Johnston's work exhibited his Beaux Art training in neoclassical design, "somewhere between the brooding power of his parents' Romanesque fortress (240 Summit) and the genteel propriety of the Georgian manor." Johnston's sense of historical styles was evident both inside and out. "The most powerful element of the design, a long basement arcade at the rear, was more attuned to seventeenth-century England than eighteenth-century America . . ." while the interior ". . . fell back to the English Renaissance, more than 150 years before the Georgian period . . . the central element of the plan was a great 'baronial' hall with reverse staircases on either side and a fireplace at the end." The exterior, with its precise symmetry and immense ordered portico, held its own with the imposing mansions of its Summit Avenue neighbors. In many ways, the rear façade with its arched veranda on the



Louis W. Hill with son, Louis W. Hill, Jr., on the lawn of the Newport house in 1903. This was their home while the new house at 260 Summit was under construction across Summit. From a private collection.

lower level and windowed bays above, all overlooking the Mississippi River, was the more dramatic exterior aspect. Given the size of the original house, the interior spaces were extremely gracious and gave the impression of a comfortable family home.⁹

As one reads the correspondence between James and Louis Hill and their architects and builders/finishers on any of their construction projects, their attention to details stands out; no item was overlooked, nothing was too insignificant for their attention, and once battle was joined on a particular issue the Hills were unrelenting. The extant documentation on the building of James Hill's house at number 240 and the building of Louis Hill's house at number 260 has that strong, common thread. Both men knew exactly what they wanted and when and where

they wanted it and made sure things were done their way. Obviously, this trait served them well in their business dealings and when it came to their building projects it produced wonderful results. What life was like for the people doing the work, one can only surmise, but it must have been frustrating and anxious at times. From the construction records, Johnston seems to have acted almost in the capacity of contractor as well as architect. As the work progressed, he often was the first to be contacted when Hill felt things were not exactly as he wished.

Hill's memos to Johnston increased in number as the December 1903 move-in date approached. On December 2, 1903, he wrote to Johnston three separate memos: 1) "The Pittsburg Plate Glass Company are still delaying furnishing glass for mantels etc. I wish you would



The Louis Hill house at 260 Summit around 1905-1920, before the addition was added to the front of the house in 1912. Private collection.

get after them.” 2) “I notice casement doors opening from living room to terrace have not yet been fitted with thresholds. I believe in addition to these weather strips should be put on.” 3) “I see no reason why work of closing in conservatory should not go ahead more rapidly . . . I wish you would take this up with Mann and have him hurry it along.”

Hill did not reserve his airing of concerns and suggestions for Johnston alone. Often he wrote directly to the companies involved, giving them precise directions, as in a letter of December 2 to Bazille & Partridge, “I notice there has been considerable delay in getting small plate glass mirrors for doors from reception room to hall and reception room to living room . . . I noticed two heavy plate mirrors at the

house today . . . I told Miller this would not do as they were too heavy . . . and weight would break down doors. It has occurred to me that the best way to get these mirrors would be to buy a lot of light plate glass from the photographers . . . from old scrap negatives . . . and send it over to Minneapolis to be properly backed with mercury etc. to make mirrors. Please advise me how this matter stands, and if you can arrange it in this way.”¹⁰

Louis and Maud Hill were married in New York City on June 5, 1901, and after an extended wedding trip to Europe returned to St. Paul in early September and stayed with James and Mary Hill while searching for a place to live until their new home was completed. In an August 19, 1901, letter to Louis Hill while he

still was in Europe, Toomey wrote, “It seems to be a very difficult matter to find a house for you on the hill, and although Mr. Read [rental agent] has canvassed the whole district he has not yet been fortunate in locating a suitable house. If Mr. Darius Miller, however, goes to Chicago he says he will be only too glad to let you have his house until yours is completed.” Toomey also informed Louis that the Walnut Street vacation had been granted.

Darius Miller, a second vice-president for the Great Northern Railway, lived at 251 Summit, a house built by Henry Rugg in 1886. City directories show Miller did not move to Chicago until sometime in 1902 which was too late for Louis Hill, but timely for his sister Charlotte and her new husband, George Slade.

In an April 3, 1903, letter to Maud, Louis writes, "I suppose George and Charlotte have taken the Rugg house and are getting it ready . . ."¹¹

On October 19, 1901, Hill signed a lease agreement on a house at 217 Summit, at the corner of Summit and Selby. The owner, Eliza Newport, had moved to her son's house at 433 Ashland after the death of her husband, General Reece M. Newport in 1900 or 1901. Her son, Reece Newport, a real estate agent, handled the rental of his family's former home. The rental fee was \$75 per month for the first year and \$100 thereafter.

There is little existent information on the Newport home other than that it was built in 1874 and torn down sometime in the 1920s to make way for a parking lot for the recently constructed St. Paul Cathedral directly across Selby Avenue. Mary Hill noted in her diary for December 21, 1901: "Louis and Maud moved into their house 'The Newports' this evening—and took their first meal there." Louis and Maud Hill lived in that house for two years until moving into their new home in December of 1903. Their first two children were born in the Newport house, Louis, Jr. on May 19, 1902 and Maude on June 1, 1903. One of the congratulatory letters received on the occasion of the birth of Louis, Jr., was written by Eliza Newport and read, "I shall always feel a peculiar interest in the dear child, born in my house and in my room, which I loved so much."¹²

Living at the Newport house, the Louis Hill family had a perfect vantage point from their front yard, to watch the actual construction of their new home that began in the summer of 1902. Since Louis Hill traveled a good deal on Great Northern Railway business and Maud traveled to visit family members in New York City, a number of letters documenting their observations on the new home have survived:

March 3, 1903—Louis, online to Spokane, to Maud: "I hope the work at the new house is getting on well and that Dahlen and Brodie are accomplishing something on the steps."

March 4, 1903—Louis, online to Butte, to

Maud: "I had a telegram from Parkhouse telling me of the plasterers strike at the house—hope it does not delay long—or put back any other work."

August 19, 1903—Louis, in Spokane, to Maud: "Hope everything in the new house is going on well and that they are working in the dining room and laying tile in bath rooms."

October 18, 1903—Louis to Maud, in New York City: "I expect this week will accomplish lots at the new house so that by the time you get home you will see lots of changes."

October 24, 1903—Louis to Maud, in New York City: "The house is going ahead slowly—all bath room tiles are here and living room fireplace facing, hearth, etc."

October 25, 1903—Louis to Maud, in New York City: "I have a new present for the new house—you never saw the things—two large bronze figures holding candelabra of 2 or 3 dozen lights—figures standing on beautiful marble and bronze pedestals—they were made in Paris and cost \$4000.00 a pair. I think they will look all right in the hall—they are about 7 or 8 feet tall. I was also given 4 or 5 paintings now hanging around my father's house but I told him I could not take them as they belonged in the house, but in the case of things that he could not use and was not using I could accept, such as the 3 windows (LaFarge design) and 2 figure candelabras."

November 12, 1903—Louis, online in Missouri, to Maud: "Keep after the men at the new house and if anything [is] going slow [tell] Johnson or tell the men at the house what you want done and make them do it."

November 21, 1903—Louis, online in Nebraska, to Maud: "I hope the work on the house will go on well while I am away. Keep after Allan Black till they get a start on fixtures."¹³

Again, entries in Mary Hill's 1903 diary for December describes the final moving preparations and the first few days the Louis Hill family spent in their new home. On December 10th: "Louis had many rugs at his house today and selected what he wanted for his house." A letter from Louis to Field, Schlick & Company on December 11th presents a

closer look at the rugs he "selected:" "Confirming our conversation at the house yesterday in regard to rugs: I shall be glad to purchase the dining room rug at \$615.00; large rug for hall at \$305.00; the two other hall rugs at \$142.00 and \$110.00 each. In regard to the three others . . . I do not care to decide on these until I have looked over what other rugs you have at the store." On December 15th Mary writes: "Maud sent her first things to the new house today, glass and china." By the following day, "Louis and Maud are moving today. As the men are still working in several parts of the house I should think setting discouraging." And it seemed things remained a bit "discouraging," as Mary wrote on December 17: "Louis and Maud are taking meals with us—As so many rooms are cold they may have to have all water drawn out of pipes to discover the difficulty."

On December 21 Mary wrote after visiting the new home: "We went over to Louis' this evening—found them pretty well settled in some rooms . . ." By Christmas Day, things obviously were looking up at No. 260: "We all went to Louis' and had luncheon in the new house" and the entertaining continued in the new year. Mary noted on January 6: "Maud's party and house warming '260' was a great success last night—everyone enjoyed the evening. And her reception today has been well attended and pleasant. Everyone seemingly delighted with the new home." A description of the interior of the Louis Hill house reveals why "everyone" was "seemingly delighted."¹⁴

The total construction cost of the Louis Hill house was close to \$60,000, and one-half of that amount was listed in the account books as "Interior Finishings." The four main public rooms of the home, library, dining room, reception room, and conservatory, were well proportioned, comfortable and bright, with numerous windows in a variety of styles, beautiful woodwork and large fireplaces. The wide center hall with its imposing fireplace at the far end opposite the front entry was the welcoming sight that greeted a visitor. French doors on either side of the hall fireplace led to the circu-

lar conservatory with its unique tile floor and richly colored grapevine-designed stained glass windows.

Louis Millet, a Chicago based art glass designer was the artist Hill turned to for his conservatory windows. Millet was, in 1903, in charge of the mural decorations for the 1904 St. Louis Worlds Fair. He held design medals from three previous world expositions, Paris in 1889 and 1900, and Chicago in 1891, and would go on to produce the first stained glass windows installed in the St. Paul Cathedral. Between 1917 and 1920, Millet designed the windows for the chapels of the Blessed Virgin, St. Peter, and St. Joseph in the newly completed cathedral.¹⁵

The library, which functioned as the Hill family living room, had walls of bookshelves and leaded glass windows. The Honduras mahogany woodwork shone in the massive fireplace, filled with the elaborately carved designs of William Yungbauer. A Vienna-trained carver, Yungbauer arrived in St. Paul in the early 1890s to supervise the interior carving at the James Hill house and stayed in the city, opening his own shop. In addition to the woodwork carving, Yungbauer's shop also made a large library table, a dining room table, a mahogany footstool and a large oak "hall piece" for the Louis Hill House. The library, as well as the dining room, opened off the hall through wide, columned entries.

On December 25, 1903, when Mary Hill came to her first luncheon at the new home, she saw one aspect of the interior that was familiar to her. On either side of the dining room fireplace, Louis had installed the LaFarge stained glass windows his father had given him. In 1882, James Hill commissioned John LaFarge to design three windows for the dining room of his Lowertown house at Ninth and Canada Streets. After the family's move to 240 Summit Avenue, James Hill saved the windows when he had the old house torn down (the third window is presently exhibited in the James J. Hill Gallery at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts).

The reception room, although smaller than the other public rooms, contained a large fireplace and two pairs of mirrored doors, the ones Louis was so concerned

about, leading from the hallway and into the library. Two more sons, Jerome and Cortlandt, were born after the family moved to 260. When the four Hill children grew older, they performed skits and plays using this room as their stage, with the "audience" in the library beyond the mirrored-door "curtain."

The remaining spaces on the main floor were for the elevator and safe, opening behind doors concealed in the wood-paneled dining room walls, and the butler's pantry. This room was connected to the main kitchen in the basement by a dumbwaiter. In addition to the normal arrangement of cupboards, the pantry had a special sink made of German silver for washing china and crystal. A unique plate/food warmer was integrated into the design of the room's radiator.

The home had six bedrooms, five family bedrooms on the second floor and a guest room one floor above. Also on the top floor were three servants' bedrooms near the inside stairway that connected with the service areas, the butler's pantry, kitchen and laundry, below. The fur storage room and other storage areas were on the third floor as well. Although the upper floors of the home were not as impressively proportioned or finished as those on the main floor, the family rooms contained many exquisite details. Four of the rooms had fireplaces with a variety of tiles and one of the baths had a border of blue and white delft tiles around its walls. As any family home does, 260 Summit underwent changes during the years the Hill family lived there. The nursery became an upstairs sitting room, and Jerome, who showed an interest in painting at an early age, moved to a bedroom specially designed with cupboards to store art supplies and paintings as well as a built-in desk/easel. When the front addition, with its four new guest rooms, was finished in 1912, Louis, Jr., then ten years old, moved upstairs to the third floor guest room.

In 1912, James Hill retired as chairman of the board of the Great Northern Railway and was succeeded by his son, Louis. Louis Hill felt a need for additional space in his home; the children were growing and the family wanted more room for visiting family members

and guests and larger areas for entertaining. Certainly, as his parents aged, Louis and his wife took on the responsibility for the bulk of the business entertaining. However, having parties seemed to be something that the entire Louis Hill family reveled in and it did seem that St. Paul society was extremely "social" during the early decades of the twentieth century.

A look at the society pages of the St. Paul newspapers reveals numerous reports, such as, "The Louis Hills hosted/entertained last evening . . .", or, "Among the guests were Mr. and Mrs. Louis (Maud) Hill . . ." Louis, Jr., Maudie, Jerome and Cortlandt were accustomed to having dinners, luncheons, teas, musicales, costume parties, etc. going on in their home. As the children entered their adolescent years, they too had frequent parties at 260 Summit. A March 6, 1922, letter written by Louis to his daughter, at school in the East noted, "Jerome's birthday party is finally over, having lasted only four days." In her diary entries, Maud Hill gave a brief look at some of their social doings:

1909—"Our Fancy Dress Party great success—There were many splendid costumes, Indians, Cowboys, Romans, Chinese & Japanese . . . Maud and Louis (children) staid up till 10:30 p.m., till after photo was taken.

1910—"We gave cotillion of 150 (guests). Walter Driscoll & Eddie (?) Saunders led. I wore 4 pairs of slippers, so tired. Everyone said they had a good time."

1912—"Mrs. Hersey & Howard Elliot, the 4 Griggs brothers came in . . . we all went to the Ordways. Not in bed till 3:45 a.m."¹⁶

Louis Hill was in charge of the St. Paul Winter Carnival celebrations in 1916 and 1917, and this was a time of many parties at his home. The Hills entertained participants, from Carnival royalty to sled dog drivers, and family members skied, tobogganed, skated, and rode in the parades. Perhaps the high point of the social activities at 260 Summit occurred in 1926 when Queen Marie of Rumania paid St. Paul a visit and stayed at Louis and Maud's home. She was feted by the city and the Hills hosted a reception in her

Who Was John Lafarge? And Louis J. Millet?

One of America's most talented artists who worked equally well in oils, water colors and on wood and in stained glass, John LaFarge has been called the "father of mural painting in America." He was born in New York City in 1835 of French parents who were living in the United States.

La Farge studied in Paris, copying the works of old masters in the Louvre. After returning to New York, he studied law but finding he disliked it, he moved to Newport, Rhode Island, to study and paint landscapes, still lifes and figures under William Morris Hunt. His interest in stained glass arose from his most important work, the decoration of Trinity Church in Boston.

James J. Hill commissioned the stained glass windows, shown on the back cover of this issue, in October, 1882, for his house on Ninth Street and Canada in Lowertown. He paid for the windows in January, 1883 (a total of \$718.75) and they would have been installed in that time period. When Hill moved to 240 Summit in 1891, he had the windows removed before ordering the Canada house demolished. Toward the end of his life, LaFarge also painted the murals for the new Minnesota State Capitol, but his greatest mural was for the chancel of the Church of the Assumption in New York City. He died in 1910.

* * *

Louis J. Millet (1856–1923), designer of the stained glass window shown on the front cover of this magazine, also was born in New York City. He studied at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, then moved to Chicago in 1879 where he began working in decorative art: stained glass, frescoes, and glass mosaics, among other mediums. Between 1886 and 1918 he was associated with the Art Institute of Chicago, founding its Department of Decorative Design.

In 1903–1904 he served as chief of mural and decorative pointing for the St. Louis World's Fair. He assisted Louis H. Sullivan in the interior decoration of the bank in Owatonna, Minnesota.

honor. The formal invitation read:

In honor of
Her Majesty
The Queen of Roumania
His Royal Highness, Prince Nicholas
and
Her Royal Highness, Princess Ileana
Mr. and Mrs. Louis W. Hill and Committee
of Hostesses invite
Miss Weyerhaeuser
To a reception on Sunday evening,
October 31, 1926
at half after nine o'clock
260 Summit Avenue

And from that date on, the guest bedroom Queen Marie slept in was known as the "Queen's Room".¹⁷

The "Queen's Room" was in the 1912 addition to the house designed for Louis Hill by architect Charles Frost. A Chicago architect, Frost was responsible for many railroad buildings including both the Great Northern Depot and the Milwaukee Road Depot in Minneapolis, the still-to-be constructed Union Depot (1923) in St. Paul, and James Hill's Railroad and Bank Building (1916), also in St. Paul. As he had with Clarence Johnston, Louis Hill kept a close eye on the progress of the addition and after he be-

came "frustrated with Frost's irritating delays . . . he complained to the architect in a letter that hinted darkly about the pending railroad commission: 'I certainly do not look forward with the assurance that I should like to the completion of our large building. When your people have so much trouble over simple matters of this nature, I do not know what they will do when it comes to the details of the large building.'"¹⁸

The 1912 addition was at the front of the original house and maintained Johnston's center hall plan and his ordered portico. The main floor had a wide hallway with twin staircases and four large bedrooms, each with its own bathroom. The entire second floor was given over to one room that the Hill family called the music room. The opposite ends were set off by a huge fireplace and a wooden screen that concealed the organ pipes. The room was wood paneled and lit primarily by a skylight above the glass-paned ceiling. One photograph of this room showed the seven eight-foot-tall bronze figure candelabras Louis had received from his father ten years earlier, and in this immense room they appeared small. For family use, in addition to the organ, there was a grand piano and a com-

fortable seating arrangement in front of the fireplace. For entertaining, hundreds of guests could be accommodated if need be. Later a swimming pool was installed in the basement of the new addition.¹⁹

By 1930, the children either had married or were away from St. Paul for long periods of time and the active lifestyle of the Hill family at 260 Summit Avenue ceased. In 1934, Maud and Louis Hill separated and she moved to a house at 475 Portland Avenue, a few blocks from 260 Summit. With all of his children now living away from home permanently, Louis Hill spent the last fourteen years of his life dividing his time between his home at 260 and the other homes he had constructed in North Oaks, Glacier Park, and Pebble Beach, California. Much of that time was spent in California as three of his children; Maudie, Jerome, and Cortlandt had homes there. Only Louis Hill, Jr. lived in St. Paul. On April 27, 1948, after a long illness, Louis Hill died at Miller Hospital in St. Paul.

In 1924, Maud and Louis Hill had redrawn the deed to 260 Summit to include equal shares for themselves and their four children in a joint tenancy. In 1950, Louis Jr., Maudie, Jerome, and Cortlandt agreed to purchase their mother's interest



A 1917 Winter Carnival party at 260 Summit for the sled dog race drivers. Louis, Sr., is in the center seated on the sofa. Camera Art Co. photo from the Louis W. Hill papers, Hill Reference Library.

and for the next four years, the house remained much as it had when Louis Hill was living there. The four heirs maintained it with a staff of three live-in servants. No documentation exists as to whether there was a plan for any of the children to use the home as a residence; perhaps they were just not ready to make a decision as to the dispersal of the family home and its contents. Whatever the reason for the delay, they evidently were ready by January 7, 1954, to move ahead with plans to offer the house for sale. On that date Louis Hill Jr., wrote to his siblings, "I asked Ryland Rothschild to help us with the sale of '260' . . . I told him that because of the personal nature of the building, the four of us had to reserve the right to veto a prospective purchaser, and that the only two who had been specifically authorized so far were the Shriners

and the Lutheran Welfare League." In response he received a letter from his brother Cortlandt: "I am in favor of the sale if we can find the right use for the house . . . I would not like to see it used for the Shriner's Social Club nor to see it put up for sale lest it get into wrong hands." Cortlandt included a comment that, if acted on, would have restored Walnut Street as a public road, "You may recall your suggestions to me that if the house was torn down, the City might build a street running down town which would greatly relieve the Cathedral traffic jam . . . the City might therefore be interested."²⁰

Whether no offers came in or there were no appropriate offers, the file is silent on the subject until June 11, 1954, when in a letter from Louis Jr., to the other heirs, he stated that Rothschild had



Jerome Hill's design for an invitation to a party at 260 Summit during the 1920s. Louis W. Hill papers, Hill Reference Library.

an organization, the St. Paul Catechetical Guild Education Society, interested in 260 Summit. In his letter, Louis wrote of the financial considerations, a \$50,000 offer by the Guild, and he informed his brothers and sister that a description of the organization and their plans for "260" would be sent by Walter Honebrink, a family friend, who was familiar with the Guild. The letter to Maudie, Jerome, and Cortlandt was sent the same day.

Honebrink wrote, "The Catechetical Guild Education Society of St. Paul creates and publishes many types of booklets primarily for use of Catholic children and families. Reverend Louis A. Gales who founded the Society in 1933 is its President. From a general knowledge of the organization and what it is doing, I sincerely hope that you . . . look favorably upon the purchase of your former home by the Guild." The last part of the letter showed that Honebrink was aware of the Hills' concern about the suitability of prospective owners: "Should the Guild become owners of your home, there would be conducted in it a dignified, quiet operation by the creative and office staff. Printing and shipping are done elsewhere, mainly in New York. In the event this should come about, I feel sure that there will come to you some degree of satisfaction in the fact that your former home, which carries pleasant memories for you and so many of your family's friends, is being used for a very worthy purpose. Copies of some of the publications are enclosed also so that you may see the nature of the work."²¹

That endorsement of the Guild evidently persuaded the Hills and they sold the property at 260 Summit Avenue on December 1, 1954. Louis Hill Jr., arranged for storage of the numerous household items in the music room until decisions were finalized as to dispositions to family members and charitable organizations.

One year later, Louis wrote regarding the items still at the house: "You will recall it had been difficult for us to make final disposition of the great number of articles, including the thousands of books, the rugs, and the furniture, and that though a good part had been orga-

nized on a tentative basis, we had items of furniture that belonged to us in many of the rooms throughout the house, and the large music room itself was just about filled with articles belonging to us." The charitable donations included "eighty-eight items" of furniture, rugs, and miscellaneous, plus books and eight religious paintings remaining in the house for the use of the Catechetical Guild, totaling an appraised value of \$6,200.²²

The Guild owned 260 Summit for seven years, until the 1961 sale of the property to a religious community, Daughters of the Heart of Mary. The members of this community, told by Archbishop John Brady of the need for a retreat house in St. Paul, felt the Louis Hill house was the perfect place for that purpose. Before opening the retreat house, the Sisters had the entire interior repainted, and converted the immense music room into a chapel. Additional bedrooms and baths were built in the storage areas on the third floor and the partitioning of the large master bedroom on the second floor. The main floor of the house received a refurbishing, but remained unchanged from the Hill years. Furniture was acquired for both the new bedroom areas and for the main rooms of the house. Most of the furniture donated by the Hill children to the Guild was still in the home when his mother died in 1961, Jerome Hill returned some pieces that originally had come from 260. The retreat house was named "Maryhill Renewal Center," after the Virgin Mary and the location of the facility on Summit Hill . . . although "the Hill family name had some significance in naming the retreat house."²³

The Daughters of the Heart of Mary operated the retreat house and conference center for thirty-six years and the Sisters maintained the home with love and care. A number of these women lived at 260 Summit for many years and some, like Sister Margaret Mary, were there from the beginning. They carried in their heads and hearts all of the stories and secrets of the house, and loved sharing them with visitors. A tour of Maryhill included the history of the house, the Hill family, and of course the story of the "Queen's Room." The Sisters refinished furniture

for the home, repaired rugs, washed beautiful stained glass windows, scrubbed the exquisite tile floors and walls, and cared for the gardens. But by the mid-1990s, the community, coping with a variety of internal and external changes, found the continued maintenance of Maryhill difficult. The decision was made in April 1996 to close the center on Easter 1997. As an article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported, "It's inevitable . . . the Daughters of the Heart of Mary don't have the money to keep the place up. The women who run it are getting older, and younger nuns are in short supply."²⁴

The Sisters had many feelings of sadness when Maryhill was put up for sale: "There was a lot of sweat and blood that went into this. You put your whole self into it. But you reach a point when you have to let go . . ." They had time to indulge in the same careful consideration the Louis Hill children employed when 260 Summit was sold to the Guild. They were determined to sell the house to people who would love it as they did, who would use it for a good cause, and who would care for it . . . and hopefully would be able to pass on the history that was so important to the Sisters. Deva Foundation, who planned to turn the home into a children's hospice, seemed an appropriate organization to take over 260 Summit. The sale went ahead and in July 1997, Maryhill became known as Deva House.²⁵

The founders of Deva envisioned the house "as a homey place . . . that [would] offer hospice and respite care, educational resources and other support for terminally ill children and their families." The new owners embarked on an ambitious renovation and remodeling of 260 Summit. They removed the partitions in the master bedroom and second floor hallway and made necessary repairs to the roof and chimneys. A new, larger elevator replaced the original installation, taking the spaces formerly occupied by the safe on the first floor and the fur storage room on the third floor. The total expense for their work was \$550,000, and in June 2000 the Deva House administrators determined that uncompleted work would amount to an additional \$1.2 million.

The costs were far above what had been estimated when the property was purchased and “efforts to mount an aggressive capital campaign never took off.” The Deva board felt the costs were unmanageable for the organization and decided to sell the house and, “find a new residential facility that won’t be such a financial drain on the program.” In the early summer of 2001, the Louis Hill house was sold to a St. Paul family. Exactly 100 years after Louis and Maud Hill were married and began plans for their home, a new family began their life at 260 Summit Avenue.²⁶

Institutional ownership of the Louis Hill house was certainly not unusual during this period in the history of Summit Avenue. By the 1950s many of Summit Avenue’s large homes were no longer family homes. Considered old-fashioned and too costly to maintain by second and third generation owners, the heirs and/or estates often donated or sold them to religious, civic or cultural associations. Ultimately, many of these houses fared well, although often victims of benign neglect due to the cost of upkeep. The organizations that owned them saved most from standing vacant, being divided into rental apartments and rooming houses, or razed. The Louis Hill house was one of the more fortunate in that for thirty-six years, from 1961 to 1997, it was in the loving hands of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary who treated it very kindly. Beginning in the 1980s St. Paulites took a good look at Summit Avenue and made the commitment to preserve its history and restore its wonderful character. Today while some houses remain affiliated with institutions, most others have returned to their original residential purpose. Once again a family home, 260 Summit and its gracious, elegant neighbors on the Avenue welcome guests back to their parlors, conservatories and libraries . . . or rather perhaps, to their family rooms, media centers and home offices.

Eileen R. McCormack is associate curator in the manuscripts area of the James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul. She is a historian specializing in local and state social and cultural history.

End Notes

1. Abstracts of Title—Lot One & Lot Thirty, Block Sixty-nine, Dayton and Irvine’s Addition to St. Paul, John H. Schultz, Clerk, Ramsey County, State of Minnesota, February 20, 1899. Palmes Property File, Louis W. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library (HRL), Saint Paul, Minnesota (LWHP).
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8. Paul Clifford Larson, *Minnesota Architect: The Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston*. (Afton: Afton Historical Society Press, 1996) Appendix Am p. 170-193. Sandeen, p. 99-106.
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13. General Correspondence, MCVTHP.
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15. Sharon S. Darling, *Chicago Ceramics & Glass*. (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1979). Eric C. Hansen, *The Cathedral of Saint Paul: An Architectural Biography*. (St. Paul: The Cathedral of St. Paul, 1990). The description of the interior of the house in this and following paragraphs was compiled from a variety of sources including: 260 Summit Residence—correspondence, specifications, financial records, photographs, LWHP; 1997 oral history done by this author with Sister Margaret Mary at Maryhill, as well as images and written documentation of 260 Summit gathered by author (1997–2001).
16. *Ibid.* Diaries 1909, 1910, 1912, MVCTHP.
17. Framed invitation now in private collection.
18. Robert M. Frame III, *James J. Hill’s Saint Paul: A Guide to Historic Sites*. (St. Paul: James J. Hill Reference Library, 1988) p. 24-25.
19. See footnote number 15.
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22. *Ibid.*

23. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 11, 1965. Oral history, 1997.

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John LaFarge's stained glass window, retrieved by James J. Hill from his Canada Street house for use by his son Louis W. Hill at 260 Summit Avenue. See article beginning on page 4. Photograph by George Heinrich for Ramsey County History.

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