

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

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

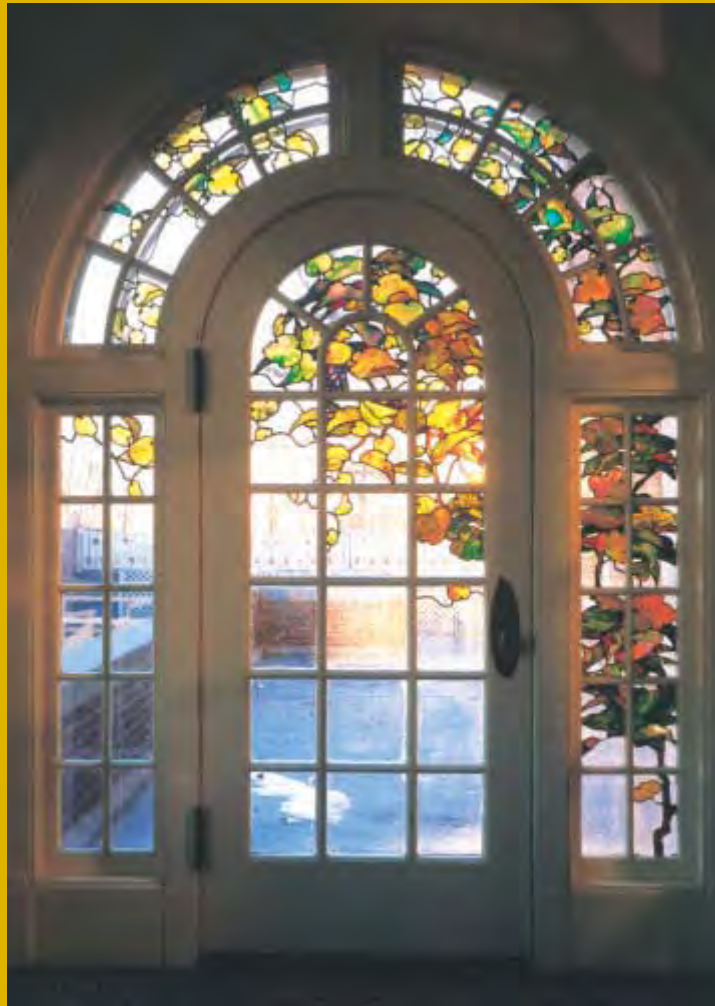
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Winter, 2003

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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

A Flourishing Fur Trade Industry

And the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Centre Building

Matt Percy

The building that currently serves as headquarters for the St. Paul District of the Army Corps of Engineers enjoys a rich history, with ties to the flourishing fur trade industry of the nineteenth century; nationally renowned Minnesota architect Clarence Johnston; famed polar explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd; and Minnesota's favorite son, Charles Lindbergh.

The Gordon and Ferguson Company, 1913–1944

The building at 333 Sibley in St. Paul originally served as the headquarters for the manufacturing and sales activities of Gordon & Ferguson, a prominent fur trading company founded by Richards Gordon (1829–1911) in 1871. Originally from Wexford, Ireland, Gordon emigrated to the United States in the 1840s, seeking his fortune. He moved to St. Paul in 1854 and opened a wholesale hat and cap business at 134 East Third Street. Four years later, he began manufacturing buffalo coats from hides collected by the tens of thousands from the herds that still roamed the unbroken prairies of the Great Plains. Gordon brought in Paul Ferguson in 1871 and changed the company name to Gordon & Ferguson.

The business flourished and, in 1880, it moved into a larger building at 216 East 4th Street. That same year, Richards Gordon brought his son, Charles, into the company, and the younger Gordon later became vice president under his father. In 1898, Richards retired to Rochelle, New York, and his son became the moving force behind Gordon & Ferguson. The company moved again in 1904, this time to 300 East Fourth Street.

By 1912, Gordon & Ferguson had become a world-renowned furrier and had set its sights on more lavish accommodations. Under the direction of Charles



The Nalpak building at 333 Sibley in 1959, as seen from Mears Park. Note the fire escape and the absence of the main entrance on East Fifth Street. Owned at the time by John J. Kaplan, president and treasurer of the Globe Paper Box Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, its name was changed to the Nalpak Building (Kaplan in reverse).

Gordon, the company began planning the construction of new offices at Sibley and Fourth Street. They hired the famed Minnesota architect Clarence Johnston to build the new Gordon & Ferguson Building. Johnston also designed virtually all of the buildings on thirty-five Minnesota-owned sites including the University of Minnesota's main campus in Minneapolis. In private practice, he designed many residences and public buildings, including forty-two houses still standing on Summit Avenue in St. Paul, one of the best-preserved, upper-class Victorian promenade boulevards in America.

The Gordon & Ferguson building was the largest manufacturing plant commission of Johnston's career. Costing \$250,000, the structure covered nearly half a city block to the height of nine stories on Fourth Street (eight stories uphill on Fifth Street). The main entrance was originally located on Sibley Street; salesrooms occupied the bottom floors, and the manufacturing processes and the main fur factory were located on the upper floors. The fleshing machines, fur-dressing shops, drying racks, cleaning drums and cases, tannery, dye house, and skin rooms were located in separate "out" buildings.



Making hats, around 1935. The company was a major supplier to the United States armed forces during World War II.

Gordon & Ferguson prospered throughout its residency at 333 Sibley Street. Because of its stellar reputation as a maker of fur coats, it was asked to supply the fur coats worn by Admiral Richard E. Byrd on his first expedition to Antarctica in 1928. The company also manufactured flight apparel, including fur-lined flight suits for open-cockpit biplanes, and was selected by Minnesota native Charles Lindbergh to supply the flight suit he wore when flying “The Spirit of St. Louis” on the first solo non-stop flight from the United States to Paris. This suit, proudly bearing the Gordon & Ferguson label, is now on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.



The Gordon & Ferguson building in 1908 when the company was located at 300 East Fourth Street in Lowertown. All photos are from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.

The company later became a major supplier to the armed forces in the United States during World War II. By 1944, the Gordon & Ferguson Company had once again outgrown its home, and it abandoned the building in favor of a new address one block to the east at 230 East Fifth Street, currently the Mears Park Center.

The Nalpak Building, 1958–1993

The early St. Paul city directories indicate that Gordon & Ferguson occupied the building at 333 Sibley from 1913–1944. Western Electric Company purchased the building in 1944 and maintained offices there until the mid-1950s, when it fell vacant for a time. In 1958, John J. Kaplan, president and treasurer of Globe Paper Box Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, purchased, refurbished, and renamed the building, calling it the Nalpak Building (Nalpak is “Kaplan” in reverse). Under Kaplan’s ownership, the building housed the United Way of St. Paul, Dun & Bradstreet, Inc., and a number of state offices, including the State Department of Employment Security, the State Department of Revenue, and the Human Services Association.

The Corps of Engineers Centre, 1993 to present

The Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District, began leasing portions of the building in 1988 for eighty employees of the district’s Construction-Operations Division. It adopted the building as the St. Paul District headquarters in 1993, after more than fifty-three years in the main downtown Post Office. The Nalpak Building was renovated—this time after its largest leaseholder, the Army Corps of Engineers. In December 1999, the BGK Group of Santa Fe, New Mexico, purchased the old Gordon & Ferguson building for a reported \$11.17 million. BGK also owns, among others in the Twin Cities, the Norwest Center and the Metro Square buildings in St. Paul and the Lumber Exchange building in Minneapolis.

Matt Percy is district historian for the Army Corps of Engineers in Paul. The corps is quartered in the old Gordon & Ferguson building at 333 Sibley Street. Percy has taught history at the University of North Texas, Denton, and is developing web-based survey courses in United States history.



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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