

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

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CELEBRATING
RAMSEY COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S

65th Anniversary

Fall 2014

Volume 49, Number 3

An Adventure in Historical Research:

In Search of Ethel Stewart

Steven C. Trimble, page 3



The Gibbs farmhouse about 1961 at the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life in Falcon Heights, Minn. The original portion of this building that was the home of Jane and Heman Gibbs for more than fifty years dates from 1854. Remarkably well preserved, the farmhouse is on the National Register of Historic Places and plays a central role in telling the story of pioneer life in Ramsey County and Jane's relationship with the Dakota Indians of the area. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 49, Number 3

Fall 2014

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

A Message from the Editorial Board

Nobody knows your own history the way you do. At RCHS, we are always advocating for families, businesses, and other groups to collect and write their own histories. This issue, we are taking our own advice! We have put pen to paper (well, digitally) and have brought together different perspectives from our history as an organization as part of celebrating the Society's 65th Anniversary. Steve Trimble writes about our founder, Ethel Stewart. John Lindley shares his views of Virginia Kunz, executive director and editor of this magazine for more than 40 years. Priscilla Farnham outlines the transformative change in interpretation at the Gibbs Museum that she initiated as executive director to include the 1995 archeological dig and the well-documented interaction between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people. Mollie Spillman, our curator/archivist, outlines her story of preserving and sharing our heritage of artifacts. And I'm in there too, writing about my first job at RCHS, one of the first tenants in Landmark Center. So get inspired, and write your own histories! Your family, friends, and maybe even readers of this magazine (should you submit an article), will thank you.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Safer and More Accessible:

The RCHS Archives and Collections Since 1994

Mollie Spillman

Collections form the foundation of Ramsey County Historical Society's history and programs. RCHS was founded in 1949 to save the Gibbs farmhouse from demolition and to preserve and present the history of the Gibbs family and pioneer settlement in east central Minnesota. The Gibbs farmhouse is the first, and largest, artifact in the Society's permanent collection. Many more artifacts, books, and photographs were donated to furnish the Gibbs farmhouse for use in the interpretive programming that began there in 1954.

Like many fledgling historical societies, object donations occurred, seemingly without a clear plan for what to collect or the appropriate methods to store and exhibit the items accepted. Accepted items related directly to the operation and interpretation of the Gibbs site with little inclusion of other elements of Ramsey County history. As the site interpretation changed over the years, the focus of collecting changed with it.

After RCHS moved its offices from the Gibbs site to Landmark Center in the mid-1970s, board leadership facilitated greater involvement and participation in collecting, documenting, and exhibiting a larger range of Ramsey County history. The increased archival and exhibit space allotted to RCHS in Landmark Center allowed for this programming expansion.

Collections Assessment

In November 1994, Priscilla Farnham, then the RCHS executive director, hired me as a consultant to conduct a preliminary collections assessment and present a plan and budget for ongoing collections care and management. I encountered an abundance of items in all of the locations where they were stored and exhibited, including Landmark Center offices and storage rooms, Gibbs site buildings, a donated warehouse stall in Lowertown, and spaces at the Ramsey County Government Center West building (West) on Kellogg Boulevard.

Archival, library, and photographic negative collections were stored in two vaults and a workroom on the first floor of Landmark Center, which had opened as a federal building in 1902, and eventually became the home for a number of cultural nonprofit organizations and museums. Frequently consulted books, plat maps, and photographs were stored and made available to researchers in the center room of the main office suite on the third floor, where our main office remains today.

Artifacts were part of the exhibit atmosphere and interpretation in all the Gibbs site buildings. Stored within every cupboard, closet, and basement were smaller artifacts that were not being used as part of the programming. Being an open air museum, of sorts, makes Gibbs problematic for the safe exhibition of artifacts, due to the lack of climate control and level of public access to the buildings. Six large transportation artifacts, including carriages, carts, and sleighs were stored in an unheated warehouse space donated to RCHS by the McNeely family.

Smaller artifacts up to medium-sized farm implements were stored in two large spaces at the West Building. West, formerly the West Publishing Building at 50 West Kellogg Boulevard, was built into and against the river bluff over a span of several decades, beginning in 1887. It had many irregular spaces, and while our storage areas were not suit-

able for county offices and were rather grim with low ceilings and the constant hum of nearby HVAC systems, the climate was stable and the spaces were relatively secure. Shortly after Priscilla joined RCHS, she began working with the County Commissioners and their staff to identify a space for artifact storage. Ramsey County has consistently supported our mission and programs since our inception.

My direction came from Priscilla Farnham and Liz Holum Johnson, H.B. Fuller's corporate archivist and RCHS board member. Liz wrote the first collection management policy for RCHS in 1993. She was a strong advocate, along with Priscilla, for improving collections management policies and procedures, stressing the need to hire a museum professional to be responsible and care for the collection. In December 1994, she presented my plan to the RCHS Board of Directors for review and discussion. The Board acknowledged that the 1995 budget needed a line item for curatorial supplies, and that the money would need to be raised, as this was to be a new and ongoing expense. In January 1995, I was hired as the full-time curator/archivist and began to implement the plan.

One of my first steps was to complete donation accessioning, including donor correspondence, for the new items that had been accepted at the Gibbs site and the Landmark office over the previous twelve months. The Board established a structure for the Collections Committee, which I had suggested. Liz and I remained the most active members with other board members participating in the monthly meetings to discuss and vote on new items being offered for donation. Earlier, the RCHS Board had suspended accepting new donations, pending the



A 2013 exhibit of selected Winter Carnival objects from the RCHS Collections included these Field-Schlick marching uniform jackets. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

hiring of a museum professional and securing storage space.

By the end of 1995, donor correspondence was up to date. Fourteen individual and organizational donors had donated 183 items. The largest donation was 112 Winter Carnival uniforms, costumes, and artifacts from the St. Paul Festival and Heritage Foundation, which manages the St. Paul Winter Carnival. This donation created the foundation for what is today a significant collection of Winter Carnival objects, numbering over 350. This is in addition to a collection of nearly 4,000 photographs (1937–1979) taken mostly by its official photographer, Kenneth M. Wright. On average, I spend about 15% of my time talking to potential collections donors and assessing their materials for recommendation to the Collections Committee. In 2013, 81 donors gave 593 items.

Nearly all standard policies and procedures needed to be written, and then approved by the RCHS Board. The disaster plan gave specific collections management directives following any type of disasters affecting the condition and safety of the collection. The retention schedule enumerated the specifics of institutional archival materials and the length of time they must be retained. We also officially began an internship program with three nearby colleges and universities. I trained

these local students in archival and curatorial work methods. Each intern worked between 40 and 120 hours, completing collections processing projects for credits at their institution.

Ramsey County Parks and Recreation Department printer's plates and glass plate negatives and a large collection of photographic safety negatives by Everett Kroeger were inventoried and properly stored, and backlogged, smaller archival collections were processed with finding aids created. Lakewood Community College, which is today Century College, was the predominant contributor of interns between 1995 and 1997. In 1995, 6 interns and volunteers contributed 362 hours. In 2013, 30 volunteers and interns contributed nearly 3,571 hours to the Collections Department.

The largest quantity of artifacts came to the collection as a single accession in 1995. It was a new type of collection for RCHS as well. Over 5,000 artifacts were recovered from the 1995 sod house archaeological excavation at the Gibbs Farm site. The Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota State Archaeologist reviewed RCHS curatorial capacity to manage this collection, and we were permitted to retain all of the artifacts. The Gibbs family lived in a partially underground, dugout sod house from 1849 to 1854; then they built a cabin a few feet away and the soddy was filled in and abandoned. We had family member recollections and stories about the structure within the Gibbs family papers, and they were entirely confirmed in the physical evidence unearthed in the excavation. The artifacts recovered and retained range from children's toys and buttons to pieces of fine china and square cut nails.

House of Hope Collection

The American Hoist and Derrick Collection (1885–1985) was the largest collection in the archive when I was hired. In 1997 RCHS accepted its second largest archival collection up to that time. Leaders of the House of Hope Presbyterian Church, founded in 1849, recognized the importance of caring for their archive, and they were about to embark on the celebration of their sesquicen-

ennial. I was contacted by their Board of Trustees to see their collection, and assess whether RCHS would be interested in accepting their materials into our archival collection. After our discussions, RCHS was awarded the donation, based largely, I believe, on our acceptance of their desire to assist with the processing and the speed with which the materials could be processed and made available for their research. For a year, I worked with members of their archives committee to process the collection. They knew their collection and I trained them how to arrange and store it for the safety of the collection and the ease of researchers. It was a successful partnership for everyone involved. This collection continues to grow with annual transfers of archival materials to the RCHS holdings.

In 1999, the Minnesota Club disbanded. Their long history was well documented in their archive (1874–1999) and they had several artifacts associated with the operations of the club headquarter building at 317 Washington Street in downtown



When archeologists excavated an area at the Gibbs Museum in 1995 in search of the sod house in which Jane and Heman Gibbs lived, they found a multitude of small artifacts. Among them were, top photo, various buttons, buckles, and hooks along with one-cent coins and a half-cent coin, bottom photo. Minted from 100% copper between 1793 and 1857, the 2014 value of a half-cent coin is \$0.14. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

St. Paul. When the time came to close, they sought RCHS as a repository for their collection. We accepted their archival collection from the earliest days to the end days, several clubhouse artifacts, and several pieces of framed art. The most notable art piece is a large pastel of Joseph Rolette that now hangs in our Research Center. Another notable thing about this donation is that the Minnesota Club provided processing funds, which aided us in making it available to researchers sooner.

As John Lindley was preparing a biographical profile of Crawford Livingston for *Ramsey County History*, he discovered a significant, privately held family collection, relevant not only to his research, but with wider-reaching components as well. In 2000, the late Mary Livingston Griggs Burke donated this Livingston Collection (1848–2001) to RCHS. For the next several years, she continued to offer other items, and provided significant funds for its processing. This collection documents her family's history through their involvement in local and national government, military service, transportation, banking, philanthropy, arts, and culture. The collection contains over 1,100 letters among family and business relations including rare letters from Sarah Sibley (wife of Minnesota governor Henry H. Sibley) to her sisters; Henry Sibley's letters to his family regarding his service as a state Representative and military leadership in the U.S.–Dakota War; Crawford Livingston's dealings in the railroad and banking industries; Theodore Griggs's courtship of Mary Livingston (the daughter of Crawford Livingston and his wife, Mary) and his work at Griggs, Cooper and Co.; and finally the education and eventual accumulation of a renowned art collection by their daughter, Mary Griggs Burke.

Sadly in 2000, Liz Johnson passed away. Her contributions of time and expertise in the critical years of establishing the foundation of professional collections management at RCHS cannot be overstated. She served on the RCHS Board from 1990–1996, and on the Collections Committee through 1999. She was a mentor to me in understanding the capacity of RCHS with regard to collections, as well as a terrific advocate and educator

to the RCHS Board and other constituencies about the vital importance of the collection to our mission.

From 2002 to late 2008, I left full-time employment at RCHS due to family responsibilities, but I continued to work as a part-time, independent contractor. With the help of new Collections Committee members, most notably Charley Bathke, collections acquisitions continued at a slowed pace. I processed these additions, along with the institutional archives generated each year. I suspended the internship program during this time and the exhibits program, which I created and managed, was lessened and maintained by a different department.

St. Paul Building Permits

In 2003, the City of St. Paul offered RCHS its largest archival collection to date, the St. Paul Building Permit Collection (1883–1976). Given the size of the collection and the expense required to move it to RCHS and to begin processing it, the Board discussed the question of accepting these materials at some length. Priscilla Farnham strongly supported accepting the collection and spent many hours working out the details of relocating it. The Board voted to accept the building permits collection once Priscilla had a detailed plan for its care in place. This collection of paper records and accompanying ledgers document the built environment of St. Paul. When the City of St. Paul had owned the collection, a few city employees would occasionally access it for licensing questions and historic preservation research. Public access to the collection was highly restricted at that time because the 200+ boxes holding the permits were stored in a warehouse basement space in Lowertown, which was not secure nor conducive to accessible research.

The city staff summarized the collection as: 185,000 individual permits in a variety of formats and box types; an unknown number of uniformly sized index cards stored in metal cabinets in the St. Paul License Inspections and Environmental Protection office; and a few dozen ledgers that duplicated the data from the permits and cards. Despite their physical condition and the obvi-



This photo shows the exterior identification for the very first building permit recorded by the City of St. Paul on August 3, 1883 for a one-story building at 302 Prince Street in the Lowertown neighborhood. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society archives.

ous fact that there were far more than 185,000 permits in the collection, RCHS agreed to accept them due to the wealth of information available in these unique documents and records.

Priscilla secured two additional rooms in the West Building for the collection with support from Julio (Jolly) Mangine, who was then the Ramsey County Property Manager. We moved the permit boxes and ledgers to West and two former collections volunteers began sorting and organizing them into their chronological permit order according to archival standards.

This two-and-a-half-year process informed us that during the span of the collection nearly 800,000 permits were issued, and that we had actually been given 347,500 of them. One reason why the city had undercounted the total number of permits was attributable to the fact that twice over the years, permit numbering had restarted at number 1. The remaining 452,500 were missing out of the total

number that had actually been issued. On the whole, all electrical and plumbing permits are missing, along with several noteworthy structures throughout St. Paul. A few long-time employees in the LIEP office recalled pulling the electrical and plumbing permits for a project, and no one could remember what had happened to them.

The most relevant data from the missing permits is readily available on the index cards, which we contracted to be microfilmed using grant funds. When the microfilming process did not work as smoothly as anticipated, they were scanned instead. Today, researchers can view the scanned index cards in our Research Center. They are organized in alphabetical street address order, so you can literally “walk down the street” by viewing the cards, noting when buildings were built, by whom, for whom, for what purpose, and for what cost. These cards were created as a WPA project in the 1930s, but there are some discrepancies, so the ledgers must be consulted when researchers run into roadblocks.

By 2008, the Research Center had been relocated to the 4th floor in Landmark Center and was accessed by appointment only. The dual location archival storage system was functioning, but the building permits quickly became our most popular collection, and it simply wasn’t feasible for researchers to meet our part-time research staff member at the West Building. Navigating around the building was notoriously confusing and eventually the county would not allow unescorted visitors in the halls. Consequently for security purposes RCHS staff did the research for requests involving the permits, which wasn’t cost efficient. If there was any discrepancy in the data they were given in a request from a researcher, the search would be invalid.

To add uncertainty to the awkward method used to handle permit research requests, the County Board decided to put the West Building up for sale, and all tenants were asked to begin seeking another space. We began the search for new artifact and archival storage. We toured possible new facilities and also discussed ideas for (1) creating a new space in Landmark Center for storage of the

archival collections including the building permits; (2) moving the archives out of St. Paul and relocating the Research Center to a Ramsey County suburb; and (3) consolidating spaces at the Gibbs site for multi-purpose use of a newly acquired building that is adjacent to the historic site.

Building the Research Center

In 2009, the best solution came with little effort from us, at least initially. The Schubert Club, a tenant in Landmark since its opening in the mid-1970s, indicated that they would be relocating their museum of musical instruments from the lower level to the second floor. The answer seemed clear. With RCHS Board approval, we would create a new, climate controlled, fully secure Research Center in the lower level of Landmark Center. We would store all archival and photographic collections in the rear room and the front room would allow public access to the library collection and select files with more than adequate work space for researchers. We would also standardize open hours to the public, and with the permits in the adjacent room, access to these collections would be made seamless. The Board approved the plan and Priscilla secured \$81,000 for the renovation and installation of the space to meet archival standards. Thanks to contributions from the Huss Family Foundation, McCarthy-Bjorklund Foundation, Scrooby Foundation, and Laurie Murphy, we began to implement our plan. We took leased possession of the space on January 2, 2010, and physical alterations started the next day.

Along with the space in the basement level came the same footprint in the sub-basement level, due to the location of the HVAC system there. Considering what RCHS could budget and the standards for temperature and relative humidity levels in the Research Center once the construction work was done, prudence required that RCHS make the Research Center HVAC automatic and seal it from the other building systems and hallway with a glass wall. For the first time, this enabled us to completely control climate in a collections space. In addition, the space granted a higher degree of security than

in any of our other areas of the building with security cameras operating continuously. Being one level below ground restricted daylight into the space, which is beneficial because light is damaging to collections.

The wall contours and pillars are load-bearing; thus only a few cosmetic changes occurred in the space, which were underway during hardhat tours in February. Furniture, shelving units, and finally the building permits were moved into the space in early April, and the remainder of the collections that were to be relocated to the space from elsewhere in the Landmark Center soon followed. The first tour of the finished space occurred with the Ethel Stewart Heritage Society honorees in late May, and we opened to the public on June 10, 2010. We assisted 563 researchers in 2010; in 2013 that number had risen to 1,317.

On the heels of opening the Research Center, we received word that we’d been awarded an Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant (also known as a Legacy Grant) to begin an inventory of the artifact collection in October 2010. This would be the first of four such grants, plus a portion of a STAR grant that we would be awarded to complete the inventory of three-dimensional holdings in the Society’s collections.

Inventory of 3D Objects

With the archival, library, and photographic collections in an accessible location that meets best practice standards for archival safety, storage, and climate control, our attention could turn to the three-dimensional artifact collection. While a rudimentary card catalog inventory existed from 1979, there was nothing more recent that indicated the location or condition of these objects. A contractor, Kevin Koontz, was hired to inventory every object in our collection; over the next two years, he examined nearly 12,000 objects located in all the buildings at the Gibbs site, at the West Building, at the warehouse in Lowertown, on exhibit in Landmark Center, and on loan to a handful of other institutions in the Twin Cities. For every object, he recorded its catalog number, its specific location, its condition, and what it was. Sometimes

the work needed to provide this information required hours of research, especially if there was no identifying marking on an object, or if it was a fragment from a larger object. The time needed to conduct an inventory was the reason for the long delay in completing it. There had never been funding for staff and equipment for such a project.

When we received word late in 2011 that RCHS had to vacate the object storage spaces at the West Building, the inventory immediately became more complicated. Once again, Priscilla called on Ramsey County Property Manager, Bruce Thompson, to inquire about the possibility of a replacement space in another Ramsey County building. Bruce and the West Building Manager, John Chitty, worked with us to select a 3,000-square-foot space in the Metro Square Building, which the county had recently purchased. This building was formerly the Emporium Department Store (1902–1968) on 7th Street between Robert and Jackson Streets. With the generous support of William Dircks, who volunteered ten men and two semi-trucks from his company, Berger Transfer, we moved the stored artifact collection to its new location over two days in September 2012.

As part of planning for the move, we had happily accepted more-appropriate, donated, shelving units for the new Metro space. The downside of this decision was that all of the inventoried locations that were in our software relating to the West Building had to be updated with their new Metro shelf locations. The upside was that new artifact donations were placed on these shelves as soon as they were processed, so Lexington Ballpark signs, Twin City Army Ammunition Plant materials, a hand-painted punchbowl, a surveyor's compass, and a portion of the Cathedral's original copper roof (to name just a few) were all safely stored right away.

Recent Accessions

In a 2011 *Pioneer Press* article about our Winter Carnival collections, I happened to mention a Field-Schlick hatbox in the collection. The next day I received a call from Frank Schlick. Frank and his father, along with James Seesel and his son, were leaders in the Field-Schlick, Inc. depart-



This nineteenth-century Grand Army of the Republic medallion honoring Union veterans of the Civil War is a recent addition to the RCHS collections. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

ment stores in St. Paul, Highland Park, Roseville, Maplewood, and West St. Paul. The first store associated with the Field family began in St. Paul in 1886 and the last Field-Schlick, Inc. store closed in Highland Park in 1979. I met with Frank and other family members to discuss why RCHS would be the best repository for the company's business records and many artifacts they had from the store operations. By the end of the year, Frank and his wife Janelle, along with his sister, Betty Andrews, had delivered many boxes of archival records, photographs, and merchandise (and a few more hat and merchandise boxes) for inclusion and processing into the collection, which they also generously supported with processing funds. The "Field-Schlick family" of employees continues to donate items to this collection, which is not only significant to Ramsey County history, but also to the regional history of department stores and retailing in the twentieth century.

In 2013, Leo Treadway, who at that time was working with another nonprofit

tenant in Landmark Center, paid me a visit. He had two singular collections that he wanted to offer to RCHS. Each collection represented a facet of Ramsey County history that was missing entirely from our collection, and I was pleased to recommend them to the Collections Committee for acceptance. Leo was a leader in the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transsexual community in St. Paul and Minneapolis from the time he moved to Minnesota, working within the St. Paul Reformation Lutheran Church and several Governors' Task Forces, he accumulated a deep and complete collection of archival materials and artifacts (1979–2012). He also offered a collection of archival materials and artifacts related to Minnesota's Asian and Pacific Islander communities (1998–2012), most notably related to Mu Theatre and to the Dragon Boat Festival, held for the last several years at Lake Phalen.

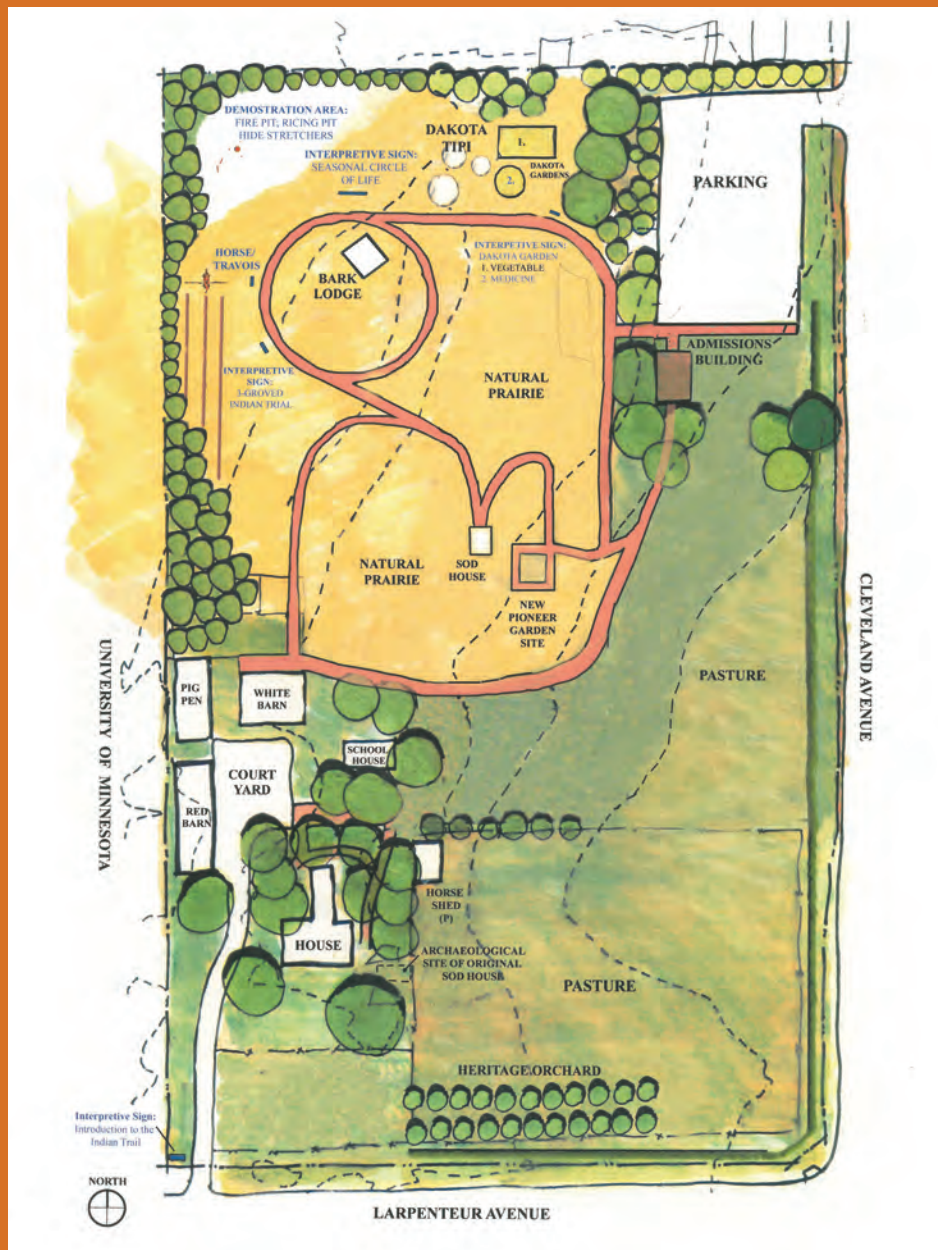
Today, the RCHS collections are safer and more accessible than they have ever been and plans for improved storage and digital accessibility are a priority. In the coming years, the artifact collection will be cataloged to include searchable, online, in-depth records and photographs of the objects. Maps, building permits, and photographic collections will be digitized. Existing archival collections will expand and new collections will be accepted. The collection will grow and will be preserved to continue to document the history of Ramsey County and provide the foundation for research and exhibits into the future.

Since joining RCHS in 1994, Mollie Spillman has been the Society's curator/archivist. She has a B.S. degree in history from Ball State University, and a M. A. degree in historical administration from Eastern Illinois University, and has held posts as a corporate collections manager/archivist and as a senior intern at the Henry Ford Museum in Greenfield Village, Mich. She has also served on the boards of the Twin Cities Archives Round Table, the North Star Museum for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and the Nettle Creek Valley Museum.

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In the late 1990s, landscape architect John Koepke prepared this conceptual drawing of the Gibbs Museum. The drawing shows how a replica sod house could be positioned at the center of the prairie to function as the key element in the movement in both space and time from a Dakota interpretation in the northern portion of the museum to a pioneer interpretation in the southern part where the Gibbs farmhouse and barn already stood. Drawing courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society archives. For more on the Gibbs Museum, see page 22.