

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Volume 49, Number 2

A Grand Topographical
Feature:

The History of the Mississippi
River Boulevard

Donald L. Empson

—Page 11

*“Sewed, Baked Bread,
and Did a Little Housework Beside”:*

The Stork Family in St. Paul, 1914–1916

Rebecca A. Mavencamp, page 3



The unknown photographer who posed Grace and William Stork, St. Paul residents from 1903–1951, in such a stoic and traditional way missed their true characters as hardworking, but jovial, individuals. The couple raised five children, buried three of them, farmed the prairie, fought in the Civil War, and served lunch to local businessmen such as Frederick Spangenberg, F. Rudolph Knapheide, and H.B. Fuller in their home on Cleveland Avenue in St. Paul. Their story unfolds in this issue, told in their own words, during the last moments of peace before America was plunged into a world forever changed by the First World War. Photo courtesy of the Rockford Area Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 49, Number 2

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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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A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue, we present several stories relating to the area near modern-day Highland Park. The Mississippi River Boulevard remains one of the more picturesque scenes in St. Paul. Donald Empson shares the story of its design by famous Chicago landscape architect Horace William Shaler Cleveland. Built in stages as land was acquired, the road had an early speed limit of 8 miles per hour and was subject to disputes between horses and new-fangled automobiles. Through careful research of family letters and diaries, Rebecca Mavencamp outlines the history of the Stork family, who lived on Cleveland Avenue South, which once lay beyond the city proper in Reserve Township. And Moira Harris traces the story of “Excelsior,” another Longfellow poem besides the famous “Song of Hiawatha,” which, in its day, inspired songs, a town, and even a Hamm’s beer label!

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

A Grand Topographical Feature

The History of the Mississippi River Boulevard

Donald L. Empson

The concept of open space for public use is not new. The town square, a vacant public space between dwellings, dates back centuries. For example, Rice Park, Mears Park, and Irvine Park in St. Paul were all mapped as nameless public squares to be used for pasture, wood gathering, gardens, live-stock, or temporary markets. The notion of these squares being parks, as we envision them today, would have been alien to the city founders.

Confronted with the bleak towns spawned by the Industrial Revolution, which were a maze of small cramped streets lined with squalid tenements, early city reformers took inspiration from the landscape gardeners who had laid out the sumptuous private gardens of the eighteenth-century palaces and estates. In earnest discussions about the relationship between art and nature, the reformers examined the cityscape in terms of mass, space, and nature.

Beginning in London in the 1820s, and France ten years later, the movement spread to the United States within two decades. New York's Central Park, the first effort in this country, was conceived and laid out in the 1850s. As the nineteenth century concept of public parks within the city developed, it profoundly influenced urban thought and planning to this day.

The idea of a city as a planned environment with its conquest of nature was exemplified by the gridiron pattern of streets platted regardless of terrain. Gradually the concept of a continuous city-park-garden ideal in which residents experienced the advantages of both city and nature supplanted the gridiron approach. St. Paul real estate developments of the 1880s, such as St. Anthony Park, Macalester Park, and Union Park with their irregular streets and public areas, exemplified this ideal.

St. Paul Plans for Parks

The notion of the public park as we know it today gained currency in St. Paul in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In

1872, the St. Paul City Council, feeling the flush of boom times, and aware of the new park ideas emanating from the East, passed the following resolution:

Resolved, That in order that this city may avoid the errors of other large cities, and begin in time to provide for parks, wide avenues, public squares, and other improvements, on a scale suitable to our future growth, commensurate with the wants of a crowded city, in a manner best calculated to utilize our natural advantages and promote the health and comfort of the citizens, on a basis which engineering skill and experience will approve, Mr. H.W.S. Cleveland, landscape architect of Chicago, be and is hereby invited to make a general outline plan for such improvements, and report to this Council, and that his proposition to perform this work is hereby accepted.¹

In his report to the city council, made some two months later, the enthusiastic Cleveland spoke glowingly of the natural beauty of St. Paul:

Now what is it that attracts strangers and excites their enthusiasm, and makes the memory of St. Paul a never failing source of pleasant associations, while Chicago, a city compared to which St. Paul is a mere village, has no hold upon their affections which should make them wish to revisit it? I need not reply that it is the natural beauty of its situation; the features which God Almighty has bestowed, and which all the wealth of Chicago, or of the nation, could not purchase.²



Horace William Shaler Cleveland (1814–1900) encouraged the city of St. Paul to build a boulevard along the Mississippi River as part of a larger plan for parks in the community. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Nearing the end of his address, Cleveland touched upon what is today, more than 140 years later, the Mississippi River Boulevard:

Of the courses on which it is desirable to arrange such avenues I cannot venture, without more careful study, to make more than general suggestions, without going into specifications of exact locality. That one or more of the most important should connect St. Paul with Minneapolis, is obvious. One of these should go by a direct course to St. Anthony, and another arranged to cross the river and follow up its west bank, entering Minneapolis from the south, and a branch from this might be carried to Minnehaha. It seems so evident that St. Paul and Minneapolis must eventually, and at no distant day, become virtually one city,



Three bridges have crossed the Mississippi River from West Seventh Street to Fort Snelling over the years. The first bridge was completed in 1880. It was replaced in 1909 with a continuous steel arch truss bridge, seen here from Mississippi River Boulevard looking west toward the fort. The current bridge in this location opened in 1965. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

and the interests and future welfare of each must be so intimately connected with that of the other, that it is very desirable that they should unite in the designing and arranging of improvements of the area which now separates them, by which they are to be equally benefited.

In speaking of these avenues, it is important to emphasize that neither Cleveland, nor other progressive landscape architects of the period, thought in terms of one or a few municipal parks. They conceived of the park as a continuous element, a green ribbon garlanded with flowers which pervaded the city plan. In this scheme, the large open parks, or “public reservations” were connected by parkways or boulevards, which, in themselves, served as a kind of linear park. As Cleveland wrote elsewhere, public gardening in Paris was not “confined to parks in one end of the town, and absent from the places where it is most wanted. It follows the street builders with trees, turns the little squares into gardens unsurpassed for good taste and beauty,

drops down graceful fountains here and there, and margins them with flowers!”³ In ending his address before the St. Paul City Council, that warm June evening almost a century and a half ago, Cleveland spoke with a passionate rhetoric, which even today stirs the reader’s spirit:

... I appeal to the echoes which my sentiments [of the beauty and grandeur of this place] must find in your own hearts, and to which the hearts of all true men in all coming time will respond in grateful benedictions on your memory, to sustain and impress upon you the conviction that you should regard it as a sacred duty to preserve this gift which the wealth of the world could not purchase, and transmit it as a heritage of beauty to your successors forever.⁴

The landscape architect’s speech had dramatic effect. In early July, the city council resolved that a committee, one member from each ward, be appointed to investigate the opening of one or more avenues between St. Paul and Minneapolis. The council further resolved that another

committee be appointed to prepare a bill to be presented to the next legislature providing for the appointment of a Board of Park Commissioners, with power to condemn private property in Ramsey County for parks, avenues, and boulevards.⁵

This promising beginning to St. Paul’s park and parkway system came to an abrupt halt with the financial depression of 1873. The city treasury was nearly bare; its residents were in no mood or circumstances to pay for any improvement that was not absolutely necessary. On the other hand, the city council committee on parks roused itself from its lethargy long enough to lease out, for farming, the property acquired for Como Park in 1872. A few benches were acquired for Irvine Park; some money was budgeted to pay for concerts in Rice Park, but it was not until the mid-1880s, when the city was experiencing its greatest growth before or since, that an interest in the parks was revived.⁶ On February 25, 1887, the Minnesota Legislature, under its Special Laws, established a Board of Park Commissioners in and for the city of St. Paul and appropriated \$225,000 for their work.⁷

Cleveland Sets the Bar High

The new Board lost no time. They had their first meeting on March 28, 1887, and one of their first orders of business was to invite the indefatigable Horace Cleveland to speak again, this time on the park systems of St. Paul and Minneapolis. His address, delivered in the old State Capitol at 10th and Wabasha Streets, on May 10, 1887, spoke directly to the future Mississippi River Boulevard:

The grand topographical feature of the whole region between the two cities is the river, and in considering the question of parks, it will be found not only that its shores afford the best position in relation to the two cities, but their character is such as to offer advantages which can very rarely be secured in the vicinity of a city, while for that very reason they are unfitted for other use, and if not thus improved, must almost of necessity become a constant source of expense and annoyance, and instead of the richest ornament the city can boast, they will simply constitute a hideous blot, which cannot be kept out

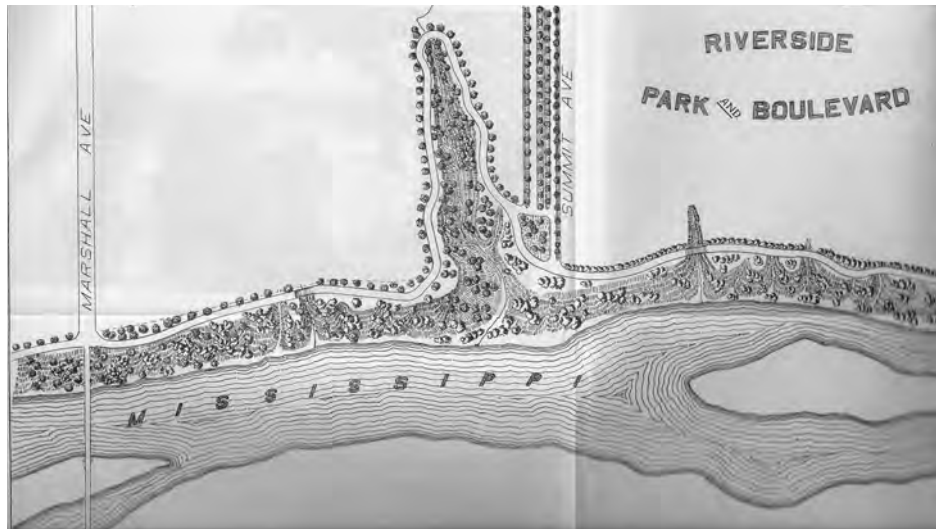
of sight and must forever mar the beauty of the whole extent of their course. . . .

Portions of the region are indeed almost inaccessible and so thickly overgrown that it is difficult to get an idea of its topography. But by persevering efforts I have satisfied myself that it comprises all the most desirable features for the construction of a park of such variety of gracefully beautiful and wildly intricate and picturesque scenery as can hardly be found elsewhere in the vicinity of any city. . . . No expenditure of money or exercise of engineering skill could create such scenes as nature has here provided with a lavish hand—and in close proximity may be found extended areas of gracefully undulating surface, on which broad lawns and all the needed accessories of a great park may be secured. If preserved and adapted to such purpose by the simple development of its existing features this region will become more and more valuable. . . .

It is enough to say at present—first, that the river shores should be preserved in their native grandeur and beauty, and the only way to do it is by laying out broad avenues along the top of the bluffs on each side, and allowing no buildings except on the side of the avenues farthest from the river, so that the views up and down and across the river may be forever kept open to the residents and those who pass up or down the avenues—the whole space between the avenues and the shore being kept as public ornamental land.⁸

Spurred on by Cleveland's remarks, the Park Board used funds from the legislative act to order a survey made "for a boulevard along the east bank of the Mississippi River, from the city boundary near the Milwaukee railway bridge to the bridge across the river at Fort Snelling." This survey made plans for a 200-foot-wide boulevard and included all the property from the river shore to the east side of the roadway, and, depending upon the terrain, additional property east of the roadway. Subsequently the Board approved plans showing the general features of the boulevard and a bill for \$353 for the survey.

In addition it directed the Board of Public Works to begin condemnation proceedings for a public road and in another of its first motions, the Park Board ordered condemnation proceed-



A portion of a blueprint from 1903 showing how the Park commissioners envisioned the junction of Summit Avenue and the Mississippi River Boulevard south of Marshall Avenue. 1903 Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners. Blueprint courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

ings on Mounds Park, West St. Paul Park, Carpenter Park, and Hiawatha Park. This last park was to occupy the space along the Mississippi River Boulevard now taken by the Ford Plant. Hiawatha Park was part of a scheme to connect Minnehaha Falls, a veritable tourist attraction for years, with St. Paul by means of a bridge across the river.⁹

After waiting a year for action, the Park Board complained that under the law, they could only order the Board of Public Works to carry out their resolutions; the Park Board could not force Public Works to act, nor could the Park Board do it themselves. Finally, the Board of Public Works began condemnation of a park site on the west side. The assessment on the adjacent landowners to pay for the park was appealed. The case went to court, and the court found the whole law establishing the Park Board void. During these legal entanglements, the Board of Public Works took no action on the other parks or the Mississippi River Boulevard.

Undaunted, however, the Park Board continued its planning during the court action. At a meeting held June 30, 1888, the surveyor was directed to prepare a plan to extend the Mississippi River Boulevard east from the bridge across the Mississippi at Fort Snelling to Snelling Avenue. The following year, the Park

Commissioners ordered another extension of the Mississippi River Boulevard from Snelling Avenue east to Toronto Street. Both resolutions were referred to the city council with the request they order the Board of Public Works to acquire the necessary property. The following year, the city council voted against the extensions.¹⁰

In the meantime, the Park Board had to reconstitute itself under a new law passed in 1889. Erring on the side of caution, they redid all their previous motions, with the exception of Hiawatha Park, which was never mentioned again. The Board also hired H.W.S. Cleveland, who had moved to Minneapolis in 1886, at an annual salary of \$1,500 for his services (half-time) "to prepare designs and plans for the improvement of St. Paul parks and parkways for the consideration of this Board and to supervise the execution of all work on parks and parkways ordered by this Board. . . ."¹¹

Acquiring Land for Parks

In his new post, Cleveland faced head-on the greatest single problem of the Park Commissioners: trying to acquire private property for park purposes. The acquisition of park land for public purposes by a city government, an obstacle that would delay completion of the Mississippi River Boulevard for twenty



Mississippi River Boulevard before it was graded and widened in the late 1920s. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

years, presented a challenge that went to the very heart of nineteenth-century capitalism and individual rights. Cleveland, however, refused to consider this a problem. He firmly believed the property owners would benefit from having a park or parkway through their property. In speaking of the acquisition of the river shores, Cleveland argued:

And now we are brought face to face with the question of the means of accomplishing this object. How are we to secure the area which all seem to agree is so desirable?

It possesses a certain money value, and we have no right to look at the material issues it involves in any but a purely business light. The intrinsic value of the river banks consists first in the quarries of stone which may be opened at various points, and, secondly, in the facilities they afford for damming the river and thus securing its power for manufacturing purposes. There will doubtless be an outcry from utilitarians at the proposition to sacrifice interests of such actual value to a mere sentiment. . . .

In determining what that shall be, however, it is but fair that the benefits they will derive from the use to be made of it should be estimated as part of the purchase price. If all the land owned by any individual is re-

quired, we have no right to ask him to take one cent less than its full value. If, however, only a portion is required, and the improvement of that portion will so increase the value of all the rest that it will more than pay for that we require, it is just to condemn it without compensation. . . .

If they are preserved and developed to



The Boulevard in the vicinity of Shadow Falls Park. 1903 Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

their full capacity of grandeur and picturesque effect, the avenues which overlook them will become the site of the most costly and magnificent public and private buildings, and all the adjacent streets will be sought for residence purposes, just as has happened in New York in the neighborhood of Central Park . . .”¹²

But nothing was done. As the Park Board reported eight years later in 1896:

The scheme [of the Mississippi River Boulevard] when originally proposed was heartily approved by the majority of the owners of the property along its route, most of whom would have gladly given the land for the purpose; but it was frustrated for the time by opposition from an unexpected quarter. Although allowed to sleep for several years, it has never been lost sight of by the Board, and occasional efforts have been made within the last two years to secure the necessary land by donation. Although the land has greatly sunk in value since that time, these efforts have not met with gratifying success. For several years past, a number of speculative projects have been broached for the improvement of navigation between Fort Snelling and the [St. Anthony] falls, carrying with them the suggestion of a possible development of water power. These projects have given some of the owners of the bluff property the impression that it may



This photo shows the Marshall Avenue-Lake Street Bridge, built in 1888, from Shadow Falls Park. 1903 Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

street railway traction has changed all that. A magnificent system of electric railways extending in every direction to the farthest frontiers of our own city and Minneapolis, with its transfers for a single fare to connecting lines, has almost abolished distance as an element of social or business convenience. The result of these changed conditions is that the necessity for local parks, or at least for new ones, has almost disappeared. The city is already fairly well provided with parks of this class. Consequently the present board has adopted the view that its efforts would be more wisely expended in the acquisition of larger parks and of parkways in situations somewhat remote from the business centre of the city, but embracing rural features of exceptional natural beauty and especial fitness for the recreative and social uses of parks.¹⁵

have some future value for quarrying or mill sites, and they have shown an unwillingness to surrender it for the proposed boulevard. Hence the prospect of any considerable commercial use for this bluff property seems to be very remote. No other use could be made of it under these circumstances which would add to its value nearly as much as the proposed boulevard and driveway through scenery of unsurpassed beauty.¹³

The report then went on to discuss the acquisition of the shoreline property near Marshall Avenue. The federal government, responding to pressure from Minneapolis to extend navigation to that city and pressure from St. Paul for water power, began construction of a lock and dam at Meeker Island just north of the Marshall/Lake Street Bridge. This dam, finished in 1906, was superseded by Lock and Dam #1 (The Ford Dam) at the mouth of Minnehaha creek. In 1912, the original Meeker Island lock and dam were abandoned. Subsequently this dam was dynamited, but the large chambers of the lock remain today, just off the east shore of the river. It was this project that had raised the value of the land in the eyes of the bluff residents and stymied the Park Board.¹⁴

New Technology

Although little was done on the Mississippi River Boulevard in the 1890s, the project was always foremost in the minds

of the Park Commissioners. Further impetus for such a parkway was added by the advent of the electric streetcars, for, as the Board put it:

When our first Board of Park Commissioners was established in 1887, the only public means of street locomotion was by horse cars. In a city of hills like St. Paul, this mode of transit was exceptionally slow and tedious and confined to narrow limits. Under these conditions it was natural and reasonable that the board should devote their attention chiefly to the acquisition of local or neighborhood parks, within easy reach by foot of the people of the vicinity. The progress since made in the machinery of

Streetcars were not the only technology that influenced thinking about parks. The “extraordinary growth and rapid increase” of bicycle riding prompted the Commissioners to resolve that the bicycle path will form a feature of all boulevards and parkways coming under the jurisdiction of the Board, including the Mississippi River Boulevard, which, the Commissioners mentioned on an optimistic note, “will probably be acquired and improved at an early period.”¹⁶

Despite this seeming optimism, the Commissioners were very concerned about acquiring the river property. As they wrote in 1898:



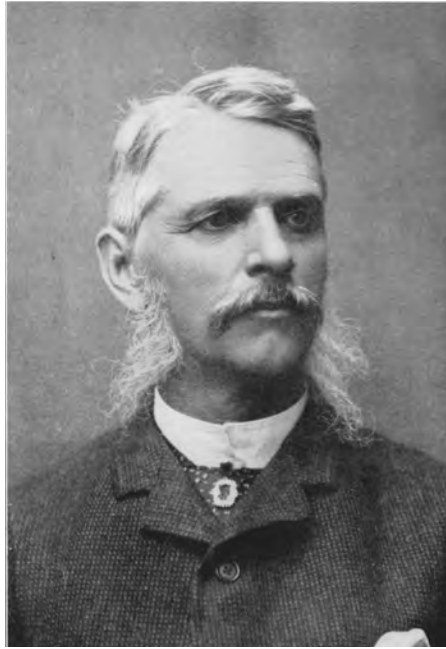
As this photo demonstrates, automobiles and pedestrians shared use of the roadway in the early years of the Boulevard. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

But while any considerable expenditure for this purpose may be postponed for years, prudence suggests that immediate steps be taken to acquire the land along and embracing the bluff. It can now be obtained for little or nothing. The recent settlement of the character of the lock and dam improvements to be made between Minnehaha creek and the Milwaukee and St. Paul bridges removes an element of uncertainty as to the future of this river bluff property. Very little of it, if any, will be available for manufacturing or business purposes. If any water power is developed there, it will be converted into electric power and transmitted to the business centers of the two cities. On the other hand, the effect of the two dams will be to convert into two still ponds the now rapid current of the Mississippi, which will detract but little from, and perhaps add to, the natural beauty of this picturesque trough of the river. An urgent reason for its early acquisition is that its precipitous and wonderfully beautiful banks are being year after year shorn and despoiled of their natural features by stone quarries and wood choppers; and if not soon acquired by the city, it will be but a few years before the city will have lost one of the most precious possessions in all its wide domain of natural beauties.¹⁷

Although of little value by itself, the first part of the Mississippi River Boulevard had actually come to the city unbidden in 1887. At that time, the Union Land Company had platted Desnoyer Park, and in the plat, they had dedicated to the public a street, two hundred feet wide, which they named Summit Avenue, projecting it as an extension of the Summit Avenue Boulevard. This street had never been opened or graded, but the Commissioners were well aware of it as a future link in their Boulevard.

Progress Is Made

Finally, in 1899, the first real progress was made toward Cleveland's dream of the Mississippi River Boulevard. John Ireland, Archbishop of St. Paul, who was developing a large swath of land in the vicinity, offered the city sixteen acres, including Shadow Falls, between Summit Avenue Boulevard, and the other Summit Avenue leading along the river north to the Minneapolis city limits. When Ireland



Newspaper editor and Park Commissioner Joseph A. Wheelock (1830–1905) was an advocate for the building of the Mississippi River Boulevard. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

wrote to the Park Commissioners making this offer, he acknowledged, however, he was having difficulty in obtaining the consent of the mortgagees to this proposal. Nonetheless, he vowed to give the property to the city.¹⁸

In the end, it became necessary for the Park Board to begin condemnation proceedings, but the Board paid their respects to Ireland anyway: "It was doubtless from a broad and intelligent view of his own business interests as the owner of the land, as well as from those motives of local patriotism . . . that Archbishop Ireland has indicated his personal willingness to donate Shadow Falls and boulevard to the city." Thus this delightful and very picturesque park at the end of Summit Avenue was added to the Mississippi River Boulevard, and with it, the acquisition of the Boulevard was completed from Summit Avenue north to the Minneapolis city limits.¹⁹

Two years later, in 1902, a roadway was constructed through the woods, around the ravine formed by Shadow Falls, and along the edge of the bluff from Summit Avenue to Marshall Avenue. Only 20 feet wide, it was opened, according to Joseph

Wheelock, Park Commissioner, "through the natural woods in such a way that the least possible disturbance to the natural contour lines and woodland growth was done. . . ."

As the Park Board lamented, however, ". . . the time has not yet come for the improvement of that portion of the Boulevard between Marshall and the city limits . . . within the present limits of the park fund, it is financially impossible to do this at present."²⁰ Buoyed, nevertheless, by the tremendous public approval of and appreciation for the opening of this small part of the Mississippi River Boulevard, in 1902 the Board ordered a resurvey of the remaining portion of the Boulevard between Summit Avenue Boulevard and the Fort Snelling Bridge. Soon property owners donated additional land to the city from Summit Avenue south to Randolph Avenue and construction of that segment of the parkway began in 1903. This work involved the excavation of many boulders and other stones; consequently the Board recommended purchase of a rock crusher so the surface of the roadway might be covered with crushed rock, a surface it retained more or less until paving in 1924.²¹

No sooner had the first part of the Mississippi River Boulevard been opened, than the automobile began causing trouble. A city ordinance passed on May 23, 1903, forbid the use of automobiles, locomobiles, and motorcycles on the Mississippi River Boulevard and in Mounds Park because horses were likely to take fright on the narrow roads running close to the edge of the bluff. The ordinance was not enforced very closely, however, for in June, the Park Commissioners complained that automobile owners were driving their cars on the Boulevard between Summit Avenue and Marshall Avenue on Sunday afternoons, and the Commissioners urged that a policeman be stationed there once a week.

The battle with the automobile continued for several years. At one point, the Park Commissioners relented, and allowed automobiles—provided they did not exceed the speed limit of 8 MPH. That allowance was canceled after three weeks. As late as 1909, C.S. Brackett

wrote to the Park Board complaining that the Merriam Park meat man could not get to his home because the Boulevard was closed.²² The automobile also brought increased maintenance problems. Even then, the Commissioners wrote that the bridge just south of Summit Avenue, constructed for horse teams, could no longer sustain the steadily increasing numbers of heavy autos.²³

No matter what objections were made, progress took its course, and by 1915, the Mississippi River Boulevard was regarded as “probably the best patronized automobile drive in the city.”²⁴ With the opening of the new roadway

in 1903, the Commissioners decided to change the name of the parkway to *Riverside Park* a name they judged was more euphonious and appropriate. That name was used more or less for several years, but gradually usage lapsed back into the original Mississippi River Boulevard.²⁵

By 1904, the Boulevard had been pretty well completed south to Randolph Avenue. As Joseph Wheelock, editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a leading park advocate and Commissioner, reported:

The driveway is laid out so as to skirt the edge of the river bluff adapted to its natural contours, winding across ravines and curving in long graceful lines through an attractive plateau advantageously revealing a constantly changing picturesque panorama of scenery and landscape beauty which cannot be rivaled anywhere in the country.

He went on to add,

It is with pardonable pride that I refer to this improvement, entrusted to me. I have painstakingly aimed and fairly succeeded in keeping in sympathetic touch with nature. No destruction of native beauty of scenery was committed. Due consideration in prosecuting the work was given to common sense, which is a quality often lost sight of by critics.²⁶



This portion of Plate 33 of the 1916 G.M. Hopkins St. Paul plat map shows where Reserve Boulevard was projected to run along the north bank of the Mississippi River between the Fort Snelling Bridge and downtown. Plat map excerpt courtesy of Donald L. Empson.

Property Owners Again

With the Boulevard completed south to Randolph Avenue, the frustrations and pressures on the Park Commissioners became evident. In a meeting on March 14, 1904, the Board complained bitterly about the remaining property owners: the fact they opposed the project, demanded exorbitant prices for the land, and refused to admit their remaining property would benefit from the improvement of the Boulevard. The Commissioners resolved that the Boulevard from Watson Avenue south to Fort Snelling was hereby abandoned and lambasted the property owners: “It is hoped that the success of the protesting property owners and their attorneys in thus defeating an improvement of the greatest importance to the City and of the greatest benefit to them, may fill them with the satisfaction due to the triumph of purblind greed over an intelligent concern for their own interests, or a decent regard for those of the community at large.”²⁷

Stung by this denunciation, the property owners protested. John Niven, who owned property where the Ford Motor Company’s Assembly Plant would be built in the 1920s, wrote to the Park Commissioners explaining that he had a stone quarry on the site since the Civil War and that two and a half years earlier, he had leased out four acres to be quarried at \$2,800 an acre. Although these

leases were worth \$11,200, the Board had only offered him \$1,600 for the property. He ended his letter with the closing “a taxpayer here since 1861.”²⁸ Although the Commissioners were unable to proceed with the Boulevard in 1904, they did request 12 incandescent gasoline lights for the finished portion—because the roadway was so near the river and so dark at night.²⁹

Public opinion was strongly on the side of the Park Commissioners, and in 1905 they again initiated condemnation proceedings south of Watson Avenue to acquire land for the Boulevard. Once more, the Commissioners argued that the presence

of the Boulevard could increase the value of nearby property. They wrote:

This park with its pleasure drive along the crest of the river banks is destined to be the great boulevard of our park system, and it is reasonably certain that it will be lined with houses of the well-to-do, lavished with architectural beauty in keeping with the picturesque and beautiful scenery, which can never be obstructed and will be preserved forever. . . . Its destiny is assured of becoming, in the near future, the most prominent and leading residence of wealth and beauty. These facts are worthy of a very liberal consideration by the owners of the property needed for an extension of improvement between Watson Avenue and Seventh St.³⁰

In 1906, condemnation proceedings on the remaining portion of the land that was needed were still continuing, and no further work was done. There is, however, a tantalizing note to the effect that “[s]ome grading was done on the Cliff drive which winds down to the river shore and up again between Jefferson Avenue and Randolph Avenue.” This driveway down to the river shore from the Boulevard above was one of a series to “give the public convenient access to admire nature’s handiwork of deep gullies and mysterious ravines from the bottom of the picturesque bluffs.”³¹ Personal inspection reveals there is the remnant of

a road leading down to the river, almost directly at the end of Jefferson Avenue. Used now as a path, and overgrown with underbrush, the road has obviously been cut diagonally along the side of the cliff. Alfred Sterk, a park employee for 48 years, recalled there was always a narrow road at that point. His recollection is that it was originally used for cutting ice from the river.³² Just as plausible, however, is the possibility that the stone farmhouse that Frederick Spangenberg, a German immigrant, completed building in 1867 adjacent to where Jefferson Avenue today meets Mt. Curve Boulevard was constructed with yellow limestone cut from the banks of the Mississippi River and hauled by stoneboat over the snow to the building site. Perhaps this road down the riverbank was originally cut in quarrying the stone for that house.

By 1907, the Commissioners could report that “The river boulevard under all its different modes of acquisition extends now from the Minneapolis boundary line on the north to the Snelling Bridge on the south, a distance of five miles.”³³ Full of satisfaction, the Commissioners again brought up the extension of the Mississippi River Boulevard southeast into the city, stretching along the riverfront down to the High Bridge. They vowed:

The preservation and improvement for public use of this picturesque river front in its entirety is a sacred duty to the Board of Park Commissioners and shortsighted greed or other obstacles thrown into the way of progress will only delay, but not defeat the project.³⁴

Extending the Boulevard

The extension of the Mississippi River Boulevard beyond its present limits was first envisioned and even surveyed in 1887. In the intervening years, it had always been in the minds of the Park Board. Now that a major portion of the riverbank had been secured, they turned their full attention to its last segment from the Fort Snelling Bridge to downtown St. Paul. Supported by many diligent citizens and given the name *Reserve Boulevard*, some property for this project was actually purchased, but the difficulties proved to be too great. The land



This 1931 photo shows how the Mississippi River Boulevard approached the Ford Assembly Plant from the south. In the distance on the left is the Intercity (Ford) Bridge, which was completed in 1925. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

acquired was sold in 1937, and it was not until Shepherd Road was constructed in the 1960s that some semblance of this early plan was fulfilled.

Unfortunately, Shepherd Road certainly does not qualify as a parkway or boulevard in the sense the early planners foresaw for the picturesque riverbank in that portion of the Mississippi, nor does it incorporate within it, Crosby Lake, as the early planners had anticipated.³⁵ As the Mississippi River Boulevard was nearing completion, the Park Commissioners were faced with another problem, which persists to this day. They complained:

The policing of the grounds are a far more complicated matter, chiefly on account of its extent. The illegal carrying of firearms by boys, and the shooting of game or birds on the premises, is often dangerous for pedestrians or to people in carriages, and is hard to suppress. Another evil of lasting damage to the woodland is the setting of fire to dead leaves and underbrush, a repetition of which will in a few years leave the river bluff barren of vegetation.³⁶

By December 31, 1909, the Park Commissioners could write with a tired satisfaction that “During the past year the north end and last section of the Riverside drive was graded and macadamized. This driveway is now entirely completed from the Fort Snelling bridge to the north city limits, where the park systems of St. Paul and Minneapolis join together.” They went on to estimate that the grading and improving of the Mississippi River Boulevard had increased the value of the adjoining real estate by seventy-five per cent.³⁷

In 1914–16 a scenic pathway from Shadow Falls to West Seventh Street was completed at a cost of \$1,529. It was suggested that this “scenic path should be supplemented at convenient places by terraced paths leading to the river which, by the completion of the government dam will be converted into a placid lake of some three miles long.”³⁸

The Ford Dam

The building of the Ford Dam, near the mouth of Minnehaha Creek brought the water power—for which the nineteenth

century owners of the property had waited in vain—necessary for manufacturing. It was this water power which attracted the Ford Motor Company to the Mississippi River Boulevard. Although there was considerable controversy about the leasing of publicly generated water power to a private corporation, the state legislature finally allowed the Ford Company to sign a fifty-year lease for the water power generated by this dam. And thus, a large industrial plant came to be set among the broad sweeping lawns of expensive private residences. But the Ford Motor Company was not oblivious to the setting of its new plant when it stated in its in-house newsletter,

It is true that in recent years industry has recognized that construction could be interpreted on terms that include more than utility. As a result, factory buildings and manufacturing plants have assumed a beauty of design that contrasts strongly with the plain homely structures of the past. The Twin City plant of the Ford Motor Company situated in a setting of such exceptional beauty will demand more than ordinary treatment, offering the architects an opportunity to go some-

what beyond the commonplace in design and construction.³⁹

Although the construction of the Ford Plant on the banks of the Mississippi did not seem to cause much public concern or outcry, the building of the Dam did, for in raising the water level, more than 55 acres of property along the river shore would be covered with water. Over the objections of residents and the Park Department, the Dam was built, and it was with great sorrow the Park Superintendent ordered many of the great trees along the riverbank cut down before they were flooded and their naked remains cluttered the shoreline.⁴⁰

By 1919, the Parks Department admonished the public:

Riverside Boulevard, with its park adjuncts, is one of the best possessions of the city. Its scenic variety and sylvan attraction make it one of the finest river parkways in this country. It would be highly appreciated if the abutting real estate owners would cooperate by platting their property in keeping with the dignity and grandeur of this pleasure drive, thereby contributing greatly to its perpetual beauty and corresponding benefit to themselves.⁴¹

Today when driving along the Mississippi River Boulevard, few motorists realize that the plan that Horace Cleveland originally drew up was intended to have parkways such as the Mississippi River Boulevard connect all the open, more traditional parks. In this scheme, the Boulevard would serve as a linear park. In this vast plan, the parkways would ensure that anyone who wished to see the most beautiful features of the city could do so. Although this system of roadways, which has sometimes been called the “Grand Rounds” because in St. Paul it would have been two circles that comprised a figure eight, was never fully built, the Mississippi River Boulevard remains an essential link in the present-day park system for St. Paul.

Donald L. Empson has been researching and writing St. Paul history for 45 years. His most recent book is The Street Where You Live: A Guide to the Place Names of St. Paul (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006). The author and editor thank Janice R. Quick, St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department, for her assistance in finding the photos that accompany this article.



An appealing vista along the Mississippi River Boulevard south of the Marshall Avenue Bridge from about 1925. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

Endnotes

1. *Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of St. Paul from April 9th to Jan. 6th, 1874*, 76.
2. *Ibid.*, 77–86.
3. Horace W.S. Cleveland, *Landscape Architecture as Applied to the Wants of the West*, ed. Roy Lubove (Pittsburgh, Penna.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965). For a profile of Cleveland's other work in the area, see William H. Tishler and Virginia S. Luckhardt, "H.W.S. Cleveland: Pioneer Landscape Architect to the Upper Midwest," *Minnesota History* 49, no. 7 (Fall 1985): 281–291.
4. *Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of St. Paul from April 9th to Jan. 6th, 1874*, 85–86.
5. *Ibid.*, 94–95. Following Cleveland's recommendation that the City of St. Paul acquire land for public park sites, such as around Como and Phalen Lakes, the council purchased the land that became Como Park and Phalen Park (1895). For a detailed account of Cleveland's role in the development of Como Park, see Andrew J. Schmidt, "Planning St. Paul's Como Park: Pleasure and Recreation for the People," *Minnesota History* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 40–58.
6. *Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of St. Paul*. Committee on Parks Reports from 1872 to 1889.
7. Minnesota State Legislature, *Special Laws of 1887*, Chapter 13.
8. *Park Systems of St. Paul and Minneapolis; An Address delivered Wednesday evening, May 10, 1887, in the Hall of Representatives, State Capitol, St. Paul*, 13–19.
9. *First Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1887*, 10–11.
10. *Second Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1888*, 4–6.
11. *Third Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1889*, 51–2.
12. *Second Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1888*, 24–25.
13. *Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1896*, 17.
14. Lucile M. Kane, "Rivalry for a River: The Twin Cities and the Mississippi," *Minnesota History*, 37, no. 8 (December 1961): 309–323.
15. *Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1894*, 6.
16. *Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1896*, 21.
17. *Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners, 1898*, 13.
18. Miscellaneous Correspondence, St. Paul Park Department Archives, City Hall Annex, St. Paul, Minn. Biographer Marvin R. O'Connell discusses Archbishop Ireland's multiple real estate ventures in St. Paul, but he makes no mention of a possible gift of this land to the city probably because St. Paul took the property by condemnation. See *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 375–85.
19. *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 7.
20. *Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 6; *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 21.
21. *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 9.
22. Minutes of Commissioners meetings and miscellaneous correspondence in the archives of the Parks Department.
23. *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 16.
24. Quoted from Lloyd Peabody, "History of the Parks and Public Grounds of St. Paul," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (1915), 15: 624.
25. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 1161.
26. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 1178.
27. Minutes of the Park Commissioners meeting, March 14, 1904, St. Paul Parks Department Archives.
28. Miscellaneous correspondence, St. Paul Parks Department Archives.
29. Minutes of the Commissioners meeting, June 20, 1904.
30. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 43.
31. *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 45.
32. Author telephone conversation with Alfred Sterk in 1975.
33. *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 10.
34. *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 9.
35. Park Department records, St. Paul Parks Department Archives.
36. *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 26.
37. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Board of Park Commissioners*, 2.
38. *Report of Department of Parks, Playgrounds and Public Buildings of the City of St. Paul, 1914–1919*, 6.
39. *Ford News*, October 15, 1923. Thanks to Brian McMahon for bringing this quotation to my attention.
40. Park Board correspondence, St. Paul Parks Department Archives.
41. *Report of Department of Parks, Playgrounds and Public Buildings of the City of St. Paul, 1914–1919*, 16. Since that time, the history of the Mississippi River Boulevard has largely been one of routine maintenance. An improved street lighting system was installed in 1918. The following year, curbing was constructed along the Boulevard. In 1922 the Daughters of the American Revolution dedicated a monument designed by Thomas Holyoke to honor the soldiers and sailors of World War I. That monument still stands at the foot of Summit Avenue. In 1924 the width of the paved roadway was increased to thirty feet. Over the years, other improvements to the parkway have led to the Boulevard that the public travels today.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



This excerpt from Plate 30 of the 1916 G.M. Hopkins plat map of St. Paul shows the Stork property along Jefferson Avenue, which is at the top of the map running east and west. They built their home on the eastern corner of the section, along Cleveland Avenue South (perpendicular to Jefferson), and farmed the remainder. By this time, the Storks had already subdivided a portion of their land to build Pleasant Park and create a portion of Juliet Street. The property to their south was owned by H.M. Muckle, friends of the Storks with whom they stayed upon their arrival to St. Paul in 1903. To the west, bordered by Mississippi River Boulevard, lived Frederick Spangenberg, whose buildings are also visible on the map near Jefferson Avenue. Plat map courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society. For more on the Stork family in St. Paul, see page 3.