

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Winter 2017

Volume 51, Number 4

*Primitive Simplicity and
Great Truths:*

Peoples Church,
the Reverend Samuel G. Smith,
and St. Paul

Philip J. Ramstad

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William T. Francis, at Home and Abroad

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The monument for the Francis family in Greenwood Cemetery, Nashville, Tennessee. In the left foreground is the grave marker for William T. (1870–1929) and on the right is the marker for Nellie G. (1874–1969). Photo by Robert Orr Jr.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 51, Number 4

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON JANUARY 25, 2016:

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future

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Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County history has yielded some fascinating lives, and in this issue Paul Nelson looks closely at one: William T. Francis. Francis, a pioneering African American lawyer, had a successful career in St. Paul before he departed as consul to Liberia in 1927. While there, he investigated conditions of forced labor before he died tragically of yellow fever. His wife, Nellie, once spoke at the Peoples Church, a monumental landmark near the Cathedral of St. Paul that is now gone, is the focus of another article here. Philip J. Ramstad traces the history of that congregation, which welcomed other speakers as well-known as Mark Twain and Winston Churchill. On the other side of the city, the former Willys-Overland building at present-day Highway 280 and University Avenue housed a massive training program for the army’s air service mechanics during World War I. Roger Bergerson details the operation that taught 3,000 students before it shut down after the Armistice. Finally, as a reminder, because RCHS has now moved to a different fiscal year, its Annual Report will be included in the upcoming Summer 2017 issue.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Review

Heart of St. Paul: A History of the Pioneer and Endicott Buildings

Larry Millett

Minnesota Museum of American Art,
2016

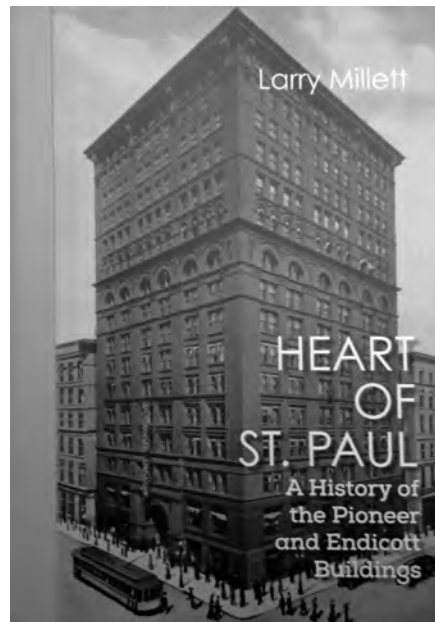
96 pages; photos; \$39.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Scott Rohr

The Pioneer was built on those greatest of motivators: growth and ego. The rapidly expanding St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, the largest of the many newspapers in late nineteenth-century St. Paul, was in need of more space. But the paper's owners also wanted a building that would rise higher than that of the rival *Daily Globe*, whose ten-story building was then St. Paul's tallest. In 1889, the twelve-story Pioneer (another four stories were added in 1910) became the tallest structure in a booming St. Paul.

The Endicott complex, completed a year after the Pioneer, consisted of two six-story buildings, the Endicott and Arcade, connected by a single-story shopping arcade, wrapping around the Pioneer building to create a formidable block. More important to most Minnesotans, the Endicott was designed by Cass Gilbert, celebrated architect of the Minnesota State Capitol.

This collection of elegant proportions, carved stone, and robust commerce, is the focus of Larry Millett's *Heart of St. Paul: A History of the Pioneer and Endicott Buildings*. Millett, former architecture critic of the *Pioneer Press*, has spent years telling the stories of Minnesota architectural gems, with books including *Lost Twin Cities* (1992), *Minnesota's Own* (2014), and *Minnesota Modern* (2015). Millett's narrative mastery is put to good use sharing the stories of these worthy but perhaps less well-known



buildings. Millett tells how the Pioneer-Endicott came to be, how it's been used, and what makes it special.

Millett also draws on his deep knowledge of St. Paul to share the origins of downtown. My favorite of his many anecdotes describes a deep ravine that once cut through the site of the Pioneer-Endicott. Millett writes that in the 1850s, "a bearded and notoriously eccentric New Yorker named Lott Moffet . . . erected a house in the 40-foot-deep ravine, next to a spring-fed stream. Over the years, Moffet built up and around his home . . . and eventually transformed the place into a seven-story hotel informally known as 'Moffet's Castle.' Because the building's lower three floors were within the ravine, the main entrance was on the fourth floor, at street level." The "castle," Millett writes, was eventually demolished, the ravine filled in, and the city continued to grow. *Heart of St. Paul* is rich with stories that illuminate the buildings we see around us, and sadly, the many more that were demolished in the name of urban renewal.

I do have minor quibbles with the book. First, Millett's attention to detail provides valuable context in telling what came before, and what was built around, the Pioneer-Endicott, but I often found myself reaching for a map of St. Paul as I read. If you know St. Paul like the back of your hand, you'll understand where the *Globe* building was demolished, or where the ravine once ran. For the rest of us, the inclusion of maps comparing downtown as it was when the Pioneer-Endicott buildings were constructed and as it is today would be helpful.

Additionally, for all the photos—archival and contemporary—of architectural details and past inhabitants, images of the Pioneer as it stands today are conspicuously missing. Much of the building's interior is now given over to residences, and is also the new permanent home of the Minnesota Museum of American Art, the book's publisher. Given that it was conceived—and the foreword written—by the developer, Richard Pakonen, you might think we'd see how drastically the building has changed in the twenty-first century. One can argue whether the Pioneer-Endicott is still the heart of St. Paul (Lowertown, anyone?), but the renovation undoubtedly secured the Pioneer-Endicott as vital to downtown for years to come. We want to see inside!

The story of the Pioneer-Endicott is the story of St. Paul, and maybe of industrial cities all over America, a story of grand ambition, successes and failures, and resilience. We're lucky to have Larry Millett as our region's architectural storyteller.

Scott Rohr is a member of the board of MNSAH (Minnesota Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians). He lives and works in St. Paul.

R.C.H.S.

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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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Ramsey County Local History Series

Join the Ramsey County Historical Society for a new series of monthly history presentations about a wide range of topics drawn from the heritage and traditions of Ramsey County.

Ramsey County Roseville Library • 7:00 pm • See www.rchs.com for speakers, topics and dates.



When the United States entered World War I, it pledged to develop an air armada that would sweep German planes from the skies over Europe. Aircraft manufacture and pilot training began immediately after the U.S. entered the war; only later was thought given to the support personnel who would be needed. For more on the training of U.S. Army aviation mechanics, see Roger Bergerson's article on page 20. Poster courtesy of the Library of Congress.