

MANITOBA RAILROAD BUILDING, THIRD AND ROSABEL STREETS, ST. PAUL.

THE HISTORY & SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
JAMES J. HILL BUILDING -
General Offices of the St. Paul, Minneapolis,
& Manitoba, and the Great Northern
Railways, 1888 - 1915

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Architecture 5141- "Historic Preservation
Process"

In the 1880's, the territory west of Minnesota was for the greater part still virgin prairie and timber waiting fo be tamed by men of foresight and courage in order to build this dream called the United States of America. This land waited to be exploited by the industrial machinesof the great northern cities which fifteen years earlier had been victorious in their war against the agrarian South. The land waited to be tilled by the boatloads of Germans, Scandinavians, Poles, Russians--the new Americans--who came to this land which promised them a better life. Such was the state of affairs in the 1880's... America had achieved its manifest destiny by spanning the continent and was settling this land with people dedicated to the growth of the new country.

James Jerome Hill was one of these men of foresight. Hill was born in 1838 in Canada, but in 1856, he took off to seek his fortune in the Orient only reaching St. Paul which at that time was the head of navigation on the Mississippi. Deciding to stay in St. Paul, James Hill took a job as the caretaker of freight and check clerk at the steamboat landing.

At that time Minnesota was still a territory, and a largely unsettled one at that. The settlement that had occurred was primarily along the rivers where there was ready access to transportation. Not all of Minnesota was along a river though, therefore the problem of moving people still remained.

Attempts by the territorial Legislature to get a railroad built in order to make Minnesota attractive to settlement also seemed fruitless. In 1854, the Minnesota & Northwestern Railroad Company became the first to be chartered by the Legislative Assembly to lay track in the territory, but the company went broke before construction was ever begun. The charter was passed in 1857 to the Minnesota & Pacific Railroad Company which graded the right of way between St. Paul and Minneapolis, but again, it went broke before track was laid.¹ Its successor, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in 1862 laid the line which was the first working track in Minnesota. The charter of the St. Paul and Pacific granted about 3.25 million acres² to the railroad contingent on the completion of its franchised rights of way. The line grew slowly reaching Sauk Rapids in 1867 and Breckenridge in 1871. The extension to St. Vincent of the Manitoba border was completed in 1879.

James Hill also became concerned with the westward expansion of the railroad taking on a job as a railroad station agent in St. Paul while retaining his ties with river transportation. In 1870, Hill established the Hill, Griggs and Company steamboat line which operated between Winnipeg and Grand Forks.

He saw that the logical transportation route between Winnipeg and the outside world was through Minnesota. During this time, Hill collaborated with Norman Kittson to form the Red River Transportation Company. In 1879, he would collaborate with Kittson to acquire the stocks, bonds and properties of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, and transfer them to his newly organized St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway Company.

The track of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba (or Manitoba, for short) lay entirely within the state of Minnesota, but throughout the 1880's and 1890's, its lines expanded through the Dakotas, Montana and Washington. The Manitoba's main line connected with the Canadian Pacific Railway whose president, George Stephen, was also the first president of the Manitoba.

In 1880, the Manitoba was operating out of a building in St. Paul called the Wilder Block, at 185 E. Fourth Street. Edward Sawyer described their offices to J.S. Kennedy in this letter:

"We have just moved into our new offices and find them delightfully light and pleasant in comparison with our old quarters.

Our walls however have a bare look which I should like to relieve and I write to ask if Mr. Tod would kindly interest himself enough to ask the Baldwin Company to send us a couple of their best photographs that we may hang them on our walls..."³

The Manitoba acquired several small railroads during the early 1880's (see attachment A) and expanded its existing lines so that by 1886 not only did the railroad have money for pictures on the walls, it had money for a whole new building. James J. Hill's statement in the company report for the year 1887 underscored the necessity of such a building: "The large accumulation of valuable records and the increase of the company's business have made such a building imperative."

The Manitoba had begun considering the location for an office building as early as 1881, in which year the railroad sold some real estate to the St. Paul Union Depot Company. The company records of 1886 indicate that in making the conveyance, it reserved in the deed, the right to the exclusive use of the two or three northernmost tracks and platforms in said depot, these being nearest the city, and affording a direct connection with its own main line."⁴ These lines paralleled Third Street (now Kellogg Blvd.) along its south side. James Hill chose a property on the north side of Third Street for the site of his new office building from which he could keep an eye on his

rail line.

In 1881, the area of St. Paul called Lowertown was still primarily residential, but the completion of Union Depot began to change that character. Foreseeing the trend, on November 1, 1882, Hill purchased the first parcel of land that later became the site of his office building. This site was still undeveloped in 1867 as the bluff along the north bank of the Mississippi was still in its natural state. By 1869, however, the first building, the St. Thomas Hotel,⁵ does appear on that block. This was the suburbs of St. Paul, a city barely 20 years old. Other residential structures followed: the Magnuson and Wilson Boarding House (1873, later called the Thorkild Wilson Boarding House) and the European House Hotel (1877). Lowertown housed the new arrivals to St. Paul who were employed at the growing industries nearby.

By 1883, the transience of the inhabitants of Lowertown is reinforced by the appearance of an employment agency (Newgard & Swanstrom, 1884) on the future site of the General Office Building as well as two saloons on the Broadway side of the block. Saloons were not considered a place where respectable people would go, thus many were found in this part of town.

The industrial character of this area of Lowertown also began to emerge about 1885 with the appearance of a couple warehouses⁶ on this site, but in early 1886, the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway decided that it was time to take the block for their office building.

The location of the Manitoba's new office building was on the southern half of the block bounded by Third Street on the south, Broadway on the east, Fourth Street on the north, and Rosabel Street on the west. The building occupied 3 platted city lots. James Hill already owned one of the lots, the other two being owned by one, George C. Squires. H.D. Minot indicated in a letter that "negotiations (are) pending for the purchase of the half block on Third Street to be used for the erection of a new office building with sufficient room and proper safeguards for the transaction of business."⁷ The building site measured 141 feet by 147 feet containing 20,000 square feet. George Squires sold his property to the railroad on February 25, 1886 for \$43,000, and Hill sold his property on July 29, 1886 for \$23,500. At a total price of \$70,000, the lots cost about \$3.00 per square foot.

The city of St. Paul may have had an influence on site selection. Wanting to see Lowertown more intensely developed, the city may have given the Manitoba some concessions. A letter from George W. Bestor, the president

of the Minnesota Sandstone Company (another company with which Hill had connections) to F.E. Ward, assistant to the president of the Great Northern alluded to the fact that the Manitoba did "not pay any special assessment for this paving" on Broadway. Bestor also requested a "letter from your company...expressing your preference to have the street paved with Kettle River Sandstone, if such is in accordance with your views."⁹ The railroad must have held some leverage in the city's decision making as the street was paved in sandstone.

Demolition of the existing structures on the site must have begun almost immediately and by November pile driving was underway. On November 8, 1886, H.D. Minot wrote "pile driving has begun for the new General Office Building which is to be built with a front and two wings facing the three streets and enclosing an open court with a fire wall in the rear. Each wing will have offices on both sides of a narrow hall."⁸

Hill took a great personal interest in the construction of this building. On December 1st, 1886, he wrote to the architect James Brodie:

"I notice from my office windows that some of the piles being driven under foundation for our new office building are going in faster than others. In cases where the piles drive easily, you should have a man there to see that they are put in at shorter intervals; that is closer together. If you rely on the contractor for this you may get a bad job. There is only one way to do (this) and that is to have an inspector there on the grounds who has sufficient knowledge and character to see that the work is done as it should be. If you have not such a man, there should be no time lost in putting one there."¹⁰

Brodie came to Minnesota from Scotland by way of Canada, and immediately entered the employment of James J. Hill (see adjoining paper). He was Hill's personal architect designing buildings for Hill's various railroad holdings as well as for his personal properties. When it came time to design and build the new General Office Building, Hill placed his trust in Brodie. James Brodie took great care in attending to Mr. Hill's projects and oversaw their construction personally. (see attachment B)

Hill wanted the design of the Manitoba Building to be "large, convenient, and above all fireproof."¹¹ It rose five stories above street level plus a basement. The plan was 'U' shaped around an open court, and the offices

faced either the street or the courtyard. The design of the facades were layer upon layer and composed of brick. The prominent design features were the rusticated base and entrance arch which were sandstone. Another important design feature was its wrought iron gate on Broadway Street. It led into a courtyard which was a light well for the interior offices and a place where Hill could park his horse and carriage.¹²

On May 11th, 1887, the building permit was issued and the structural steel frame was ready to be put into place. The piers and foundations which did not require a permit were already in place. Hill sought the best value for his money. He indicated in a letter that the best offer for the I beams seemed to be too high, and felt that perhaps Carnegie and the other steel manufacturers had made a combination to fix prices. The possibility of imports could cause the domestic steel producers to reduce their figures.¹³ The construction continued into 1888(see attachment C), and on June 30th, 1888, N.D. Miller, the chief engineer for the Manitoba road, became the first person to move into the new building. Hill moved in on August 14th, and later gave this assessment of the building:

"The new general office building at St. Paul was completed and occupied in August, and is found well adapted for that purpose.

The building is fire proof, and the company's valuable records may, we think, hereafter be considered safe from destruction."¹⁴

The St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway became the Great Northern Railway on February 1st, 1890, and afterward, the building came to be known as the Great Northern Building. The Great Northern wasn't the only company operating from that building. Another of Hill's railroads, the Eastern Railway Company of Minnesota which operated a line from the Twin Cities to Duluth, was one of the original tenants, as was the Sand Coulee Coal Company, a Montana company that supplied coal for Hill's locomotives. Hill initially charged rent to the companies that occupied his Great Northern Building, based upon the occupied square footage(see attachment D). \$45,000 a year was the estimated cost to cover the interest on the building heat, light, care and other expenses of operating the building.¹⁵ In 1892, he cancelled the rent portion(presumably covering interest) charging only for the expenses of heat, light and janitor service.

In 1893, the railway reached Puget Sound making it the second trans-continental road along the northern tier of states. The Northern Pacific

had reached the west coast in 1883. With the increase in business came an increase in staff. In 1897, more lights in the offices were already needed, a move which would be impractical given the capacity of the electrical system of the building.¹⁶ In 1899, a shortage of telephones in the building inspired the Great Northern to expand its telephone system.¹⁷ Within 10 years, the railroad had outgrown its office building.

Late in 1897, James Hill started to think about an addition to the building. John Stevens, Hill's chief engineer, upon digging out one of the piles found them "to be perfectly sound and apparently in as good condition as the day they were driven."¹⁸ The foundation was sound enough to support an addition to the building. Hill, once again, called upon his architect, James Brodie, to design and supervise the construction of the addition.

Brodie designed an addition of two floors employing the same style he used on the original building. This made it difficult to discern that this was an addition at all unless one realized the incongruity of the window pattern. The original five story building had arched windows at the fifth floor. Brodie added two more rows of arched windows, and though this gave the facades an awkward appearance, it served the purpose of hiding the addition. Construction of the addition began in February, 1900 and was completed in 1901.

Another of Hill's considerations in deciding to add on to his building, as opposed to building new, were land costs. Lowertown was experiencing a sharp increase in land values, presumably due to its more intense development and increased value to the city. The site which had been purchased in 1886 for \$76,500 was estimated to have a value of \$113,600¹⁹ in 1901. By 1907, that estimate rose to \$160,000.²⁰ Lowertown was the place to be.

By 1901, James J. Hill's "empire" had become quite large, particularly with the addition of the Northern Pacific, of which Hill acquired minority control in 1896, and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, which he acquired by way of Northern Securities Company, a railroad holding company. Northern Securities was formed to hold the stocks from the three railroad companies, but Teddy Roosevelt, who was president at the time, ordered the Attorney General to prosecute Northern Securities on the grounds that it violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Law, and thus in 1904, it was dissolved.²¹ Ironically, in 1970, Congress allowed the same three railroads to merge to form the Burlington Northern.

Business grew quite rapidly for the Great Northern in the early 1900's and with it, the number of employees at the General Office Building...

in 1905 there were 711, 1906-798, 1907-936, 1908-868.²² By 1910, the lack of space in the office building once again posed a real problem. Lack of space in the vault led to the misplacement of one of the minute books, causing "quite an anxious time" for the employees in the Secretary's Department.²³ The incident pointed out one of the inadequacies of the space.

Not only the lack of space, but also building code legislation and the lack of desire to technologically adapt the building began to overtake it. In a 1911 letter, it noted that a recent session of the state legislature had amended the laws dealing with fire escapes to include office buildings.²⁴

In 1912 the order for compliance came:

"Order has finally been issued compelling us to put on such escapes, and as under the law there seems no avoiding putting them on or avoiding the number and style of escapes to be put on, an authority for \$2400 has been approved covering same."²⁵

Earlier that year, a fire started by an office boy striking a match to look for some papers not only pointed out the need for fire escapes²⁶ but also indicated the inadequacy of the lighting system. Then in early 1913, James Hill became concerned with the employee time lost waiting for the elevator.²⁷ The building had two elevators: a small one that ran continuously during office hours, and a large one that ran only during the rush hours—morning, noon, and evening. The size of the power plant in the building limited the continuous operation of both elevators during office hours. Since the elevator company advised against gearing the elevators for greater speeds, another full time elevator operator was hired in order to coordinate the operation of both of the elevators. It was still cheaper to hire additional help, rather than to invest in the building. By this time, however, the decision had been made to construct a new building.

In the late summer of 1912, the rumors started flying about the possible construction of a new office building. Howard James wrote in a letter:

"Rumor comes to me that the company proposes to build a building on the south side of Third Street opposite the present General Office."²⁸

The reply to that letter indicated that the company had "not taken any definite steps with respect to a building on the south side of Third Street, but that the matter is having a consideration."²⁹ Toward the end of the year when Hill acquired the 1st National Bank, the 2nd National Bank, and the Northwestern Trust Company.

Now, James Hill needed a building that not only would provide more space for the Great Northern offices, but would also provide space for the Northern Pacific, the 1st National Bank, the Northwestern Trust Company, and the Northwest General Offices of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Under those conditions, construction of the new General Office Building began in 1914. When James J. Hill moved his office to the new building on December 11, 1915,³⁰ the old General Office Building had been in service for only 27 short years.

Before the railroad moved to its new offices, there was outside interest in the disposition of the old building. The St. Paul Association of Commerce whose goal it was "to assist in locating new industries in this city,"³¹ wanted to have enough property vacant in which to locate new industries, and inquired if there was not some way they could be of assistance in utilizing both the Northern Pacific and Great Northern Buildings. Griggs Cooper & Co., a wholesale grocery and food manufacturing company located on the northeast corner of Third and Broadway, also inquired about space in the old Great Northern Building.³² The building was not really suited for purposes other than office space. The large elevator had a capacity of 2000 pounds and was not adapted for handling merchandise. Also the small capacity of the floors limited its use as warehouse space, as many of the buildings in Lowertown were becoming. Thus the Great Northern decided to retain the building for its own use.

The major tenant of the building after the railroad moved its offices was the Great Northern Express Company, an express service primarily for the transshipment of packages. The rent of their offices was lowered in 1931, and again in 1932 to induce the company to stay in the building. They stayed until the end of September, 1934.

During World War II, W.J. Kerr of the War Production Board at Minneapolis became interested in the old General Office Building. He wrote of the strategic material contained in the building's structure:

"If the building were dismantled as proposed, approximately 663 tons of steel beams, plates, angles, tie rods, vault door and jambs, fire escapes, elevator guides, netting, hardware, 31 tons of cast iron building and elevator columns, stairways and sash weights would be salvaged."³³

Fortunately, this was not the fate of the building.

After World War II, the Great Northern used the building for its yardmasters office, news service, and record storage. In the 1950's, the building also housed the express traffic department, relay repair shop, and

telegraph department, but by the early 1980's the building was used only for record storage. The Burlington Northern Railroad sold the building in 1984.

As a piece of architecture, the James J. Hill Building was not a major architectural achievement. It was as generic of an office building as one could get. Built in an era when most public buildings contained a great deal of classical ornamentation, this building stood as an exception. Maybe that was its significance, its symbolism. Hill had a straightforward style, and the office building, too, presented itself as a straightforward, powerful statement of the man who conceived it. The fact that the building was even built symbolized the risk taking qualities of Hill. For a railroad only 7 years old, the building was a great financial risk. However, Hill started the railroad with no money. The building was appropriately named the James J. Hill Building for it symbolized the best of his entrepreneurial qualities. The building was a monument to the man.

Does that fact alone justify the preservation of the building as a historic place? Probably not by itself. There have been many buildings that have been monuments to their benefactors, but few that have had the historic impact of the Hill Building. I'm sure the preceding narrative seemed quite wordy and that at times there was little connection to the historic significance but that was the historic significance. The histories of the Dakotas, Montana, Washington, Lowertown, the railroad industry, and James J. Hill were so affected by what occurred within the walls of that one, small office building that their histories are the history of the James J. Hill Building. From that building, Hill beckoned settlers to come west, to tame the prairies and woodlands, to mine the coal and build the factories. By the time the new office building on Fifth Street was built, there was no more frontier, the plains were settled, that building could claim no part in the taming of the West. The James J. Hill Building saw the fulfillment of the dreams of the man. It is significant to note that within 6 months of moving into the new office building, Hill died.

What would have been the impact if the old General Office Building had been dismantled in 1943 as proposed? Most importantly Lowertown would have lost one of its cornerstones. It would have eroded the fabric of that area of St. Paul allowing other buildings to be destroyed there. By maintaining the entire Lowertown area, we are preserving a historic reminder of the development and growth of St. Paul. None of the buildings in Lowertown can stand alone, as the James J. Hill Building can't. It's as though Lowertown is a play, and each of its buildings are the actors.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹History, Minnesota & Pacific Railroad Co., "Subsidiaries and Related Companies", in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ²History, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad Co., "Subsidiaries and Related Companies", in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society..
- ³Letter, Edward Sawyer to J.S. Kennedy, April 8, 1880, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway records of the Great Northern Railway records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ⁴Records of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway Co. of Minnesota Up to April, 1886, p. 98, University of Minnesota Law Library.
- ⁵St. Paul City Directory, 1869-70, St. Paul: The Pioneer Press Co., 1869. St. Paul Public Library.
- ⁶St. Paul, Sanborn Map Publishing Co., New York, 1885, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ⁷Letter, Henry D. Minot to J.S. Kennedy, February 17, 1886, Henry D. Minot Files, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway records, in the Great Northern Railway records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ⁸Letter, Henry D. Minot to J.S. Kennedy, November 8, 1886, Henry D. Minot Files, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway records in the Great Northern Railway records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ⁹Letter, George W. Bestor to F.E. Ward, March 20, 1897, GN President's Subject File 3204, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ¹⁰Letter, James J. Hill to James Brodie, December 1, 1886, in the James J. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library.
- ¹¹Eighth Annual Report of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway Co., Fiscal Year Ending June 30th, 1887, St. Paul, Minnesota, St. Paul: The Pioneer Press Co., 1887, p. 18, James J. Hill Reference Library.
- ¹²Westbrook, Nicholas, ed., Guide to the Industrial Archaeology of the Twin Cities, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, p. 80.
- ¹³Letter, James J. Hill to John S. Kennedy, May 28, 1887, in the James J. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library.
- ¹⁴Ninth Annual Report of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway Co., St. Paul: the Pioneer Press Co., 1888, p. 18, James J. Hill Reference Library.
- ¹⁵Letter, C.H. Warren to T.J. Hyman, December 17, 1892, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ¹⁶Letter, John F. Stevens to F.E. Ward, December 22, 1897, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- ¹⁷Proposal by the Allen-Hussey Co. of St. Paul, February 28, 1899, GN President's Subject File 3429, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota

Historical Society

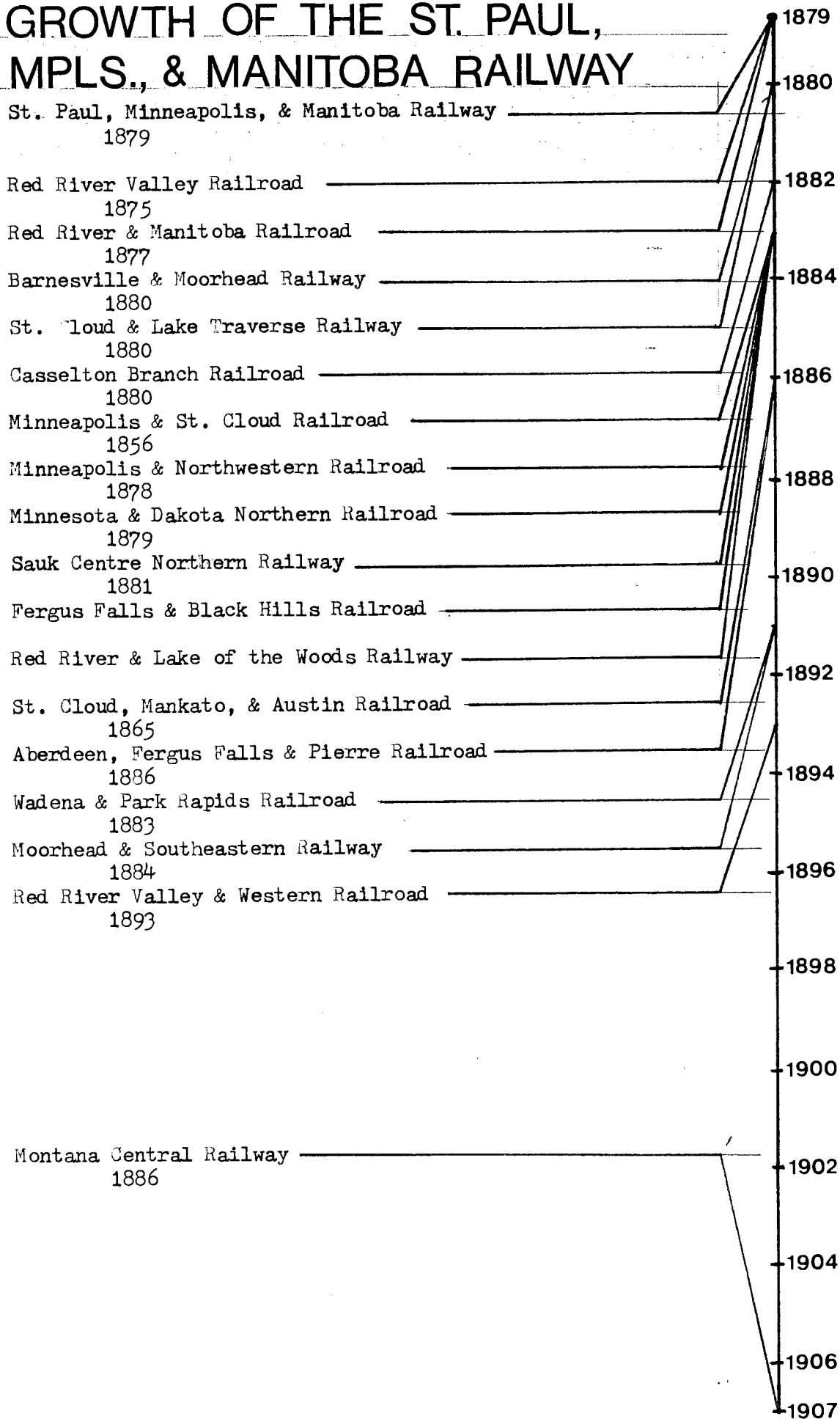
- 18 Letter, John F. Stevens to James J. Hill, December 23, 1897, President's incoming correspondence, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 19 Letter, John F. Stevens to R.I. Farrington. July 27, 1901, GN President's Subj. File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 20 Letter, A.H. Hogeland to J.A. Sandberg, June 6, 1907, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 21 DeWitt, W.J., "Burlington Northern General Office Building- 1980", in the Burlington Northern Railroad Co. Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 22 Memo, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 23 Letter, J.H. Gruber to H.H. Parkhouse, December 22, 1910, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 24 Letter, Lindley to A.H. Hogeland, June 5, 1911, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 25 Letter, H.H. Parkhouse to L.W. Hill, June 18, 1912, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 26 Letter, A.H. Hogeland to L.W. Hill, January 17, 1912, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 27 Letter, James J. Hill to Louis W. Hill, January 10, 1913, GN President's Subject Files, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 28 Letter, Howard James to C.R. Gray, August 26, 1912, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 29 Letter, C.R. Gray to Howard James, August 29, 1912, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 30 Letter, Ralph Budd to J.J. Toomey, December 6, 1915, Toomey Files, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.
- 31 Letter, G.F. Thomas to R. Budd, June 9, 1915, GN President's Subject File 4419, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.

32 Letter, R. Budd to James T. Maher, March 27, 1917, in the GN President's Subject Files, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.

33 Letter, George H. Hess to F.J. Gavin, March 23, 1943, GN President's Subject Files, in the Great Northern Railway Co. records, Minnesota Historical Society.

Attachment A

GROWTH OF THE ST. PAUL, MPLS., & MANITOBA RAILWAY



Attachment A

GROWTH OF THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY

