

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

*The St. Paul Camera Club  
Celebrates Its 125th  
Anniversary*

*Bob Muschewske*

**Spring 2018**

Volume 53, Number 1

—Page 15

## Charles and Elaine Eastman: Their Years in St. Paul, 1893–1898

*Teresa Swanson, Sydney Beane, and William Beane, page 3*



When Dr. Charles A. Eastman and his wife, Elaine Goodale Eastman, right, left the Lakota reservation in South Dakota and relocated to St. Paul in 1893, they chose a place where Charles had deep ancestral roots as can be seen in this excerpt from Joseph Nicollet's 1843 map of the Hydrographic Basin of the Upper Mississippi. Nicollet labelled the area where the Mississippi River meets the Minnesota River MDEWAKANTON COUNTRY. It is also known to Dakota as Bdote, the place "where two waters come together." Barely discernible on the map are the locations of Fort Snelling, St. Anthony Falls, the lakes of Minneapolis, and Carver's Cave, sites that today are in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The photos of Charles and Elaine Eastman are courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.; map courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 53, Number 1

Spring 2018

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**

## CONTENTS

- 3 Charles and Elaine Eastman: Their Years in St. Paul, 1893–1898  
*Teresa Swanson, Sydney Beane, and William Beane*
- 15 The St. Paul Camera Club Celebrates Its 125th Anniversary  
*Bob Muschewske*
- 22 “An Architectural Freak” Is Saved  
How St. Paul’s Federal Courts Building and  
Post Office Became Today’s Landmark Center  
*Bob Roscoe*

*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

In the 1890s, St. Paul was a burgeoning city. Dr. Charles Eastman and his wife, Elaine Goodale, arrived from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, where Eastman had served as a doctor. Eastman had been to medical school in Boston but was brought up in the traditional Dakota way. Teresa Swanson, Sydney Beane, and William Beane recount how, during several years spent in St. Paul, Eastman wrote and published a number of culturally accurate Dakota stories in the national press. About the same time the Eastmans lived in the city, ground was broken on the impressive Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. Bob Roscoe shares how, through patient maneuvering, cultural leaders in St. Paul managed to save it from the wrecking ball in the 1970s and preserve it for, among other uses, RCHS’s own offices and Research Center! And members of the St. Paul Camera Club, which was organized in 1893, may have taken photographs of that building as it went up over the city. Camera Club and RCHS board member Bob Muschewske tells us the history of this group, which reflected growing interest in this art form and still encourages it today.

*Anne Cowie*  
Chair, Editorial Board

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## *“An Architectural Freak” Is Saved*

# How St. Paul’s Federal Courts Building and Post Office Became Today’s Landmark Center

*Bob Roscoe*

In 1969, demolition of one of the most elegant Richardson Romanesque-Chateausque-style public buildings in the Upper Midwest seemed imminent. The federal government had declared the nearly vacant Federal Courts and Post Office Building in downtown St. Paul to be surplus property.<sup>1</sup> Many public officials and business leaders in the city saw no means of rescue. In the next few years, however, a persuasive coalition of city and county cultural and political leaders joined by redoubtable concerned citizens prevented its demise. What followed involved many years of analysis and discussion of potential options for reuse of the building followed by careful renovation of the structure. Of immeasurable local importance, the threatened demolition of the Federal Courts and Post Office Building also contributed to the birth of historic preservation movement in this area. Today the building is meticulously restored and home for many of St. Paul’s cultural organizations.

The Federal Courts and Post Office Building has a commanding presence on its site bordered by Fifth and Sixth Streets, Market and Washington Streets in downtown St. Paul. Its main entrance is strengthened by its Romanesque-Chateausque architectural stone features that enrich the building’s principal façade, which faces Rice Park, forming a magnificent presence that enhances both structure and landscape.

When in 1849 real estate speculators John R. Irvine and Henry M. Rice platted out a slightly irregular parcel of land just west of the downtown grid for “public purposes,” their reasons for this beneficence are today unknown. What is known is that this green space became known as Rice Park. Serendipity may have been the cause for Rice Park’s eventual graceful emergence. Its formation in that year makes it older than Central Park in New York City and Union Square in San Francisco.

The first Saint Paul City Hall anchored the site just north of Rice Park from 1854 to 1890 when that structure was removed

to make way for the construction of the courts building.<sup>2</sup> Construction of the Federal Courts Building and Post Office began in 1892. It partially opened in 1898, but wasn’t finally completed until 1901.

Construction of this federal building took longer than might have been expected because the government decided on two occasions to enlarge the structure. It occupies an entire city block that is slightly trapezoidal because of its irregular shape. When completed, the Federal Courts and Post Office Building had five stories with a relatively slender tower on the south side which rises to a height of 150 feet. There is also a slightly lower tower on the north side that was added in 1899 when the building was expanded. The building cost nearly \$2.5 million (about \$70 million today).

Between 1901 and 1967, all federal offices in the city were located there and between 1902 and 1934 it housed St. Paul’s main post office.<sup>3</sup> The post office occupied the basement and first floor with the federal courts on the second and

third floors. All the other federal agencies had their offices on the fourth and fifth floors. Following the completion of the new main post office and custom house on Kellogg Boulevard, a post office sub-station occupied the first floor of the Courts Building.

### **Abandonment in 1970**

By mid-twentieth century, downtown Saint Paul had fallen into lethargic decline as businesses departed for the suburbs as part of a nationwide pattern of urban abandonment. Meanwhile, modern architecture was promising a bright new future to replace what were deemed worn-out, older buildings. The federal government’s solution was to amply fund local urban renewal programs that were intended to eradicate what was frequently named urban blight.

In 1961, the General Services Administration (GSA) built a new Federal Courts Building near Lowertown on Robert Street with modern architecture’s prevailing use of expansive panels of marble and glass, and moved the federal judicial functions out of their old building at Rice Park. Since the 1930s, most post office functions had been moved to the main Post Office building on Kellogg Boulevard between Sibley and Jackson streets.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Federal Courts Building seemed especially out of step with the prevailing insistence on modernism. Now renamed the “Old” Federal Courts Building, it became programmed for removal.

On March 5, 1969, Minnesota’s U.S. House Representative Clark MacGregor sent a letter to the General Services Administration concerning the status of the Federal Courts Building. A few weeks



*This 1971 photo looks across Rice Park in the foreground at the south facade of the Federal Courts Building and Post Office. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

later, a reply came from William A. Schmidt, Commissioner, Public Buildings Service, who was then the acting director of the National Park Service. "The building is not nationally significant either on historical or architectural grounds," he stated.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, prodded by several influential St. Paul city leaders, the Minnesota Legislature passed a resolution requesting GSA to "dispose of the old Federal Courts Building consistent with its historic architectural value."<sup>6</sup>

Shortly afterward, public officials led by St. Paul Mayor George Vavoulis reacted by forming the Mayor's Committee to Preserve the Old Federal Courts Building.<sup>7</sup> Several women, including Georgia DeCoster and Elizabeth (Betty)

Willett Musser, who were identified as preservationists, led the effort to work with the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Minnesota Historical Society to gain placement of the building on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>8</sup>

Donald Torbert, professor of art history at the University of Minnesota, called it "one of the truly excellent Richardsonian buildings that remain in the Midwest." The professor then added a statement that became a preservation commandment still in use today. "When a city allows a work of this quality to be razed, it finds too late that it has thrown away its history."<sup>9</sup>

By 1967, a branch post office and

Army and Navy recruiting offices were the only occupants of the Federal Courts and Post Office Building. The Mayor's Committee now faced a formidable task, weighted with immense uncertainty. It would have to develop the expertise needed to save an historic building, techniques and procedures that went way beyond the academic exercises in place at that time and that other historic preservation groups across the nation were also discovering. The birth of American historic preservation had just recently begun, and was brand new in Minnesota. Knowing the value of preservation was gaining appreciation nationwide. Knowing how to make it happen locally was yet to come.

Architecturally distinctive public structures, such as the then-65-year-old Federal Courts Building, were not usually recognized or supported by a particular historic association, such as was the case with Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia, or Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. The prevailing conception of preservation at that time meant the use and ownership for which the building was singularly to be assigned required a succeeding owner interested in purchasing it to retain it for that original use. Vacant buildings thus became problematic.

Ever since the Kodak Brownie camera was introduced in 1901, American travelers vacationing in Great Britain and Europe had clicked their cameras in front of older buildings and brought home pictures of centuries-old edifices that charmed them. In contrast, left-behind architecture in the downtowns of American cities stood in the way of urban renewal, carrying no importance.

Academic discourse during this time and architectural publications focused on new buildings as the way to build the future in the United States. These publications used the word "tradition" as the favored process intended to continue developing new expressions of traditional architectural styles. In the words of English philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, "The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order."<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s, preservationists had

a very rudimentary knowledge of the economics of preservation. Donn Coddington, Supervisor of Historic Sites for the Minnesota Historical Society, addressed the Federal Building situation by calling for the “wisdom and the power to find a solution to this very real problem which plagues all who are engaged in the field of historic preservation, as no satisfactory solution is in sight.”<sup>11</sup> By this time, most observers assumed the Old Federal Courts Building was scheduled for demolition. The Mayor’s Committee, however, decided to find a way for the federal government to act as building owner, and the members looked for tenants. The committee also organized a fundraising committee to garner funds for renovation.

### “An Architectural Freak”

In the early 1960s, several members of the downtown business community—the de facto leaders of civic life—considered historic preservation unworkable. Razing this empty structure and building a parking lot was one idea. Making cleared land into a park was another notion. *St. Paul Pioneer Press* editor William Sumner wrote an editorial in which he called the Federal Courts Building an “ante-bellum Disneyland architecture” and “an architectural freak.”<sup>12</sup>

A few days later, the newspaper printed a letter to the editor which stated, “None of the architectural dictionaries I have at my disposal supply a definition for the word ‘freak,’ but my standard dictionary defines freak as something unusual. If this is what Mr. Sumner meant, I agree with him. I am glad downtown St. Paul has among its structures something unusual.”<sup>13</sup>

Another oblique compliment came from a Minneapolis newspaper columnist, who considered the structure “pure funk with all its granite towers and turrets” and added, “It’s one of those nut buildings one embraces and ultimately falls in love with, the kind of place that makes modern cities just a bit more livable and lovable.”<sup>14</sup>

The Mayor’s Committee’s primary task was to convince GSA to declare the building eligible for an entity to purchase it. Along with this consideration was

establishing that the building’s future use would be compatible with its historic nature while also working to prevent the building from being slated for demolition.

In 1968, a fortuitous event took place, as reported in the pages of the *Saint Paul Pioneer Dispatch*. The newspaper published an article that erroneously stated that a developer who owned a property near the Federal Courts Building was interested in trading it to GSA in exchange for the Courts Building, with the result that the developer would demolish the Courts Building to make way for a parking lot on the site across from Rice Park.<sup>15</sup>

This inaccurate newspaper report caused an immediate, and very unexpected, public reaction. Letters of protest were sent to government offices in St. Paul and Washington, D.C. The resulting brouhaha became a turning point in the fate of the Federal Courts Building, and it spurred public support for an or-

derly transfer of the building to the City of Saint Paul.

### Rescue

An opportunity now came into play. The Mayor’s Committee had basically finished its task. The public spirit and a few inspired citizens who supported preservation at this time led to the establishment of Minnesota Landmarks, Incorporated, a nonprofit organization set in place by the City of Saint Paul that resembled a variety of local non-government preservation organizations appearing throughout the nation during this time. Many board members of the newly formed Minnesota Landmarks had also served on the Mayor’s Committee.

Because the number of local people interested in active historic preservation was quite limited in those days, this recasting procedure was essential for achieving the preservation of the building. A critically important distinction between a committee appointed by



Betty Musser, right, Frank Marzitelli, center, Carl Drake, far left, and Ron Hubbs wield axes in a symbolic demolition of a portion of the loading dock used by the former Post Office prior to the beginning of the renovation of the building in 1975. Betty Musser represented Minnesota Landmarks, Frank Marzitelli represented the Saint Paul Port Authority, and Carl Drake and Ron Hubbs represented the St. Paul Companies (now Travelers), which supported restoring the Courts Building. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Landmarks.

the mayor and Minnesota Landmarks was the nonprofit's charter permitted it to apply for and receive funds for use in property management. This led to an important breakthrough. Shortly after it was organized, Minnesota Landmarks received substantial financial grants from two Minnesota philanthropic institutions—the Bush Foundation and the Hill Foundation—along with donations from private citizens.

Another momentous step in the process of saving the building occurred in April 1969 when the Old Federal Courts Building was added to the National Register of Historic Places, the highest status a historic building could receive. This designation came about primarily through the work of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Ramsey County Historical Society in preparing the nomination materials.<sup>16</sup>

The National Register of Historic Places had its origins in the 1935 Historic Sites Act. For the first time, this law es-

tablished a national policy that recognized the importance of historic structures and places. The act led to guidelines drafted by the National Park Service, operating within the Department of the Interior, which established regulations for the protection and preservation of nationally significant properties.

Under the provisions of the Historic Sites Act, placement of a building on the National Register of Historic Places served the purpose of honorary recognition, but it did not in itself prohibit the demolition of a building if no federal funds were used in that process. To remedy this situation, municipalities could follow specified procedures in the act to give a building local historic designation. Thus the Minnesota Historical Society could offer guidance to Minnesota Landmarks on how to provide protection from demolition, although few local historic organizations at that time had this ability.

Historic preservation gained credibility as a bona fide civic movement with

the 1966 National Preservation Act. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Senate Bill 3035, the National Historic Preservation Act, into law on October 15, 1966. It proved to be the single most influential piece of legislation intended to strengthen historic preservation's role as a recognized factor in the nation's marketplace.

The act requires federal agencies, through a process known as *Section 106 Review*, to evaluate all federally funded or permitted projects on historic properties and their impact on the buildings, archaeological sites, and the like that were involved in the project. Thus federal review under Section 106 of the law was useful in the case of historic properties, such as the Federal Courts Building in St. Paul, that were endangered by the threat of demolition.

The National Historic Preservation Act strengthened the 1935 legislation and enlarged the inventory of buildings eligible to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Many local governments that were unfamiliar with the fact that certain older buildings in their communities had historic value began to recognize the legitimacy and value of these structures.

Once this began to happen, citizens in those communities began organizing campaigns to save them. Consequently the National Register status of these buildings became useful as a delaying tactic, which often was critical, especially when an enlightened developer or a community nonprofit organization would recognize the importance of preservation and find a new economic role for the building.

### **Breakthrough**

When the Mayor's Committee had studied the options for saving the Federal Courts Building, it had identified a restrictive impediment to reuse in the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare's regulations that were applicable to federal buildings. These regulations stipulated that historic buildings had no other use than their specified historic purposes, but by the early 1970s, these regulations were being reconsidered. Eventually, the St. Paul Federal



*In the early 1970s, Betty Musser and Minnesota Landmarks' Building Committee conducted candlelight dinners such as this one as part of the fundraising campaign that helped to underwrite the cost of restoring Landmark Center. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Courts Building gained recognition that other public uses, and eventually commercial enterprises, could be a commodious fit with buildings of historic origins.

In October 1971, President Richard M. Nixon signed Executive Order #11593, which directed the GSA to provide leadership in augmenting various preservation measures throughout the nation.<sup>17</sup> Then on September 8, 1972, the City of Saint Paul proposed that the Saint Paul Arts and Sciences Council become the major tenant in the building. Up until this time, GSA had rejected various submissions by the city for a variety of reasons. When the City Council offered to buy the building outright from GSA, for example, the federal agency set a \$1,606,000 selling price, which was then prohibitively expensive.

Unlike its handling of the earlier proposals that it had rejected, GSA was now becoming more receptive to the possibility of historic preservation. It accepted Saint Paul's recommendation that the Saint Paul Arts and Sciences Council be the major tenant in the Federal Courts Building and sent it to the Department of the Interior. Several weeks later, on October 20, 1972, Arthur Sampson, GSA's Acting Administrator, made the official transfer of title to the building to the City of Saint Paul, causing great public delight among city and business leaders, including many of St. Paul's citizens.<sup>18</sup>

The transfer of the title to the city served as the impetus for the city and the Arts and Sciences board, influenced by Betty Musser and Georgia DeCoster, to move ahead. Very soon thereafter, the two women began to raise funds for the building's renovation and restoration. This decision by federal officials was not only epochal for the rescue of the Federal Courts Building, but also for the elevation of the young historic preservation movement, supported by recent federal legislation, to become a trusted and working procedure in urban planning and development. Above all, a significant and beautiful building was given protection.

When the GSA declared the building to be surplus property that was available for a public purpose, the authors of *Landmark Reclaimed* noted, "There no longer was any question of the desire to



*American conductor and pianist Dennis Russell Davies conducts a rehearsal of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra in the atrium of the Landmark Center in about 1980. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

save the building. The problem became how to do it."<sup>19</sup>

As occasionally happens with attempts to rescue historic buildings, even when the fate of the building is out of harm's way in terms of demolition, the process to save the building and convert it into a worthy reuse involves piles of paperwork and numerous meetings among the people involved. Thus dealing with the paperwork and the meetings seems to be harder work than the physical labor done by construction workers on scaffolds. In the case of the Federal Courts Building, Minnesota Landmarks faced the monumental task of finding a new building owner acceptable to its current owner, GSA.

Securing tenants appropriate to the historic nature of the building, establishing a renovation budget and a slate of operating costs, organizing a project development team, and formulating a scope of work became an undertaking of which there was no available precedent in these nascent years of historic preservation.

The participants faced learning the complicated aspects of their mission, including the leaders educating themselves in what was required of them. In the case of the Landmark Center restoration, Brooks Cavin, an eminent St. Paul

architect and one of the architecture profession's early adapters of historic preservation, greatly assisted this process immensely. Cavin's willingness to step up and help came at a time when many architects did not consider historic preservation a worthy architectural exercise. Consequently, he became a very important and critical leader in this effort to restore the Federal Courts Building.

While the transfer of ownership of the Courts Building from the federal government to the City of Saint Paul was in process, Minnesota Landmarks had become aware that the nearby Saint Paul Arts and Sciences Council was expanding beyond the available space in its current facility. Betty Musser, who was then the president of the Council's board of directors, saw the Old Courts Building as an opportunity for the Council. She, along with Malcolm Lein, director of the former St. Paul Gallery and School of Art, partnered with Bruce Carlson, executive director of the Schubert Club, to persuade the Council's board to seize the opportunity they saw in the available federal building.

The Arts and Sciences Council board then issued a momentous proposition: If Minnesota Landmarks could acquire the Federal Courts Building from the federal government, the Council board would

raise the funds for its renovation and encourage its member organizations to move into the restored building.

What happened in St. Paul with the Federal Courts Building is a case study of how historic preservation was forming its own history and methodology. In historic preservation's early days, its advocates' method of just standing at a public podium with outstretched arms and pleading for the community to save a building for the sole reason that the property was historic was the only course of action. By the late 1970s, however, the *economics* of building reuse emerged as the all-important rationale for preserving historic properties. Ironically, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as the American built environment was enlarging and growing more architecturally diversified, even in small towns there were efforts being made to reuse a former gas station and turn it into a place to get a sewing machine repaired or to convert a former jewelry store into a chiropractor's office.

The first order of business for Minnesota Landmarks was organizing a plan for reuse of the Federal Courts Building. Georgia DeCoster's eleven-page report, *Saving and Recycling the St. Paul Old Federal Courts Building*, served as the platform to gain title to the building. Searching for potential tenants to fit the mission of cultural uses included the Saint Paul Public Library, the Minnesota Museum of Art, and a number of educational institutions. At the same time, the board of the Saint Paul Arts and

Sciences Council, led by its president Betty Musser, developed a critical interest in the building.

However, more federal roadblocks appeared. Musser proposed studies of new possibilities for the building. Phillip Aziz, a designer, prepared graphic sketches of the interior showing potential exhibition spaces, concert spaces, and other uses for the building's interior including a rathskeller in the subbasement. Brooks Cavin submitted a companion report to the Arts and Sciences board that proved to be another major step forward. While these plans were being developed, the City of Saint Paul agreed to take on a portion of maintenance costs for the Courts Building if the Arts and Sciences Council became the tenants. The convergence of all these actions meant a new course for preservation of this elegant granite edifice had just been set.

On October 20, 1972, at a ceremony in front of the Federal Courts Building and facing Rice Park, Minnesota Fourth District Congressman Joseph Karth proudly handed the \$1.00 payment for the building to General Services Administrator Arthur F. Sampson. Waverly Smith, who represented the Saint Paul Companies, Minnesota's oldest business corporation and an active supporter of the city, accompanied the congressman while St. Paul Mayor Lawrence Cohen and Mayor's Committee member Betty Musser stood by. After the ceremonial change in ownership had concluded, she commented, "For one dollar and a lot of hard work, we have a castle."<sup>20</sup>

As major fund raising got underway, Minnesota Landmarks was now owner of the building. Georgia DeCoster took office as the president of the nonprofit and Betty Musser took charge of the building committee. The Schubert Club, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Senior Advocates, and the Ramsey County Historical Society all agreed to be among the first tenants of the building.<sup>21</sup>

Every American city has a portion of its downtown that holds its identity and history. This place is almost always in the heart of the city. A city's early economic stature, its cultural locus, and its political influence typically shape its birth and its early growth that becomes a pattern for the city's future. Eventually this pattern becomes translated into records and human cognition that can identify and preserve a city's heritage.

St. Paul, Minnesota, is emblematic of this historical process. The Federal Courts Building, now known as Landmark Center, sits in this place in St. Paul. This building, along with Rice Park immediately across the street, perhaps more than any other part of the city, has served and continues to serve as St. Paul's history laboratory.

*Bob Roscoe has been active in historic preservation in the Twin Cities for many years. He is the author of two books dealing with historic buildings in the state and is currently writing a history of Rice Park from which portions of this article are drawn.*

## Endnotes

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8. *Ibid.*, 79.

9. Biloine W. Young, *Landmark: Stories of a Place* (St. Paul: Minnesota Landmarks, 2002), 26.

10. Quoted in Dale E. Casper, *Architects on Architecture: Opinions, Statements, and Critical Examinations, Journal Articles, 1982–1988* (Monticello, Ill.: Vance Bibliographies, 1989), XX [author: please supply page number]. The essay in which Whitehead first made this statement is in his book *Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology; Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh during the Session 1927–28* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and New York: Macmillan, 1929).

11. Copy of Donn Coddington Letter to The Editor, *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 9, 1970, in Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, Subject Files, Box 113.J.5.7B, Minnesota History Center, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

12. Young, 29.

13. Donn Coddington Letter to The Editor, *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 9, 1970.

14. Young, 29.

15. *Ibid.*, 25.

16. Michels, 69.

17. *Ibid.*, 72.

18. *Ibid.*, 74.

19. *Ibid.*, 70.

20. Young, 31.

21. For an account of what happened when the Ramsey County Historical Society moved into Landmark Center after the renovation work began in 1974, see Anne Cowie, "Growing Up in St. Paul: The Peripatetic RCHS in the Mid-1970s," *Ramsey County History*, 49:3 (Fall 2014): 8–11. The building reopened to the public in 1978. Today the Landmark Center is owned by Ramsey County and Minnesota Landmarks continues to operate and maintain the building on behalf of the county.



R.C.H.S.

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Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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*The monumental architecture of Landmark Center's granite façade along Market Street provides a complementary background to the colorful garden at the nearby Saint Paul Hotel. Photograph courtesy of Landmark Center. For more on how the Old Federal Courts Building and Post Office became Landmark Center, see Bob Roscoe's article beginning on page 22.*