

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Setting the Record Straight*

**The Scoop that Helped Save  
a St. Paul Landmark**

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*Architect of St. Paul's West Side*

# H. Emil Strassburger

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## By the Numbers . . .

When researching the built environment, building permits and related materials are invaluable. These documents provide addresses; building specifications; filing dates; names of owners, contractors, and builders; project costs; and other details. In this issue, all three authors focused on the built environment. Two writers—Nicole Foss and Krista Finstad Hanson—spent hours reviewing permits at the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center—the only location where early city permits are housed.

Thanks to support from the Dietz Family Foundation of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation and a Legacy Grant, RCHS is now creating a web-based portal providing online access to our nearly 2 million pages of permits and other documents by year's end. This project has been financed, in part, with funds provided by the State of Minnesota from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society. Check out the stats below to learn more:

Year the City of St. Paul's License, Inspection, and Environmental Protection Office donated its building permits from 1883 to 1975 to RCHS:  
**2003**

Year our Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center opened:  
**2010**

Number of St. Paul building permits housed at RCHS:  
**385,000**

Number of pages of permits that will be available online by end of 2024:  
**Nearly 2 million**

Number of research requests received at RCHS in 2023:  
**1,429**

Please visit our Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center for building permits or other research needs in the lower level of Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street.

SOURCE: RCHS Director of Collections and Exhibitions Mollie Spillman.

### ON THE COVER



Architect H. Emil Strassburger spent about fifteen years making his mark on St. Paul's West Side. Photo and name plate courtesy of John Riley; Architectural tools courtesy of Dmitry Makeev (compass) and the Collection of Auckland Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira (ruler) via Wikipedia Commons.

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## Message from the Editorial Board

A city boasting a variety of architecture, St. Paul is a testament to both change and preservation. Economies boom and bust, peace follows war, buildings stand or fall. An architect's work endures or gets scraped by a bulldozer. Most often, the prevailing styles and civic leaders of the time dictate what stays and what goes. Architect Emil Strassburger is a perfect example of this, as Nicole Foss reveals to us. His work is much admired and played a big role in developing St. Paul's West Side, but most of it is gone today. Linda Kohl tells us that sometimes there is only a serendipitous series of events that spares landmarks, like our own Landmark Center. And sometimes, modest well-built homes endure far longer than their bigger, flashier counterparts, as Krista Finstad Hanson details for us in her piece on the Hamline Midway neighborhood.

Whether your home, your office, or your favorite cultural landmark looks like the ornate layers of a wedding cake or a sleek functional design of steel and glass, the common denominator is people. Regardless of the architectural styles of the day, the buildings of our city belong to the citizens who make up our businesses and neighborhoods. As immigration ebbed and flowed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so did the prevailing styles of architecture across the city. To follow the threads of these structures is to discover the tapestry of St. Paul.

*Anne Field*  
Chair, Editorial Board

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*Ramsey County History has revised its numbering system. At the start of each calendar year, the first issue will be labeled No. 1. This issue is Winter 2024, Vol. 59, No. 1. Note that with this change, Vol. 58 includes only three issues for 2023.*

## The Scoop that Helped Save a St. Paul Landmark

LINDA KOHL

The year was 1968, and urban renewal was in its heyday. Grand (or “fusty,” some might say) old buildings in the Twin Cities were disappearing to make way for sleek, modern (or “soulless,” some might say) new buildings.<sup>1</sup>

In St. Paul, construction of a new Federal Courts Building at Kellogg Boulevard and Robert Street was complete. Designed in the modernist and brutalist architectural style and characterized by hulking, block-like structures and a lack of ornamentation, the building was the antithesis of what it was replacing.<sup>2</sup>

With its turrets, towers, and gables, the Old Federal Courts Building across Fifth Street from Rice Park was often described as a castle. Opened in 1902, it housed federal offices and agencies for Minnesota and much of the upper Midwest—circuit and district courts (including judges’ chambers and courtrooms), immigration and naturalization offices, the Internal Revenue Service, the Bureau of Investigation/FBI and other federal agencies, a US Post Office branch, and district offices of senators and congressional representatives. Notorious gangsters, including Alvin Karpis, had been tried and convicted here. Prohibition had its roots here, yet by the 1960s, the building was considered obsolete.<sup>3</sup>

St. Paul city and county officials and other community leaders had known for years that something eventually would have to be done with the nearly empty, deteriorating, but still glorious pile of granite that graced the north side of Rice Park. Yet, no one was quite sure what, despite a number of committees formed in the late 1960s to develop viable solutions.

In the end, a newspaper scoop would help save it.



In the late 1960s, the Old Federal Courts Building had seen better days. For a time, its future was uncertain. *Photo by Joan Larson Kelly, courtesy of Minnesota Landmarks.*



In 1966, a modern Federal Courts Building was built six blocks from the Old Federal Courts Building. Today, the facility is called the Warren E. Burger Federal Building and US Courthouse in honor of former US Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger of St. Paul. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*

## Out with the Old?

For years, committees had been formed and studies commissioned to devise a new use for the old building. But there didn't seem to be any urgency to find a solution, even as, one by one, offices and agencies relocated to the new federal building and courthouse six blocks away.

The building—now sixty-six-years old and suffering from neglect—was still beloved, and most people at the time believed it was safe from destruction. An unscientific poll published in the *Minneapolis Star* in October 1968 declared that metropolitan residents overwhelmingly believed the structure should be restored:

Eighty-six per cent of those interviewed agreed that the Federal Courts Building, now being vacated with the construction of a new building, should be preserved. Actually, there seems to be little question that it will be saved. St. Paul officials now are engaged in an attempt to find new tenants.<sup>4</sup>

That assumption turned out to be overly optimistic. The building was, indeed, in danger.

The headline in the December 17, 1968, *St. Paul Dispatch*, the city's afternoon paper, shocked readers: "Old Court House May Be Traded for Parking Lot." The story, by reporter George Beran, sounded dire:

St. Paul's old Federal Court House, the belle of Victorian architecture standing north of Rice Park, may be swapped for a lower-Loop parking lot.

Whether the belle survives the wrecking ball is in doubt.<sup>5</sup>

Unbeknownst to the public and many preservation-minded officials, the City of St. Paul had quietly dropped its plans to acquire the old courts building. The story quoted a top official of the federal General Services Administration (GSA), the building's landlord, saying, "The city won't be able to come up with a proposal and [the city] said it would not object to exchange with private interests."<sup>6</sup>

The article further revealed that the federal government was negotiating with a private St. Paul developer—whose identity was not

disclosed—to trade a parcel of property in what is now known as Lowertown for the old courts building. The Lowertown property at an undisclosed location would provide parking for employees and visitors to the new building. In an even-up trade with no cash involved, the developer would take ownership of the Old Federal Courts Building.<sup>7</sup>

In the next days, more stories ran, each adding details, mystery, and intrigue. A story in the December 18 *Pioneer Press*, St. Paul's morning newspaper, confirmed that the city had quietly all but abandoned its chance to acquire the old building. St. Paul Mayor Thomas Byrne acknowledged that negotiations for the swap that would leave the Old Federal Courts Building in private hands were "just about complete." Never mind that only a few months before, Byrne had given his "personal pledge" to an audience of more than a hundred architects that the city would become the owner of the building.<sup>8</sup>

"Speculation Grows Over Dealings On Old Courts Building," read the headline in the *Dispatch* that same afternoon:

The Old Federal Courts Building continued today to be the central figure in a mystery-suspense downtown-real-estate story. . . . New interest in the old building was reawakened Tuesday when it was learned that the General Services Administration (GSA) has practically completed negotiations between the federal government and a St. Paul real estate developer or combination of developers to acquire the building. . . . Several persons who wanted the city of St. Paul to take over the building to insure its preservation are in the dark as to the identity of the person or persons with whom GSA is negotiating the trade, which is to involve no money.<sup>9</sup>

Soon, part of the mystery was solved. A December 18 story in the *Minneapolis Star* revealed that the private developer proposing the swap was Austin John Baillon, a real estate broker. A follow-up article by reporter Kathryn Boardman in the December 20 *Dispatch* confirmed that the developer proposing the swap was Baillon,

This early, undated photograph (circa early 1920s) shows a structure at the corner of E. Fourth and Broadway that housed the St. Paul Rubber Company for many years, followed by other companies, including Rotary Press Company and E. W. Honsa Printing Company. For a time, there was talk that the building would be demolished and replaced by a parking lot. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



president of Baillon Real Estate Company. In a classic understatement, the story acknowledged that the trade proposal was “somewhat complicated.”<sup>10</sup>

Through foreclosure, Baillon had acquired an old industrial building at 300 E. Fourth Street, three blocks from the new Federal Courts Building. Baillon proposed to demolish the Fourth Street building and build a parking ramp there for employees and other users of the new courts facilities. That ramp would be traded, even-up, for the Old Federal Courts Building, giving Baillon control of the building’s fate. While Baillon said he wanted to preserve the structure, he made no guarantees: “I do not want to commit myself unequivocally to the preservation of the building but we have had a number of inquiries from prospective tenants and it would be torn down as a last resort.”<sup>11</sup>

An editorial in the December 20 *Dispatch* bleakly summed up the situation:

The fate of the old Federal Court building apparently is out of the city’s hands. The huge, dark building on the north end of Rice Park is vacant except for a post office on the main floor. Earlier, it was thought that the federal government would give the building to the city for a small price, probably \$1. The great need for parking space, however, for the new Federal Court building at Kellogg and Robert has killed this plan because the government wants to trade the building for land suitable for a parking ramp, and the city has no such land available. The building will probably go to private developers.<sup>12</sup>

Top city officials and others who had been working to preserve the building were furious. Two of them, Frank D. Marzitelli and Malcolm E. Lein, wrote a scathing letter to Fourth District US Rep. Joseph Karth:

The shocking announcement that negotiations between Baillon Real Estate Company, a private real estate agency and the GSA to trade the Federal Courts Building for parking facilities was a critical blow to support of the Arts in Saint Paul. . . . Furthermore, it cannot help but damage confidence in any public agency involved in those proceedings. . . .

It can only be concluded that instead of serving worthwhile purposes the building will be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

The two letter writers carried considerable political and civic weight. Marzitelli, a former St. Paul City Council member, was then executive vice president of the city’s Port Authority and president of the Saint Paul Art Center board. Lein was director of the art center, which for years had been trying to acquire the Old Federal Courts Building from the federal government for a nominal sum to preserve it as a museum or gallery.<sup>14</sup>

In mid-January, the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) “question[ed] the propriety of conducting secret negotiations to seal the fate of the publicly owned building which graces the north side of Rice Park.” And both RCHS and the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) expressed “fears that demolition may be the cruel fate of the 67-year-old landmark of gingerbread architecture.”<sup>15</sup>

### More Controversy

While the initial story and those that followed had helped galvanize a community into action, the controversy would get worse. In January 1969, Beran uncovered another stunning development. Six months earlier, in July 1968, the National Historic Sites Committee of the US Interior Department had decided that the building did not qualify as a historic monument. Beran reported that the committee found that the building “is not nationally significant either

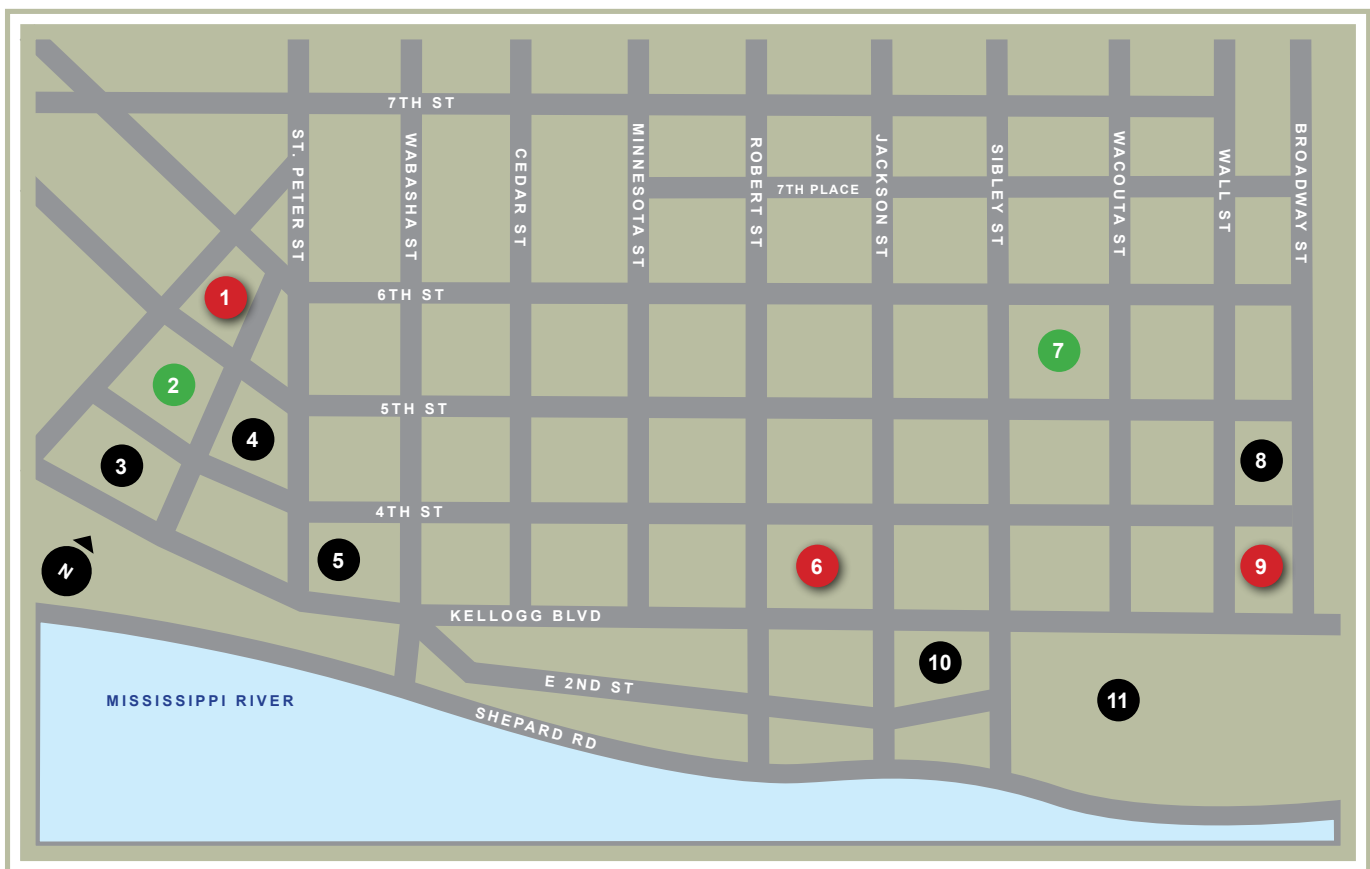
on historical or architectural grounds within the meaning of the Historical Sites Act of 1935.” Federal officials neglected to tell St. Paul officials of the decision until January 16, 1969. The news came in a letter from Robert T. Griffin, assistant administrator of the GSA, to Representative Karth. The letter also said that the building was not federal surplus and, thus, could not be donated to the city or anyone else for \$1.<sup>16</sup>

Regional GSA Administrator Richard Austin explained, “We don’t consider it surplus. We consider it a public asset to use in solving a dire parking problem for employees and patrons of the new Federal Building and main Post Office.” Still, there was a glimmer of hope. Beran’s story

also explained that the GSA was seeking additional proposals for a parking swap in the wake of criticism of the secret negotiations. And it noted that a bipartisan group of legislators was planning to introduce a bill demanding preservation of the building.<sup>17</sup>

The next day, another Beran article indicated that Russell Fridley, director of MNHS, had asked the National Park Service to include the structure in its register of significant city and state sites. The request, Fridley said, was designed to buy the city more time to come up with a preservation plan. “Officials, however, are stumped over how to finance such a plan,” the story concluded.<sup>18</sup>

Today’s Lowertown Commons (9) was developer Austin John Baillon’s proposed location for a much-needed parking lot that never materialized. Map compilation courtesy of Joy Yoshikawa.



- 1 Old Federal Courts Building (Landmark Center)
- 2 Rice Park
- 3 Central Library (George Latimer Central Library)
- 4 The St. Paul Hotel
- 5 St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Courthouse
- 6 Warren E. Burger Federal Courts Building and US Courthouse
- 7 Mears Park
- 8 St. Paul Farmers’ Market (since 1982)
- 9 Former St. Paul Rubber Company (Lowertown Commons)
- 10 US Post Office (Custom House)
- 11 Union Depot



The following week, the Federal Courts Building Study Committee of the Saint Paul Art Center met to explore options to preserve the building. Baillon was in attendance. It is unclear if he was a member of the art center board or was simply requested to attend the committee meeting on January 29, 1969, after the first stories broke. With both Marzitelli and Lein present, Baillon talked about his proposal. He emphasized that he'd spent "considerable time and effort" on the deal, which had been tentatively approved by the GSA, and that he "will proceed with his plans for the development for the property involved in the proposed trade for the Federal Courts Building." While he said his company would cooperate with any group that wanted to acquire the building, "[he] confirmed that if the building could not be operated successfully on a commercial basis it would have to be torn down and the property sold."<sup>19</sup>

Less than a month later in February 1969, Beran reported another bombshell: Baillon, "has virtually abandoned [his] attempt to swap a proposed parking ramp for the old Federal Courts Building." The move came after multiple delays, including pushback from RCHS and MNHS, as well as the submission of an official nomination to place the building on the National Register of Historic Places. In withdrawing his proposal, Baillon said that "he cannot delay disposing of the Lower Loop site."<sup>20</sup>

While the Old Federal Courts Building was not yet entirely safe, the immediate threat had dissipated. Wheels had been set in motion. Within months, the Minnesota Legislature passed a resolution requesting the GSA to either give the building to a public entity or "dispose of the building in another manner that will insure the preservation of its historic and architectural value." In May 1969, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places and put on the "surplus property disposal list."<sup>21</sup> That meant the city could finally acquire it for \$1, provided it came up with a suitable plan for reuse that met federal government requirements.

It took more than three years, but on October 20, 1972, ownership of the Old Federal Courts Building was transferred to the City of St. Paul in a ceremony in Rice Park, presided over by Mayor Lawrence Cohen.<sup>22</sup>

## Correcting History: Setting the Record Straight

Somehow, in the course of recording the history of how the Old Federal Courts Building was saved, the contributions of the St. Paul newspapers and its reporters were disparaged. One of the earliest historical accounts was *The Old Federal Courts Building: A Landmark Reclaimed* by author and architecture historian Eileen Michels, published in 1977. In recounting the events of 1968, she wrote:

Public reaction was intense and negative chiefly because of misleading newspaper publicity. A headline mistakenly proclaimed that the Old Federal Courts Building was to be razed for a parking lot. Although totally inaccurate, the story galvanized the public. Government offices in both Washington, D.C. and St. Paul were inundated with letters, telegrams and telephone calls protesting the trade. It was a meaningful demonstration of public affection for the building, and, in a sense, a turning point. From that point on, step by step actions eventually resulting in the transfer of the building to the city of St. Paul four years later received ever increasing public support.<sup>23</sup>

The account was correct about the impact the scoop had in galvanizing public reaction but wrong about the article's inaccuracy. None of the stories, nor the headlines, stated that the Old Federal Courts Building would be razed and replaced by a parking lot. The St. Paul newspaper stories correctly reported that the proposed swap involved trading a parcel in Lowertown for the Old Federal Courts Building. It was a building on the Lowertown property that was meant to be razed for a parking facility—not the Old Federal Courts Building.

How did the incorrect allegations of inaccuracy of the newspaper stories and headlines surface almost ten years after the stories first appeared? It is unclear, but some evidence exists that supporters and champions of the building's restoration may have played a role.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps preservationists were concerned that their efforts to raise money to save the old building would falter if people thought it was

about to be torn down anyway. Maybe they were angry at the St. Paul newspapers, whose editorial writers had not been consistently enthusiastic or supportive about efforts to preserve the building. For example, William Sumner, editorial page editor of the *Dispatch*, famously called the building an “architectural freak,” a “funny-looking building, rather ugly, in fact” and suggested “[t]he thing ought to be taken down and grass and trees planted in its place.”<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, Baillon may have been surprised and dismayed by the outraged public reaction to his development plan. He reportedly told people that the stories were inaccurate, and, according to his son, Paul Baillon, he had no intention of tearing down the Old Federal Courts Building.<sup>26</sup>

It is also certainly possible, perhaps even likely, that the complicated nature of the deal—and an ambiguous headline—were confusing to readers, especially casual readers who were not city government insiders. Yet, all they needed to do was read further to understand that an old St. Paul building might be razed for a parking lot. The structure proposed for demolition was the vacant and decrepit industrial building in what is now known as Lowertown.

Whatever the source or sources, the idea that the initial stories were misleading or inaccurate was not challenged by later writers, including Biloine (Billie) Young whose book, *Landmark: Stories of a Place*, was published in 2002, thirty-four years after the first reports appeared. Young described the initial story as “a small miracle [that] occurred in the form of a misleading article in the *Pioneer Press*. . . .”

The article created a sensation. Public reaction was swift and vehement. Citizens, whom no one had any idea cared about the Old Federal Courts Building, besieged public officials. The phones in Mayor Thomas Byrne’s office rang constantly and letters and telegrams protesting the trade poured into city hall and offices in Washington, D.C. To everyone’s surprise, a great many people cared about the fusty wedding cake of a building bordering Rice Park.<sup>27</sup>

Later magazine stories, including one in *Ramsey County History*, and online posts repeated the allegations about the supposedly incorrect newspaper articles. Even a display in

## Back to the Source

### RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

When researching history, primary sources are essential to truly understanding topics big and small. These sources provide firsthand information with the least amount of bias—an essential quality that makes them incredibly important to understanding events that happened decades or centuries in the past. Primary sources include census records, city directories, letters, memos and other original documents, and, sometimes, newspaper articles from long ago.

Ramsey County Historical Society was approached by the author of this article to correct history. We’ve carefully reviewed her sources and looked into additional sources, including other newspapers that reported on the Old Federal Courts Building between 1968-1969.

In this case, a couple sentences in one paragraph of an otherwise excellent 1977 history of Landmark Center and its predecessors were incorrect: “A headline mistakenly proclaimed that the Old Federal Courts Building was to be razed for a parking lot. Although totally inaccurate,

the story galvanized the public,<sup>28</sup> and, thus, citizens and public officials rallied to save the building.

Those lines, which may have come to be through word of mouth or speculation, are not correct. The headline, while not inaccurate, was ambiguous. However, the newspaper article itself and (and others that followed) correctly stated that a developer wished to swap the Old Federal Courts Building for an abandoned building in Lowertown. The Lowertown building was to be bulldozed to provide needed parking.

Over the years, misinformation about the article has been repeated in multiple stories about saving and restoring Landmark Center. Had authors and editors gone back to the original source, they would have discovered the error. For the record, this includes work completed by Ramsey County Historical Society. We apologize for getting this piece of history wrong.

Mistakes do happen. As a history organization, when an error comes to our attention, it is important to correct that history.





After a decade of overcoming obstacles and through tremendous community collaboration, the former Old Federal Courts Building reopened as Landmark Center on September 9, 1978. (L-R): US Rep. Bruce Vento, US Vice President Walter Mondale, Ramsey County Commissioner Warren Shaber, Elizabeth W. Musser, US Rep. Donald Fraser, Frank Marzitelli, Georgia DeCoster, and Second Lady Joan Mondale.



US Vice President Walter Mondale spoke to a crowd in the Landmark Center cortile at the building's reopening. *Both images courtesy of Minnesota Landmarks.*

Landmark Center about the struggle to save the building repeated the error:

In late 1968, a St. Paul newspaper reported that the old Federal Building would be razed to make way for a parking lot. The angry response of many St. Paul residents to the news, later proven false, showed that support for the building extended far beyond a few dozen historians and architects.<sup>28</sup>

The newspaper stories of late 1968 and early 1969 resulted in a reprieve for the beloved edifice. They had awakened the public to the very real possibility that the building could be lost. Over the next decade, a small army of dedicated preservationists, civic leaders, and volunteers (including Rosalie Butler, Mayor Thomas Byrne and the City of St. Paul, Georgia DeCoster, Russell Fridley and the Minnesota Historical Society, Edward H. Hamm, Virginia B. Kunz and the Ramsey County Historical Society, Joan Larson Kelly, Malcolm E. Lein, Frank D. Marzitelli, Joseph S. Micallef, Minnesota Landmarks, Elizabeth W. Musser, Terry O'Brien, Ramsey County, Donald Salverda, Dick Slade, Nancy Weyerhaeuser, multiple foundations, organizations, and so many more),<sup>29</sup> mounted efforts to develop plans, raise money, acquire the building, restore it to its former glory, and find tenants. Despite setbacks at

many a turn, the restored building opened to the public in 1978 as the newly renamed Landmark Center. Today, forty-six years later, the building serves as a vibrant cultural center, housing a musical instrument museum, a wood art gallery, a permanent art collection, special art exhibitions, and offices of local cultural, history, and arts organizations. It hosts theater productions, concerts, dance performances, speeches, lectures, naturalization ceremonies, and is a popular venue for special events and weddings.

At the same time, for the sake of history, the early role played by St. Paul newspapers and its reporters in saving Landmark Center should not be minimized. These journalists galvanized early efforts to rally the public to preserve the grand old building, which was in more danger than anyone knew. Their accurate reporting helped save it.

*Linda Kohl worked as a reporter, editor, and weekly columnist for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. While at the paper, she met and married reporter George Beran. In 1991, she was appointed commissioner of the State Planning Agency by Gov. Arne H. Carlson. After serving six years in various roles in the Carlson administration, she became associate vice chancellor for public affairs of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, where she worked for fourteen years until retirement. In 2023, her daughter, Molly Beran, chose Landmark Center as the venue for her wedding to Todd Chaney.*



Since opening in 1978, Landmark Center has served as the venue for hundreds of arts and cultural performances, including this program by Minnesota Boychoir under the direction of Mark S. Johnson (far left) in 1995. Both images courtesy of Minnesota Landmarks.



### Learn More

This brief article focuses on a narrow time frame from December 1968 to May 1969 when news articles detailing the tenuous future of the Old Federal Courts Building helped galvanize the public to work together to ensure its survival. For a broader, more in-depth history of the OFCB and what is today Landmark Center, go to: “Landmark Center – Old Federal Courts Building,” Historic Twin Cities, November 17, 2021, <http://www.historictwincities.com/2021/11/17/landmark-center/>.

### NOTES

1. Biloine W. Young, *Landmark: Stories of a Place* (St. Paul: Minnesota Landmarks, 2002), 5; Katherine McLaughlin, “Brutalist Architecture: Everything You Need to Know,” *Architectural Digest*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/brutalist-architecture-101>.

2. “Warren E. Burger Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse,” US General Services Administration website, [www.gsa.gov/about-us/regions/welcome-to-the-great-lakes-region-5/buildings-and-facilities/minnesota/warren-e-burger-federal-building-and-us-courthouse](http://www.gsa.gov/about-us/regions/welcome-to-the-great-lakes-region-5/buildings-and-facilities/minnesota/warren-e-burger-federal-building-and-us-courthouse).

3. “National Register of Historic Places Inventory–Nomination Form,” submitted by John R. Ferguson

(MNHS) and certified by Russell W. Fridley, designated state liaison officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, in Frank Marzitelli papers, box 8, Mayor’s Committee 1968-1969 subject files, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter, MNHS); Eileen Michels, with a chapter by Nate N. Bomberg, *The Old Federal Courts Building: A Landmark Reclaimed* (St. Paul: Minnesota Landmarks, 1977), 49, 54. Bomberg, legendary longtime police reporter for the *Pioneer Press*, wrote a chapter about St. Paul’s colorful gangster era and the trials that occurred in the Old Federal Courts Building, some of which he had covered; US Rep. Andrew Volstead, who had an office in the building, was author of the Volstead Act. In 1919 when the prohibition law

passed, taverns closed their doors, and the bootlegging era began.

4. "St. Paul Landmark: Poll Favors Saving Courts Building," *Minneapolis Star*, October 29, 1968, 63. This unscientific poll was based on showing an unknown number of people photos of six old buildings in the Twin Cities and asking them to vote on whether the buildings were or were not attractive and should or should not be saved.

5. George Beran, "Old Court House May be Traded for Parking Lot," *Pioneer Press*, December 17, 1968, 21.

6. Beran, 21.

7. Beran, 21.

8. Phil Lee, "City Finds Fed Building Out of Reach," *Pioneer Press*, December 18, 1968, 1; Dick Horning, "Byrne Pledges City Will Own Old Post Office," *Pioneer Press*, February 22, 1968, 19.

9. Kathryn Boardman, "Speculation Grows Over Dealings On Old Courts Building," *Pioneer Press*, December 18, 1968, 18.

10. "US May Swap St. Paul Court Building," *Minneapolis Star*, December 18, 1968, 31; Kathryn Boardman, "Firm Would Swap Ramp For Building," *Dispatch*, December 20, 1968, 1.

11. Boardman, "Firm Would Swap," 1.

12. "What Now for Rice Park?" editorial, *Pioneer Press*, December 20, 1968.

13. Frank D. Marzitelli and Malcolm E. Lein, letter, to US Rep. Joseph Karth, December 23, 1968, in Frank Marzitelli papers, MNHS.

14. Marzitelli and Lein letter; Frank D. Marzitelli, Biographical Note, in Marzitelli papers, MNHS.

15. "Secrecy Over Courts Building Fate Hit," *Dispatch*, January 16, 1969.

16. George Beran, "Additional Proposals Sought in Swap of Old Courts Building," *Dispatch*, January 17, 1969; Robert T. Griffin, letter, to Rep. Joseph E. Karth, January 16, 1969, in Marzitelli papers, MNHS.

17. Beran, "Additional Proposals;" Griffin, letter.

18. George Beran, "Historical Status Urged," January 25, 1969, *Dispatch*.

19. Malcolm Lein, memorandum to chair and members of the Saint Paul Art Center's Federal Courts Building Study Committee regarding the committee meeting of January 21, 1969, 2, in Marzitelli papers, MNHS.

20. George Beran, "Real Estate Firm Drops Offer to Trade For Courts Building," *Dispatch*, February 19, 1969, 1; "Apartments in Lowertown St. Paul Lowertown Commons, Real Estate Equities website, [www.reeapartments.com/apartments/lowertown-commons/?utm\\_knock=g](http://www.reeapartments.com/apartments/lowertown-commons/?utm_knock=g). The building at 300 E. Fourth Street was never demolished and stands today across from the St. Paul Farmers' Market. Now called Lowertown Commons, the 1905 revival-style building, originally the St. Paul Rubber Company, has been renovated into apartments.

21. House File 235/Senate File 247, in Marzitelli papers, MNHS; William A. Schmidt, letter to Rep.

Joseph Karth, May 19, 1969, referenced in letter from Frank D. Marzitelli to George Vavoulis, April 3, 1972, 2, in Marzitelli files, MNHS. At the time, Vavoulis, former mayor of St. Paul, was regional administrator of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

22. Michels, 74.

23. Michels, 68.

24. Georgia Ray DeCoster, letter to Katherine Lanpher, April 2, 1995, 3, in Landmark Center Subject Files, Ramsey County Historical Society. Georgia DeCoster was hired by Frank Marzitelli as the executive secretary of the Mayor's Committee to Preserve the Old Federal Courts Building in 1969. In 1995, she wrote a twelve-page letter and addendum to Katherine Lanpher, then a *Pioneer Press* reporter who had written a story praising the contributions of Elizabeth Musser in saving the building. DeCoster wrote, "Public fear that the OFCB was to be torn down for a parking lot was the specific instance that triggered preservation efforts. That fear was unfounded, but it helped galvanize civic action. The public outcry against demolition convinced Mayor Byrne and the Minnesota congressional delegation that an effort should be made to save the building." Michels credits Georgia DeCoster and Elizabeth Musser in providing information for her book, and both were likely sources for Billie Young's book, as well.

25. William Sumner, "Is the Old Courts Building Worth Saving?" *Dispatch*, October 7, 1970, 14.

26. Paul A. Baillon, son of Austin John Baillon, interview with author, September 1, 2022. Paul Baillon was about ten when the stories ran. He said his father, who died in 2012, told him people had misconstrued his intent regarding the building, that "the newspaper stories got it wrong" and that "somehow the rumor got started" that he was going to tear the building down for a parking lot. Editorial note: Amy Mino, executive director of Minnesota Landmarks, Zoom interview with editor, January 16, 2024. According to Amy Mino, in 1970, Baillon joined the Minnesota Landmarks Board of Directors, helping to raise money in those early years to restore the building.

27. Young, 5.

28. "Bob Roscoe, "An 'Architectural Freak' is Saved," *Ramsey County History* 53, no. 1, (Spring 2018): 24; Lisa L. Heinrich, "Landmark Center: Old Federal Building was rescued from demolition in early preservation effort," *Lisa Stories* (blog), July 31, 2018, <https://lisastories.com/2018/07/31/landmark-center-old-federal-building-was-rescued-from-demolition-in-early-preservation-effort/>; A "Building in Jeopardy" framed poster display on first floor of Landmark Center.

29. DeCoster, letter to Lanpher, 1-12.

#### **Notes to Sidebar on page 15**

a. Eileen Michels, with a chapter by Nate N. Bomberg, *The Old Federal Courts Building: A Landmark Reclaimed* (St. Paul: Minnesota Landmarks, 1977), 68.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community; deliver inspiring history programming; and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Ĥeyáta Othújwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers public programming for youth and adults. Visit [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. The Society serves more than 15,000 students annually on field trips or through school outreach. Programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

### **Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Inclusion**

RCHS is committed to ensuring it preserves and presents our county's history. As we continue our work to incorporate more culturally diverse histories, we have made a commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion that is based on this core idea: RCHS exists to serve ALL who call Ramsey County home. To learn more, please see [www.rchs.com/about](http://www.rchs.com/about).

### **Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land**

Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com). This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.



## In Memoriam

In recent months, Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) said goodbye to two admired members of the RCHS Board of Directors—Carl Kuhrmeyer (1928-2023) and Roxanne Sands (1940-2023)—and to David Riehle (1946-2024) a member of our editorial board.

**Carl Kuhrmeyer** grew up on St. Paul's East Side and loved the city of his childhood. He enjoyed a forty-two-year career at 3M, first in the role of mechanical engineer and later as executive vice president. Kuhrmeyer was an experienced board member in the East Metro, collaborating on many boards, always with the goal of improving people's lives. He brought humor and tremendous talent to the RCHS board from 2012-2022, serving as second vice chair and member of the Gibbs Farm Transformation Task Force. He and his wife, Janet, were generous contributors to RCHS, providing leadership in the renovation of the Red Barn.

**Roxanne Sands** brought positive energy to the work of RCHS and made the projects she was involved in more fun for everyone. In her professional life, she was a graphic designer and editor. Civically, she was a member of the Junior League of Saint Paul and City of Lilydale Planning Commission. She joined the RCHS board in 2016 and served as secretary from 2018-2021.

**David Riehle** was a beloved member of the RCHS editorial board. Over twenty years, he shared his expertise and love of birding, labor, politics, social justice, and railroading in the many fascinating articles he wrote for *Ramsey County History* magazine. Committee members were always eager to learn history through Riehle's unique perspectives.

*RCHS is grateful for the diligent work and thoughtful collaboration that Kuhrmeyer, Sands, and Riehle brought to RCHS and the community. They are missed.*



The poster features a large yellow sun in the top left corner and a purple butterfly on the right. The title "GIBBS FARM SUMMER CAMPS" is prominently displayed in the center, with "GIBBS FARM" in green, "SUMMER" in white with a red outline, and "CAMPS" in large white letters with a red outline. Below the title, it says "CAMPS FOR KIDS AGES 4 TO 13" in green. A blue button with white text reads "REGISTER AT RCHS.COM". The bottom of the poster is divided into two circular images: on the left, a child in a blue hat looks over a wooden fence at a horse; on the right, a boy in a baseball cap holds a bunch of carrots. The Gibbs Farm logo, featuring a red barn and a black teepee, is in the top right corner.

**GIBBS FARM**  
**SUMMER CAMPS**  
CAMPS FOR KIDS AGES 4 TO 13  
REGISTER AT RCHS.COM

**PeeWee Mini Camps**  
**Kids on the Farm**  
**Dakota Camp**  
**Life of a Gibbs Girl**  
**Nature Detectives**  
**Victorian Ladies**  
**Minnesota Time Travel Camp**  
**Farm Survivor**

**GIBBS FARM**



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*It Takes a Village*

## Building Community in the Hamline Midway Neighborhood

KRISTA FINSTAD HANSON, PAGE 19

INSPECTOR'S COPY

CITY OF SAINT PAUL  
 DIVISION OF BUILDING INSPECTION  
 ROOM 219, CITY HALL, SECOND FLOOR

PERMIT No. 33514

TOTAL FEE COLLECTED \$ 2 25

DOUBLE FEE COLLECTED

TO: BUILD  ERECT  INSTALL  ADD  ALTER  REPAIR  MOVE  WRECK

ACCOUNT ORDINANCE VIOLATION  MARK SQUARES WITH

9-7-1928  
 owl

PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED:

OWNER Theo. H. Mertens ADDRESS 762 W. Mannesha

CONTRACTOR \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

To carry out the work indicated above on the following described property, upon the express condition that said persons and their agents, employees and workmen, in such work done, shall conform in all respects to the ordinances of the City of Saint Paul, Minnesota. THIS PERMIT DOES NOT AUTHORIZE ELECTRICAL, PLUMBING, INTERIOR, OR EXTERIOR PLASTERING, HEATING, or any work not fully described herein. Permits for the use of public property, such as streets, sidewalks, alleys, etc., must be secured from the Department of Public Works.

NUMBER	STREET	SIDE	BETWEEN WHAT STREETS
1199	Capitol	N	Guggis & Dunlap
WARD	LOT	BLOCK	ADDITION OR TRACT
10	21	6	Gilberts

FRONT OR WIDTH Feet	SIDE OR LENGTH Feet	HEIGHT Feet	NUMBER OF STORES	CONSTRUCTED OF	CONTENTS Cubical or Square Feet	COST OF WORK Covered by this Permit
34	41		1	Frame		\$ 4000

DETAILS OR REMARKS

COMMISSIONER OF PARKS,  
 PLAYGROUNDS, AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS  
 Ex-Officio Building Inspector

BY [Signature]

PENALTY: FOR VIOLATION OF ANY OF THE PROVISIONS OF BUILDING CODE, ORDINANCE NO. 5580: FINE OF FROM FIVE (\$5.00) TO ONE HUNDRED (\$100.00) DOLLARS OR IMPRISONMENT FOR FROM FIVE (5) TO NINETY (90) DAYS.

FORM C80-16 19M 11-26

On September 6, 1928, Theodore Mertens applied for a permit to construct a modest home at 1199 Capitol Avenue (Englewood Avenue today). Mertens signed the application "Theo. H. Mertens for H. Schaeffgen," also a local contractor and Merten's father-in-law. The pair worked together to build most of the houses along the 1162-1218 section of this street. The next day, this permit was issued. As Krista Finstad Hanson conducted research for her Hamline Midway article, she relied heavily on St. Paul Building Permits to understand how and when the twenty-nine homes built here came to be. Author Nicole Foss also made use of these permits for her cover story. The permits are archived at Ramsey County Historical Society and will be available online by the end of 2024. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*