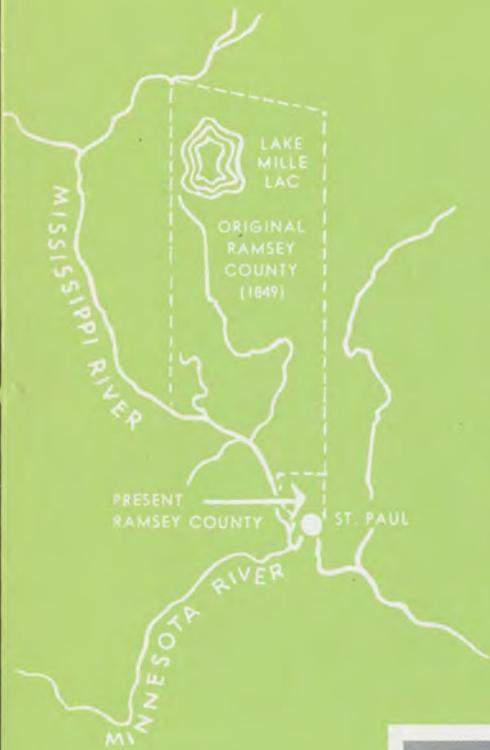


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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**Volume 14  
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*ON THE COVER: Derham Hall, the first building on the College of St. Catherine campus, photographed in 1905.*

*ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Pictures on pages 3-18 were loaned to the Society by the College of St. Catherine. The drawing on page 19 was given to the Society by the John B. Hilton family. The photograph on page 20 was loaned by James H. Skinner's granddaughter, Mrs. Paul Guenzel.*



Reproduction of a drawing of the house at 385 Portland by artist Gare R. Frick, 1976.

## James Henry Skinner's Mansion Reflects Summit Avenue in Its Prime

*Editor's Note: The James Henry Skinner mansion at 385 Portland Avenue in St. Paul is the 1978 Designer's Showcase, sponsored by the Friends of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Decorated by the Minneapolis Interior Designers Association, the house is open to the public May 22-June 17.*

*By Caroline Harney*

**T**he fifteen-room red brick house and carriage house at the intersection of Portland, Western and Summit Avenues in St. Paul was designed by the eminent Clarence H. Johnston, Sr. and built for the James Henry Skinner family in 1901. At the turn of the century, the Summit Hill area was among the most glamorous neighborhoods in Minnesota. James J. Hill, Crawford Livingston, Chauncey Griggs, Louis Hill, the Ordways, Fields and Bigelows all resided in a neighborhood that was dominated by aggressive businessmen who, having made their fortunes, were interested in acquiring culture and elegance. They enjoyed Summit Avenue's beautiful vistas and its wide boulevard and

they liked to compare it — favorably — with other fashionable neighborhoods in the country. At the time the Skinner home was built, the area was at its zenith and its grand style of architecture radiated wealth, although much of it was overpoweringly and elaborately picturesque. By 1900 tastes had begun to reflect European styles and these grand modes of architecture helped the city change its image from provincial "cow town" to bustling commercial center of the Middle West.

The Skinner mansion combines Georgian and neo-classical styles and is complemented with a Queen Anne style carriage house.<sup>1</sup> Blending of styles was typical of Johnston's early work. He, Cass Gilbert and James Knox Taylor were students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1877, a time when the school trained its architects in "eclecticism".<sup>2</sup> Students learned to adapt varying styles and features according to specific needs or tastes. Professional architecture in America was in its early years and Gilbert, Taylor

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The dining room when the Matthias family lived there. The Honduras mahogany was carved by William Yungbauer.

and Johnston were the first Minnesota architects trained in a university. All three acquired national reputations and were very prolific. Johnston was the architect for the Minnesota State Board of Control for twenty years and the University of Minnesota Board of Regents as well as designer of many private residences. Among his most noteworthy structures are Northrup Auditorium, the Northwestern Bell Telephone Building in St. Paul and the Congdon mansion in Duluth.

THE EXTERIOR of the Skinner mansion is constructed of red brick on tile and trimmed with Indiana Bedford limestone. Bricks rather than wood are the supports. Even the dividing walls are brick; no wood at all is used in the exterior construction. The use of brick made the home sturdier and created better insulation for St. Paul's cold winters and hot summers.

The interior of the mansion is as grand as the exterior, with fifteen fireplaces, eight bedrooms, elegant living and dining rooms, and a billiard room with a nine-foot ceiling in the basement. William Yungbauer, an Austrian cabinet-maker brought to St. Paul by James J. Hill, carved the interior woodwork. Hand-carved Honduras mahogany

lines the living and dining rooms. The front hallway is finished with French treillage wallpaper and Minnesota oak. Yungbauer also designed buffets, a piano, and furnishings for many of the rooms.

No major structural changes have altered the house during the seventy-seven years since it was built. Remodeling occurred mainly during the period between 1945-1957 when the Edwin C. Matthias family lived in the house, but that work consisted of rewiring, modernizing kitchen and laundry facilities, and adapting the third floor into an apartment for the Matthias' daughter and her husband.

Houses, however, are more than mere descriptions of structure, materials and design. Distinction and value are imparted by the families who live there, as well as the changes in the neighborhood. In the case of the Skinner house, the three families and the neighborhood's prominence, decline, and revitalization are integral to its history.

THE JAMES HENRY SKINNER family was an established Minnesota family. Born in Faribault, Minnesota, James was the second child of George E. and Mary Gibson Skinner who had moved to Faribault from Buffalo, New York, shortly after their marriage because Mary suffered from "lung complaint." Minnesota's dry climate was thought to be

*\*(The Congdon estate is the site of last summer's murder of Elizabeth Congdon.)*

more healthful. George Skinner was in the lumber business until his mill burned down; then he worked as a lawyer and, finally, as a land commissioner for the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. A respected member of the Faribault community, he was elected state representative in 1858, the year James was born. Shortly after his birth, the railroad transferred its central offices to St. Paul and the Skinners followed. Their two children, Elizabeth and James, were starting school and the family was pleased to take advantage of the superior quality education available in the city.

James next attended Shattuck School, then went east to the Old Albany Academy in Buffalo, New York, and to Cornell University at Ithaca. While at Cornell, he roomed with Edward M. House who later became a trusted advisor and assistant to President Woodrow Wilson.

After graduation in 1881, Skinner returned to St. Paul to work for the railroad in the land commission office. Soon after, with his father's help, he borrowed \$30,000 from the railroad and invested in a partnership with Obedia Lanpher, an established St. Paul furrier who wanted to expand his business. Lanpher, Skinner and Company prospered. Fur coats were popular with soldiers at Fort Snelling and with local residents trying to brave the winter cold. Within seven years, James was able to repay his debt.

In 1885 he married Annie Wood, the daughter of the president of the First National Bank of Kalamazoo, Michigan. That same year their daughter, Elizabeth, was born, and three years later their son, William Wood. The marriage was a happy one and business continued to be profitable thereby permitting Skinner to buy the plot of land at 385 Portland, one of only two left on the block, and build a home.

IN 1915 SKINNER was 57 and in poor health. His son, William, later recalled that he wanted to retire,<sup>3</sup> and that winter Lanpher and Skinner sold their business to Gordon and Ferguson. But Skinner was not a successful retiree. Six months later he became a founder and president of the Merchants Trust Company, later merged with the First Trust Company of St. Paul.

By this time World War I was raging in Europe and his former roommate was among President Wilson's advisors. Whatever plans Skinner may have had to retire, he became even more active. President Wilson appointed him to the Inter-Allied Council, in charge of

War Purchase and Finance, and sent him to London. Skinner's obituary notice, printed in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on December 26, 1926, noted that Skinner and Colonel House traveled to England on a voyage through "the most intense submarine offensive of the war." After the war, Skinner returned to the Merchants Trust, and finally retired in 1924. He died two years later, but Mrs. Skinner continued to live at 385 Portland until her death in 1945.

As was true by this time of many residences along Summit, the Skinner house had fallen into some disrepair. In 1945 the county assessor's office labeled its condition "fair." Edwin C. Matthias purchased the house for \$12,000 and remodeled the kitchen and electric wiring, bringing it back up to "good." Matthias was well-established when he, his wife, and four children moved into the Skinner home. Matthias had been a trial lawyer in Seattle, then counsel for the Great Northern, then director of the railroad's lines west. In 1945 when he was promoted to vice president and chief counsel, the family packed and moved to St. Paul.

After looking at houses in Highland Park

**James H. and Annie Woods Skinner outside their summer home in White Bear Lake.**



and the Summit Hill area, the family bought 385 Portland because they felt that Highland Park was too far out. Jamie and Edwin, Jr., attended Princeton University and Mary Matthias was in her senior year at the University of Minnesota. Only Roger lived at home and attended St. Paul Academy until he left for Stanford University.

Roger and Mary Matthias still live in Ramsey County and they have fond memories of the Portland Avenue home. Both mention the family's annual buffet luncheon as a highlight of the Winter Carnival's parade down Summit Avenue. The Matthiases held a grand open house and invited neighbors and friends to watch the parade assemble at Nathan Hale Park across the street and take off for the march down Summit to the state capitol.

THE ST. PAUL YEARS were exciting years in Matthias' career, the family recalls. He often traveled to New York and to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of the railroads or argue cases before the Supreme Court. As president of the American Railroad Association, Matthias successfully challenged the United States Government's attempt to receive special discounts on armament shipped during World War II. In 1957 he retired and moved to California. He died in 1976.

The John B. Hilton family bought the house for \$22,000 in 1957<sup>4</sup> and lived there until 1977. John Hilton was a real estate partner with his father, Roy E., and his brother, Judson D. The Hilton Company was well-known throughout the city. They had been active in the Commerce Association and the St. Paul and National Board of Realtors.

During the years the Matthias and Hilton families lived at 385 Portland, the area changed economically. During the critical housing shortage after World War II, many mansions were sold or subdivided into what Mary Matthias Ahrens termed "thirteen hot plate houses." Between 1885 and 1920 — the halcyon years for Summit Avenue — domestic help was plentiful. Mansions such as the Skinners', with their many rooms, meant dozens of windows to wash and yards of woodwork to dust. By the 1950's, however, domestic help was virtually non-existent and the big old homes became less popular. In addition, a dozen or more fireplaces made such houses extremely expensive to heat.

THE SKINNERS' BLOCK did maintain much of its quality and many people, such as Mrs. Theodore L. Griggs, Mrs. John E.

Stryker, and Mrs. Louis Hill, Sr., continued to live in their family homes. But evidence of decay penetrated. One home on Holly Avenue was subdivided by 1940 and turned into a rooming house. A mansion on the corner of Western and Holly, the lot between the Skinner home and the Commodore Hotel, was razed and a ranch-style home and a duplex erected there in the late 1950s.

City officials were seeing the area as a decaying inner city neighborhood by the 1960s. The county assessor's office valued the Skinner mansion at less than \$10,000 because it was "too large" to be of premium value. Residents were conscious of the change. When the Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict put their Summit Avenue mansion on the market, the next-door owners at 370 Summit bought the house and had it razed to prevent it from being subdivided and rented to transients.

Today the area is experiencing a renaissance as a National Historic District. Well-to-do residents are returning to the area and rooming houses are once again becoming single family dwellings. Since 1973, land values have risen considerably; the Skinner mansion was placed on the market for \$175,000 last year and evidence of new investment and restoration is visible throughout the neighborhood.

At the turn of the century, the area shaped St. Paul's image as a commercial center. Now in 1978, it again is projecting an image of a city concerned with historic preservation as an antidote to inner city decay.

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Chris Owen, architectural historian for Old Town Restorations, Inc.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Lathrope, director of the Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.

<sup>3</sup>Letter to the St. Paul Public Library by William Wood Skinner.

<sup>4</sup>Ramsey County Assessor's Office.

#### SOURCES

Old Town Restorations, buildings file.

Alan Lathrop, director of the Northwest Architectural Archives.

Gilbert and Johnston papers, Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

Records courtesy of the Ramsey County Assessors Office.

Roger Kennedy, *Minnesota Houses: an Architectural and Historical View*, Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1967, pp. 181-243.

St. Paul Public Library, biographical files.

Interviews with Roger Matthias and Mrs. Robert M. Ahrens, children of Edwin C. Matthias.



### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.*

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society will be located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society presently has its offices at the Gibbs Farm. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.