

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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To The **N**th Degree™

Fall, 1995

Volume 30, Number 3

The 108-Year History of Norwest St. Paul—

Page 4



A portion of Ta-coumba Aiken's mural for Norwest Bank St. Paul. See pages 3 and 17.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen
in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

Ta-coumba Aiken and "The Spirit of St. Paul"

St. Paul painter, sculptor and muralist Ta-coumba Aiken painted the mural, a
portion of which graces the cover of this issue of *Ramsey County History*,
for Norwest Bank St. Paul's sparkling new retail banking superstore. On page
17 he speaks of how he envisioned his work, "The Spirit of St. Paul—Now and
Forever."

What's Historic About This Site?

The Blair Flats—Once the Old Angus— High Victorian on Cathedral Hill

The Blair Flats, a massive stone landmark occupying the southwest corner of the Selby and Western Avenue intersection, have been a fixture of the Cathedral Hill neighborhood for more than a century.

Built in 1887 at a cost of \$300,000, the building was commissioned by Frank P. Blair, secretary of the St. Paul Improvement Company, as an apartment building with storefronts on the first floor. It was designed by local builders Hermann Kretz and William H. Thomas in the High Victorian or Queen Anne style of many of the elegant homes that still dot the surrounding Summit Avenue neighborhood.

Six years later, in 1893, the building was converted to a residential hotel and renamed the Albion Hotel. While it was an elegant address for many of St. Paul's up-and-coming new residents, the Albion also was an important link to St. Paul's streetcar era. In 1911 Thomas Lowry, president of the St. Paul Street Railway Company, bought the Albion and renamed it the Angus Hotel. For many years Lowry's Selby Street streetcar line ran along the north side of the building, heading for downtown St. Paul.

The streetcar line, in fact, outlasted Lowry's ownership of the Angus. He sold the hotel in 1918, launching it on decades of changing ownership and a gradual deterioration in condition and quality until it closed in 1971. Now, however, a new era has opened for this wonderfully ornate remnant of St. Paul's Victorian era. New owners conducted a massive restoration of the building, restoring its original name, recreating its early splendor and reopening it for a new generation of apartment-dwellers. Shopfronts once



The Blair Flats, photographed in 1980. Ramsey County Historical Society photo.

again surround the building's street level.

The building, as constructed, is divided by airways into four masses, two fronting on Selby and two on Western. All are nearly identical. They are lined at the first floor by the continuous band of storefronts with stone rounded arched entrances at the dividing points between each five-story section.

The rounded tower at the building's northeastern corner is its focal point. Other important features are ornate pressed metal three-sided oriel windows which extend from the cornice above the storefront all the way to the top of the fifth floor windows. Above these is more ornate decorative metal work.

In 1981, when the building was surveyed during the two-year Historic Sites Survey conducted by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the St. Paul Historic Preservation Commis-

sion, the future of the old hotel/apartment house was not promising. Today it is a cornerstone of a flourishing historic district.

Moreover, the district predates the settlement of St. Paul. This area of the city was part of the nine-mile stretch of land along the Mississippi River that the explorer, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, acquired for the United States government in 1805 for construction of a fort.

There was little settlement, however, until after Minnesota became a territory in 1849. In that year, J. W. Selby arrived in St. Paul and established a farm surrounding the site of the St. Paul Cathedral. He served in the 1852 territorial legislature, and was a city assessor and a member of the Board of Ramsey County Commissioners. He died in 1855 at the age of forty-three.



Sister Annette Relf who founded the Episcopal Church Home of Minnesota, now beginning its second century of service. See article beginning on page 22.

R.C.H.S.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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