

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*St. Gaudens' New York Eagle:
Rescue and Restoration
of a St. Paul Icon*

Page 12

Fall, 2002

Volume 37, Number 3

Lost Neighborhood

**Borup's Addition and the Prosperous
African Americans Who Lived There**

—Page 4



A duplex at 555–561 in one of St. Paul's Lost Neighborhoods. This and other houses in the long-since razed Borup's Addition were the homes of pioneer African Americans who came to St. Paul after the Civil War. See article beginning on page 4. Photo by Camera Shop, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society collections.

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CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Lost Neighborhood
Borup's Addition and the Prosperous Pioneer African Americans Who Owned Homes There
David Riehle
- 11 Who Was the Borup of Borup's Addition?
- 12 St. Gaudens' *New York Eagle*: Rescue and Restoration of St. Paul's First Outdoor Sculpture, Icon of Its Past
Christine Podas-Larson
- 15 Restoring the *Eagle*
- 16 New Roost for a Century-old *Eagle*
- 17 Growing Up in St. Paul
Seeing, Talking to, Calling on Spirits:
Grandma Minda's Adventures in Spiritualism
Joanne A. Englund
- 22 Norman Kittson and the Fur Trade
- 25 Book Reviews

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In February 1998 the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society reviewed the Society's Mission Statement and reaffirmed and adopted the following statement:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve, communicate and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship of this history.

This issue of our quarterly magazine once again carries out the Society's goal of discovering and communicating Ramsey County's past. Historian David Riehle gives us a fascinating look at another of St. Paul's "Lost Neighborhoods," known as "Borup's Addition" in the late nineteenth century when this area was home to prosperous African Americans. Next, Christine Podas-Larson describes the construction of the ten-story New York Life Insurance Building, completed in 1889 at Sixth and Minnesota, and the creation of its magnificent sculpture, the *New York Eagle*, by the renowned Augustus St. Gaudens and his brother Louis. Although the building was torn down in 1967, the *Eagle* has survived and soon will soar again over St. Paul at Summit Overlook Park.

Long-time Society member and family historian Joanne Englund's "Growing Up in St. Paul" essay focuses on her grandmother Minda's experiences in spiritualism while living in the Midway district. Included is a remarkable photograph of Minda and the other women who worked at the Bohn Refrigerator Company about the time of World War I. Finally, *Ramsey County History* returns to an earlier era in state and local history with an account of the life and times of the colorful fur trader and entrepreneur. Norman W. Kittson.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

placed on the National Register of Historic Places. A group of citizens did, however, make the case for preserving the *New York Eagle* from the building's demolition, and headlines of the day asked, "Anybody for a Genuine Homeless Green Eagle?" It was purchased from the demolition contract by Davidson and installed outside one of his other downtown holdings at Fourth Street and Jackson. Sadly, however, the site chosen was next to his building's 1960s parking ramp, on a low pedestal on a street corner somewhat removed from the city's center and pedestrian traffic. The *New York Eagle* was saved from melt down but lost its magnificently prominent perch, and appeared somewhat like a deflating helium balloon, sinking ever lower to the earth.

Public Art Saint Paul

The poor condition of the sculpture's surface and the work's vulnerability to the same fate that befell the New York Life Building testified to the urgent need for conservation. From 1967 until 1999, the *New York Eagle* has been the property of whoever owned the parking ramp. For twenty years, there had been only two owners, both of them local real estate developers. However, within the last five

years, the property has changed hands twice and is about to again.

Fearing that this important piece of St. Paul history would be forgotten, discarded in a real estate transaction, or removed from the property to some private residence or far away office building, Public Art Saint Paul approached the current building owner, Dynex Corporation, asking for title to the sculpture. Dynex generously agreed, and Public Art Saint Paul secured legal title to the work in April, 1999. Its intention is to retain title until completion of the conservation treatment and relocation of the work, and then to transfer title to the City of St. Paul.

Under the terms of the agreement with Dynex, Public Art Saint Paul removed the sculpture from its thirty-year perch at Fourth and Jackson and has been in storage at the city's Como Park storage warehouse since the beginning of conservation treatment early in 2000. Conservator was Kristen Cheronis. Plans call for the *Eagle* to be installed in the fall of 2003 at Summit Overlook Park. The Ramsey Hill Association currently is seeking financial support from public and private sources to prepare the park site and increase its amenities. The restoration is sponsored by the New York Life Foundation and

the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.

Public Art Saint Paul was the Twin Cities and Minnesota Coordinator of Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!), a national program of the Smithsonian Institution to survey, assess condition, and promote awareness of America's public art collection. As a result of its role in SOS!, Public Art Saint Paul led the conservation treatment of Summit Avenue's *Indian Hunter and His Dog* by Paulanship and *Nathan Hale* by William Ordway Partridge. Like the *New York Eagle*, both works were among those identified as being at highest risk in the SOS! survey. Some \$40,000 was raised in the community to cover costs associated with the conservation treatment and public awareness campaign.

SOS! also "found" a bronze bust of playwright Henrik Ibsen by Jacob Fjelde, that had been stolen from Como Park and was discovered by an SOS! volunteer in a suburban video store. The work was formally declared recovered stolen property by the city; an improved site at Como Park was prepared, and the sculpture was cleaned and restored for re-installation in Como Park. The goal is to clean and restore all of the St. Paul's historic outdoor sculptures.

Restoring the *Eagle*

Restoration of the 112-year-old *New York Eagle* is a complex process, as indicated by conservator Kristin Cheronis in the following digest of her progress report to Public Art Saint Paul dated August 19, 2002:

1. We have completed the larger section of the patina, and that has been viewed and approved by Public Art Saint Paul directors.

2. Additional weep holes were added, one in the lower edge of the *Eagle*'s left wing, another added to the bottom of the snake's tail and still another to the snake's head. Both of the last two were filled with water and sediment from the original molds.

3. We worked lead into several seams, one under the *Eagle*'s tail in back; two on the feet to the rock attachment, and another where the center of the snake joins the rock.

4. We found more dark gray crusty accre-

tions behind the left eaglet on the back rock wall. A large, extremely hard area was removed by scraping it down with a scalpel.

5. We have worked steadily on the patina, using cupric nitrate to lighten dark areas and opacify areas of corroded metal and sulphurated potash to darken light and etched areas and accentuate shadows.

6. The bottom edge of the rock has many severe undercuts where it is difficult to apply patina. The metal must be sufficiently heated or the patina won't take. Any missed areas can be finished when the sculpture is installed.

7. This week (August 19) we will be doing the final coatings. Inralac would be the most protective but waxing is more attractive—first a hot wax on torch-heated metal, then a second coat of wax on cool

metal, and both coats polished well. However, waxing requires a scrupulous, unwavering commitment to annual washing and waxing, maintenance that might best be done by a conservator.

8. The sculpture will remain brown overall, but some lighter-in-value reds and greens will be used to create a saturated, dark appearance—a rich, variegated red brown to dark brown with some green peeking through. The base and the eaglets will be left as they are now.

The report also explains that such a large, complex sculpture "has a great deal of surface area" and that its on-going maintenance will require access by using either a scaffold or a cherry-picker/snorkel lift/boom truck. In the meantime, work on the restoration and conservation of the *Eagle* proceeds.



Minda was a Spiritualist and apparently subscribed to the Spiritual Science Magazine, copies of which were found among her belongings after her death. See Growing Up in St. Paul article on page 17.

R.C.H.S.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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