

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
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*James J. Hill's yacht, the Wacouta of St. Paul. See Page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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**On the cover:** The *Wacouta*, James J. Hill's yacht, passing through the locks at the Sault Ste. Marie, seen in the background.

**Acknowledgements:** Except for Page 9, photographs with the articles on James J. Hill and the yacht *Wacouta* are from the James J. Hill Papers in the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, and used with the library's permission. Photographs on Pages 9, 12, 13 and 27 are from the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual collection. The photograph on Page 22 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society's photo collection. The photograph on Page 10 is from the Debs Foundation, Terre Haute, Indiana.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome to the "new" *Ramsey County History*. In 1987 the Society's Board of Directors established a task force to develop a strategic plan. One of the principal recommendations of that task force was to publish our magazine on a quarterly basis. For that purpose an Editorial Board was established and as a result of their efforts over a two-year planning period, we are proud and happy to present to you, our members and our readers, this new, enlivened format. You will note the additional new features, such as "A Matter of Time," Letters to the Editor, book reviews, descriptions of St. Paul's historic sites and other features.

We hope you will enjoy this new format, and request your comments and reactions to it. We also would like to remind you that we always are looking for manuscripts, for writers and particularly for reminiscences, those colorful and personal accounts of your experiences and memories of St. Paul and Ramsey County. If you would like to contribute to our new magazine, just call the editor.

—William S. Fallon

# The *Wacouta* in Two World Wars

Thomas C. Buckley

At the time of James J. Hill's death in May of 1916, the European nations had been at war for close to two years and the United States was trying to maintain its traditional policy of neutrality. With the resources of Britain's Royal Navy severely stretched, the British government had expressed an interest in securing large American steam yachts for conversion into auxiliary patrol boats.

For several months the Hill estate had had the *Wacouta* listed for sale with several East Coast yacht brokers. They relayed a number of inquiries to John Toomey, who had been asked from time to time since 1904 about selling or chartering the yacht. However, no purchaser was willing to meet the asking price of \$125,000.

In late 1916 George F. Baker, president of the First National Bank of New York, long-time Hill business associate and frequent guest on the yacht, displayed a serious interest in purchasing the vessel. Baker already had a yacht, the *Viking*, and his interest in Hill's vessel appears to have been more for resale to Britain than for personal use. Baker purchased the *Wacouta* for \$100,000 a few weeks before America entered the war, thus becoming a "two yacht" yachtsman.

As the German campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare escalated and the United States moved toward war, the Navy sought badly needed additional warships

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for patrol duty and eventual combat. Large steam yachts provided a partial solution. They could readily be converted into patrol boats and manned by naval reservists to ease the strain on the regular Navy. The direction of the yacht procurement program centered in the office of assistant secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, no stranger among yachtsmen of the Northeast. The vessels were to be no less than 110 feet in length and have a long cruising radius.

Yacht owners offered their vessels to support the build up of the U.S. Navy and Baker, a yacht club commodore, offered the *Viking*. Later he changed his mind and the *Wacouta*, a vessel sixty feet longer and ten feet wider than *Viking*, was substituted. The 240 foot *Wacouta*, with its world, Atlantic, Arctic and Baltic cruises, as well as its careful maintenance record, more than filled the bill. Eventually the *Wacouta* was one of 119 such yachts to be accepted by the Navy where they were converted to warships and designated as "Patrol Vessels" or "SP boats."

At New York the *Wacouta* was armed with four three-inch guns, four one-pounders, two Colt machine guns and ten depth charges. The vessel was manned by a complement of five officers and sixty-six men and renamed the *USS Harvard* on April 23, 1917. The new name reflected the alma mater of several of the officers and crew who were naval reservists. In addition, *Harvard* was an institution favored by the yacht's new owner and eventually received a total of \$6 million in gifts from George Baker.

The *Harvard* was commissioned as a special patrol boat, *SP 209*, on May 10, 1917. One month later, as part of a flotilla of five converted yachts, she steamed to France by way of Bermuda and the Azores. The *Harvard* reached Brest on the Fourth of July and operated out of that port for most of her naval career. She did not



*Forward three-inch gun crew on the USS Harvard. The warship was armed with four three-inch guns, two at the bow and two at the stern, four one-pounder-guns, two Colt machine guns and ten depth charges for anti-submarine duty.*

sink any German submarines or surface vessels but did engage in convoy and patrol duties off the French coast. Operating mainly in the submarine infested waters of the Bay of Biscay from Brest south to La Pallice, she rendered assistance to ships and seamen who had been torpedoed or were otherwise in distress.

Several months after the Armistice, in the spring of 1919, the *Harvard* sailed into the Baltic. She steamed along the German coast between the Danish and Russian borders inspecting German bases and fishing vessels. The following summer she returned to America with two Army officers aboard, was restored to her original condition, decommissioned, and returned to Baker on July 26, 1919.

Baker retained the name *Harvard* as well as ownership of the vessel until 1922. That year he sold the ship to two Greek

ship owners, Apostolos Ringas and Dimitri Polymeros. They converted the yacht into a passenger ship, added several small staterooms and increased her passenger capacity from sixteen to ninety-three. The ship's name was changed to *Athinai*, and it operated out of Piraeus, the port for Athens. The *Athinai* provided regular service along the mainland coast and islands of Greece ranging from Thessaloniki in the north to Argostoli on the west. By 1929 she was one of several converted yachts that merged into Hellenic Coastal Lines, and ten years later became

part of Hellenic Mediterranean Lines, a company that exists today.

In early 1941, Hill's former yacht was once again actively involved in a world war. In the fall of 1940 Italy invaded Greece and the *Athinai* and other vessels of the merchant marine came under tighter control by the Greek Government. The following spring, Hitler decided to send the German Army and Luftwaffe to the assistance of the Italian forces embroiled in Greece. On Palm Sunday, April 6, the Germans launched a combined land invasion and air attack on Greece. German

planes attacked the *Athinai* and set it on fire. The fire was put out and the ship sailed west a few days later to the port of Itsea where it was attacked again on April 22 and sunk. The ship was raised by the Italians and used for transportation purposes during the war. In 1942 the *Athinai* was renamed the *Palermo*, and commissioned into the Italian navy. When Italy left the war in 1943, the *Palermo* steamed the Adriatic as a commercial vessel. On May 27, 1944 she struck a mine and sank ten miles off Piran on the Yugoslavian coast.

*Hill from page 19*

And his old friend Jim Hill died the following spring. He was 77.

### **The Tentative Yachtsman**

When James J. Hill passed away, his heirs had little use for the yacht and put it up for sale. The yacht was uniquely Hill's and reflected his style of work and recreation. No aspect of its operation and expense was too trivial to escape scrutiny, as delegated through his personal secretaries. While the evidence does not show Hill's personal involvement in demanding direct accountability for such mundane items as a missing one-half-inch wood chisel or white lead costing one-and-three-quarter cents more in New York than in St. Paul, such inquiries reflected an approach that existed in the operation of his business.

Hill's railroad survived the panic of the late 19th century when others failed largely because he was knowledgeable about the most intimate aspects of the transportation business from market potential to track laying, from bridge building to the coal consumption of locomotives. That interest in knowing about transportation details on land extended to transportation on water. He displayed a key interest in the details of construction and operation of ships whether it was his yacht or his passenger-freighters.

Hill was one of the men characterized in the post-Civil War era as a self-made millionaire, rising from obscurity to prominence and great wealth in one lifetime. Unlike J. P. Morgan and many of his later associates, Hill did not come from a family with money. He was the product of a

thrifty farm family of Scots-Irish ancestry that settled in Upper Canada, fifty miles west of Toronto. He did not build his fortune by wasting money, and he did not forget the virtues of thrift, like a number of his fellow "new millionaires," when he had secured surplus funds to spend on homes, trips, and ships. Yet he was in the ranks of the wealthy, counted many of them as his friends, and sought their support. Yachts were a significant part of the social and business style of the East Coast where Hill spent an increasing amount of time. Yet there is little evidence that he ever used it for anything more than short vacations. Had it been used for business conferences, long cruises and elaborate entertaining, Hill might have lavished money on the *Wacouta* the way associates like Morgan and Payne spent money on their yachts.

James J. Hill was a workaholic. One of the characteristics that stands out in going through his papers is the extent to which he was constantly on the move. The only vacation in which he regularly indulged himself was the late June-early July fishing trip to Quebec. The newspapers as well as Mary Hill's diary noted how rested he looked when returning from those trips. For that necessary diversion from business the *Wacouta* was integral, and explains why he kept the yacht for so many years after the projected world, Caribbean, and Mediterranean cruises never materialized.

In 1912 Hill stated that "Most men who have really lived have had, in some shape their great adventure. This railway is mine." Had his entrance into the Pacific maritime transportation business been more successful in those years, his in-

volvement with the sea would have been a more positive extension of his great railway adventure. And the *Wacouta* undoubtedly would have played a more extensive role in his life, moving him about on his own tight time schedule between Pacific ports as the railroad took him between continental depots. Had his suggestions for canals from Lake Superior to the Mississippi river and from the Mississippi to the Gulf ever materialize, the "*Wacouta* of St. Paul" could indeed have reached St. Paul.

### *SOURCES*

*The major sources for this article are contained in the James J. Hill Reference Library. They are the Wacouta and St. John's River subgroups of the James J. Hill Papers and the Mary T. Hill Diary and John J. Toomey subgroup of the Louis W. Hill Papers. Other sources included James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest by Albro Martin, Bath Iron Works, The First Hundred Years by Ralph L. Snow, The Luxury Yachts by John Rousmaniere, The Great Pierpont Morgan by Frederick Lewis Allen, Pierpont Morgan and Friends by George Wheeler, and correspondence and interviews with James J. Hill's grandchildren, Louis W. Hill, Jr., and Maud Hill Schroll. A fully annotated copy of the article with footnotes is available at the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102.*



*Henry H. Sibley's house at 417 Woodward, St. Paul, from the 1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, published by A. M. Andreas.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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