

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

The Great Railroad  
Excursion  
of 1854  
—Page 14

Spring, 1995

Volume 30, Number 1

*From Iceboxes to Freezers:*  
The Seeger Refrigerator Company—Page 4



A view of the Seeger Company's Arcade Street factory, ca. 1930. The last building remaining at the company's site was razed in April, 1995. See article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 30, Number 1

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## CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** From Iceboxes to Refrigerators  
The Story of the Seeger Refrigerator Company  
*James B. Bell*
- 14** The Great Railway Excursion of 1854  
'The Most Notable Event of the Year'  
*Virginia Brainard Kunz*
- 17** Who Was Millard Fillmore?  
And What Was He Doing in St. Paul?
- 19** Growing Up in St. Paul  
Gas Stoves, Gas Jets, Gas Lights And  
Coal Through an Open Chute to the Cellar  
*Frieda Claussen*
- 25** What's Historic About This Site?  
The Benjamin Brunson House  
And the East Side's Railroad Island
- 27** Contributors

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

## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**his Spring issue of *Ramsey County History* offers two stories about grow-  
ing up in St. Paul. The first is an institutional and corporate history of the  
Seeger Refrigeration Company written by James B. Bell. The other is a per-  
sonal and individual account written by Frieda Claussen of her coming to adult-  
hood and launching her career as a medical technologist at Miller Hospital.  
While the Seeger Company was located on the East Side of St. Paul from 1902  
to 1984, Frieda Claussen's professional life spanned forty-two years in the de-  
velopment of modern medical practice. Unlike the Seeger Company, which has  
passed from the local scene, Frieda Claussen and her sister, Clara, have made  
sure their experiences will enrich others in their willingness to value local history  
and to tell their story in our magazine. For this, we thank them.

*John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board*

# What's Historic About This Site?

## *The Benjamin Brunson house And the East Side's Railroad Island*

*This is the fifteenth in a series of articles on Ramsey County's historic sites.*

One of the oldest documented houses still standing in St. Paul was built by Benjamin Brunson, surveyor and politician, in 1855 or 1856 at 485 Kenny Road in an early East Side neighborhood long known as Railroad Island.

The house is described in the Historic Sites Survey conducted in 1978–1980 by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission as a rare example of a mildly Federal style of architecture much used during the pioneer era in St. Paul's history. It has a plain hipped roof, windows evenly spaced across its facade, a bay window on its east side and a small open side porch.

Brunson is best known to Minnesota history as a surveyor who, with his brother, Ira, created St. Paul's first town plat in 1847. Benjamin Brunson was born in Detroit in 1823, the son of the Reverend Alfred Brunson who settled later in Prairie du Chien and became a well-known pioneer preacher and writer. In 1844 Benjamin Brunson left Prairie du Chien to open a mill business in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, with his brother-in-law, Jacob Bass. Three years later, Bass and Brunson sold the business and moved to St. Paul where Brunson joined his brother, Ira, then deputy marshall for Wisconsin territory, in the survey of the town plat. The first plat, however, was not properly recorded. It was redrawn by Benjamin, who received official credit for the original plat of the settlement.

The town plat was entered on April 28, 1849, after Minnesota became a territory, and signed the following year by



*Benjamin Brunson's house at 485 Kenny Road in 1896 (top) and in 1978. The house was built in 1855 or 1856 in a neighborhood now surrounded by railroad tracks and known, appropriately enough, as Railroad Island. The photograph of the house in 1896 is from the Minnesota Historical Society; the 1978 photo is from the Ramsey County Historical Society's historic sites files.*



fourteen of the town's pioneers. Among them were Jacob Bass and Benjamin Brunson. The plat contained at that time about ninety acres, and included what was then the town's principal business section. Lots were deeded to each owner. Brunson later described the process in connection with an 1866 lawsuit, as quoted by J. Fletcher Williams in his 1875 *History of the City of Saint Paul*:

"We had meetings about once a week at the time, in regulating proprietors' lines. There was a committee to determine who owned lots, and [where] the lines were so that parties entering the town could own equitably; most of those difficulties were settled before the plat was signed."

In June, 1852, Benjamin Brunson laid out "Brunson's Addition," a large tract of land lying east of Trout Brook. Here he built his house on a rise of land that extended between Payne Avenue and Trout Brook—a scenic spot for a home. In time the area became the home of some of the city's wealthiest residents. Brunson himself prospered fitfully, apparently.

"Like all our pioneers," Williams wrote, "he has experienced many reverses of fortune—today rich, tomorrow poor. Mr. Brunson, pursuing his profession of surveyor, has surveyed a considerable part of our own city into streets and lots, when it was a 'wilderness' still, and has laid out some of what are now the most flourishing towns of Minnesota."

In 1861, after the outbreak of the Civil War, Brunson enlisted in Company K, Eighth Minnesota Volunteers, and served three years as an orderly sergeant and a first lieutenant. He was a charter member of St. Paul Lodge Number 2, I.O.O.F. He was elected a representative to the first Territorial Legislature, served for several years as a justice of the peace, was the city's first superintendent of mail carriers and worked as a civil engineer for the Lake Superior Railroad.

In the years following the Civil War, the railroads, seeking level routes into the city, laid their tracks through the

valley formed by Trout Brook. A portion of Brunson's Addition was completely surrounded by Railroad Island, as it became known. The neighborhood today has lost the elegance of the pre-Civil War years but it still contains many of the oldest buildings in the city's East Side Payne-Phalen district.

As early as the 1860s new residents were moving into the area. Swedish immigrants arrived and settled first in a deep ravine, with Phalen Creek running through it, that still separates the East Side district from Dayton's Bluff. They called their valley "Svenska Dalen," or Swede Hollow, a colorful world of its own. As they moved out, they were followed there by successive waves of immigrants, including Irish, Italians, Poles and Mexican Americans.

During its peak years, Swede Hollow had sixty homes, a grocery store and a Catholic chapel. Today Swede Hollow is a city park and the creek, which has been channeled underground, stubbornly surfaces in places along the old creek bed.

The Payne-Phalen District was the home of the Seeger Refrigeration Company whose history is traced in the article beginning on page 4. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in St. Paul and has a colorful history that, dating back to the city's earliest years, is linked to a somewhat disruptable character named Edward Phelan (now spelled Phalen).

Phelan was a soldier serving a tour of duty with the United States Fifth Infantry at Fort Snelling in the 1830s. Of Irish ancestry, he was born in Londonderry. Army records carry his name as "Felyn." Discharged in 1838 or 1839, he and a fellow soldier, John Hays of Waterford, Ireland, took up a claim at the foot of what is now Eagle Street in downtown St. Paul.

His association with Hays didn't last long. Within months, Hays was found floating in the Mississippi near Carver's Cave, his head bashed in. Phelan had an apparently well-deserved reputation for cruelty. He was arrested and dispatched to Prairie du Chien for trial. The jury, however, released him for lack of evidence. Later, a Dakota warrior con-

fessed that he had killed Hays, but the suspicion of guilt continued to cling to Phelan throughout his remaining years in Minnesota.

He returned to St. Paul and took up another claim at the head of the ravine and on the creek that now bears his name. Here he built a cabin near Payne and Minnehaha Avenue. Other soldiers discharged from Fort Snelling followed him to his sheltered ravine and fur traders also camped there.

Subsequent events evidently did not deal kindly with Phelan. He acquired and sold several more claims, all in the Trout Brook-Phalen Creek area. In the Spring of 1850 he was indicted for perjury by the first Grand Jury ever to sit in Ramsey County. When the sheriff arrived to arrest him, Phelan was nowhere to be found. He had fled, heading for the gold fields of California. Tradition holds that he came to a violent end before reaching his Eldorado.

Others who followed Phelan to the Trout Brook-Phalen Creek valley also tended to be temporary settlers who built log cabins along the banks. As the age of the rails dawned, modest nineteenth century houses were built along the western edge of Swede Hollow and in the tiny, alley-like streets such as Petit and Fred Streets, according to the *Historic Sites Survey Final Report*.

A building boom in the 1880s allowed dwellers in both the Lower and Upper Payne Avenue neighborhoods to acquire their own homes. Real estate agents began to sell lots there and many working class families built homes with the help of a local building society.

North of Railroad Island, the Upper Payne Avenue neighborhood has wood-frame and brick Victorian houses. It was settled during that decade by Scandinavian immigrants, many of whom worked for the nearby railroads and Hamm's Brewery.

When Benjamin Brunson built his house overlooking Trout Brook and Phalen Creek in the mid-1850s, St. Paul was already a community with settlers from many different ethnic groups. It remains so today.



*St. Paul around 1869 was still a rather rude frontier town and not exactly the "second city of magnificent distances" described by the Eastern press who descended on the village in 1854. This view of a muddy Jackson Street looks north from Third Street. The St. Paul Hotel, right, was built in 1846-1847 and developed into the Merchants Hotel. See article about the Great Railroad Excursion of 1854, beginning on page 14. McLeish & Pasel photo, Minnesota Historical Society.*

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

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