

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
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**Spring 2006**

Volume 41, Number 1

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The Cave Under  
the Castle*

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Mary Hill's Lowertown, 1867–1891

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*Mary Mehegan Hill (1867). This painting is from a wedding photograph. The date of the painting and the artist are not known. In 1956 a member of the Hill family gave this painting to the James J. Hill Reference Library. Reproduced by permission of the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, Minnesota. Photograph by Maureen McGinn.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 1

Spring 2006

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect,  
preserve 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 over this history.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

Our Spring issue leads with dual articles presenting a vibrant portrait of old Lowertown, which now remains only as a fragment of a neighborhood tucked within a spaghetti-like web of freeway lanes. Eileen McCormack describes the social and economic framework that nourished Jim and Mary Hill from 1867 until 1891, when they moved to their Summit Avenue mansion. And David Riehle portrays the homes and businesses of working-class St. Paul citizens in the same neighborhood. Greg Brick leads a reader's tour underneath the streets in the West Seventh area, through thirty miles of corridors leading to caves that once cooled German-style lager beer brewed by the Stahlmann, and later Schmidt, breweries. Bernice Fisher provides an evocative remembrance of attending St. Adalbert's Catholic school in a Polish neighborhood full of traditions. Finally, many treasures await readers who sample our reviewers' picks marking, among others, Minnesota's state capitol building, the career of a recent riverboat legend, and the story of a gifted educator who grew up on a farm supplying butter and meat to city dwellers. We are proud of the last, *Pearl and the Howling Hound Farm*, which is one of our own recent publications, available through RCHS. Happy reading!

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

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## Notes

1. Mary T. Hill to Louis W. Hill, July 22, 1891. Louis W. Hill Papers (LWHP), James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, Minnesota.

2. Sources for this narrative are primarily St. Paul City Directories, published maps, and financial information in the James J. Hill Papers, and Mary Hill letters and diaries in the Louis Hill Papers. All are held at the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, Minnesota. For general information on business and society in early St. Paul see: Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul 1849-1883* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005) and Mary Lethert Wingerd, *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

3. Virginia Brainard Kunz, *Saint Paul—The First 150 Years* (St. Paul: The Saint Paul Foundation, 1991), pp 34-35.

4. Census records, both United States and Minnesota State, held at Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

5. “The Gotzian Footprint” (Saint Paul: Rice & Bell Pub., 1915). Gotzian and Schurmeier family information courtesy of Geoffrey Brewster.

6. *Organization and Governance of the Minnesota Club* (St. Paul: The Minnesota Club, 1886), p. 29. Mary T. Hill Diaries, LWHP.

7. Mary T. Hill Diaries, February 2, 1891; June 20–27, 1889, LWHP.

8. Rev. James M. Reardon, *The Church of St.*

*Mary of Saint Paul* (St. Paul: Saint Paul Archdiocese, 1935). Information on the Gotzians and the Schurmeiers is from Helen Miller Dickison, “Roots in the English John Wesley: St. Paul’s First German Methodist Church,” *Ramsey County History* 38 (Spring 2003): 19–24. Henry Upham’s obituary (he died May 1, 1909) states that funeral services were conducted by the Rev. John Wright, who was the rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.

9. *The Duluth Evening Herald*, (Duluth, Minnesota), April 27, 1901.

10. Bill Hakala and Nancy Skaran, *Bethesda, A Century of Caring: 1883-1983* (St. Paul: North Central Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 16–22.

11. Mary T. Hill Diary, June 20, 1917, LWHP.

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# Lowertown: Another Perspective

## David Riehle

The fire insurance maps compiled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the information of insurers are an invaluable resource for historians. The mapmakers needed to provide their customers with crucial information on the materials used in buildings, especially their combustible potential. Accordingly their maps were color coded to distinguish stone and brick buildings from wood construction, houses and industrial structures from stables, as well as supplementary information on access to fire hydrants, internal sprinkling systems, and so on.

While it was certainly not the purpose of the mapmakers, we can readily deduce patterns of social differentiation among the multicolored records they have left us. In general, relative positions on the ladder of economic class in the city were marked by the materials used to construct private homes, as well as, inevitably, their dimensions. Brick and stone houses were, of course, for the most part more expensive than those of wood-frame material, and generally bigger. And, conveniently for historians, they were indicated by dif-

ferent colors on the insurance maps. The homes of James J. Hill, Conrad Gotzian, and Henry Upham on the block bounded by Ninth, Tenth, Wacouta and Canada streets, whose residents are the focus of Eileen McCormack’s article elsewhere in this magazine, are tinted pink in the 1884 edition of the *G.M. Hopkins Real Estate Atlas* for the city of St. Paul, indicating they were constructed of stone or brick.

And they were bigger. Looking at the formidable pink footprints of these three structures on the Hopkins map of the Lowertown area, for this writer at least, an irresistible image arises of an area where elephants have recently trod. Of course the Empire Builder was, beyond the possibility of dispute, the alpha-elephant in the world of the Great Northwest in his time.

Zooming out, however, many other footprints come into view. This watering hole, to continue the metaphor, clearly was not frequented by only one species. Almost all the buildings in the surrounding blocks are wooden structures, and smaller. Those that are not are, with very

few exceptions, either churches or apartment buildings. The numerous structures marked with interior “x’s” are stables, surely redolent of olfactory signatures we rarely encounter in our present urban life. Thus Jim Hill had his personal horse barn right across Ninth Street from the family home, although, being Jim Hill, his was built of brick.

This commingling of the classes, evident in Lowertown’s jumble of buildings depicted in the Hopkins map, was not limited to proximity of homes. In those days people walked to work, and to just about every other location with which they were concerned in their personal lives. The overwhelming majority of retail and working destinations of people in Lowertown were only a few blocks from their homes, as well as their churches, fraternal lodges, union halls, and venues for drinking, gambling, and prostitution.<sup>1</sup> Leon Trotsky, the Russian communist leader who helped organize the 1917 revolution, once said that one of the crucial historic social distinctions was between the equestrian and the pedestrian,

but this was far more characteristic of a highly stratified feudal society like Imperial Russia than a forty-year-old city like St. Paul, which was just emerging from a frontier village in the 1870s.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that on many, if not most occasions, in the 1870s and '80s, St. Paul's nascent *haute bourgeoisie* traveled on foot along with everybody else. Jim Hill's Great Northern headquarters building was just a six-block walk from his home, down Canada and Rosabel (now Wall) to Third Street. When the numerous residents of Lowertown emerged onto the city streets mornings and evenings walking to and from their respective workplaces, in most cases shoulder to shoulder with their employers heading for the same destinations, there must have been a crowded tumult of shouting, laughter, sweat, dust, and other vibrant emissions for the senses as well as a feeling of commonality we can only guess at today.

In the blocks surrounding the Hill-Upham-Gotzian Lowertown compound there was dense working class housing, including many boarding houses. The Austin Boarding House at 382 Wacouta was the home in 1890 for nine residents: Louis Bondele and Charles Quamer were painters; William Freston was a truckman on the railroad; Harry Lowell was a conductor on the Wisconsin Central Railroad; James Lowell, presumably his brother, was a stationery engineer. Shoe worker James Morehouse would have walked to work six days a week to the Foot Schulze Company, at Third and Wacouta, about a block west of Jim Hill's destination at the Great Northern at Third and Rosabel.<sup>3</sup>

Benoni Baker's boarding house at 539 Wacouta, only a half block removed from the Hill block, had twenty-seven young men and women living there. Interestingly, unlike the Austin House, the Baker house residents were all what we would today call white-collar workers with fifteen male clerical workers and the remainder employed in such vocations as stenographer, teacher, salesman, cashier, etc. The implications of what was apparently a self-imposed stratification among young working people, one might suspect, contained the yet ungerminated seeds of future suburbias.

One block north, at 215 Spruce Street,



*This photograph from 1890 is of a boarding house, which was known as the "Swedish Castle." It was located on the corner of Williams and Pine streets in the Lowertown neighborhood. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Caroline Blenis's boarding house was home to nine unmarried young workers, eight of whom were male. Their occupations ranged from clerk to glazier to milliner to yet another shoe factory worker and even a stained glass designer.

The *R.L. Polk City Directory for 1889-90* discloses at least eleven boarding houses within a few blocks of the Hills, Gotzians, and Uphams, as well as three livery stables, numerous stables that were on residential property, and five saloons. One block west lay the two-square-block Borup's Addition, bounded by Cooper (now Sibley) Street, Temperance, Tenth, and Norris streets. Borup's Addition was predominantly made up of African American homeowners, although Dr. Albert Upham, a dentist who may have been a brother of Henry Upham, resided for decades at 547 Cooper Street in a comfortable, three-story home surrounded by black neighbors. George James, an African American St. Paul pioneer who arrived in the city before the Civil War, lived at 541 Cooper. James was employed for twenty-five years as head porter at the Merchant's Hotel and undoubtedly knew Mary Mehegan when she worked there as a waitress prior to her marriage to James J. Hill.<sup>4</sup>

Even churches had a diversity that contemporary readers might not expect to find at the close of the nineteenth century. Most notable was the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, located a few blocks

further west at Twelfth and Cedar streets, almost directly across the street from Pilgrim Baptist Church, the historic African American congregation founded during the Civil War by Robert Hickman.

Good Shepherd's communicants included about thirty Dakota Native Americans, a group of traditionally Episcopalian African Americans of which the James family played a leading part, and, among others, St. Paul pioneer, Norman Kittson, Jim Hill's original business partner.<sup>5</sup>

While this personal and residential proximity of all strata of society would seem like a revolution in social relations today, none of it would have struck Mary or James Hill, or their wealthy neighbors, as unusual, it seems to me. The Hills, at least, were of unambiguously plebian social origin and had spent their entire adult lives in the city from virtually its beginning. The social differentiation that was soon to lead to a residential removal to the western plateau along Summit Avenue on the part of the city's wealthy, including Jim Hill, was still in the future.

*David Reihle is a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board. His article on Borup's Addition in St. Paul's Lowertown neighborhood in the late nineteenth century was published in the Fall 2002 edition of this magazine.*

## Notes

1. Most houses of prostitution were located in Upper Town, near Irvine and Rice Parks. See Joel Best, "Looking Evil in the Face: Being an Examination of Vice and Respectability in St. Paul as Seen in the City's Press, 1865-1883," *Minnesota History* 50 (Summer 1987): 241-51.

2. "The Questions of Wendelin Thomas," July 6, 1937, in George Breitman and others, eds., *The Writings of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 9, 1937-38 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978).

3. *St. Paul City Directory, 1889-90* (R.L. Polk Co., 1890-91); *Dual City Blue Book, Minneapolis-St. Paul* (R.L. Polk Co., 1890-91).

4. David Reihle, "Borup's Addition and the Prosperous African Americans Who Lived There," *Ramsey County History* 37:3 (Fall 2002): 4-10.

5. *Year Book of the Church of the Good Shepard, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1894* (St. Paul: Commercial Press, 1894); Jon Butler, "Communities and Congregations: The Black Church in St. Paul, 1860-1900," *The Journal of Negro History* 56:2 (April 1971): 118-34.



The Stahlmann Cave Brewery as depicted on the company letterhead. Courtesy of Paul Clifford Larson. See article beginning on page 12.

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