

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

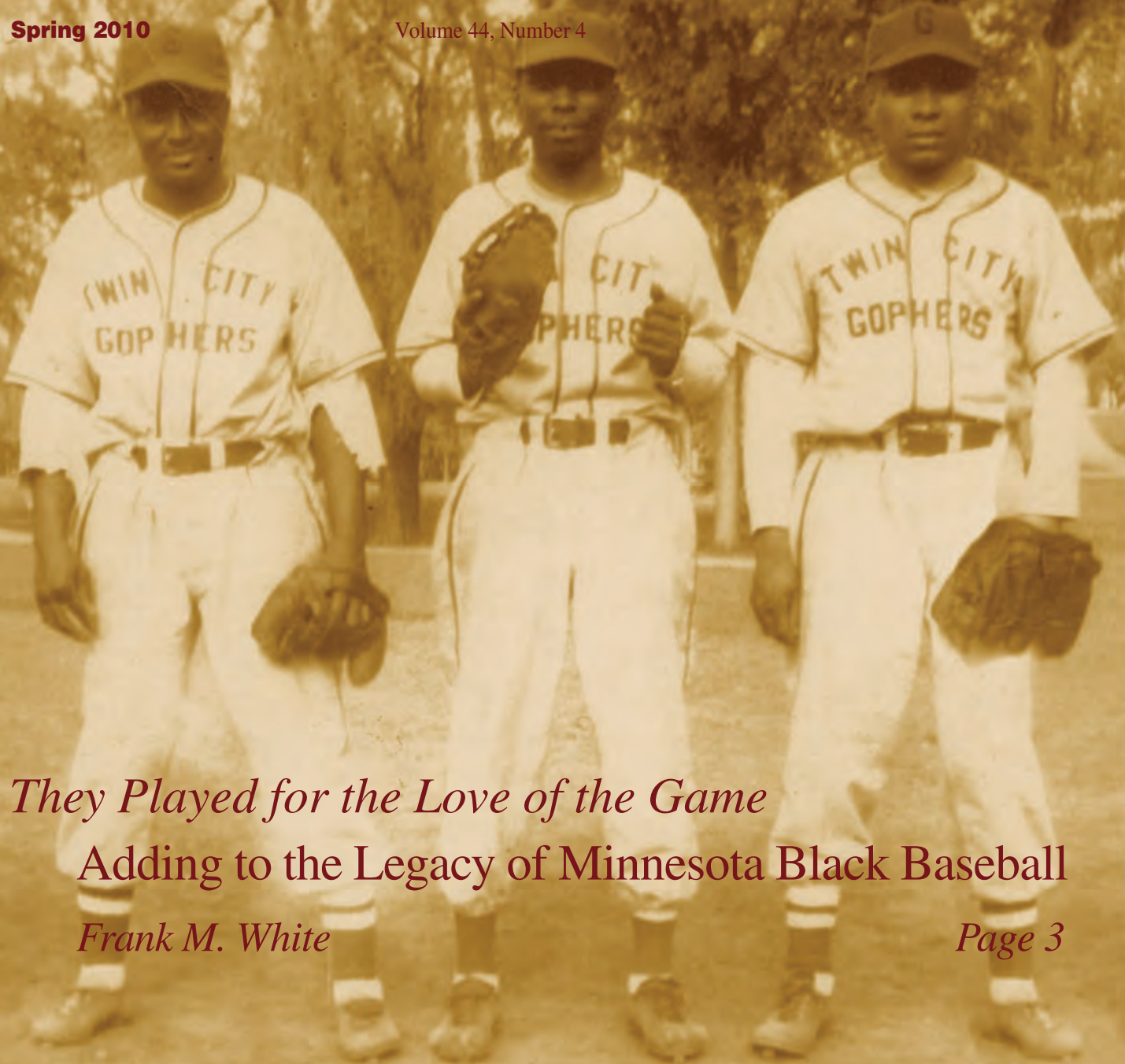
*“Good Grief!”  
Said Charlie Brown:  
The Business of Death  
in Bygone St. Paul*

*Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris*

—Page 14

**Spring 2010**

Volume 44, Number 4



*They Played for the Love of the Game*

*Adding to the Legacy of Minnesota Black Baseball*

*Frank M. White*

*Page 3*

*John Cotton, left, was an outstanding athlete and second baseman for the Twin City Gophers, his Marshall Senior High School team, and other professional teams in the 1940s and '50s. He and Lloyd "Dulov" Hogan, right, and the other unidentified player in this photo were part of the thriving black baseball scene in Minnesota in the middle of the twentieth century. Photo courtesy of the Cotton family. Photo restoration by Lori Gleason.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 45, Number 1

Spring 2010

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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*Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

History reminds us of change in a vivid way. Just a few decades ago, de facto H segregation reigned even in the North, and black players could not play baseball in white leagues. Frank White presents a valuable account of the talented St. Paul players who joined the Negro Leagues, barnstorming in the 1930s through 1950s and staying in private homes because they were not welcome in many public accommodations. After Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the major leagues in 1947, black players still found St. Paul to be a valuable training ground, which could act as a steppingstone to playing major league baseball. Also in this issue, Moira F. and Leo G. Harris explore the business of death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using primary source material, they have documented such customs as long funeral processions, mourning cards, and the advent of ready-made coffins when railroad traffic could bring them to the Twin Cities. Elaborate funeral customs may have reflected the reality of earlier death, when disease and accidents cut short the lives of many Ramsey County residents. But these traditions have a graceful legacy in the headstones of Oakland and Calvary Cemeteries, which are well worth a visit even after the tributes and ceremonies that mark Memorial Day.

*Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board*

# Book Reviews

## *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota*

William D. Green

St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007

219 pages; \$32.95.

Reviewed by Paul D. Nelson

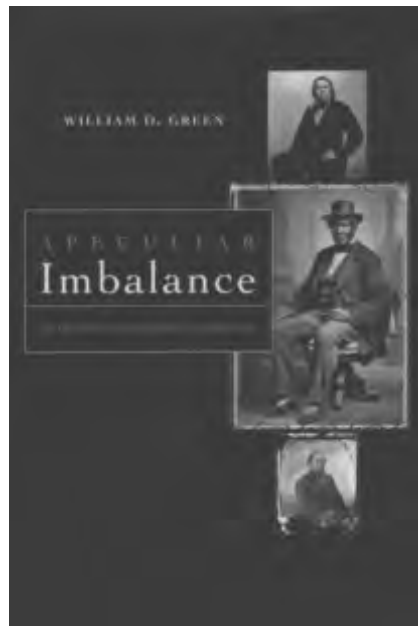
Let's get the quibbles right out front. *A Peculiar Imbalance* has many awkward sentences, some poor word choices, and inexplicable misspellings (Edward Phelen for the early St. Paul settler Edward Phelan), and several conclusions that outrun the supporting evidence.

Should these problems stop anyone from reading the book? Not at all. It has compensating virtues: an important, previously unexplored subject; a sensible central argument; lively characters; interesting and heretofore neglected stories; delightful details and eloquent quotations. It is also short, about 180 text pages. If the reader occasionally grumbles—"No, your evidence doesn't support *that!*"—this is not a bad thing. It's engagement.

*A Peculiar Imbalance* examines the question of race (with forays into class and religion too) in the first generation of Minnesota's modern history, 1837 to 1869. Most of the action takes place in and around St. Paul, the state's first major population center. In this period St. Paul went from a polyglot, frontier hamlet of refugees, adventurers, traders, Indians, soldiers, and the occasional African American, to a capital city dominated by unilin-

gual Yankees organized in political parties.

The author describes this transformation mostly through a selection of events—riots, rescues, political meetings, legislative battles, and court cases. Some memorable characters show up, among them Dred and Harriet Scott, the great pilgrim Robert Hickman, Jim Thompson, the only black among St. Paul's founders, Paul Mazakutemani, leader of the Hazelwood Republic, along with the unavoidable Ignatius Donnelly and Henry H. Sibley.



The book's most memorable character is Jim Thompson, till now a blurry figure, remembered as an ex-slave and interpreter and the only black among the Old Pioneers, but nothing more. The author brings him fully to life as

a complex and contradictory man: a missionary interpreter but maybe a bad one; a devout Methodist and a whiskey peddler; a respected businessman and a cheat; a hero (he saved a girl from rape, in one of the book's best minor stories) and a rat. In short, he was a frontier character.

Jim Thompson serves well as a prime character in the book. A mulatto, he married a daughter of the Dakota leader Cloud Man. They had two children, a son and a daughter. As adults, the son chose Indian life on a Santee reservation, while the daughter married into respectable white society in St. Paul. The Thompson family spanned three races and exemplified St. Paul's earliest days, when race meant less. When people are few they need each other more, and need tends to overpower differences of color and culture. An Indian or African who helps you can't really be a "filthy savage" or an "insolent nagur."

William Green's analysis of Minnesota's twelve-year internal struggle over suffrage is also a welcome one. The question—Who should have the right to vote?—roiled state politics from the approach of statehood, around 1856, past the end of the Civil War, 1868. Mr. Green takes us through the complex gyrations of leaders and citizens trying to maneuver between principle (all men created equal) and democracy: black suffrage in the state constitution would doom it to failure with the voters. One of the many ironies that resulted was that Indians, though sometimes hostile and culturally and linguistically at

odds with the settler majority, got (limited) voting rights. Black Minnesotans, though Christian, English-speaking, earnest, and loyal, got none. It took the Civil War and the expulsion of almost all Indians from the state to correct this “peculiar imbalance.”

The saddest account in the book tells of the Hazelwood Republic, a community of Dakota persuaded to adopt settler ways, clothing, religion, and work in return for promises of political rights and autonomy. They got neither, and their community was destroyed in the Dakota Conflict of 1862.

Race, we learn, wrecked an early Minnesota tourist industry. In the late 1850s the town of St. Anthony built up a lively trade among slaveholding southerners vacationing in the cooler north, enjoying St. Anthony Falls and the lakes. But local abolitionists took to taunting and abusing the visitors as they disembarked at the St. Paul levy. “They would vilify and insult Southern visitors as they stepped into the four-horse stagecoach to be whisked to the Winslow House. At the hotel the lobby and halls were stealthily patrolled by small squadrons of righteous emancipators. . . .” The 1860 Eliza Winston case, in which a slave of one such southern family won her freedom in a Minnesota court, put an end to this trade.

Author Green fills out the story of Robert Hickman, the Missouri slave who engineered the escape of seventy-six fellow slaves by building a raft and launching it onto the Mississippi, hope and desperation their only means of navigation. They got lucky: a steamer headed for St. Paul towed the raft north (perhaps, the author suggests, because the captain knew that Henry Sibley was looking for black laborers). Every reader should be grateful for this detail—the steamer that towed Hickman and his followers to freedom in Minnesota turned around and carried 540 Indians, caught up in the Dakota conflict, to permanent exile (or worse) in Dakota Territory.

These are just a few of the stories in the book that show early Minnesotans,

white, black, Indian, and mixed, caught in the many snares of racial classification, and responding in a host of ways, such as through litigation and legislation, violence, acquiescence and resistance, lawful organizing and direct action. Often the eloquence and sophistication of public discourse surpassed what we endure today.

This book gives us an interesting and somewhat troubling account of an 1869 criminal case in St. Paul. A black man named Willis Harris was charged with burglary (the alleged victim was another black man). There was nothing special or significant about the facts, the issues, or the parties. The jury was the story. No African American had ever served on a Minnesota jury and yet, to the surprise of all, five were called and seated in this case. (One of them was Robert Hickman.) This appears to have been arranged as a political stunt by Democratic politicians in St. Paul in reaction to the grant of political rights to African Americans by the state’s Republican-dominated leadership. Green makes much of the case, though it is not really clear what conclusions, if any, to draw from it.

The author argues that because Harris was acquitted, the public concluded that blacks could not be trusted as jurors:

The question was, of course, would black jurymen—the best St. Paul’s black community had to offer—find in favor of law and order as administered by Ramsey County Democrats or find in favor of race? . . . No record exists of how the jury polled, but when the verdict of not guilty was announced, to the Democrats the answer was in. The blacks had apparently voted for the black. . . . The verdict stood on its own, a judgment *for* the defendant and *against* the jury. Blacks could not be relied on to protect Democratic justice, let alone the security of the community.

What is troubling about this account is that it is not true. The very first newspaper article about the case, one that Green cites, reports that the five black men on the jury were the only ones to vote for conviction. They were eventually won over by

the seven white men who favored acquittal. There *is* a record of how the jury polled, it was immediate public knowledge, and it showed the black citizens supporting the Democratic police and the prosecutor.

This leads us back to the quibbles. Those regarding writing style are simply cautions to the reader not to be put off by the author’s occasional infelicities; they aren’t important. The objections to certain overreaching conclusions are more serious. Examples: In the chapter about the forming of the first state constitution (“Divided Brethren”) and the contentious battle over suffrage, Green writes, “The specter of Bleeding Kansas was suddenly never more real.” Well. Bleeding Kansas was a guerrilla war of blood and terror between competing factions of pro- and anti-slavery thugs (including John Brown) that killed over 200 people. Nothing remotely similar to that ever occurred in Minnesota, and to suggest that its specter was real here goes too far. In Chapter 4 (“A Peculiar Imbalance”) the author describes an 1854 St. Paul incident where a black man named Bush got into a fight with a white man and was later waylaid and beaten by some of his adversary’s chums. He does not seem to have been severely hurt, but Green writes that “the episode reflected . . . that blacks were not only rivals to be degraded and murdered but were viewed as inherently too foul for human companionship.” His evidence does not support so extreme a conclusion. There was, after all, no murder.

Stumbles like these have the unfortunate effect of undermining the reader’s confidence in the author’s judgment. This is a shame because *A Peculiar Imbalance* is interesting, lively, and makes welcome contributions to the early history of Minnesota and St. Paul.

*Paul D. Nelson is a member of the Society’s Editorial Board and the author of Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912 (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).*

## *Winging It at a Country Crossroads: The Ups and Downs of Minnesota's First Real Airport*

Roger Bergerson

St. Paul: self-published, 2008

66 pages; \$15.95.

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Roger Bergerson is a former newspaper reporter and long-time freelance writer who has published a very engaging history of the Curtiss Northwest Airport that was located in Falcon Heights from 1919 to 1930. Driving along Larpenteur Avenue today, few people would have any idea that at the southeast corner of the junction with Snelling Avenue, there had once been an airfield. Full of photos and anecdotes, this book is a gem.

Curtiss Field, as it was called, is obscure but not unknown. The standard account of aviation in Minnesota by Noel Allard and Gerald Sandvick refers to it as “the first major airport in Minnesota” and for a time, “the center of aviation in the state.” The field was the brainchild of William A. Kidder, a Minneapolis real estate developer who also learned to fly a two-seat biplane known as the “Jenny” that was built by the Curtiss Aviation Company of New York. Glenn Curtiss, the firm’s founder, was himself an aviation pioneer. He was also the first person to fly an airplane in Minnesota when in June 1910 he soloed at the State Fairgrounds during one of his barnstorming tours.

After the United States entered World War I in 1917, Kidder’s real estate business suffered. He decided to capitalize on the growing interest in aviation, especially after the war ended abruptly in November 1918, leaving thousands of surplus Jenny biplanes available for sale to anyone who had the money to buy them. A representative of the Curtiss firm sold seventy-five of the planes to Kidder, who put no money down and had no airfield on which to store them.

Undeterred, Kidder got financial help and in April 1919 incorporated the Curtiss Northwest Airplane Com-

pany—Minnesota’s first air transportation charter—and then leased a field at the corner of the unpaved Larpenteur and Snelling roads from Lorenzo Hoyt, a successful farmer. Soon there was a hanger on the L-shaped field and Kidder had hired his first pilot. By July the airfield was open for business. Anyone who was willing to pay \$15 was able to have a short ride in one of the Jennys. Kidder also sold aircraft to anyone interested in getting into flying.



pany. Ever the promoter, Kidder worked hard to develop interest in his business by advertising in the local newspapers and seeking whatever publicity his planes could gather by offering sightseeing rides at local events. In 1920 the U.S. Post Office announced that it would start airmail service between the Twin Cities and Chicago. Kidder vied for the contract, but Speedway Field, the site of today’s Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport, was bigger and was selected by the postal authorities. When the state of Minnesota decided to establish an Air National Guard unit in the early 1920s, the army rented airplanes from Kidder until Washington supplied planes to the Minnesota squadron. Soon Kidder had built another hanger, employed four pilots, and got more publicity when Dayton’s Department Store hired his planes to deliver goods as part of several promotions.

On another occasion, Northern States Power hired a Kidder plane to do aerial mapping for routing power lines. Kidder planes also did aerial photography work and aerial spraying of grasshopper eggs. When a man in Wisconsin who was very ill needed to get to a St. Paul hospital in a hurry, Kidder’s mechanics figured out

how to get a hospital cot in a plane. Before they could use the plane, however, the man died. Ever the salesman, Kidder instead sold the family on flying the deceased to St. Paul for burial instead of shipping the body by rail. In 1922 Kidder aircraft were used to fly a political candidate to several campaign appearances when the roads were too muddy for automobile travel.

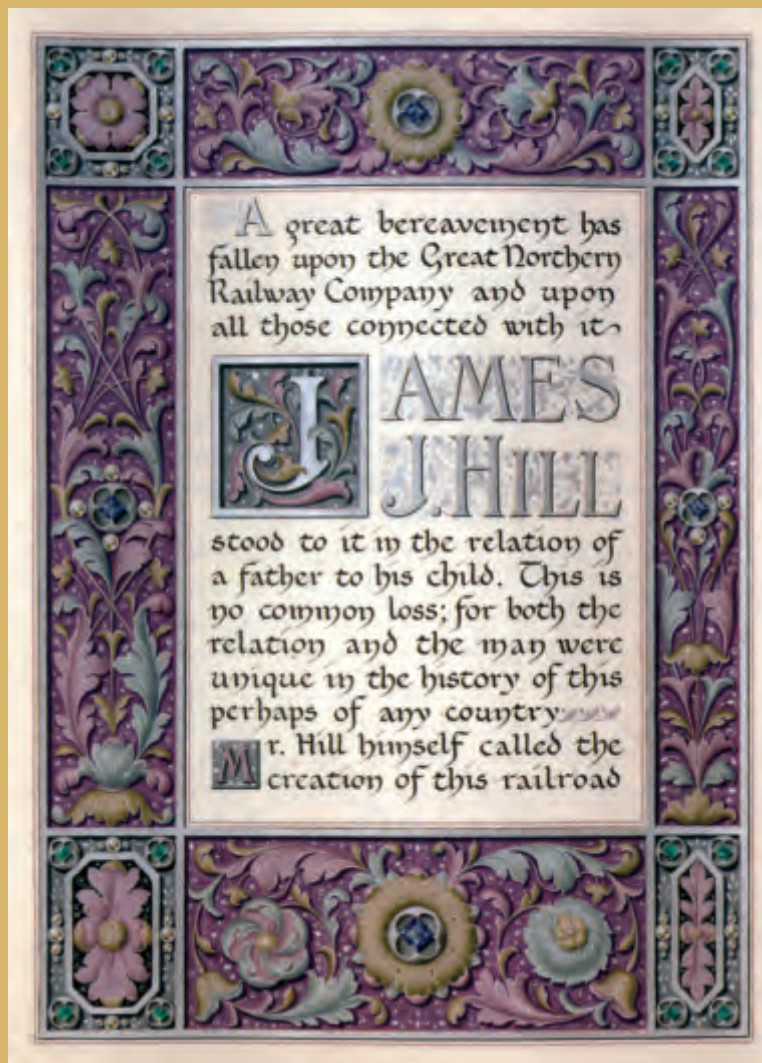
A recent Mechanic Arts High School graduate named Phoebe Fairgrave showed up at the field in 1921 and asked if she could make a parachute jump from one of Kidder’s planes. With some training and practice, Fairgrave was able to set a record jump of 15,200 feet. Later, after she had married pilot Vernon Omlie, she became the first woman to earn a federal pilot’s license. Phoebe Omlie went on to fly in a number of air races and perform aerial stunts for a Hollywood movie.

Kidder and Charles “Speed” Holman joined forces in 1924. With financial help from the Washburn Crosby milling company, Kidder beefed up Holman’s biplane for competition and painted the Gold Medal trademark on it. Holman subsequently became the first pilot for the fledgling Northwest Airways, flying airmail runs between the Twin Cities and Chicago.

The opening of the Wold-Chamberlain Airport (1923) and the St. Paul Municipal Airport (1926) doomed Curtiss Northwest Airport. In Bergerson’s words, the field began a “slow fade to obscurity.” Kidder left aviation for commercial real estate work and residential development began to encroach upon the airfield. By 1930 the site was finished for aviation purposes and within a decade or so the former airport was a de facto recreational field and holding pond for rain runoff from Snelling. Fortunately, in 1991 the city of Falcon Heights turned Curtiss Northwest Field into an attractive park with picnic and playground facilities. Today Curtiss Field Park provides entertainment to young and old, even if it’s not as high flying as it was in the days of early Minnesota aviation.

*John M. Lindley is the editor of Ramsey County History.*

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*Following the death of James J. Hill on May 29, 1916, the board of directors of the Great Northern Railway sent an engrossed memorial to the Hill family that conveyed their sense of loss and condolences to the surviving family members. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris discuss this artifact along with other aspects of the business of death in bygone St. Paul beginning on page 14.*