

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

Essay by Richard Moe:  
'Landmarks Reborn:  
Channeling Past Into Present'

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Summer, 2001

Volume 36, Number 2

*Can History Come Alive?*

A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites

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Watercolor "Landmark Center," painted by artist Lou Roman, formerly of St. Paul, in 1988 and reproduced with her permission.  
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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

In 2002 Landmark Center will be 100 years old. Because the Ramsey County Historical Society has been in the forefront of efforts to preserve historic sites in St. Paul and Ramsey County since the 1960s, the Editorial Board decided to honor Landmark Center by devoting this issue to the topic of historic preservation.

Your Society helped to establish St. Paul's Historic Preservation Commission in the 1970s and has been represented on the Commission since its inception. RCHS played a leading role in creating the Irvine Park Historic District and contributed to the work of many to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building, today's Landmark Center. Although the Ramsey County Historical Society was not alone in these efforts, few of us today understand or may remember how difficult it was to make a case for historic preservation in the face of the federal, state, and local governmental programs of the 1960s and '70s that supported a "tear-it-down" approach to urban renewal.

Richard Moe, a Minnesota native and president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has written a brief introduction that gives a national perspective to historic preservation. Moe's message—how far our nation has come since the 1960s in its acceptance of the goals of historic preservation—sets the tone for the four articles that follow, the first three of which were previously published in this magazine. Writing in 1965, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen sets out the local issues of historic preservation as he saw them then and the need for a "sense of urgency" in addressing them. In the next essay, Georgia Ray DeCoster stresses the importance of historic preservation in the revitalization of St. Paul and its economic value to the city. Eileen Michels follows with a specific example of how this might work in a 1972 article about the need to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building. Charles W. Nelson concludes the discussion with an account of his experiences in the early 1970s with the efforts to create the Irvine Park and Historic Summit Hill National Historic Districts.

The Editorial Board hopes that readers of our magazine will enjoy learning more about the work of the many people and organizations that have made historic preservation a vital and guiding part of civic planning in St. Paul and Ramsey County.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

# Landmarks Reborn: Channeling the Past Into the Present

It's a bit hard to believe that more than twenty years have passed since one of St. Paul's most prominent historic landmarks, the Old Federal Courts Building, was reborn as Landmark Center. Led by dedicated citizens such as Georgia DeCoster and Betty Musser (both of whom received National Preservation Honor Awards in recognition of their efforts), the struggle to preserve and reuse this building was a long and difficult one—and, as many doubtless remember, there was a very real chance that it might end in defeat.

Preservation in those days was often a matter of heated confrontations, missed opportunities and lost battles. Happily, conditions have changed and, indeed, the very nature of preservation itself has changed dramatically in recent years.

Consider how far we've come in just a few decades:

- Not too many years ago, preservationists spent most of their time and energy fighting to hold on to landmarks threatened with demolition. Today, old buildings sometimes still are razed, but they no longer are torn down as a matter of course. Among preservationists, developers and architects alike, rehabilitation and adaptive use are widely regarded as viable—often preferable—alternatives to demolition.

- At one time, preservationists' concerns tended to end at the boundaries of the "old part of town." Nowadays we take a much more holistic approach, recognizing that what happens in the suburbs and the countryside has a direct bearing on the fate of older areas, and we don't hesitate to confront challenging issues, such as community livability, sprawl, and sustainable development.

- Until fairly recently, preservationists didn't have many statistics to back up their vaguely-held notions about preservation's economic benefits. Today, with decades of success through the Main Street program, the impact of the Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit, and the widespread community benefits generated by heritage tourism and federal programs, we have firsthand knowledge of the effectiveness of preservation in bringing new economic vitality to both residential and commercial neighborhoods.

- Finally, not many years ago, preservation was still working largely in the shadows, its efforts confined to a relative handful of communities. Today, in what may be the most significant change of all, the effects of preservation are visible everywhere. From one end of America to the other, there is hardly a community—large or small—where houses and storefronts haven't been "fixed up" with pride, where underused or obsolete buildings haven't been put to new and often innovative uses, where historic resources haven't been inventoried and protected in some way, where historic sites aren't heavily marketed to attract tourists. The impact of preservation can be seen almost everywhere, and it has made a clear difference in both the appearance and the quality of life in countless communities here in Ramsey County, across Minnesota, and all over the United States.

How did this happen?

The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that America has undergone a great national change of heart. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of Urban Renewal and Interstate Highway construction that saw thousands of historic buildings and neighborhoods destroyed, Americans began to develop a new attitude toward the past. We began to realize, more strongly than ever before, how much we needed the physical evidence of our past—needed it close at hand where we could live with it, touch it, learn from it. We began to see our heritage as more than something to be put on display behind velvet ropes. We began to realize that we could make the past a living part of our present—and the result is all around us, in buildings and neighborhoods reborn.

Preservation has matured from (in the words of a recent newspaper article) "a hobby of the tea-sipping set" to a mainstream activity involving public officials, corporate executives, urban planners, and thousands of private citizens who would never think of describing themselves as preservationists. Here in Ramsey County preservationists have gained a seat at the decision-makers' table through their success in saving individual buildings such as Landmark Center and revitalizing entire areas such as Lowertown, where years of hard work by a network of public/private partnerships has turned an urban backwater into an urban asset of major proportions.

Ramsey County residents can be proud of what they've accomplished in saving the historic places that enrich our lives. But the work of preservation is never finished. There are always new opportunities and challenges to be faced. With continued vigilance and dedication, and with continued leadership by organizations such as the Ramsey County Historical Society, preservationists here can make their city, their county, a model for other cities, other counties, everywhere in how to channel the heritage of the past into vibrant, attractive, livable communities for the future.

*Richard Moe, President, The National Trust for Historic Preservation*



*The restored Irvine Park with its gazebo, as it looked about 1989. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 21.*

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

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