

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Memoir:
Jimmy Griffin Remembers
His Years on the Force

Page 13

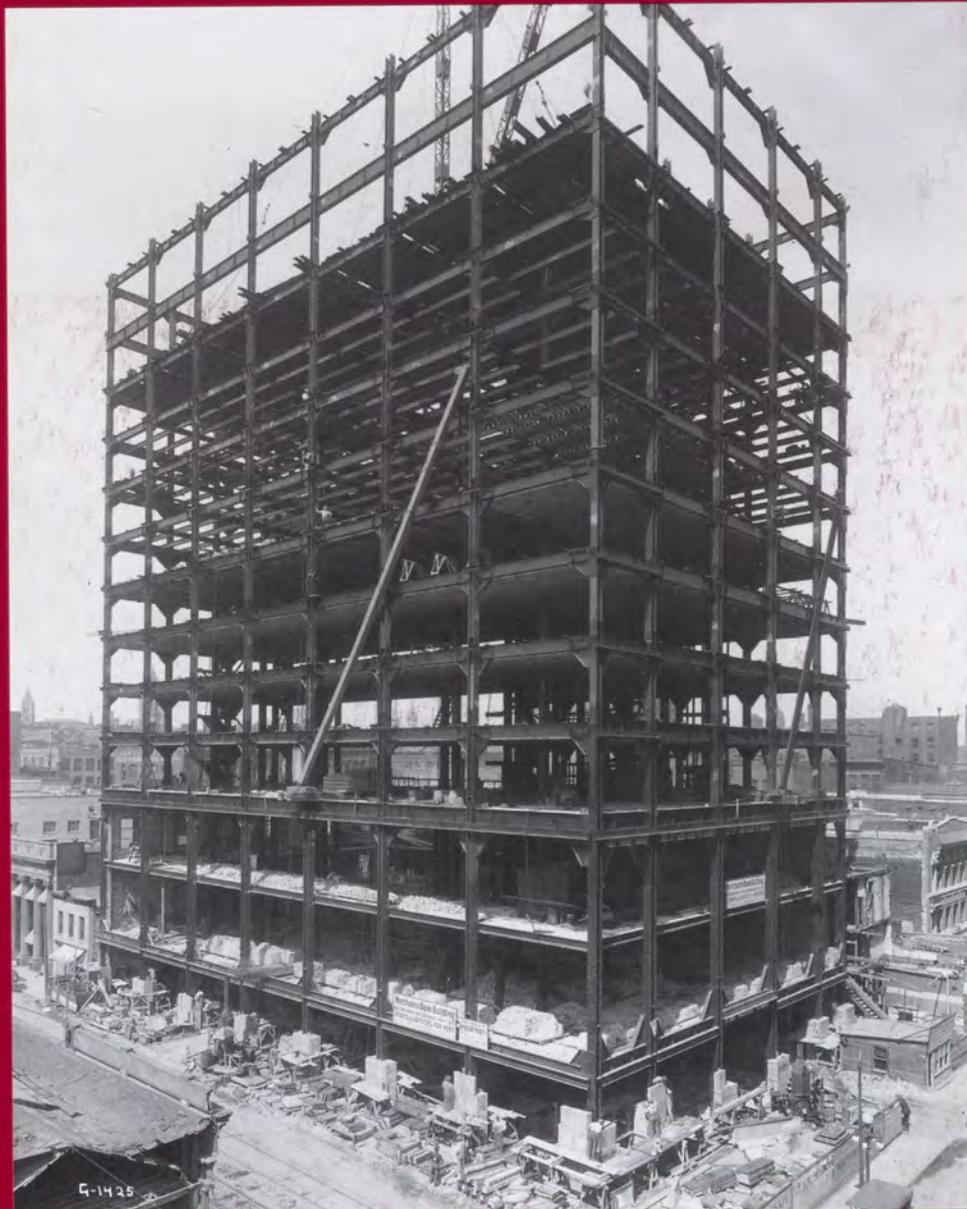
Winter, 2002

Volume 36, Number 4

Crises and Panics and Mergers and Failures

St. Paul's Banks and How They Survived 75 Years

—Page 4



The Merchants Bank building under construction at 333 North Robert Street in 1914. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director
Priscilla Farnham
Editor
Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Howard M. Guthmann
Chair

James Russell
President

Marlene Marschall
First Vice President

Ronald J. Zweber
Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit
Secretary

Peter K. Butler
Treasurer

Charles L. Bathke, W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Norbert Conzemius, Anne Cowie, Charlotte H. Drake, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Scott Hutton, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Richard Nicholson, Linda Owen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Glenn Wiessner, Laurie Zenner, Ronald J. Zweber.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Henry Blodgett, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Mark Eisenschen, Pat Hart, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Richard H. Nicholson, Paul R. Nelson, G. Richard Slade.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner James McDonough, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner Tony Bennett
Commissioner Rafael Ortega
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt
Commissioner Janice Rettman
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2002, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 36, Number 4

Winter, 2002

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Crises and Panics and Mergers and Failures
St. Paul's Banks and How They Survived
Their First 75 Years
G. Richard Slade
- 13 A Memoir
Jimmy Griffin, St. Paul's First Black Deputy
Police Chief, Remembers His Years on the Force
Jimmy Griffin with Kwame JC McDonald
- 19 Tubal Cain in New Brighton
The Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Company
Leo J. Harris
- 24 Who Was the Charles E. Flandrau Who Built That House?
- 25 Books

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

In this issue Richard Slade, a former St. Paul bank executive who's also an historian of Twin Cities banking, examines the first seventy-five years of St. Paul's banks. Slade's primary focus is on the events and maneuvers during the 1920s that led to the formation in early 1929 of the "Minnesota Twins"—Northwest Bancorporation in Minneapolis and the First Bank Stock Group in St. Paul. During the decade of the 1920s, Minnesota banking experienced significant problems that led to numerous bank failures before the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in the fall of 1929. As Slade explains, Minnesota's banking problems of the 1920s produced a "combination of enlightened self-interest and fear" that gave rise to the idea of creating a bank holding company as an institutional bulwark against the growing economical and financial uncertainties of the times.

The Ramsey County Historical Society is also pleased to reprint in this issue an excerpt from *Jimmy Griffin: A Son of Rondo, A Memoir*. In the selection reproduced here, Griffin recounts some of his experiences as an African American rejoining the St. Paul police force in 1946, following his wartime service in the U.S. Navy. This firsthand account tells without editorializing of the racism of that era, Griffin's effectiveness as an officer and his unflinching determination to make his way on the force on the merits of his performance on the job.

This issue concludes with another piece of family history from Leo Harris, a local lawyer and historian. In a carefully researched account of his family's iron business, the Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Company, in New Brighton in the 1880s and '90s, Harris gives us a glimpse of the efforts of a small manufacturing firm to prosper in a rural community on the fringe of St. Paul. Despite careful management and a ready market for its iron bar, fire twice destroyed the firm's plant and in 1893 doomed the business, bringing hard times to the Harris family and the community of New Brighton.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Who Was the Charles E. Flandrau Who Built That House?

Charles E. Flandrau, the father of Charles Macomb Flandrau and Blair Flandrau [see *Letters*, page 3], was a pioneer Minnesota jurist and “the best-known man in the state [of Minnesota] after Governor Ramsey,” William Watts Folwell wrote of him in volume II of *A History of Minnesota*.

Flandrau’s roots lay in the early years of the nation’s history. He was born on July 15, 1828 in New York City where his father was a lawyer and partner of Aaron Burr. His mother was a half-sister of Alexander Macomb, commanding general of the American army from 1828–1841.

Educated at “Georgetown D. C.,” according to the *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography*, the young Flandrau went off to sea at the age of thirteen, then began the study of law in Whitesboro, New York. He was admitted to the bar in 1851, practiced law for two years as his father’s partner, and set out for Minnesota in 1853. He was twenty-five, and, Folwell noted, his “enterprise, physical vigor, wit, and bonhomie soon gained him friends and his influence with juries rapidly extended his reputation.”

In a 1935 issue of *Minnesota History*, Bertha L. Heilbron paints a colorful picture of Flandrau as he celebrated “the first day of 1854” in St. Paul. Quoting Flandrau’s own reminiscences, Heilbron wrote that “He found to his delight that ‘everybody kept open house and expected everybody else to call and see them. . . . There was great strife among the entertainers as to who should have the most elaborate spread, and the most brilliant and attractive array of young ladies to greet the guests,’ according to Flandrau.” “‘A register of callers was always kept, and great was the victory of the hostess who recorded the greatest number.’” Flandrau reported that he was “one of four frisky fellows” who “started out together with a good team and made one hundred and fifty calls by midnight.”

“When he had made the rounds of the



Charles E. Flandrau’s old home at 385 Pleasant Avenue in St. Paul as it looked in 1950. Sinclair Lewis’s diary describes its location in 1942 as “Down under Summit, with the old farm still stretching up back of it. . . .” Built in 1871, the house was torn down in 1955. *Minnesota Historical Society photograph.*

‘principal houses’ in the territorial capital, he went on to ‘Fort Snelling, with its Old School Army officers, famous for their courtesy and hospitality,’ and while in the neighborhood he called also upon ‘Henry H. Sibley at Mendota, to whom the finest amenities of life were a creed.’”

However, Flandrau settled first not in St. Paul but at Traverse des Sioux. In 1856 President Franklin Pierce appointed him agent for the Dakota people at the Upper and Lower agencies along the Minnesota River. He served in the territorial legislature and he sat in the convention that wrote the constitution Minnesota would adopt as it entered statehood. He was a developer of New Ulm and during the Dakota Conflict of 1862, bearing the honorary rank of colonel, he successfully defended the settlement from attack.

Active in politics almost from the moment he set foot in Minnesota, he was one of three justices appointed to the territorial Supreme Court. After Minnesota became a state in 1858 he was elected to the same position. When Ann Bilansky was sentenced to death in 1859 for the murder of her husband—the first and only woman executed in Minnesota—Flandrau, whose task it was to join his fellow justices in affirming the sentence, wrote Governor Sibley unsuccessfully urging that he commute the sentence to imprisonment.

Flandrau resigned from the court in 1864, moved to Nevada, then to St. Louis, before returning to St. Paul in 1867. He

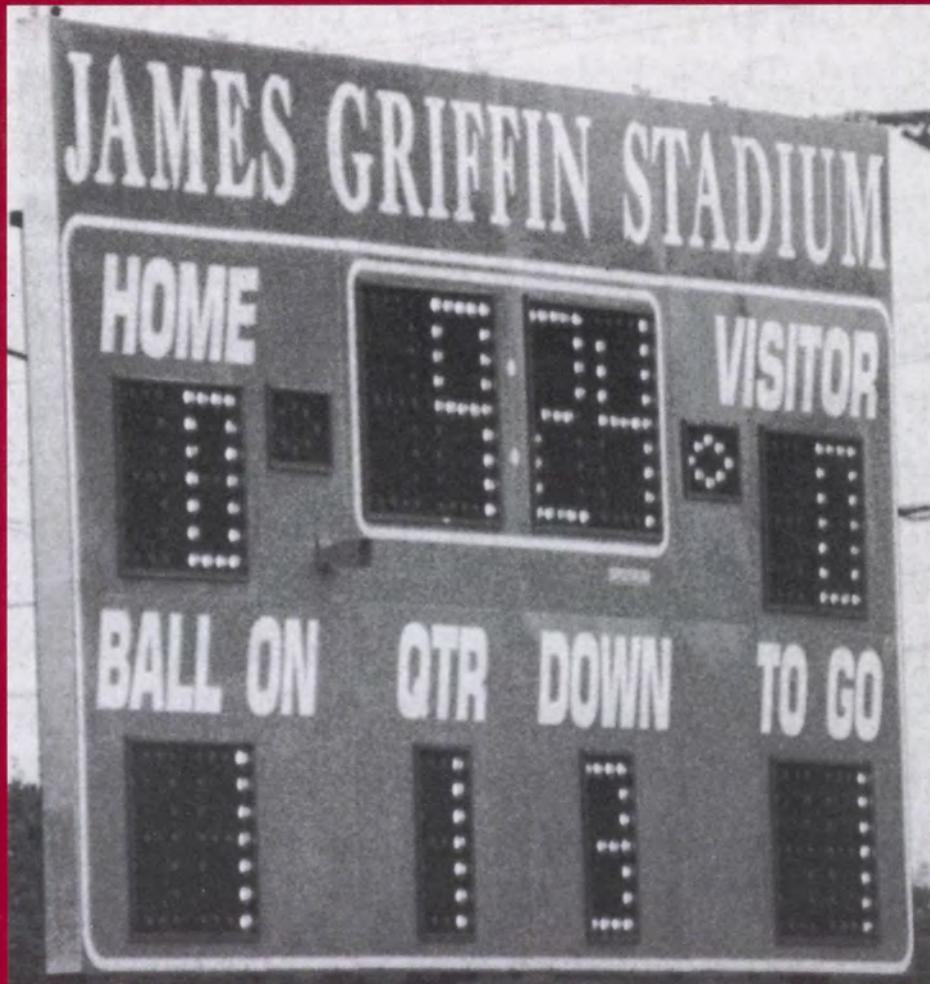
ran for governor against William R. Marshall, but was defeated. He ran for the post of Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, and again he was defeated.

Nevertheless, through the years Flandrau maintained a flourishing law practice. In his best-selling book, *Murder in Minnesota*, published first in 1962, author Walter N. Trenerry described Flandrau’s ingenious defense of John Gut, who was on trial for stabbing a man during an 1866 drunken riot in New Ulm. Flandrau lost. Gut was sentenced to life imprisonment. Three years later, Flandrau and Willis A. Gorman, “two unquestioned leaders of the Minnesota bar,” appeared for the defense in the trial of Thomas H. Stokely, charged with first degree murder in the stabbing death of George Northup during an 1869 election-day fracas in Duluth. Stokely was convicted, but pardoned in 1871.

“Contemporaries were of the opinion that Flandrau was at his best at the bar,” Folwell wrote. “A colleague said of him: ‘He was not of the ordinary type of man. He was original, unique, picturesque, versatile, adventurous; and his career is illuminated by the light of an heroic spirit.’”

Perhaps because he had lived through so much history himself, Flandrau wrote widely on historical subjects. This “cavalier of the border,” as Folwell called him, married twice and had four children. He died on September 8, 1903.

V.B.K.



Griffin Stadium Scoreboard and Signage. See excerpts from Jimmy Griffin's memoir beginning on page 13.

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

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989