

Building the City

By David Lanegran

The Capitol, cathedral, courthouse, rail yard, freeways, warehouses, stores, offices, factories, and houses, both grand and modest, show to the attentive observer the processes that created Saint Paul. Like all urban places, Saint Paul is a location where goods, people and information are brought together, processed and redistributed to various markets or consumers. All cities are, therefore, landscapes of movement. Standing high above the Mississippi Valley in Mounds Park on the southeast side of Saint Paul, one can see evidence of the various forms of transportation that have facilitated that movement and created the city: the riverboats, highways, and airport.

Because cities are primarily centers of exchange, they are best understood as parts of a national, and even international, pattern; the transportation routes connecting them; and the trade areas or resource regions of each particular city. Just as one city cannot be thought of in isolation from other cities, it could not exist without its local trade area or resource region. Saint Paul is no exception. Throughout its history it has served as a link between the Upper Midwest and the rest of the nation. The city's history has been dominated by individuals who understood these relationships and who sought to improve and control them.

Improvements in transportation and manufacturing technologies have had a great impact on the connections between Saint Paul and other cities, as well as changing the economic base of its supporting trade area. In general, transportation improvements have increased the movement of commodities, people and ideas between Saint Paul and the rest of the nation, while changing technology has permitted the exploitation of resources.

Because these changes have had nearly revolutionary impacts on the city, we will divide the evolution of the city into a series of natural resource, transportation, and social periods. The first, really a pre-urban period, is the "canoe and fur trade era" to 1825. The second, during which the city was established, is the "steamboat and local railroad era" (1825-1870). Fur trading, lumbering and farming were all important during these years. The third, "the national railroad era" (1870-1940), saw the emergence of Saint Paul as a major city and its physical merger with Minneapolis. Agriculture, transportation, wholesaling, financial services, and government were significant economic factors in this era of massive immigration. This was also the time when street railroads or streetcars made the rapid expansion of cities possible. The fourth era (1940-1970), has been dominated by the automobile and airplane. Widespread use of the car for commuting did not occur until after World War II. It is, therefore, possible to identify a "transition era" (1920-1950), when people were gradually moving away from the center of the city and placing increased reliance upon the car.

During the auto era there was an explosion of suburban development and the mass transit system was neglected. Now in the late 1970s, we seem to be on the threshold of a new era when the cost of energy may dictate an alteration of the settlement pattern. Also although agriculture continues to be a major factor in the trade area of Saint Paul, today

its largest corporations are involved in highly technologic forms of manufacturing that do not depend upon local raw materials and serve an international and national market.

The Canoe and Fur Trade Era

Despite the outcomes of the American Revolution, when the nineteenth century opened the British were in firm control of the upper Mississippi River. The Americans did not wrest the area from the Hudson Bay Company until after the war of 1812. Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, U.S. Army, led the first American expedition into the area and began the Americanization of the territory in 1805. Pike purchased land from the Dakota for a fort at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. Fort Snelling was fortified and became one of the foci of white settlement in the region. The resource to be exploited was furs, and Henry Sibley came to the area as the agent of the American Fur Company to organize the fur trade in ways that would benefit the new nation.

Sibley settled across the river from Fort Snelling. Before the treaty of 1837 cleared the land east of the Mississippi from Indian title, no white person could own land there. Sibley's town, Mendota, was a squatter settlement similar to the one nearer the fort made up of refugees from a colony in the Red River Valley near Winnipeg. Once the land was opened for settlement in 1837, steamboats carried settlers and timbermen to the area to seek their fortune.

Plying the Mississippi

In this first phase of urbanization, several sites, each with special advantages, were promoted as the future center of the northern city. Stillwater and Marine-on-the-Saint Croix were established to harvest and saw the timber in the valley. While they flourished for a time, the supply of trees that could be conveniently cut and floated down the river to their mills was soon exhausted, and no new resources were discovered in the area to replace the timber. Mendota, even though it was well suited for canoe travel, was dependent upon fur trade. When the local supply of furs was exhausted, it could not compete with the larger steamboat ports downstream.

The two landings in Saint Paul, one at the mouth of Trout Creek just east of downtown and the other at the foot of Chestnut Street near Seven Corners, were similar in many respects. Both were able to take advantage of breaks in the Mississippi bluffs caused by erosion of small tributary streams. These gaps made it possible to get cargo away from the riverside onto upland without much difficulty. Therefore, although it was possible to take steamboats up as far as the falls, the Saint Paul sites became the effective head of navigation.

The Saint Paul sites were first settled by French-speaking squatters who were driven off the military reservation. In 1838, this group originally relocated to a site near Fountain Cave on the riverbank near the foot of Randolph Avenue. Unfortunately, this place was not off of the reservation, and, in 1840, they were driven out of their cabins by soldiers and resettled in the lower levee near present day Jackson Street.

The upper and lower levees struggled to dominate the fur trade, which was becoming

extremely lucrative. In 1844, the landings became the focus for delivery of the pelts and buffalo hides harvested in the Red River Valley and northern pine forests. These furs were hauled to the landings on two-wheeled ox-drawn carts. They were then graded, sold and loaded aboard steamboats bound for Saint Louis. While the falls settlements were based on sawmilling, Saint Paul had established its North Dakota trade area and for twenty years flourished as the prime port of the upper Mississippi, connecting this region to the rest of the world.

In 1849, Saint Paul became the capital of the newly created Minnesota territory, and the military road along the east bank of the Mississippi between Saint Paul and Prairie du Chien was completed. The boom was on! In that year Saint Paul had 910 residents, Stillwater 609, Saint Anthony 248, and Little Canada 322. A great migration began when the land on the west side of the Mississippi was opened for settlement in 1851. Saint Paul, as the region's chief port, was the destination of these land-hungry people. By 1860, Saint Paul had 10,401 people. Although it would grow by ninety two percent in the 1860s, Minneapolis also began to explode, growing by an incredible 409 percent in the 1860s, 258 percent in the 1870s, and 251 percent in the 1880s. In 1880 the population of Minneapolis surpassed that of Saint Paul.

Iron Horse Spurs the Economy

Although no longer the largest city in the region, Saint Paul did not diminish in importance. It remained the chief port and the heart of the transportation industry. The early combination of steamboats and oxcarts had served the city well. It was clear to most people, however, that land transportation could be improved dramatically by the application of steam power. Early attempts to develop a locomotive in Britain had been successful, and entrepreneurs throughout this country were developing plans to build railroads that would focus on river and lake ports. Saint Paul's railroads struggled for several years until James J. Hill and his associate Norman Kittson, a wealthy fur trader, built their system, financed in large part by money from the East.

River and railroad traffic were the lifeblood of Saint Paul. Buffalo hides replaced beaver pelts as the primary commodity brought overland to the river. Settlers and manufactured goods came up river to this point before spreading out to the frontier. Agricultural products soon replaced frontier resources as cargo on steamers headed downstream. The early spurt of growth earned Saint Paul the State Capitol in 1858.

At first the railroad was a tributary of the river, but by 1880 it had replaced the steamboats as the region's major link to the rest of the nation. The first track connecting Saint Paul and Saint Anthony was completed in 1862. (The link between downtown Saint Paul, the falls/river crossing at Saint Anthony and downtown Minneapolis is one of the most persistent features in the urban landscape. Railroads, bus lines, highways, and freeways all occupy the linking corridor today.) Rail lines fanned out west and north from Saint Paul during the 1870s and early 1880s. Seattle, with its deep water port on the Pacific, was reached in 1883.

The 1870s brought an agricultural bonanza to the prairies of western Minnesota and the Red River Valley. By this time the Indians had been moved to remote reservations

and the manufacturing centers of the East provided an ever-growing market for wheat. This boom was made possible by the development of agricultural machinery, new four milling techniques developed in Minneapolis, and a transportation system developed and managed in Saint Paul. In the span of fifty years, the resource base shifted from furs to timber to agricultural products; and the trade area expanded into the high plains.

The capital and local markets generated by the transportation industry in Saint Paul prompted a great deal of industrial diversification. Wholesale and retail trade flourished. Leather working, garment making, hardware, and wooden manufacturing all contributed to the city's economy. The red brick warehouses and loft buildings just west of the belt of railroad tracks near downtown are vestiges of this period of the city's growth.

Immigration Fills the City

The railroads brought vast numbers of new immigrants to Saint Paul. They came seeking a chance for a better life by working in one of the many expanding industries of the frontier metropolis. Although Europeans made up a large fraction of the immigrant population, Saint Paul was never an ethnic city like the large industrial centers of the Great Lake states and eastern seaboard. Nonetheless, they had a tremendous impact on the city and brief examination of the experiences of the larger groups tells us much about the character of the city, during its industrial phase.

The New Englanders and Midwesterners who founded the city brought an established Yankee culture into which most immigrant groups were to be drawn. Some, including the Irish and other northern Europeans, found the process of acculturation relatively easy; others assimilating more slowly into the city's social, political and economic life, leaving the ethnic history of Saint Paul less a story of cultural preservation than of routine Americanization.

Because house styles and materials were largely standardized by the time Saint Paul was settled, individual cultural groups have left few traces of their presence in the landscape. But even if houses give no indication of their occupants, here and there distinctive landmarks still provide us with a clue to the sequence of settlers in the area; a few churches, fraternal lodges and restaurants proclaim their ancestry. Buildings, such as Czechoslovakian Sokol Hall at Michigan and West Seventh streets, Saint Mary's Romanian Orthodox Church on Atwater Street and the several restaurants and bars with Irish motifs on Grand Avenue, remind us of communities that have since become scattered.

THE GERMANS

Until 1920, Germans were the largest group of foreign-born residents in Saint Paul. At first they moved to the city from adjacent states, but in 1864 a concerted effort began to promote German Catholic migration to Minnesota. Unlike later immigrants, these were largely middle-class craftsmen, laborers, farmers, and merchants. Because there were so many of them and they assimilated quickly, the Germans spread throughout the city, although in a few neighborhoods ethnic enclaves did develop, at first in the downtown area near the Church of the Assumption, sometimes called the German Cathedral. Later, larger and longer-lived clusters developed to the north and northwest of downtown.

Although somewhat scattered, the German population was large enough to support a local newspaper for many years, and German businesses prospered.

Politics, as much as time, led to the demise of Saint Paul's German ethnic community. Just before World War I, 6489 Saint Paul residents returned to Germany to enter the military. Then, an anti-German sentiment swept the state, and many local institutions removed references to Germany from their titles. German was no longer spoken and persons with German names were suspected of being less American.

THE IRISH

A wave of Irish emigration was set in motion by famines that swept Ireland in 1847. These migrants generally stayed in eastern port cities, although a few came west to take advantage of the economic boom that accompanied the opening of Minnesota's agricultural frontier. After 1864, when the Minnesota Irish Emigration Society was formed, immigration of Irish families to the state increased in response to organized boosterism. Those with capital or a craft soon prospered and joined the open society of the new town. Others worked as unskilled laborers in transportation and manufacturing industries.

THE JEWS

From its founding, Saint Paul has had a Jewish population. By 1859, there was a community of German Jews who had moved to the frontier from more settled areas in the eastern United States. Their first temple, Mount Zion, was founded in 1856, although a synagogue was not built until later. The early community lived with everyone else, close to downtown, in residential neighborhoods now destroyed. At the turn of the century, the ninety or so families belonging to the temple decided to build a new synagogue in the booming suburban development on Summit Hill. Mount Zion Synagogue at Holly and Avon was finished in 1904.

During the great migration of 1880 to 1920, this German population was joined by Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia. These were poorer people - many destitute - and they settled in the West Side slums across the river from downtown. Their population grew rapidly, and in 1912 they founded the Temple of Aaron at the corner of Grotto and Ashland streets. As West Side residents prospered, they moved to the better housing available near their synagogue on the hill.

The Polish and Russian Jews were more conservative than the earlier immigrants. They continued to speak Yiddish and adhere more closely to Judaic dietary laws. They created a demand for a variety of special services and, most important, a supply of kosher food. The commercial area around Selby and Dale developed to serve the needs of this population. Beginning in the 1930s, the Jewish population moved to the newer Highland Park neighborhood.

THE BLACKS

The Reverend Robert Hickman arrived by paddleboat in Saint Paul on May 6, 1863,

leading a group of approximately twenty freed slaves in search of a new life. They were received with great hostility by Saint Paul dockworkers and decided to continue on to Fort Snelling. They walked back to the city from the fort and joined the 100 or so blacks that had established themselves in the community before the Civil War. It was a bleak beginning in that year of the Emancipation Proclamation, but within a few years, a reasonably stable community was established. At first blacks lived on the fringe of downtown, between the business district and the present location of the Capitol. They gradually migrated to the northwest, and by the end of the century Rondo Avenue (now Concordia Avenue) was the commercial core of the community.

Unlike other ethnic groups, the history of the blacks did not end up with assimilation into mainstream America. The early 1900s saw a local Ku Klux Klan established; their demonstrative hatred forced a black population, once relatively widespread in the older parts of the city, to become concentrated in ghettos. In the 1920s, when racism was at a fever pitch, two-thirds of the black population lived in the Rondo area. Regardless of status or income, blacks were not able to move into white neighborhoods, protected as they were by deed restrictions and "neighborhood improvement associations." Since these restrictions are now illegal, the black community has moved both north, into the southern edge of Frogtown, and south toward Summit Avenue.

THE SWEDES AND NORWEGIANS

Although no single landmark illustrates the presence of Swedes and Norwegians in Saint Paul, they have made up a significant proportion of the city's population throughout its history. Unlike the Germans and the Irish, the Swedes and Norwegians lived in a territorial community. Some Swedes lived as servants in grand mansions, but most resided across the tracks from downtown on the East Side - an industrial, manufacturing and railroad area.

A well known site on the East Side is Swede Hollow, or Svendska Dalen, a narrow ravine three-quarters of a mile long and sixty to eighty feet deep. Scandinavian settlement of the Hollow began in the 1850s when immigrants took over the shacks of the French Canadian fur trappers. The single unimproved road in the Hollow was a country lane and houses were crowded together wherever there was room.

As families became prosperous, they moved up Arlington Hill toward Lake Phalen. The hill soon became the core of the Scandinavian community.

Payne Avenue, sometimes called "Snoose Boulevard," was the main street of the Scandinavian community. The early grocery and meat stores shared the street with saloons, barber shops and professional offices. When the railroad bridge was completed in 1893, the commercial district rapidly expanded to the north; by the 1930s, the economic center of the community was well north of the Hollow. Although the national economy slowed during that decade, Payne Avenue and the East Side did not suffer greatly. In 1934, the end of prohibition and the resumption of brewing gave the neighborhood's economy a boost that carried it through to the post-war boom.

The lure of increased living space, new homes and increased status, however, pulled most of the successful families of Scandinavian or mixed ancestry out of the East Side. Americanized in the public schools, later generations lost the Scandinavian culture, only celebrating their ethnicity with specially prepared foods on holidays. The churches adopted English language services in the 1930s and began to leave the historic community in the 1950s as their congregations suburbanized.

THE ITALIANS

Although the Hollow's name wasn't changed, by 1900 there were more Italians than Swedes living there. The new immigrants took over the two- and three-bedroom homes built by the Swedes, and developed their own community. Improvements were made on the houses, and all had little sheds that contained outdoor ovens for baking bread. Before long, Italian commercial establishments lined Payne Avenue and the marvelous smells of bakeries, groceries and restaurants filled the air.

In this community the church was very important. Father Louis Pioletti of Saint Ambrose was a key figure in the lives of most of the area's residents and the church festivals were always major events. Like the Scandinavian churches, Saint Ambrose relocated and the services were given in English. The Italians did not follow the Swedes up Arlington Hill, however. Instead they occupied the area just west, east and southwest of the Hollow.

THE MEXICAN-AMERICANS

One of the more recent immigrant groups to make Saint Paul their home, the Mexican-Americans population has a complex history. Among its members are recent immigrants from Mexico awaiting citizenship, others already naturalized, and many native-born.

In 1920, there were approximately seventy Mexican families in Saint Paul; by 1930 their number had increased and the permanent population is estimated to have been around 400 people. Many lived in Swede Hollow. As the Jews moved out of the West Side, the growing Mexican American population moved into the area. During these years the community lived quite apart from the rest of the urban population, from which they were physically separated by the high bluffs, the river and the undeveloped lowlands between the West Side and South Saint Paul.

By the end of the Depression direct migration from Mexico had all but ceased only to swell again during World War II. In 1943, 1000 Mexican nationals or Braceros arrived in Minnesota to work in agricultural fields and vegetable canneries. By 1946, the state was hosting approximately 4000 migrant workers annually. Many of these migrants settled in Saint Paul, and by 1950 there were 4000 Spanish-speaking residents in the city - most of them living in the flats.

The old flats community was destroyed by the Saint Paul Port Authority when it created the Riverview Industrial Park in the late 1950s and early 1960s. South Robert and Concord streets were once the center of a thriving and lively commercial district that

served the densely settled areas on the lowland toward the river. The Port Authority purchased most of the land in the area to develop the industrial park, relocating the Jewish, Italian, and black populations that had made the area their home. Only the worst housing was removed, however, and the Mexican-American population was not relocated.

Trains on the Streets

Many immigrants settled in neighborhoods dominated by the streetcar. The early mass transit system, based on horsecars, was electrified in the 1890s, and real estate promoters began to develop a wide range of residential districts. In the early years of the city, when people had to depend upon their feet or private carriages for transportation, the city's population lived close to places of employment and commercial districts so they could minimize the time spent traveling to and fro. Only the very wealthy could afford to live on the edge of the city where the settings were more attractive and healthful.

When the streetcar came into use during the 1890s, middle class neighborhoods were developed on the fringe of the city and a forty-year era of rapid expansion began. The streetcar fostered all sorts of activity along its route. At the center of the system was downtown, the place where all the routes were focused. Here thousands of passengers got off and on cars daily. Such crowds attracted stores and entertainment establishments.

Away from the downtown, the tracks provided a lineal pattern for the development of newer neighborhoods. Small commercial districts grew up at intersections, and during the 1920s large brick apartment buildings were constructed along several lines. Local movie theaters and corner drugstores cropped up in most neighborhoods during the 1930s. The streetcars also brought people to large amusement parks on the urban fringe.

When World War II broke out, the neighborhoods of Saint Paul reached their greatest population. There was little construction during the Depression, and many houses had to be divided to provide rental space. In some areas, two houses were constructed on a single lot.

The Automobile Era

When the war ended Saint Paul was a city with several problems. There was an acute housing shortage, many parts of the city were dilapidated and the fringe of the downtown was being abandoned by commercial establishments. There had been a few attempts to renew the city during the 1920s. Kellogg Mall was constructed, and University Avenue, together with West Seventh Street, were widened. However, these efforts were not sufficient to stop the spread of urban blight.

Neighborhoods like Highland Park, large sections of the East Side and the Como Park district were essentially undeveloped at the close of the war. These places became suburbs in the city when developers built modest single-family houses for returning GIs and their families. However, other builders were creating new communities in the distant suburbs, which would eventually attract a sizable portion of the city's population away from the old neighborhoods.

During the 1950s, the city responded to the problems of urban blight with renewal programs for the areas around the Capitol building, the river flats below the High Bridge and eventually the right-of-way for the interstate freeways. Public housing projects were constructed to house displaced families.

The most recent period in the city's development has been characterized by the filling in of the last open spaces during the 1950s, the selective clearing and rebuilding of some of the oldest neighborhoods, and the general reduction of the population density. The ethnic mix within the population has also changed. First generation European immigrants no longer are important parts of the city's culture. Instead, the Spanish-speaking population, the city's largest immigrant population, blacks and newly arrived immigrants from Southeast Asia are establishing distinctive residential patterns in the city.

The built environment of Saint Paul cannot be expected to undergo many changes in the years to come, with the exception of new development in the downtown areas. Instead, it is clear that many of the older neighborhoods will be restored by middle-class households seeking alternatives to suburban developments. For the most part, therefore, the next decades will be characterized not by the establishment of a new physical landscape for the city, but fresh forms of urban culture within the extant environment.