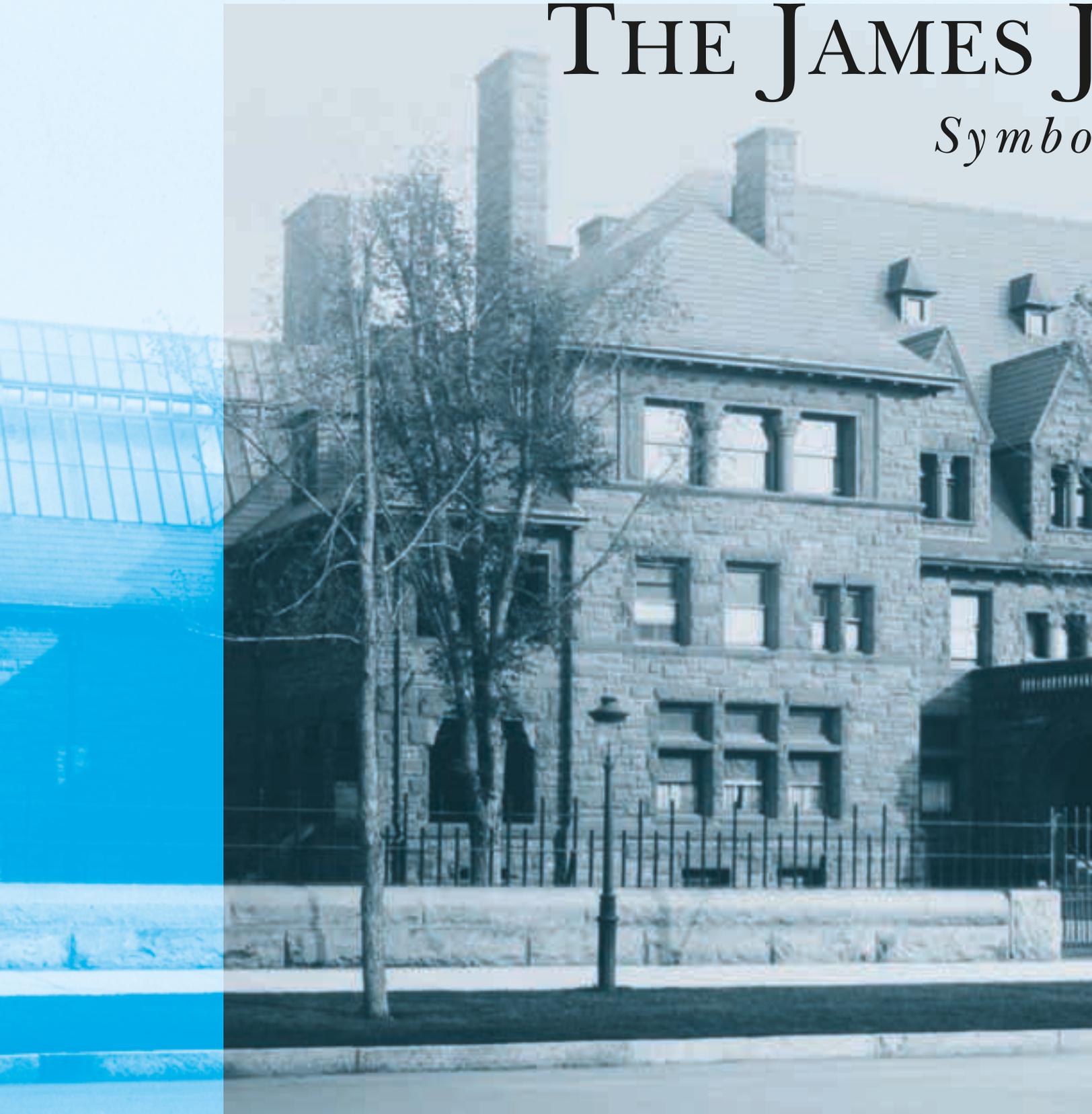


THE JAMES J

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*Above: The Hill family residence at 240 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, about 1905
Above right: Portrait of James J. Hill by Adolf Muller-Ury, 1889*

JAMES HILL HOUSE

Journal of Status and Security



The James J. Hill House, significant as the residence of a prominent nineteenth-century Minnesota entrepreneur, is also a fine example of upper-class Gilded Age residential architecture. Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have acknowledged that homes are an important reflection of their owners and “a dominant symbol of American

**BARBARA
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culture.”¹ While Hill’s biographers have given relatively little attention to the domestic side of his life, a study of his opulent St. Paul residence at 240 Summit Avenue provides insights into both the man and the social and cultural history of his time and place.

In 1856 Hill, a 17-year-old Canadian, arrived in St. Paul and found employment

and by 1878 he and four partners had acquired the bankrupt St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company. By the 1880s, Hill had become a major force in the development of the Upper Midwest. In 1890 he was president of the newly incorporated Great Northern Railway Company, and his net worth had reached nearly \$10 million. By his death in 1916, it had grown to \$63 million—almost a billion dollars today. A successful entrepreneur, he was also a ruthless and incessant businessman with an obsessive interest in detail.²

Paralleling the expansion of his business empire was the growth of Hill’s family. In 1867, after a three-year engagement, he married Mary Theresa Mehegan. Ten children were born to the Hills over the next 18 years. To shelter his growing family, in 1871 Hill purchased his first home, a cottage at Ninth and Canada Streets in downtown St. Paul. Five years later he tore it down and replaced it with a Second Empire-style dwelling that was completed in 1878.³

In 1881, as his business efforts succeeded, Hill began to assume the trappings of wealth, including paintings purchased through dealers in New York and Paris. Amassing a collection of “good” art was a common practice for successful businessmen who wanted to show their cultural refinement. To display the paintings, Hill in 1885 added an art gallery to his home. Jutting from the front of the house, it was a public symbol of his wealth and high culture. The acquisition of several building lots on fashionable Summit Avenue in the mid-1880s signaled Hill’s plans for an even more conspicuous symbol of his success. The entrepreneur was planning to construct an impressive new home.⁴

Designed in 1887 and completed in 1891, the James J. Hill House occupies a prominent bluff site overlooking the city of St. Paul. Built in the Romanesque style, the three-story red stone mansion is 187 feet



James and Mary Hill in South Carolina, 1906

ment as a shipping

clerk on the Mississippi levee. Within ten years he owned his own freight and storage business,

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¹ Jan Cohn, *The Palace or the Poorhouse: The American House As a Cultural Symbol* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1979), xi.

² Albro Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest* (1976; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 27, 50, 186–89; Jane H. Hancock, Sheila ffolliott, and Thomas O’Sullivan, *Homecoming: The Art Collection of James J. Hill* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 64.

³ Martin, *J. J. Hill*, 61–64, 85–86, 140–41; Craig Johnson, *The James J. Hill House* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993), 4.

⁴ Hancock, ffolliott, and O’Sullivan, *Homecoming*, 2–3, 21–22, 46; E. E. Myers & Son, Architects, to Hill, May 17, 1886, General Correspondence, James J. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence is in this series.

long and 94 feet wide. It has 36,000 square feet of interior living space, with 42 rooms, 13 bathrooms, and 22 fireplaces.⁵

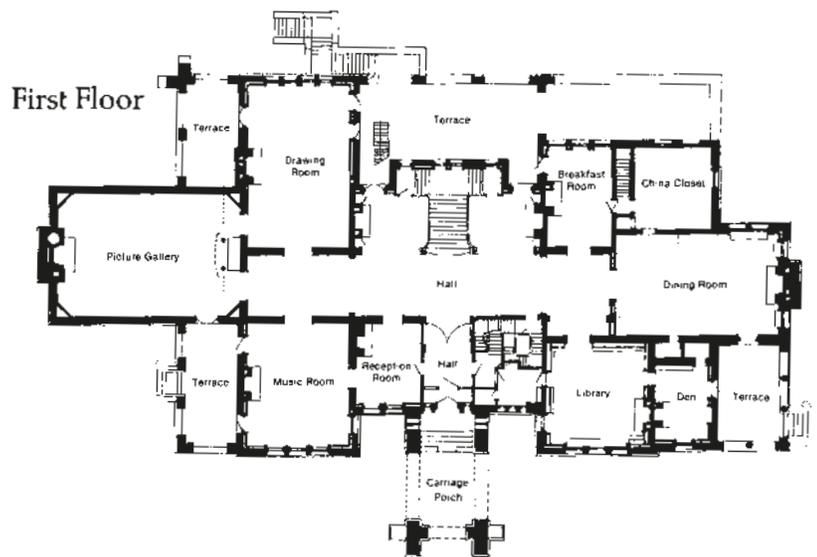
The largest room on the first floor, a 1,500-square-foot gallery, housed Hill's growing collection of landscapes, sculptures, and art folios. Other public spaces on this floor included reception, music, drawing, and dining rooms. The library, den, and breakfast room were used primarily by the family. Located on the second floor were adjoining rooms for James and Mary Hill and bedrooms for their daughters, as well as two guest rooms. The third floor housed the sons' bedrooms, a schoolroom, a sewing room, and servants' quarters. (The Hills employed about a dozen live-in servants.) Under the eaves, the fourth floor contained a stage and more room for the children's activities. The basement included the kitchen, pantry, storerooms, and laundry, as well as the servants' sitting and dining rooms.

The home's mechanical systems took advantage of new technology, at the same time reflecting the Victorian concern for hygiene and sanitation. Sophisticated bathrooms had hot and cold running water, bathtubs or showers with multiple shower heads, and flush toilets. There were both gas and electric lights. Electrical power for some motors came from the home's own generating system, one of the first and largest residential electrical plants in the country. Telephone service linked the Hills to the outside world, and a system of bells and speaking tubes facilitated internal communication.

Elaborate security precautions included locking iron gates over the first-floor doors and windows, permanent bars on the basement windows, and an "annunciator" system of electrical-contact alarms attached to basement doors and windows. Two vaults, one in the dining room and one in the den, served to secure valuables. There was also a well-coordinated collection of nearly 500 locks and keys.

Hill's mansion was not only the largest home on Summit Avenue, it was also the most expensive. Cash disbursements as of January 31, 1893, totaled \$931,275, equivalent to almost \$16 million today. This figure includes the house and furnishings as well as the land, street-improvement assessments, improvements to the grounds, and peripherals—a conservatory, gatehouse, power plant, and mushroom cave. The house itself, exclusive of furnishings, cost \$552,854.

The Hills' house was a product of its time. Architecture often draws upon the past for inspiration, and this was certainly true in the Victorian age, which was characterized by both eclecticism and revivalism. Uncertainty and insecurity followed the Civil War. This mood was fed by the growth of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization and by the economic recession of 1884. At the same time, entrepreneurs made fortunes and, as architectural historian Wayne Andrews shows, "the millionaire was the American hero." In this age in search of stability, cohesion, and social order, both the nouveaux riches and people with old money built houses that were "bold-faced, aggressive, and intimidating announcements about their wealth and power," according to historian Geoffrey Blodgett. They commissioned homes in architectural styles that



Peabody and Stearns plan for the first floor of the Hills' house

reflected a conservative return to familiar historical precedents, offering the comfort of psychological security while confirming the owner's personal status.⁶

In the late 1800s, St. Paul's rich and fashionable lived on Summit Avenue, which was convenient to the commercial center of the city and yet separate from it. There, successful entrepreneurs created a relatively homogeneous community. The tree-lined, paved street was almost

⁵ Here and four paragraphs below, Johnson, *Hill House*, 11, 14, 19, 22, 25, 36.

⁶ Wayne Andrews, *Architecture, Ambition and Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 152; Geoffrey Blodgett, "The Architectural Psychology of the Gilded Age," *Hayes Historical Journal* 7 (Spring 1988): 9, 13, 18.



Fashionable Summit Avenue near the intersection with Nina Street, 1888

parklike, ideal for carriage rides and promenading, important recreational activities for prosperous Victorians.⁷ The Summit Avenue dwellings represented the variety of styles popular nationally, including Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne, and Romanesque.

In Victorian times, the architectural style of a house was thought to reflect the character and concerns of its occupants. In the 1840s and 1850s, A. J. Downing's writings educated Americans—architects, homeowners, and the general public alike—about a full range of styles. His *Architecture of Country Houses* recommended a Romanesque villa design as “the country seat of a man of ample fortune.” He noted that it provided “abundant accommodation for all the requirements of our most refined social life.” Aesthetically, the exterior “equally denotes conservatism and culture,” respectively defined as “a life in which the importance and preservation of the family name is largely valued” and “appreciation of literature and the arts.” The tastemaker could have been describing Hill, whose 240 Summit

residence was to be an impressive, imposing, urban fortress advertising his success and reflecting the Victorian need for security and stability.⁸

Hill's vision of his new home was probably influenced by his experiences in the business world as well as his own tastes and preferences. By the late 1870s, he associated with some of the East Coast's most prominent men, such as Henry Villard, financier, railroad promoter, and one-time president of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and William H. Vanderbilt, financier and railroad magnate. Perhaps Hill modeled his art collecting after Vanderbilt's. Both men were advised by Samuel Putnam Avery, an art connoisseur who had a profound impact on American art collecting and later helped to found the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁹

Hill added William Rockefeller, industrialist and financier, to his acquaintances in the early 1880s. By the end of the decade, he was associated with J. Pierpont Morgan, prominent banker and financier. Hill's circle also included Charles E. Perkins, president of the Chicago, Bur-

⁷ Ernest R. Sandeen, *St. Paul's Historic Summit Avenue* (St. Paul: Macalester College, 1978), 10–11.

⁸ A. J. Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850; reprint, New York: Dover, 1969), 389; Blodgett, “Architectural Psychology,” 9.

⁹ Martin, *J. J. Hill*, 301–03; Hancock, ffolliott, and O'Sullivan, *Homecoming*, 2–3; “Samuel Putnam Avery,” in *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner's, 1928–36), 1:445.

lington, and Quincy Railroad, and Charles F. Adams, president of the Union Pacific.¹⁰

Like his contemporaries, Hill commissioned a home in a conservative, revival style. The first architect to submit drawings for the building was Henry O. Avery of New York, the son of the art dealer. His design, submitted in early 1887, was French Gothic. The strong axial ground floor measured about 120 feet square. Its focal point was a 1,200-square-foot picture gallery that projected out from the back of the house.¹¹

A year after submitting the plans, having heard no response, Avery asked for Hill's opinion on the matter:

I hope you will consider them favorably, if you decide to build soon; if however you have other ideas, in regard to the matter, I would of course like to have my designs returned (unless you care to keep them). . . . I will, of course, be very much disappointed, for I can freely say, that they are original, and as fine, I think, in architectural arrangement & style as any gentleman's estate in this country of similar magnitude.

Within days, Hill returned the drawings, requested a bill, and thanked Avery for all of his trouble.¹²

It appears that Hill also considered using Philadelphia architect Frank Furness for the project. While Furness apparently never developed architectural plans for the house, he later submitted designs for the interior.¹³

Instead, Hill turned to Peabody and Stearns, an experienced, prestigious Boston architectural firm. Millionaires of the 1880s often relied on architects as arbiters of taste, and perhaps Hill felt most comfortable with an eastern firm experienced in designing for the upper class. Architectural historians have described Peabody and Stearns as "the most important arbiters of building taste after H. H. Richardson" and "one of

the chief wellsprings of architectural inspiration in their time." Wheaton A. Holden suggests that by 1886 the firm had risen to a position in Boston equivalent to that of McKim, Mead and White in New York City.¹⁴

Robert Peabody distinguished himself as a residential architect working in a wide variety of styles but prepared to use whichever one suited the client. He thought that "the real test of a building's success was its suitability in terms of use and situation and that conventional ornament was always preferable." By 1887 when Hill commissioned Peabody and Stearns, the firm had designed banks, post offices, bathhouses, casinos and clubhouses, churches, gymnasiums, hotels, libraries, museums, office buildings, railroad stations, school and college buildings, and town halls—mostly in New England. The architects had also drawn up plans for mansions in New England, St. Louis, Colorado Springs, Chicago, Peoria, Portland, Cleveland, New York, and Kansas City.¹⁵

Peabody and Stearns had designed homes for many of Hill's business associates, men such as C. E. Perkins (Milton, Massachusetts, 1881), J. P. Morgan (Cranston, Rhode Island, 1886–88), Charles F. Adams (Boston, 1887–88), H. O. Havemeyer (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1890), and numerous Vanderbilts, including son-in-law William Douglas Sloane (Lenox, Massachusetts, 1886–87), whose New York firm later supplied window treatments and floor coverings for the Hill home.¹⁶ All of these connections probably increased Hill's confidence in the architects.

In addition, between 1885 and 1893 Peabody and Stearns maintained a St. Louis office staffed by P. P. Furber, the son of one of Hill's business associates. On May 26, 1887, the elder Furber recommended the firm: "I believe the result would be satisfactory and pleasant to yourself, as I believe there is no better firm of Architects in the country than they are, and

¹⁰ Martin, *J. J. Hill*, 324; W. Thomas White, "James J. Hill's Library: The First 75 Years," *Minnesota History* 55 (Fall 1996): 122–23.

¹¹ Plans in Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York City.

¹² Avery to Hill, Feb. 25, 1888, Hill Papers; Hill to Avery, Mar. 9, 1888, letterpress books, microfilm roll 56, Hill Papers.

¹³ Hill to Thomson, Mar. 9, 1887, letterpress books, microfilm roll 30; Furness to Hill, May 2, 1887—both Hill Papers.

¹⁴ Karl S. Putnam, quoted in Wheaton A. Holden, "The Peabody Touch: Peabody and Stearns of Boston, 1870–1917," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 32 (May 1973): 114, 116.

¹⁵ Holden, "Peabody Touch," 120, 129–31.

¹⁶ Holden, "Peabody Touch," 128–29; Arnold Lewis, *American Country Houses of the Gilded Age* (New York: Dover, 1982), 33, 94, 100; W. & J. Sloane to James J. Hill, Voucher 1056, Aug. 1892, Hill Papers; Louis Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age* (New York: Scribner's, 1989), 67.

while Mr. Peabody . . . has very decided views and tastes he is a man who wishes to please his patrons.”¹⁷

In May 1887 John Goddard Stearns Jr. arrived in St. Paul to visit Hill’s Summit Avenue site. By late July the architects had prepared several plans, perspectives, and other drawings. While the interiors were quite similar, the exterior of the first design resembled “an old time English mansion,” and the second was “after the type of a French chateau.”¹⁸

As the plan evolved, rooms were relocated and reconfigured. At one point, some of the rooms were octagonal; eventually, all took on simpler, more rectangular shapes. The picture gallery was ultimately moved from the southwest corner to the east side of the house. This new position not only improved the natural light but made the gallery visible from Summit Avenue, a prominent symbol of Hill’s culture and refinement.¹⁹

All of the plans included a reception room, music room, parlor, library, dining room, and breakfast room. The final version saw the addition of a den off the library and the elimination of a conservatory adjacent to the main hall. Instead, the grand stairway became the focal point. The design of the exterior also evolved—to the Romanesque style characterized by dark, rough-hewn stone walls and heavy arches.²⁰ In April 1888 Hill was ready to proceed with construction.

By the 1880s, Boston architect Henry H. Richardson’s work in the Romanesque style had decidedly influenced other architects. Best known for his public buildings, Richardson also designed private residences. As a result, the

Romanesque came to be associated with urban architecture, especially civic and commercial buildings that combined solid, self-contained permanence with a monumental stateliness. Harkening back to medieval European church architecture with massive masonry construction, wide semicircular arches, and recessed windows and doorways, Richardson’s adaptation for residences proclaimed that a man’s home was his castle.²¹

Architectural historian Alan K. Lathrop notes that the Romanesque style “had a look of tradition and permanence that particularly appealed to settlers of the new western cities.” By the late 1880s homes and lodges as well as office, commercial, university, and government buildings throughout the Twin Cities were built in this style. Among them were Pillsbury Hall (Harvey Ellis, 1887) on the campus of the University of Minnesota, the Minneapolis Public Library (Long and Kees, 1888–89) and the Minneapolis City Hall and Hennepin County Courthouse (Long and Kees, 1888–1906).²²

There is no record of Hill’s deliberations resulting in the choice of this bold, impressive, and intimidating style for his home, but he seems to have had an affinity for the Romanesque. In 1882 he completed the Stone Arch Bridge that carried his railroad over the Mississippi River near St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis, a structure that looked much like a Roman viaduct. His General Office Building, begun in 1886, was designed by James Brodie in a simplified Romanesque style.²³ (Brodie later became construction superintendent on the Summit Avenue residence.)

In addition, by 1887 there were six Romanesque houses on Summit Avenue, all

¹⁷ Furber to Hill, May 26, 1887, Hill Papers. Hill again took advantage of connections in 1911, when he began working with New York architect Electus Litchfield on plans for the James J. Hill Reference Library, modeled after J. P. Morgan’s library in New York. Litchfield was the son of W. B. Litchfield, who had been president of the Saint Paul and Pacific Railroad Company; White, “Hill’s Library,” 124.

¹⁸ Peabody and Stearns to Hill, July 29, 1887, Hill Papers.

¹⁹ Hancock, ffolliott, and O’Sullivan, *Homecoming*, 49. For earliest floor plans, see Peabody and Stearns plans in Boston Public Library; for later ones, see James J. Hill House, Architectural Drawings ca. 1890, Historic Sites, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Archives.

²⁰ Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to American Architecture* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 61–65.

²¹ Thomas E. Tallmadge, *The Story of Architecture in America* (rev. ed., New York: Norton, 1936), 175; Rifkind, *Field Guide*, 65.

²² Alan K. Lathrop, “Architecture in Minnesota at the Turn of the Century,” in *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890–1915*, ed. Michael Conforti (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 29, 32–33; Paul C. Larson, “H. H. Richardson Goes West: The Rise and Fall of an Eastern Star,” in *The Spirit of H. H. Richardson on the Midland Prairies*, ed. Paul C. Larson, and Susan M. Brown (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Art Museum, 1988), 22, 25.

²³ Stewart H. Holbrook, *James J. Hill, A Life in Brief* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 93; Robert M. Frame III, *James J. Hill’s St. Paul: A Guide to Historic Sites* (St. Paul: James J. Hill Reference Library, 1988), 8–9.

within a few blocks of Hill's site (see sidebar, page 242). Construction on the Hill house began that year, and seven more Romanesque-style dwellings were built nearby on the avenue between 1889 and 1893. Seven of these 13 residences were designed by local architecture firms that Hill did not consider for his edifice: three by Clarence H. Johnston, and one each by Cass Gilbert, Willcox and Johnston, Gilbert and Taylor, and Hermann Kretz.²⁴

Peabody and Stearns, too, had designed Romanesque-style homes, including "Vinland" (1882–84), the Newport, Rhode Island, residence of Catherine Lorillard Wolfe, and public buildings, such as Crowe Memorial Museum of Fine Arts, St. Louis (1879–81) and Memorial

Hall, Lawrenceville School, New Jersey (1884).²⁵ The Hill house bears a striking resemblance to Memorial Hall in its massing, roof line, and simplicity of exterior ornamentation. The Summit Avenue home also somewhat resembles the Wolfe residence, which is significantly smaller.

Construction proceeded after groundbreaking in 1888 until suddenly, in August 1889, Hill dismissed Peabody and Stearns for countermanding his orders about stone carvings. Apparently, the architects had specified work similar to their Unitarian Building in Boston, but Hill preferred something more elaborate and, consequently, more

²⁴ Sandeen, *Historic Summit Avenue*, 22–23, 25, 50–51, 57, 68, 81, 99–101, 109; Bonnie Richter, ed., *Saint Paul Omnibus: Images of the Changing City* (St. Paul: Old Town Restorations, 1979), 73–74. In 1893 Hill employed Gilbert to design gates, the conservatory, and the powerhouse that was located at the back of the Hill property; Gilbert to Hill, Dec. 28, 1893, Hill Papers.

²⁵ Lewis, *American Country Houses*, 100; Arnold Lewis and Keith Morgan, *American Victorian Architecture: A Survey of the 70's and 80's in Contemporary Photographs* (New York: Dover, 1975), 23, 103; Holden, "Peabody Touch," 118, 124.

Romanesque neighbors, the Chauncey W. Griggs and A. G. Foster houses, 476 and 490 Summit Avenue, about 1905. Both were designed by St. Paul architect Clarence H. Johnston.



ROMANESQUE ON SUMMIT: A SAMPLER



Alpheus B. Stickney's house, razed in 1930

Even before ground was broken for the Hill mansion, six new Romanesque dwellings lined the nearby blocks. Some of them may still be seen, though slightly altered by later owners, on stately Summit Avenue.

In 1883 St. Paul architect Clarence H. Johnston designed the Chauncey W. Griggs house at 476 Summit and the A. G. Foster house at 490, both located in the block between Mackubin and Arundel Streets. Griggs, who dealt in fuel and lumber, had done business with Hill since the early 1870s. Foster was Griggs's lumber partner.

A year later A. B. Stickney's home, designed by J. Walter Stevens, took shape at 288 Summit. Stickney was manager, superintendent, and eventually president of numerous railroads. His dwelling was razed in 1930 when neither home buyer nor suitable reuse could be found for it.

In 1886 architects Gilbert and Taylor designed a double house for law partners George B. Young and William H. Lightner at 322–324 Summit, near the intersection of Farrington Street. The next year saw the completion of two more Romanesque mansions. Amherst H. Wilder's, designed by Willcox-Johnston, stood at 226 Summit. Wilder, a merchant, also engaged in steamboat and stage transportation and eventually moved into railroads. His dwelling, which had replaced an earlier one on the spot, was razed in 1959, and the chancery office of the Archdiocese of St. Paul now occupies the site at the intersection of Summit and Selby Avenues. Horace P. Rugg's home, designed by Hodgson-Stem, still stands at 251 Summit, just across the street from the Hill house. Businessman Rugg sold pumps as well as railway and plumbing supplies.

Source: Ernest R. Sandeen, St. Paul's Historic Summit Avenue

expensive. Peabody and Stearns had attempted to serve as intermediaries between Hill, C. E. Clark of Boston, the contractor, and Evans and Tombs, the stone carvers.²⁶

While the architects seemed quite willing to sever their association with the Hill project, they did suggest:

It would probably be much to your advantage did we finish the drawings necessary to complete the house and were we to make the necessary explanations of same, for, while some one else could probably arrange the work so that things would come together it might prove very difficult. . . . We simply bring this point to your attention . . . being willing to allow you to settle the question of superintendence to suit yourself.

The firm calculated its services at \$13,000 plus reimbursement for travel expenses. Hill, who had already made several payments, settled the account in October.²⁷

Having dismissed his architects, Hill needed a firm to plan and supervise the decoration and furnishing of his house. He received numerous inquiries from St. Paul, Buffalo, and at least six companies in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. William A. Hazel, a Twin Cities purveyor of decorative and stained glass windows, was frank about his motivations: "Much more than the mere money profit . . . is involved in this for me—To get his work would go a great way to making my business a success—from the prestige it would bring to me." Herter Brothers, a respected New York firm that had recently decorated William H. Vanderbilt's and J. Pierpont Morgan's New York homes, wrote, "As we may fairly claim that we stand among the first in our profession as designers, and that our facilities as manufacturers are unsurpassed . . . we feel justified in asking you the favor of an opportunity to prepare your plans."²⁸

²⁶ Clark to Furber, May 26, 1888; Peabody, Stearns and Furber to Hill, July 20, 25, Aug. 1, 1889; Evans and Tombs to Hill, Oct. 22, 1889; Hill to Peabody, Stearns and Furber, Aug. 7, 1889, letterpress books, microfilm roll 59—all Hill Papers.

²⁷ Peabody, Stearns and Furber to Hill, Aug. 15, Oct. 17, 1889, Hill Papers.

²⁸ W. A. Hazel to F. J. Stevens, Oct. 17, 1890, and Herter Brothers to Hill, Dec. 5, 1888, both Hill Papers. Ultimately, Herter Brothers supplied only a bed, mattress, bolster, and two pillows through the chosen firm; Irving and Casson, Voucher 1500, Oct. 6, 1893, Hill Papers.

A. G. Wilbor Jr., a representative from the Tiffany Decorating Company in New York, reminded Hill that he had encouraged the company's interest in providing glass and decorative work. Hill responded that the glass work would probably be bid with the interior finishing. Correspondence indicates that Wilbor both came to St. Paul and met with Mary Hill in New York. Apparently, Hill was less than pleased with the designs. He said of a sketch for windows, "It is *anything but* what I want. I want very little stained or leaded glass but want it good."²⁹

Hill considered a detailed proposal by Frank Furness, who had earlier been interested in designing the house itself. In late 1889 Furness visited St. Paul and over the next few months kept Hill informed of his progress by telegram, letter, sketches, and drawings. His correspondence specifically mentions designs for the parlor, hall, music room, dining room, and staircase. By the end of March 1890, however, Hill told Furness that the designs were not what he wanted.³⁰

This news and word that another firm had been selected was "a most disagreeable surprise" for Furness, who was "not only greatly interested in the work on account of its magnitude, but also because it would undoubtedly have given me an opportunity to establish a reputation and a connection in the North West." Furness made it clear that he had spent considerable time and effort on the project. On May 22, he billed Hill for \$11,000, which represented 10 percent of the cost of the work he had proposed. Having no response, he sent the bill again on June 13. Hill was apparently slow to respond, because Furness turned the matter over to the New York law firm of Whitehead and Suydam. The account was eventually settled in early 1892.³¹

The firm that Hill finally selected was also from the prestigious Boston design world. Irving and Casson had earlier worked with H. H. Richardson, producing furniture that the architect had designed for his buildings.³² The company's designs for the Hill home were characterized by extensive hand- and machine-carved woodwork, mosaic wall panels, marble facings and hearths, and custom furniture.

A STINGING REBUKE

In a characteristically emphatic letter, Hill fired Peabody and Stearns for not following instructions:

"**Y**ou appear to be still laboring under the impression that your duties in connection with my building cover supervision of the work. I told you before you were engaged that I would employ my own superintendent and let my own contracts. . . .

"Later, without any notice to me, or any authority from me, you undertook to change the specifications as to the character of the work and the size or thickness of the same. In your letter of the 1st instant you refer to the Unitarian building in Boston as to style of carving to be done by Clark. My specifications state nothing whatever about that building; but set forth that this work, is to be done in the most handsome and artistic manner.

"Now, I have tried to avoid annoyance and misunderstanding or being deceived through any interference on your part, and I write this to advise you that hereafter I will not allow you to come near the building, or to have anything to do with it, directly or indirectly; and I want your account rendered for services up to this date. I may say to you that I would gladly have paid your outside price and have paid my own superintendent, but the course you have taken in modifying the specifications and changing the character of the work to favor a contractor particularly recommended by you has led me to conclude that I cannot afford to have anything more to do with you in connection with the building; and it will be of no use for you to interfere with the work, directly or indirectly in any way. I regret to be compelled to take this course, but it appears to be the only one that will enable me to keep you in your proper place."

Source: Hill to Peabody, Stearns and Furber, Aug. 7, 1889, Hill Papers.

The interior decoration clearly reveals that the house was meant to be a showcase. The first-floor entertaining rooms were lavishly carved and furnished, and the Rococo floral scrolls, neoclassical columns and pilasters, exotic Islamic motifs, and Renaissance paneling were

²⁹ A. G. Wilbor to Hill, Jan. 20, May 23, 1890; Hill to Wilbor, May 24, 1890, handwritten note attached to Wilbor to Hill, Hill Papers.

³⁰ Hill to W. A. Stephens, Oct. 16, 1889; Furness to Hill, Dec. 4, 1889, Jan. 24, Mar. 19, 1890, Hill Papers; Hill to Furness, May 6, 1890, President files, Great Northern Railway Records, MHS.

³¹ Furness to Hill, May 7, 22, June 13, 1890; Whitehead and Suydam to Hill, Feb. 10, Sept. 10, 1891, Feb. 6, 1892—all Hill Papers.

³² Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *Three Centuries of American Furniture* (New York: Gramercy Publishing Co., 1985), 250.

typical of the Victorian era. A multistory gallery, open to the public by admission ticket, showed off Hill's growing art collection. (The family rooms were smaller in scale and contained more simply carved woodwork.) A statement documenting Irving and Casson's services to May 20, 1892, represents nearly two years' work at \$81,003.87 for materials and finishing on the main floor and \$26,462.99 for the furniture and other furnishings, totaling in all \$107,466.86. Another summary of costs enumerated an additional \$112,068.96 for bronzes, statuary, and

other objets d'art; organ and pianos; carpets, rugs, curtains, portieres, and wall coverings; china and glassware; silverware; books; miscellaneous items; and transferring furnishings from the Hills' Ninth and Canada residence. The total expenditure—\$219,535.82—converts to more than \$3.8 million in 1990 dollars.³³

Detailed records preserved in Hill's papers make it possible to determine the cost of decorating and furnishing all of the major rooms in the house. A good example of Hill's no-holds-barred approach is the main hall, measuring

Richly appointed main hall with stairway and alcoves (at left); photograph looks toward the dining room, about 1922



Detail of stair banister, main hall



100-by-15 feet with 13-foot ceilings. Prominently located at the center of the house, it was clearly intended to make an impression on visitors. Master carver John Kirchmayer of Cambridge, Massachusetts, worked there for almost 500 hours, transforming some 13,244 feet of wood (mostly oak). Other woodcarvers logged more than 9,200 hours, and some 462 hours of carving-machine time was also billed. The final cost of the wood, carving, and finishing for the main hall was nearly \$19,000, and the furnishings cost slightly more than \$3,000. The adjacent 45-by-17-foot staircase and alcoves added another

³³ Here and below, Irving and Casson, Voucher 1500; Summit Avenue Residence, Statement of Cost of Furniture and Furnishings (Mar. 5, 1891–Aug. 31, 1895), filed under Mar. 5, 1891, Hill Papers.

\$10,357.55. A. B. Cutter and Company provided the decorative glass windows for \$750. At more than \$32,000, the main hall, staircase, and alcoves accounted for almost 30 percent of the total Irving and Casson bill.

The dining room, located at the west end of the main hall, and the picture gallery at the east were the second- and third-most expensive rooms. The dining room's mahogany woodwork and finishing, including the sideboard and cabinets, cost nearly \$10,000. The dining table, side table, clock case, mahogany screen, and 16

for the organ and fixtures that are the focal point of the gallery's west side.³⁴

Flanking the picture gallery were the parlor (or drawing room) on the south and the music room on the north. Both had decorative details of papier mâché and richly carved pine. The woodwork, ceilings, and furniture were painted white, and the furniture was accented with gilding and brass ornaments. In the parlor, panels of ivory damask were ordered for the upper walls, and the furniture was adapted from the French Louis XVI style. The music-room wall



Dining room, about 1922, showing the custom-carved mahogany woodwork with matching furniture and ceiling of textured plaster and gold leaf

Detail of mantel woodwork, main hall

mahogany chairs amounted to almost \$3,300. When the Hills entertained, dinner guests most often were business associates; however, they also received papal envoys, European nobility, American business leaders, and even President William McKinley. The table's 17 leaves allowed it to extend to 25 feet. Leather for the hand-tooled walls was supplied by Finch, Van Slyck, Young, and Company, a St. Paul firm. In the picture gallery, the woodwork and finishing cost more than \$7,000, and the two carved oak benches and brass rails amounted to almost \$650. In addition, the Hills spent nearly \$4,700



³⁴ Finch, Van Slyck, Young, and Co. to W. A. Stephens, June 16, 1891, Hill Papers; Irving and Casson, Voucher 1500.

covering, as seen in a photograph from about 1920, was more highly patterned, and much of the furniture followed the Louis XV style. The two pianos had custom-carved and gilded cases and stools.³⁵

Based on receipts and photographs, it appears that the reception room was the least ornately embellished of the public areas. Pieces from the Hills' earlier home—chairs from its art gallery and a parlor table—were used here.³⁶

Two family spaces were located on either side of the dining room. On the south, the

Kirchmayer, the master carver, did only a small amount of work in these rooms; most was executed by others and by machine. The custom-designed mahogany furniture included tables and chairs for the library and a desk for the den.

Other decorative elements include the lighting units, window treatments, and floor coverings. The most prominent luminaires on the main floor were chandeliers supplied by Mt. Washington Glass Co. of New Bedford, Massachusetts, at costs ranging from \$135 to

*Music room, about 1922,
with James and Mary
Hill's portraits on the wall*



breakfast room, originally used for informal family meals, had carved and stained oak woodwork as well as Lincrusta Walton wall covering supplied by a New York firm. (Lincrusta Walton, embossed semiliquid linseed oil on a backing, was an alternative to wallpaper or embossed leather.) The custom-made oak furniture consisted of a table, sideboard, side table, pedestal, and 12 chairs. Mexican mahogany was the primary wood in the library and adjacent den.

\$235 each. The most expensive chandeliers were purchased for the parlor, music room, and dining room. Round mirrors on the ceiling above the chandeliers helped to diffuse the light. Upholstery and other fabrics came mainly from F. Schumacher of New York and Finch, Van Slyck, Young, and Company of St. Paul. W. & J. Sloane of New York supplied lace curtains for the main-floor rooms and bedrooms, tapestry or repp (ribbed or corded) fabrics for an

³⁵ Finch, Van Slyck, Young, and Co. to Hill, Jan. 30, 1891, Hill Papers; Irving and Casson, Voucher 1500; music-room photograph, about 1922, MHS.

³⁶ Here and two paragraphs below, see photos of interiors, MHS; Irving and Casson Voucher 1500; Summit Ave. Residence . . . Cost of Furniture. Transfers of furniture from Ninth Street accounted for about \$14,000—or about 10 percent of the total cost of the new home's movable furnishings.

outer layer of curtains in the bedrooms, and rugs or carpets for many of the main rooms and bedrooms. Arnold Constable and Company of New York provided oriental rugs.

Irving and Casson's responsibility for woodwork and finishing appears to have been limited to the main floor—the public spaces—although the firm also supplied furniture for the family bedrooms. Custom-made bedroom furniture cost only about \$5,000, or less than 5 percent of the decorator's work. A St. Paul firm, Jackson Brothers and Loomis, provided a few additional

his eastern business associates as early as 1883, their activities seemed to revolve around sports such as shooting and salmon fishing. Hill does not appear to have spent much time in the homes of his cohorts.³⁸

Hill's Summit Avenue mansion, completed in 1891 after four years of effort, seems to signal his desire to step cleanly into a new role of greater status and national prominence. While he already owned a farm in North Oaks and a relatively new home at Ninth



*Mary Hill's bedroom,
about 1922*

furnishings, along with sash doors, window screens, and the restoring of older furniture. Irving and Casson also refurbished 28 rattan chairs and three couches.³⁷

The interior of Hill's house shows many similarities to those of his contemporaries, including intricately carved woodwork, richly finished walls and ceilings, and custom-designed and built Louis XV and XVI furniture. Yet Hill's vision was probably influenced more by his travels and by hotel living, especially on the East Coast. While he socialized with

and Canada Streets, the entrepreneur built an impressive dwelling on the most fashionable residential street of St. Paul. Everything about it was calculated to impress—from the choice of architectural and design firms to the handmade furnishings. Then, after the move was completed from the Ninth and Canada residence, Hill had that "sturdy, thirteen-year-old mansion torn apart by the wreckers without ceremony." Biographer Albro Martin attributes this to "the purest sentiment," but it could also be interpreted as a sign of the hard-working immi-

³⁷ Irving and Casson, Voucher 1500; Jackson Brothers and Loomis, Voucher 1446, Oct. 1891, Hill Papers.

³⁸ Martin, *J. J. Hill*, 323.



Construction crew posed at the Hills' new house, about 1890

grant's desire to assume a position of prominence without reminders of the past.³⁹

Any home as massive as 240 Summit Avenue is certain to evoke a response. During construction, the site became an attraction for St. Paul residents and visitors alike. Some were fascinated by the new building techniques and technology. Others were probably drawn by the sheer massiveness of the project and the degree of conspicuous consumption.⁴⁰

In 1891 *Harper's* magazine complimented Summit Avenue on its "sense of liberal expendi-

ture without ostentation, directed by skill and restrained by taste."⁴¹ While specific comments by Hill's contemporaries are not readily available, some probably resented or envied the man who could build so lavishly, while others likely thought the house appropriate for a man of success and stature.

In 1961 the house received National Historic Landmark designation based primarily on "Hill's major contribution to the transportation systems of the growing nation." In the 1970s local and national interest in public history and

³⁹ Martin, *J. J. Hill*, 420.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth W. Doermann and Ellen M. Rosenthal, "Introducing the Hill House," *Minnesota History* 46 (Winter 1979): 332–33.

⁴¹ Quoted in Thomas W. Kelly and Joan Kelly, "A Street Above the Average: Summit Avenue, St. Paul," *Architecture Minnesota*, July–Aug. 1976, p. 31.

historic preservation generated renewed interest in the Historic Hill District of St. Paul in general and the James J. Hill House in particular. A 1975 planning document considered the house worthy of being a major landmark, based on architectural characteristics such as site, landscape, use of materials, building detail, massing and scale, relation to the neighborhood, and visual impact. In 1978 the Minnesota Historical Society obtained the building from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and began restoration, turning it into a popular historic site.⁴²

That same year, historian Ernest Sandeen, remarking on Summit Avenue's Romanesque architecture, noted that the Hill mansion, although "impressive and large enough to suit anyone's notion of baronial splendor," was "not really attractive." He went on to observe that it "illustrates the danger of Romanesque—that the massive qualities of the construction may create forbidding images of castles or (worse) warehouses, rather than the inviting and friendly vision of the rural villa." These comments echo the cautions of Victorian tastemaker Downing, who liked the style but mourned the lack of good examples, noting a "rudeness and clumsiness . . . and a barbarous incongruity . . . that renders them useless, except as studies." According to Sandeen, many architects during the late nineteenth century were called upon to design homes that "isolated and protected their clients from a hostile environment." The Hill house failed to "use the Romanesque style in ways which emphasized the strength and protection afforded by the dwelling, without losing

delicacy or projecting hostility." Writers continue to comment on the home's brooding or forbidding presence.⁴³

Historian Vincent Scully, on the other hand, argues that grandiose homes of America's millionaires must be viewed in their nineteenth-century context to be understood and appreciated.⁴⁴ Within the social, political, economic, and architectural context of its time, the James J. Hill House was a superb example of upper-class residential architecture and a symbol of its owner's desire for social status as well as physical and psychological security.



Visitors lined up in 1981 to tour the Hill House.

⁴² Doermann and Rosenthal, "Introducing the Hill House," 328–29; Old Town Restorations, *Building the Future from Our Past* (St. Paul: Old Town Restorations, 1975), 80–82.

⁴³ Sandeen, *Historic Summit Avenue*, 81; Downing, *Architecture*, 389; "The Looming Presence of James J. Hill," *Architecture Minnesota*, July–Aug. 1987, 42–43.

⁴⁴ Vincent Scully, "American Houses: Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright," in *The Rise of an American Architecture*, ed. Edgar Kaufmann Jr. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 163, 184.

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