

THIS IS ONE OF SEVEN INTRIGUING IMAGES of what might be the interior of a building at 730 East Fourth Street, St. Paul, owned by the William North family from 1901 to 1960. These images are factual, rife with detail, and simultaneously shrouded in mystery. The material of gas- and day-lit domesticity, circa 1900, abounds. Chairs shuffle from one image to another. Photographs decorate several spaces: tucked into a shelf, arrayed across a mantel, or, in this case, nearly three-dozen mostly formal studio portraits, affixed to a wall.

One might cast the man in this image as an itinerant bachelor whose portable bric-a-brac includes a gallery of companions who populate his temporary lodgings. This proto-curator may even have fashioned this photograph as a self-portrait, his own door-framed form joining the display at center stage (though the “survey” quality of the seven-photo series suggests otherwise). The table clock gives the time as shortly before five—assuming it had been recently wound and set—and the light suggests a non-winter evening. But all assumptions here are tenuous.

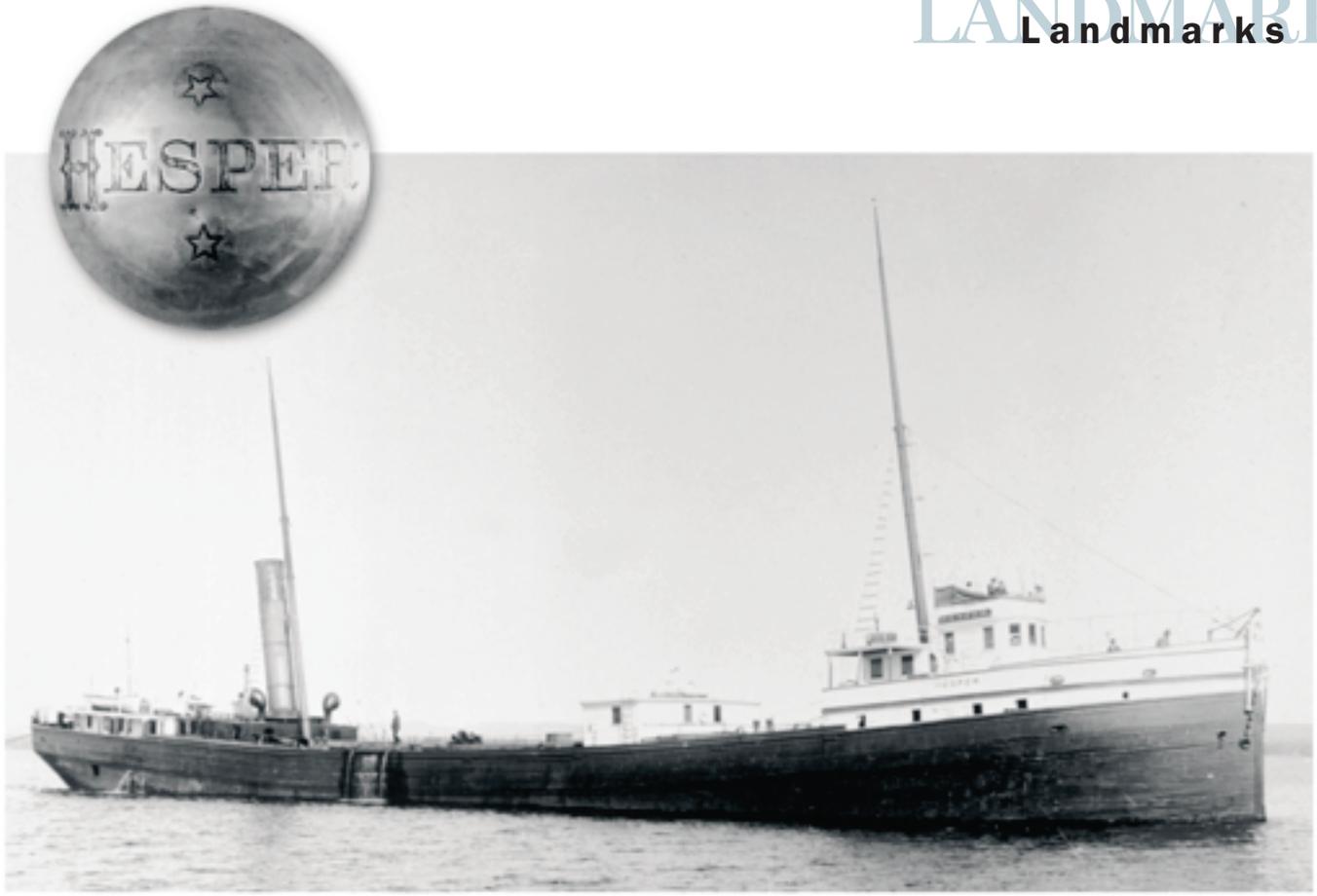
What must have been reasoned and purposeful, given the deliberate effort involved in late-nineteenth-century photography, is now cryptic. But speculating about agendas and identities provides much of the pleasure found in reviewing these images. They are unlabeled time capsules—their transported content is fresh and legible, but the impulse to record it is not. As writer Susan Orlean comments: “An ordinary life examined closely reveals itself to be exquisite and complicated and exceptional, somehow managing to be both heroic and plain.”\* Never knowing the truth allows us to delight in the facts.

—GEORGE SLADE

*George Slade is the artistic director of the Minnesota Center for Photography and the editor of Minnesota In Our Time: A Photographic Portrait (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000).*

\* Susan Orlean, *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup: My Encounters with Extraordinary People* (New York: Random House, 2001), xiv.





Capstan cover (inset) from the wreck of the *Hesper*, shown here on the *St. Mary's River*, about 1900

IN LATE OCTOBER 1896, *Hesper*, a wooden-hulled steamer, was caught in a Lake Superior tempest as she towed the schooner-barge *Samuel P. Ely* from Duluth to Two Harbors. Unable to steer both vessels into the safety of Agate Bay, *Hesper's* crew severed the towline. *Ely* dropped anchor, hoping to ride out the storm, while *Hesper* fought her way into the bay. The storm proved too much for *Ely*, hurling her against the harbor's west breakwater where she broke apart and sank. The crew survived. Ironically, *Hesper* would later suffer a similar fate.

*Hesper* was launched at Radcliffe Yard in Cleveland on June 28, 1890. Constructed for that city's Bradley Transportation Company, she was a bulk freighter with a forward pilot-house, designed to haul loads like grain and iron ore across the Great

Lakes. With masts and a steam engine, *Hesper* was a hybrid that reflected the transition from wind-powered vessels to mechanically propelled ships. About 250 feet long, she was large for her day; today, many Great Lakes freighters measure more than 1,000 feet.

*Hesper's* career was mostly uneventful. On May 3, 1905, however, as she forged through a northeaster en route to Duluth, the crew lost its bearings and the ship was thrown against a reef near present-day Silver Bay. She was repeatedly bludgeoned against the rocks until an enormous wave pitched her over the reef. Fortunately, the ship's crew escaped before she sank. Today, *Hesper* rests 30 to 50 feet below the surface of Lake Superior, abutting the west breakwater at Silver Bay Harbor, a port constructed long after the ship

went down. The port and starboard sides of the hull, which was split near the turn of the bilge, now lie adjacent to the hull's base. *Hesper* was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994, two years after *Samuel P. Ely*.

—DENIS P. GARDNER

*Denis P. Gardner is author of the forthcoming book Minnesota Treasures: Stories Behind the State's Historic Places (Minnesota Historical Society Press, May 2004).*

Sources: Stephen R. James, "*Hesper* (U.S. Registry 96054)," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Sept. 1994, State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Julius F. Wolff Jr., *Julius F. Wolff Jr.'s Lake Superior Shipwrecks*, ed. Thomas H. Holden (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities, Inc., 1990), 104; *Duluth Evening Herald*, May 5, 1905. The photos are courtesy the Thunder Bay National Marine Collection, Alpena, MI (*Hesper*) and the Lake Superior Maritime Visitors Center, Duluth (capstan cover).



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