THE NEW MINNESOTA HISTORY CENTER
Looking Back at the Journey

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In October 1992, the Minnesota Historical Society celebrates the opening of its spacious new History Center. For the first time, Minnesotans will have museum, research, and programming facilities worthy of the state’s heritage. A new era of service to the people of Minnesota and visitors from across the nation begins.

The story of the planning of the History Center is now itself history, and the past decade’s events represent only the most recent chapter. During these years, trustees and staff shared a guiding vision. As one staff member described it in 1987:

We have envisioned a place that draws the public in, fires its imagination, and responds to its hunger for an understanding of the past. We have envisioned a building alive with people from morning until far into the evening—families in the museum; scholars, genealogists, and teachers in the reading rooms; children absorbed in a variety of things, from dramatic presentations to craft activities; crowds arriving for classes, lectures, films, symposia, and plays; and school and tour buses lining the entrance drive—a vital cultural and educational center with something going on all the time.

This dream extends back before 1917, when the Society completed its first headquarters next to the capitol in St. Paul. Indeed, Elmer L. Andersen, former Minnesota governor and past Society president, traced the idea to the organization’s founders. He noted at the History Center construction celebration in 1989 that Minnesota’s first territorial governor and Society president, Alexander Ramsey, told the 1849 legislature: “The preservation by a community of materials for the composition of its history, when a future time shall require it to be written, is a task not without its uses; and, when early commenced, easily accomplished.” Ramsey’s words prompted the fledgling legislature to incorporate the Society as its fifth act. This permanently connected Minnesota’s future with its past.

Leaders from different centuries, Ramsey and Andersen both believed that people should be actively involved with their history. Ramsey underscored his commitment at the Society’s second annual meeting in 1851: “There is much for each of us individually to do. . . . Each member should consider it his duty to contribute something to the common stock, and not rest content with permitting or asking a few only to sustain the institution by their labors.”

Rhoda Gilman to Vera Stanton (both Society staff members), Mar. 29, 1987, History Center files, Administration Records, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Archives, MHS.

Alexander Ramsey, "Message to the Territorial Legislature, 1849," Messages to the Legislature, 1849-[1855?), Minnesota Territorial Archives, State Archives, MHS.


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More than a century later, Andersen, the Society's thirty-sixth president, spoke of the growing interest in experiencing and enjoying history. At the 120th annual meeting in 1969, he presented a key idea that would shape the Society's development for the next two decades and beyond: "A new concept has taken hold—the concept of bringing history to the people. . . . This is not a matter of conjuring up gimmicks to attract people to history—it is rather a necessary step to fulfill a present need that our own citizens and visitors are demonstrating in increasing numbers." Building on a long tradition of excellent scholarship and collecting, the Society could broaden its scope and develop a statewide educational program through its historic sites, public programs, and a state history center.

AS EARLY AS 1856, the legislature mandated a public educational role for the Society, calling on the young organization not only to collect and preserve the materials of Minnesota's history, but "to cultivate among the citizens thereof a knowledge of the useful and liberal arts, science, and literature." In 1869 the legislature further directed the Society to offer Minnesotans a free public library.

For many years, however, the institution remained a small, learned society, wholly centered in St. Paul and residing, at the largess of the legislature, in the basements of the state's three succeeding capitols. Expanding collections of books, papers, and objects repeatedly outgrew their assigned quarters, suffered under poor storage conditions, and twice were threatened by fires. Staff members, it was reported, worked "in all sorts of cubby-holes and dark corners."

Despite these impediments, the Society quickly established a tradition of excellence in collections and scholarship. In 1851 it copublished with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language. The material collected in those years has proven invaluable. The library attracted many patrons, especially for genealogical research, but the institution, like most at this time, had yet to offer programs of widespread public interest.

The Society began raising money for a building of its own as early as 1855, and throughout the 1870s and 1880s it requested funds from the legislature for this purpose. Finally, in 1913, these efforts bore fruit. The legislature appropriated $500,000 to construct a fireproof building that the Society would share with the Minnesota Supreme Court, contingent upon the Society's contribution of $75,000 for purchasing the site and its own furnishings.

With Society approval, the state selected a site directly northeast of the present capitol, acquiring the property with $35,000 of the institution's money. As planning progressed, however, it became clear that the legislature's appropriation was inadequate to construct a building suitable for both tenants. The supreme court decided to remain in its capitol quarters, annexing the space vacated by the Society—a move that would be echoed some seven decades later. The 1915 legislature allowed the Society to purchase another site for a building of its own, giving credit for the amount already expended. The Society deeded the new lot, immediately southeast of the capitol, to the state.

From the beginning, the legislature and the Society agreed that the organization's new home at 690 Cedar Street should be a "Minnesota building," located near the capitol, built of materials from the state, designed by a Minnesota architect, and constructed with Minnesota labor. State architect Clarence Johnston designed a handsome building in the Roman Renaissance style to give the institution its first public face and serve as its home for three-quarters of a century. It reflected a dignified image suited to an educational institution entrusted with preserving the state's heritage.

As the building neared completion in 1917, librarian John Talman imagined a new, broader role for the institution. Writing about the library's expanding newspaper collections, he exhorted: "Let editors and publishers consider at all times the growing importance of the Society as a vital force in the educational system of the state. . . . The Minnesota Historical Society lives and works for to-morrow." Dedicating its new headquarters on May 11, 1918, the Society initiated a program of public service that by century's end would reach nearly two million people each year.

EVEN BEFORE the doors opened, some observers had premonitions that the building might be inadequate for the institution's expanding programs. In an article on its design, St. Paul architect Stirling Horner noted: "For the first time the historical society will have a suitable home, adequate, for the present at least, for its library and other activities." Within a generation, the building needed renovation and physical expansion. After years of slow but steady growth of its collections,
storage space for new acquisitions was running out. Cramped conditions impeded their proper care.

In 1955 the Society found a formal way to assess its needs. Participating in a self-survey of state government launched by Governor Orville L. Freeman, it documented several problem areas:

The library and manuscript departments face a continuing and heavy accumulation of dust in the stack areas. This dust poses a genuine threat to books and valuable manuscripts. . . . The most serious problem . . . is the location and condition of the museum. Ninety percent of the people who visit the


The self-survey report’s recommendation would guide planning efforts for the next quarter century: “The best solution to this problem would be to add a modern and functional addition onto the rear of the Historical building which could house the museum and extensive storage space. Such an addition would meet the Society’s needs for several decades to come.”

During the state’s centennial anniversary in 1958, Minnesotans made unprecedented use of the Society’s library and collections, further demonstrating the demand for public services. Accordingly, the Society asked the legislature that year to acquire adjacent Me-
chastic Arts High School as space for future expansion, but the legislature took no action.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Director Russell W. Fridley led efforts to expand the Society’s activities throughout Minnesota. While focusing on its mission to serve the people of the entire state, the organization also established its need for larger headquarters. Society leaders worked closely with state legislators, who came to recognize history as a vital, nonrenewable resource requiring protection and yielding educational and economic benefits. As Minnesotans and their legislators began to see and value the Society’s work in their own communities, public support for a new historical building grew.

The new network of historic sites reached out to offer Minnesotans a chance to experience history where it happened. In 1958 the Society acquired its first historic property, the LeDuc/Simmons House in Hastings. (Since then the system has grown to include thirty-one sites.) The Society’s most ambitious effort was the struggle to preserve and restore Historic Fort Snelling.

Following passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, the Society in 1969 began identifying and recommending properties for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. (Today the register lists approximately fourteen hundred Minnesota nominations, representing more than five thousand buildings, structures, objects, and sites.) This program raised public awareness of the importance of historic places and our collective responsibility to preserve them.

The Society also developed programs to help county and local historical organizations around the state carry out their work. Assisted by financial grants and technical advice from Society staff, these organizations, today numbering more than three hundred, became partners in collecting, preserving, and presenting the state’s history.

CREATING BROAD-BASED support for the Society’s work and demonstrating the state’s need for a new history building proved time consuming. Then, in 1967, the legislature created the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Commission to study the future of the capitol area, including possible expansion of the state’s historical facilities. From that time on, the Society’s space needs became part of comprehensive planning for the entire area.

The 1969 budget request to the legislature reflected both long-term and more immediate needs. The institution again asked the state to purchase the Mechanic Arts site for expansion, requested $40,000 to fund a study of future space requirements, and sought an appropriation to purchase the McLean Warehouse at 1500 Mississippi Street in St. Paul. The legislature approved only the last measure. While this provided welcome space to develop a research center and repository for manuscript collections, such decentralization required patrons to travel between locations to use all of the Society’s resources.

The demand for space continued to increase. In 1971 the Society accepted responsibility for administering the State Archives, which included approximately nineteen thousand cubic feet of government records from local and state offices. (Today these records have grown to more than forty-five thousand cubic feet.) In 1968 and 1972, the Society also acquired the vast records of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads, documenting the role these Minnesota corporations played in the nation’s development. Together, those collections fill fifteen thousand cubic feet of storage space. Meanwhile, interest in the nation’s Bicentennial brought more and more people in to use the institution’s rich resources.

Pressed by its growing collections, the Society further extended and decentralized its operations. By the late 1980s important holdings resided in six facilities, including 690 Cedar Street, the Mississippi Street research center, the Fort Snelling interpretive center and another building in that complex, and two leased warehouses. But decentralization proved to be an imperfect solution. As time passed, space again became cramped, while inadequate environmental controls threatened the safety of the resources. The library at 690 Cedar Street, for example, lacked a sprinkler system to protect against fire. One Society report noted: “Inaccessible storage spaces, scattered around the metropolitan area, are stacked to the ceilings. The library is crowded. Patrons must wait for materials to be retrieved from remote storage, and they compete for limited seating at microfilm readers.”

Throughout the 1970s, the fate of the plan for enlarging the headquarters building remained uncertain. A possibility for a new facility arose in 1975 when the Society accepted the legislature’s invitation to participate in planning a large, underground government and history complex below the grassy capitol mall. The complex would have housed legislative meeting rooms and a state historical center with much more museum space, public facilities and classrooms, and parking. The Society’s old building would have been retained as a library and research center.

In March 1977, the capitol area planning group conducted a national design competition for the subterranean complex. Helmut Jahn of C. F. Murphy Associates in Chicago submitted the winning design. A ma-

The majority of legislators, however, came to view the underground mall concept as too radical. The Society saw its chance for a new facility slip away as support for the venture died in the 1977 legislative session.

Undaunted in the commitment to improve its facilities, the Society refocused its attention on the adjacent Mechanic Arts site, and in 1978—twenty years after the Society’s first request—the legislature purchased it from the St. Paul school board. Although the property was not acquired specifically for the Society’s use, the institution quickly restated its long-standing interest in it. After some delay, the 1981 legislature designated the Society’s Cedar Street building and the adjacent land housing the Mechanic Arts gymnasium and parking lot as the state historical center. Two years later, Governor Rudy Perpich authorized use of the high school building, as well, until a new state history center could be built there.

In 1979 the Society conducted an in-depth institutional self-study with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although the study focused specifically on the Society’s public programs, visiting evaluators called attention to the unmet needs of the Society’s artifact collections and to the need for an appropriate museum.

Determined to address the increasingly frustrating demand for storage and public museum space and for more efficient, centralized reference facilities, the Society’s staff and executive council worked together between 1981 and 1984 to begin to plan a large new facility called the History Center. In 1981 they produced the first planning document for it, envisioning a building “that would provide the public with a central source and vantage point from which to see, use, and participate in the state’s history program.” These ideas became the basis for a “concept” plan, completed in 1982 with the assistance of Dober and Associates, Inc., of Belmont, Massachusetts. This plan, which expressed the vision of greatly expanded service to the public, proposed rehabilitating the Cedar Street headquarters and constructing an adjoining facility on the Mechanic Arts site to create a new state history center.

As these planning efforts moved forward, a dramatic incident illustrated the pressing need for an accessible museum. In 1982 staff members mounted a major new exhibition on the fur trade. Try as they would, they could not maneuver a key artifact—the Society’s thirty-seven-foot-long birch-bark Montreal canoe—up the winding staircase to the cramped third-floor exhibit gallery.

WITH GOVERNOR PERPICH’S support, the 1983 legislature appropriated $400,000 for planning and a design competition for a new history center. As part of this process, a task force of eleven staff members, each of whom headed satellite committees representing all

Crew carrying the thirty-seven-foot birch-bark canoe out of storage into the new History Center

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program areas, produced a planning document in 1984 that included detailed information about the spaces required to meet existing and anticipated demands. The task force recommended dedicating two-thirds of the total space to the storage, maintenance, exhibition, and study of collections ranging from canoes and thimbles to books, diaries, maps, and government records. The task force also emphasized the use of space for attractive and convenient public amenities, such as a restaurant and museum stores. The History Center was to be a public-oriented facility.

Early in 1984 the capitol area planning group initiated a design competition for the History Center, but legislative disagreements about the most appropriate future use of the headquarters building and the Mechanic Arts site interrupted the process. Like the Society, the Minnesota Supreme Court faced urgent space needs, and the justices proposed using 690 Cedar Street as a new judicial center. A period of controversy ensued, attracting significant media attention, as the Society fought to keep its sixty-seven-year-old headquarters and expand onto the Mechanic Arts site.

The 1984 legislature decided in favor of a judicial center on the site, leading to uncertainty about how the Society would fulfill its dream of an improved and expanded facility. Members and friends rallied to the Society’s aid. County and local historical agencies and organizations such as the Minnesota Genealogical Society urged the legislature to give priority to the institution’s needs. These same friends worked with Society leaders to request legislative funding for a new building site. An information campaign of newspaper articles and regional presentations about the History Center reached out to constituents across the state.

Governor Perpich and the legislature reaffirmed their support for the Society in 1984 by authorizing funding for a site-selection study. After considering twenty-four possible locations, the capitol area board and the Society recommended the site of the former Miller Hospital, ten acres on the south edge of the state capitol complex near the Cathedral of St. Paul. In 1985 the legislature approved the choice and appropriated $2.5 million for purchasing the land—$2 million in state funds and $500,000 from the Society’s nonstate resources. The city of St. Paul also contributed property of substantial value.

Because the Society’s 1984 planning document had focused on the institution’s activities, rather than on use of a particular building, its specifications could be readily adapted to the new site. The design competition resumed in 1985, and by June 1986, a national panel of jurors had selected Hammel Green and Abrahamson of Minneapolis as the winner from a field of six nationally distinguished architectural firms. Canadian architect and juror Arthur Erickson expressed the excitement generated by the competition results, predicting that the History Center would change the institution in ways we could not begin to imagine.

By the time Russell Fridley retired as the Society’s director in 1986, the long-awaited History Center was well on its way to becoming a reality. The following year the legislature and Governor Perpich approved a bonding bill appropriating $50 million to construct the center, $5 million of this amount contingent upon the Society matching the sum from nonstate sources.

In response to this challenge, the Society began the first major capital fund-raising effort in its history. The Society’s executive council concluded that $14 million would be needed from the private sector to complete the building, to purchase special equipment for storage and care of collections, and to develop the first museum exhibitions. Corporate and individual response to the campaign proved heartening. By the time of the cornerstone-laying on June 11, 1991, and the public announcement of the campaign, $9.5 million had already been raised.

Excavation at the History Center site began in July 1989, following the Society’s selection of local firms BOR-SON Construction, Inc., and Knutson Construction Company in a joint venture. For the next thirty months, hundreds of skilled Minnesota artisans representing dozens of trades worked year-round. To monitor building progress, executive council members and staff donned hard hats and met regularly with the on-site construction managers, Cost Planning Management International. The state’s administration department provided construction assistance, and the

Editorial-page comment on the fierce competition in 1984 for the Society’s headquarters


"Arthur Erickson, conversation with Nina Archabal, June 28, 1986."
Construction celebration in October 1989 with school children, Director Nina Archabal, former Governor Andersen, and Governor Perpich.

transportation department cooperated with the Society to build the freeway tunnel and bridges to the site.

A major new landmark emerged on the St. Paul skyline. Clad in Minnesota Cold Spring granite and Winona limestone with copper and terra-cotta trim, the six-level, L-shaped building encompasses 427,000 square feet. Its great hall, a monumental glass-enclosed atrium, stands at the building's center, connecting the new facilities for expanded public service, including three galleries with 44,400 square feet of exhibit space, spacious classrooms and laboratories for educational programs, a research center, and an auditorium for plays, concerts, films, and lectures. Embedded in the great hall floor and etched into window glass at the building's two main entrances are images depicting Minnesota themes. These were selected through the state's Percent for Art program competition, which allows up to 1 percent of building appropriations to be devoted to art. Outdoor terraces for public programs, a restaurant, and museum stores complete the History Center as a building for people.

WHEN CONSTRUCTION of the History Center officially ended in January 1992, the Society could report that it had proceeded on time, within budget, and without litigation. As contractors added their final touches, the Society commenced its "move of the century." Between February and July, staff and collections moved into their new headquarters. One of the first artifacts to take its place in the spacious new exhibition galleries was the Montreal canoe.

A long journey has ended, and a great adventure begins. The Society's challenge is to carry out its expanded vision of public service. Exhibits in the new museum intend to bring history to life for visitors in the same way that historic sites enable them to make dynamic personal connections with the past. Educational programs should provide a variety of learning opportunities for people of all age groups and diverse heritages. Collections, amply housed and carefully preserved, will be available in one central location. On the threshold of this new era, the Society welcomes the challenges of its historic mission to collect, preserve, and tell the Minnesota story into the next century.

The illustration on p. 121 (bottom) is courtesy the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Feb. 19, 1992; the drawing on p. 121 (top) is from G. F. Murphy, Minnesota II (1978), p. 11; the cartoon on p. 122 is from the St. Paul Dispatch, Mar. 29, 1984. All other illustrations are in the MHS collections.