“Temples of Mammon and Hives of Industry”

RAILROADS

and the

Minneapolis Milling District

DON L. HOFsommer
“When we consider that it is but a few short years since the birds of the air and the beasts of the prairies were monarchs of all they surveyed in and around the Falls of St. Anthony,” marveled a local writer in 1867, “we can safely say that we live in an age of improvement.” Raw wilderness had indeed been transformed in the twinkling of an historical eye. The hum and clatter from mills, factories, and machine shops along the west bank of the Mississippi River was punctuated day and night by the whistles and bells of locomotives that represented the critical link between the young, vigorous city of Minneapolis and a broad outback and burgeoning market for local products.\(^1\)

More than a century-and-a-quarter later, only an industrial archaeologist or a patient researcher could detect traces of this well-muscled, constantly frenetic manufacturing and transportation hub. The west bank milling district by the twenty-first century was once again utterly transformed—apartment structures, condominiums, and office buildings standing where swarms of men had turned out prodigious volumes of lumber, flour, woolen goods, iron products, and machinery and where railroaders had toiled ardently to meet the needs of shippers and travelers alike. Only an interpretive museum stands to celebrate the area’s industrial past; the Stone Arch Bridge, the former Milwaukee Road passenger depot (now a hotel) and a portion of its freight depot (a coffeehouse) provide the sole reminders of the age of railways. The opening of the $125 million Guthrie Theater in June 2006 seemed an apt denouement. The transformation was complete.\(^2\)

As early as 1821, the U.S. Army had recognized that the Falls of St. Anthony, a thundering 16-foot cataract on the Mississippi, would be a ready and convenient power source. In that year, the post commander at Fort Snelling ordered construction of both gristmills and sawmills on the west bank. In 1838 Franklin Steele staked a large claim on the east side, and a decade later he completed a dam and sawmill. Before the year was out, the half-million board feet of lumber produced there failed to meet the insatiable demand. In 1855 the fledgling community of St. Anthony was incorporated with a population of perhaps 3,000. Across the way, investors exploited water power, too, and a small settlement of homes, stores, schools, and churches dotted

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Bustling Minneapolis milling district at the Falls of St. Anthony, about 1890

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“Bustling Minneapolis milling district at the Falls of St. Anthony, about 1890"
the landscape. About 1,500 persons lived there when Minneapolis was platted in 1855 and a suspension bridge over the river connected the two young communities.³

Downstream stood St. Paul, the region’s premier urban center and the head of navigation on the Mississippi. Trade centered there, and it was Minnesota’s territorial and then state capital. In 1850 its population had been a mere 850, but the city grew to 4,040 in 1855 and to an impressive 10,600 in 1860.⁴

During the 1850s the United States experienced a veritable explosion of railroad construction.

St. Paul’s early fortunes were tied to navigation. Steamboats on the upper Mississippi dated from 1823 when the Virginia landed at Fort Snelling; in 1844, no fewer than 41 vessels made the trip, and three years later regular packet service began to the awakening community of St. Paul. Shortly thereafter, service inched up the Minnesota River to Shakopee and eventually to Mankato, New Ulm, and even occasionally to Redwood.⁵

There was no question that the steamboat was a salient element in what historian George Rogers Taylor identified as the “transportation revolution” that gripped the nation between 1815 and 1860. Yet, like all waterborne commerce, the steamboat was subject in northern climes to the “ice king,” which closed streams and lakes for months each year. Moreover, there was an obvious disadvantage irrespective of locale: vessels were restricted to navigable water, which was limited in most areas and totally absent in others. But St. Paul had the Mississippi and its tributaries. A total of 630 vessels called there in 1864 during a 210-day shipping season.⁶

However useful and important, nature’s highways were inadequate to demand. Dog sleighs in 1849 delivered mail to St. Paul from Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, and a crude stage road also linked those two communities, if by a most indirect route. Another coarse road connected St. Paul with Stillwater, and a third reached out to the neighboring village of St. Anthony. And, of course, ox carts had been freighting to the Red River of the North since the mid-1840s.⁷

None of this was adequate to fulfill transportation needs. Railroads were the answer. Increasingly, public leaders and aspiring entrepreneurs embraced ribbons of rail as transportation salvation. Steamcars, they perceived, would provide a reliable, low-cost, high-speed means of moving passengers, mail, and express. Further, rails alone could provide all-season transport of freight—lumber, fuel, and grain, for example—in a way that would not consume the value of commodities in carriage charges.

During the 1850s the United States experienced a veritable explosion of railroad construction—a total of 21,605 miles of new line put in service. By the end of the decade, several Chicago-based roads stood on the east bank of the Mississippi in Illinois, and they or their surrogates had already breached the rolling prairies of Iowa—or were about to. Farther north, two predecessors of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (CM&StP or Milwaukee Road) had moved west from Milwaukee to the Mississippi—one to Prairie du Chien, the other to La Crosse. All of these represented bold urban economic impulses of leaders in Chicago and Milwaukee, and each road, in time, would figure in the railroad affairs of Minnesota.⁸

Yet none of these early players evinced any immediate interest in Minnesota, occupying themselves in the well-settled areas of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Railroad ventures were, after all, capital and labor intensive: expensive undertakings fraught with monumental financial risk. No need to add danger by building ahead of justifiable demand.

So Minnesotans were left to wring their hands. Statehood in 1858, a growing population, and a generous grant of land for use in fostering railroads were offset by the Panic of 1857 and rumblings of civil war. By 1861 a stage line accommodated passengers and mail on a daily turn between Minneapolis and St. Paul, and the Milwaukee and Chicago railroads urged patrons to utilize steamboats to La Crosse, Prairie du Chien, or Dunleith (Illinois, across from Dubuque) for rail connections eastward. The Dunleith Line, for example, provided nightly 24-hour service from St. Paul to Dunleith, where passengers could board Illinois Central trains. Railroad agents and forwarding and commission merchants solicited freight over the same water-rail routes. But, as always, travel and shipping on inland
waterways was seasonal. “The unexpected withdrawal of the boats” in November 1863 “left several St. Paul passengers at Dubuque” when the river froze up. Some of them bought horses for the remainder of the trip, a local newspaper drearily reported, “and are now journeying northward by their own conveyance.”

The railroad era did, of course, finally arrive in Minnesota. After fits and starts, the St. Paul & Pacific recruited adequate capital, and on June 28, 1862, the resplendent William Crooks steamed away from a crude depot in St. Paul. With a few cars in tow, it was bound for end-of-track about ten miles to the northwest—an open bit of prairie on the east bank of the Mississippi River, just short of the falls at St. Anthony. A year later, the company advertised three trains daily (except Sunday) in each direction.

There was predictable rejoicing in St. Anthony and especially, St. Paul, but the mood in Minneapolis was subdued. The road started and was headquartered at St. Paul, and “Pacific” in the corporate title urged that the enterprise would not long tarry at St. Anthony before heading westward. Minneapolitans had either to walk over the suspension bridge to reach the railroad or, as a local newspaper reported, save their shoe leather by paying Burbank & Company twenty-five cents for a stage ride “to and from the cars.” Freight, likewise, had to be carted across the river, loaded, and then unloaded after the very short rail trek to St. Paul.

Frustration increased among Minneapolis's industrial and political leaders as the city grew and activity around the falls accelerated during the late years of the Civil War. “The endless water power here is being steadily developed,” wrote a local journalist as early as 1861, “giving employment to large bodies of mechanics and laborers.” But, he moaned, this natural gift was “comparatively unavailable and unproductive . . . for want of railroad transportation and communication.”

Not surprisingly, then, Minneapolis attached huge importance to schemes to implement a rail line reaching southward to the Iowa border—one that did not favor or even touch “Saintly neighbors” downstream. The first of such efforts was the “Cedar Valley” organization, which experienced a bumpy evolution, including name changes and corporate reorganization, to become the Minnesota Central (MC) in 1864.

Grading had commenced in 1856 between Mendota and Owatonna, but hard times and then war prevented further labor until 1863, when the project took on new energy. Engineering obstacles between Mendota and Minneapolis gave pause to promoters, however, and they wondered openly if St. Paul might not be a better choice for the road’s northern terminus. Minneapolis held its breath, nervous in the extreme, as the company built a pier and warehouse at the mouth of the Minnesota River and advertised for bids on a line from Mendota to St. Paul. On August 8, 1864, the steamboat Enterprise delivered MC’s first locomotive as well as “iron for the road” to Mendota. Nevertheless, the Minnesota Central had pledged itself first to Minneapolis—perhaps because the city or some of its prominent citizens offered a land subsidy near the west bank milling district.

Construction proved depressingly slow. The line finally opened from Mendota to Northfield on September 4, 1865; with completion of the Minneapolis-to-Mendota leg, through service began from Minneapolis to Dundas and all the way to Faribault.
on October 18. Additional work in 1866 took rail to Owatonna in mid-August and, the next year, to Austin and beyond. Another company, McGregor Western, climbed out of the Mississippi River valley in northeastern Iowa and on October 14, 1867, joined rails with the Minnesota Central at Adams, Minnesota, to complete a through route from Minneapolis to the east via Prairie du Chien.

For its Minneapolis hub, Minnesota Central committed itself to erect the necessary support facilities. On 14 acres (seven city blocks) of depot grounds just one block from the lumber and flour manufacturers, six impressive buildings arose, all but one built of stone: a frame passenger and freight depot; a five-stall engine house with turntable and two water tanks adjoining; a two-story car shop; a one-story machine shop; a blacksmith shop with six fires; and a building for drying lumber. Workmen at the car shop soon turned out new freight equipment, including flatcars and boxcars. They built and rebuilt passenger coaches and even assembled locomotives. The more than 200 men at the shops and other local employees of the company predictably rejoiced at the arrival of the pay car and paymaster, who, as the Minneapolis Tribune reported, “distributed his greenbacks quite freely.”

Business on the west bank was brisk. Before the Civil War ended, six lumber mills were perched on the Minneapolis Water Power Company’s dam. Flour merchants supplied local and distant markets, and nearby stood a tub and pail manufacturer, a sash and door factory, a large cooper shop, and the North Star Woolen mill. Some of these firms predated the arrival of Minnesota Central rail; many more followed. Soon after hostilities ended, a large grain elevator was erected beside the Minnesota Central’s track. Cadwallader C. Washburn built a substantial new flour mill, and Minnesota Central put up extensive sheds for storing flour prior to shipment. An iron works and foundry appeared, as did a paper factory. J. Dean & Company, located near the railroad’s depot on Second Street, advertised “2½ acres of... dry and well seasoned lumber,” and the Claystone Cooper Shop, opposite the depot, was rebuilt into a plow factory. Lager beer flowed from four breweries in the area, and local “saddlery makers” turned out “harness double and single.”

Beginning October 28, 1865, the Minnesota Central scheduled double daily passenger service between Minneapolis and Faribault, which was extended as the line went on to Owatonna and Austin. Sleeping cars were added when the through route was established via Prairie du Chien. And three daily Minneapolis-St. Paul “accommodation trains” handled commuter chores. Demand for freight service was nothing short of dramatic. The Minneapolis Tribune on June 10, 1867, reported that...
“the amount of lumber, flour, merchandise, etc. that is shipped daily is enormous. . . . so great that the rolling stock of the company is wholly insufficient.” Indeed, said the Tribune, “the yard is literally piled with lumber from one end to the other, awaiting shipment.”

In 1869, Minnesota Central and McGregor Western combined to form the Milwaukee & St. Paul, and, with rival Minnesota Valley, constructed, owned, and operated a line from Mendota to St. Paul. The new corporate identity caused considerable consternation in Minneapolis. The original companies had boasted local control, but area promoters clearly had lacked the financial wherewithal to birth the enterprise. “Milwaukee” in the new name erased any pretense; the road obviously was a tool of that Lake Michigan port city, designed to hold a huge geographic area subservient to its own economic interest. And the “St. Paul” certainly implied that company owners saw Minnesota’s capital city as more worthy than its “rural suburb.” Milwaukee interests presently broadened control of the region by driving a line upriver on the Minnesota side from La Crosse through Winona, Red Wing, and Hastings and then completing an independent outlet from Milwaukee to Chicago. All of this and the Minnesota Central’s pioneer line from Minneapolis to Owatonna and Austin soon were pooled with other properties to become the mighty Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (or Milwaukee Road), a blue chip behemoth that, along with other Chicago roads, threatened to choke Minneapolis’s own instincts for urban economic ascendancy.

The Minneapolis Tribune fussed, with reason, that the Milwaukee & St. Paul exercised a “tigerish monopoly”—indeed, it was “a positive detriment to our manufacturing interests.” The newspaper pleaded for “more lines of communication with the West and South” because, it rightly contended, “greater facilities for carrying freight” would mean that “rates would be materially reduced . . . what every businessman in Minneapolis and St. Anthony is interested in.”

The St. Paul & Pacific, having reached St. Anthony in 1862, could help with this, but only marginally. In 1864 it had pushed northwestward to Elk River; in 1866–67 it reached East St. Cloud and Sauk Rapids, and it had authority for another line west to the Red River. But it was not until 1867, when a railroad bridge was thrown over the Mississippi from St. Anthony, that the first StP&P train arrived in Minneapolis, where a throng of people welcomed it with cheers. A new depot was opened on Dakota Street between Washington Avenue and Third Street, and a three-stall roundhouse and turntable went up nearby. The road pressed westward in 1868, arriving in Breckenridge in 1871. “The Pacific road is bound to be a great feeder of Minneapolis,” the Tribune joyously predicted. Business volume increased so dramatically that the road’s rolling stock was inadequate to demand, and the St. Paul & Pacific expanded its Minneapolis yard and side tracks. But it could do nothing to ameliorate
problems caused by the imperious Chicago roads—and its allegiance, as always, was to St. Paul.  

At the end of 1870, some 20,300 persons lived in the capital city, which had direct rail communication northward to Duluth (Lake Superior & Mississippi), southwest to St. Peter (St. Paul & Sioux City), to the west and northwest (St. Paul & Pacific), and south and southeast (Milwaukee & St. Paul). All but the latter were headquartered in St. Paul. By comparison, Minneapolis and St. Anthony, with a combined population of 18,079, claimed only marginal transportation service and, city leaders testily admitted, even that had a distinctly St. Paul or “foreign” flavor. Yes, Minneapolis—to which St. Anthony soon would be joined—had many reasons to be proud as the new decade opened. The collective value of manufacturing at the falls was an impressive $6.8 million. Lumber led in value, followed by flour. What Minneapolis needed, and needed desperately, were railroads and more railroads—forged and owned locally, tightly focused on the needs of hometown industry and commerce, and certainly not pets of St. Paul or stooges of powerful rivals Milwaukee and Chicago.

A curious mixture of fear and determination slowly but surely mobilized leaders in Minneapolis. A direct rail outlet from the city to Lake Superior, they concluded, was absolutely necessary. So was a line to the south—even eventually, they hoped, all the way to St. Louis. In 1870 an old charter was dusted off and amended to create the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad (M&StL) with immediate authority to build and operate from some point on the Lake Superior & Mississippi line above St. Paul through Minneapolis to the Iowa border. Behind the enterprise was a “who’s who” at the falls, including milling magnate William D. Washburn, who exclaimed: “Upon this enterprise more than any other hangs the future destiny, for good or for evil, of our young city.” He pledged substantial personal support for the project and purchased important properties for facilities and tracks to, in, and about the industrial district on the west bank of the falls. This would give the Minneapolis & St. Louis an exclusive advantage.

The M&StL gained leasing rights from the St. Paul & Pacific for a parallel line in Minneapolis out to Cedar Lake and from there through Chaska and Carver to a junction with the St. Paul & Sioux City. The new road also secured operating rights over the St. Paul & Pacific’s Mississippi River bridge to push northeastward to the Lake Superior & Mississippi at White Bear Lake. Initially, the M&StL used the St. Paul & Pacific passenger facility in Minneapolis but erected its own six-stall roundhouse in the lower part of the city and a smaller engine facility in the milling district. Track reached White Bear Lake in July 1871 and Sioux City Junction (Merriam) four months later.

The nasty Panic of 1873 threw a wrench into the flywheel of M&StL’s long-range plan for a route to St. Louis, just as it did for innumerable ventures elsewhere. But even in those depression years, a vibrancy attended the west bank. Further build-up occurred as the financial crisis passed. Miscellaneous Minneapolis manufacturers—58 of them, creating everything from substantial iron products to soap, furniture, and brooms—aggregated $3.78 million in sales for 1876 alone. Minneapolis Harvester shipped a carload of Meadow Lark mowers and reapers daily; Monitor Plow turned out corn planters, sulky hay rakes, and railroad plows and scrapers; and Lymann Brothers, owners of Northwestern Oil Tank Line, bought in “burning and lubricating oils” for local use. In 1876 the market value of lumber and lumber products reached $3.4 million, superseded, however, by the value of flour and bran—$7.3 million. C. C. Washburn by 1875 had added substantial capacity at the falls with his A Mill, reportedly the largest such facility in the country, and Stammitz & Schober opened their smaller but still impressive Phoenix Mill. By 1880 Minneapolis stood first among all domestic locations in flour production, third in milled lumber, and twentieth in miscellaneous manufactured products.

This impressive growth of industry at and near the falls was matched
by expansion of rail lines serving the city. The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul marched confidently into additional service areas in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota Territory; Minneapolis & St. Louis drove lines into Iowa and Dakota Territory; St. Paul & Pacific metamorphosed into the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba and looked toward Montana Territory and beyond; and the fabled Northern Pacific entered the local scene. So did the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha (nee St. Paul & Sioux City), a Chicago & North Western surrogate.24

As early as 1870 the St. Anthony Democrat had grumped that the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul’s depot in Minneapolis was “small . . . quite insufficient to accommodate the large amount of travel.” The company had made modest betterments a year earlier, but nothing more substantial was authorized until 1876, when the road announced plans for a new two-story “French style” depot fronting on Washington Avenue between Third and Fourth Avenues. “It will be a credit to the company, a convenience to its patrons, and an ornament to the city,” enthused the Minneapolis Tribune. The edifice opened at the end of February 1877.25

This provoked editors at the Tribune to goad St. Paul & Pacific officials to “take a peep at” CM&StP’s new facility and then “return to their own dilapidated and tumble-down depot” in the city “and reflect, as they

Fleeting glory: the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul’s impressive Minneapolis passenger station of 1877 soon proved inadequate. Replaced with an even grander edifice after 20 years, it was razed (shown here) in 1900.
sit and wait for trains in the midst of the dreary discomforts of that dingy waiting room,” on the comparative elegance of the Milwaukee Road’s structure. That shaming may have had the desired effect, for the StP&P did agree to replace its “old excuse for a depot” with a functional if unpretentious one-story frame building between Washington Avenue and Third Street. It, too, opened in 1877.26

Impressive traffic statistics encouraged railroads to add capacity in or near the milling district.

New station facilities certainly did reflect the growing and insistent need for passenger transport. “The amount of travel to and from Minneapolis,” exclaimed one observer in 1869, “is unprecedented . . . the trains are always crowded.” Passenger trains delivered business travelers, excursionists, immigrants, and land hunters moving west. The St. Paul & Pacific operated special trains annually from Minneapolis to the Minnesota State Fair and also, along with the Milwaukee Road, scheduled commuter trains between Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 1876 the carriers operated 12,016 passenger trains to, from, or through Minneapolis, delivering 121,130 customers to the city.27

Freight volumes, meanwhile, mirrored local, regional, and even national economic circumstance. In June 1869, the Chicago, Milwaukee, & St. Paul had dispatched 77 cars of locally generated lumber, flour, machinery, furniture, and merchandise. (It also handled lading to and from St. Paul & Pacific stations, such as Anoka and St. Cloud, transferred by drays.) Volumes increased when the Panic of 1873 eased, as manufacturing grew and the city’s railroads extended reach. In late October 1875, more than 250 carloads of lumber, shingles, and lath filled the Milwaukee Road’s yards. St. Paul & Pacific was similarly busy, loading out about 20 cars of lumber per day. The following September, 1,095 carloads of wheat arrived for the city’s hungry flour mills, which dispatched in the same month 915 cars of flour and 173 cars of bran. In 1876 railroads delivered 25,312 cars of freight to Minneapolis and carried away 31,275.28

These impressive traffic statistics encouraged railroads to add capacity in or near the milling district. The Minneapolis & St. Louis’s early entry into the area had essentially created a shield between most of the important shippers, hugging the west bank, and the powerful Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul. To overcome this disadvantage, this company, along with opponents of the Washburns, in 1878 dredged up an old charter authorizing Minneapolis Eastern to build a line from St. Paul to Minneapolis. The Minneapolis Eastern proved to be a stooge for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul and the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha (client of the larger Chicago & North Western), and other anti-Washburn forces. Combined, they forced the M&StL to exchange and lease tracks in a way that broke its strong position. In the end, Minneapolis Eastern built only about three miles of track, all at the upper end of the west side milling district. It added a two-stall engine house and support buildings nearby and began operation in midsummer 1879 with plant switching and interchange of cars among CM&StP, St. Paul & Pacific and, eventually, the Omaha itself.29

In response, the Minneapolis & St. Louis increased its own capacity in the middle and lower end of the milling district with elevated tracks, level with the second floor of several shippers. It put down more yard tracks, erected a yard office at Eighth Avenue South and an engine house at Eleventh Avenue South (later moved to Nineteenth Avenue South at Bluff Street), and continued to handle a plurality of business in the district.30

The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, nevertheless, did more business at Minneapolis than any other single carrier, and its managers were determined to maintain that domination. Energized in part by its success in raiding M&StL’s rich domain with Minneapolis Eastern, CM&StP advanced on several fronts, including a new 10-mile “short line” between Minneapolis and St. Paul (shaving five miles from the original route by way of Mendota), as well as an impressive 31-mile cutoff westward from Minneapolis to its Hastings & Dakota line at Cologne. In 1880 the road decided to remove its cramped shop facility and roundhouse from downtown to South Minneapolis, where it erected a 24-stall roundhouse, substantial shop buildings, and other impressive facilities. Virtually all of the structures at the downtown location were eventually razed, although CM&StP did retain its turntable near Eighth Avenue.
Demolition freed up space for additional yard tracks to serve the large inbound and outbound freight houses near the passenger depot, a company-owned million-bushel grain elevator, and an independent wheat house. Reaching beyond its customers in the milling area, the railroad also ran spurs to Empire Elevator, Case Threshing Machine, and a hide-and-wool dealer south of Washington Avenue.31

Not to be forgotten was the former St. Paul & Pacific—now rechristened St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba and soon to be the Great Northern—led by the energetic and talented James J. Hill, who took greater interest in Minneapolis than had earlier managers. Hill in 1883 celebrated construction of a splendid stone-arch bridge over the Mississippi and in 1885 of a new passenger station at the foot of Hennepin Avenue, used by several other roads as well. Hill and associates in 1884 also wedged directly into the traffic-dense west side by creating Minneapolis Western. This switching and transfer company in 1892 completed a yard clinging to the river’s edge on the lower end of the district and added a bridge downstream from the stone structure.32

The Northern Pacific was a latecomer to the Minneapolis party, initially inching in through the back door, so to speak, with operating rights over the St. Paul & Pacific eastward from Sauk Rapids through the Mill City to St. Paul. NP later gained independent access from the west, built two bridges over the Mississippi at Minneapolis—one above Hennepin Avenue, one below—and constructed its own line to St. Paul, using the Minneapolis & St. Louis through the milling zone. Along with other relative newcomers, the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie and the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & St. Louis established yards and other facilities along the west bank of the river above Hill’s new passenger facility. A sidebar agreement between the NP and M&StL allowed the latter use of NP tracks into and out of St. Paul, and from 1886 to 1892 M&StL operated commuter trains between the two cities with eight intermediate stops, including one at a small frame depot at Tenth Avenue South.33

By 1890 the industrial landscape and railroad matrix along the Mississippi’s west bank in Minneapolis stood in mature form. Even so, a new entry, the Chicago Great Western, located its freight house and passenger depot at Washington Avenue and Tenth Avenue South, and in 1897–99 Milwaukee Road replaced its passenger terminal with a new Renaissance Revival station fronting on Third Avenue South along Washington Avenue. The three-story headhouse featured an elaborate 140-foot tower and a 600-foot train shed covering five tracks.34

Minneapolis and its railroads grew up together. “As a center of business,” opined the State Atlas in 1861, “Minneapolis and St. Anthony can have no real rival in Minnesota. The entire trade of the upper Mis-
Mississippi must from necessity center here.” Indeed, echoed the Tribune in the next decade, “Nature designed that a great city should be built at the Falls of St. Anthony.” But nature alone was inadequate. Railroads, too, were essential to the development of great cities. The Atlas in 1863 had recognized as much, declaring that “of all the great interests upon which our citizens must” put their shoulders, “none is more important than our present and prospective railroad enterprises.” Fifteen years later, with the age of railways well unfurled and Minneapolis a full player in the steamcar civilization, a Tribune writer invoked the obvious: “Railroads are the vital arteries of her life . . . the great iron duets . . . [enabling Minneapolis to] receive and disseminate its commerce and manufacturers, and all the new materials which enter into all their products.” This verity was writ large in the west bank milling district—“temples of mammon and hives of industry,” as one writer approvingly labeled it.35

Yet change was afoot. Lumber milling moved away from the falls and then disappeared from the local scene; flour milling continued apace well into the twentieth century, then declined and, likewise, made exit. So did machine shops and woolen mills. Railroads had provided the essential link between the city and its expansive hinterland and between the city’s manufacturers and their broad consumer base. Agents of profound change in their own right, the railroads now found themselves victims of change. The last passenger train departed from the Milwaukee Road station in 1971, and the final freight car was billed out of the west side industrial area a few years later. Dismantlers picked up the rail to end the era. As the writer from 1867 might have put it: “We live in an age of improvement.”36