

Cahill House, St. Paul



AMONG ST. PAUL'S prime architectural curiosities is a rugged stone house perched on a hilltop lot at 1999 Sargent Avenue in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood. Inevitably dubbed the "castle," the house appears to be the remnants of an ancient fortress mysteriously marooned amid early-twentieth-century bungalows, foursquares, and Period Revival cottages. In fact, the "castle" dates only to 1930, and how it came to be is quite a story.

It was built for George and Mary Cahill, who did not set out to create a novelty. George was a lawyer, while Mary seems to have been a designer-builder at heart. The couple initially turned to St. Paul architect Charles Saxby Elwood to draw up plans for the house, which was to be a Tudor Revival-style mansion complete with half-timbered walls and dramatic gables rising above a base built of random slabs of local Platteville limestone.

Construction began in 1929, not long before the stock market crashed and money gushed from middle-class households like water from a burst main. The Cahills, it appears, found themselves in chastened circumstances, and their dream house must



Cahill House, Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, 2007 (DAVID ENBLOM)

have suddenly seemed unattainable, even though its 16-inch-thick lower walls had already been built. That's when Mary Cahill stepped in to finish the design herself.

She eliminated the upper floors, leaving only the stone base, which under her supervision took on a functionalist look that included a flat roof and deep-set, industrial-style casement windows. Inside, she laid out an open, flowing plan that featured only one bedroom. The house instantly became the talk of the neighborhood, although not everyone admired its unconventional appearance.

In an interview with the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in August 1930, Mrs. Cahill admitted that the house wasn't

"perfection," noting that "it is not easy to do something that has never been done." She added, "Sometimes I think I see the neighbors eyeing me queerly." The newspaper never mentioned that the house was a scaled-back version of an earlier plan, suggesting instead that Mrs. Cahill developed her peculiar design from the start.

In the early 2000s, the house was updated by its then architect-owner, but most of its original elements remain, and it continues to be one of the small wonders of the city.

—LARRY MILLETT

Larry Millett, retired architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, is the author of the illustrated handbook AIA Guide to the Twin Cities.



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