

## Charles H. Prior House and Prior Building, Minneapolis



AS THE COMMERCIAL CORE of downtown Minneapolis expanded in response to the city's rapid growth in the early-twentieth century, numerous mansions succumbed to redevelopment. These homes had been built, beginning in the 1860s, along downtown's southern and western fringes, and many of them occupied large lots. Once commerce encroached, most homeowners opted to sell their property, usually at a nice profit, and then moved to Lowry Hill, Park Avenue, or one of the city's other prime residential venues. But as this photograph from 1941 demonstrates, a few mansions survived for many additional decades by embracing commerce rather than fighting it.

Taken from a vantage point looking southeast across Third Avenue South near Seventh Street, the photograph shows the historic Charles H. Prior house, its roof already stripped away in preparation for demolition. Prior was an engineer who became a general superintendent of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad before branching off into real estate and other business interests. (Prior Lake in Scott County is named after him.) He built his

mansion in about 1880 at 306 Seventh Street South, in what was then prime mansion territory. By 1900, however, commercial development was filling in all around the house, and Prior decided to take action.

Instead of demolishing the old family home, he took the unusual step of building a commercial block around it. The L-shaped, two-story brick shop-and-office building went up in about 1905, extending a half-block along Third Avenue South and an equal distance on Seventh Street. Known inevitably as the Prior Building, the new structure effectively hid from view all but the roof of the mansion.

It's not known how this peculiar mix of home and businesses on the same site worked out, although it appears Prior and his wife moved to a new residence near Loring Park early in the new century. One of Prior's sons later occupied the old mansion for a time, but city directories indicate the property was vacant by 1930. The commercial building came down with the house in 1941, and the entire block is now occupied by the Hennepin County Government Center.

—Larry Millett

*Larry Millett, retired architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, is the author of (among many other books) Once There Were Castles: Lost Mansions and Estates of the Twin Cities (2011).*

*The L-shaped Prior Building, 621–637 Third Avenue South, wrapped around the roofless Prior mansion, 1941 (MHS COLLECTIONS)*





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