

## Ford Plant, St. Paul



HENRY FORD was a man who knew what he wanted, and he wasn't shy about getting it. In 1923 what he wanted was a new assembly plant in St. Paul for the production of the Model T, the invention that introduced Americans to the automobile. The Model T made Henry Ford rich and changed the world.

The Ford Motor Company already owned two multistory assembly buildings in the Twin Cities, but due to its owner's revolutionary new method of production—the moving assembly line—an expansive, one-story facility was needed. Ford planned to build the plant on a bluff 100 feet above the Mississippi River in the Highland Park neighborhood.

The site had many advantages; primary among them was the potential for hydroelectric power, courtesy of the recently constructed Lock and Dam No. 1. It took a year—and a license from the federal government—for Ford to build his power plant. The site was also rich in silica, a key ingredient in the manufacture of glass used in the Model T. The sandstone composition of portions of the bluff permitted the excavation of tunnels to connect factory production areas with the navigable river below and lucrative markets beyond.

Ford's favored architect, Albert Kahn, designed a utilitarian building that was also an elegant one. But it was Ford who insisted that the classically detailed structure face the Mississippi River like a modern-day temple to the gods of transportation on a midwestern acropolis.

The first Model T rolled off the production line in 1925. Eighty-six years and millions of cars and trucks later, vehicle production ceased at the plant. Within two years, demolition of Ford's visionary building was underway.



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*Aerial view of the revolutionary new assembly plant; photo by A. F. Raymond, 1937.*

Today, it is impossible to conceive of a world without automobiles. And for many Minnesotans it's also inconceivable to imagine St. Paul without a Ford plant, the place where the geography and resources of Minnesota met the cutting edge of automotive production.

—Jane King Hession

*Jane King Hession is an architectural writer and historian based in Edina. With Bill Olexy, she recently wrote and produced the documentary, Wright on the Park: Saving the City National Bank and Park Inn.*

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