

Martin and Morrison Block, Minneapolis



THE UPTON BLOCK (today the Aster Café) may be older and the flamboyant Pracna Saloon building, better known. But the elegant building between them, the Martin and Morrison Block, is the architectural gem among the historic storefronts that crown Main Street Southeast in old St. Anthony.

What appears to be one building is actually two, joined by a party wall. Soon after entrepreneur John Martin began construction of his uniform, four-bay building in spring 1858, fellow Vermont native Francis (Frank) Morrison announced he would build three more bays next door. The Morrison building explicitly emulated the Martin block's design, a classical façade of native Platteville limestone, described in a contemporary account as "the neatest and most tasty front" of any in the city.

In its early years, the block was the most desirable retail and professional space in the young settlement at the falls. Among the first tenants behind the street-level arcade supported by cast-iron Corinthian columns was the William Wales Bookstore. Book lovers of a certain age today fondly recall Gringolet Books, with its ahead-of-the-times café, occupying the same space in the early 1980s.

By the 1870s, however, the Martin and Morrison Block, like other buildings on Main Street, was converted to industrial use, a constant into the midtwentieth century. Architectural historians could still see the beauty



Buildings at 125–127 Main Street Southeast, still elegant in 1934 when F. W. Brown photographed them for the Historic American Buildings Survey (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

beyond its partially destroyed cornice and down-at-the-heels appearance. In 1934 the Historic American Buildings Survey noted "the quality of its design and workmanship, the stones of the arches being perfectly fitted with very fine jointing." Similarly, architectural historian Donald Torbert singled it out in 1958 as "most refined in design and in execution."

Street life returned to Main Street with the multimillion-dollar renovations of its historic buildings in the late 1970s. The St. Anthony Main and Riverplace shopping and entertainment centers may have gone bust, but Main Street's architecture, restaurants, and riverside location continue to make it a destination. Restored to its former glory in 1985, the Martin and Morrison Block again houses

businesses—in 2014, Segway tours and a party room for the Aster Café.

—Laura Weber

Sources: 1934 Historic American Building Survey documentation; *Saint Anthony Falls Rediscovered*, restoration and preservation study for the Minneapolis Riverfront Development Coordination Board, 1980; Penny A. Petersen, *Hiding In Plain Sight: Minneapolis' First Neighborhood* (2000).

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