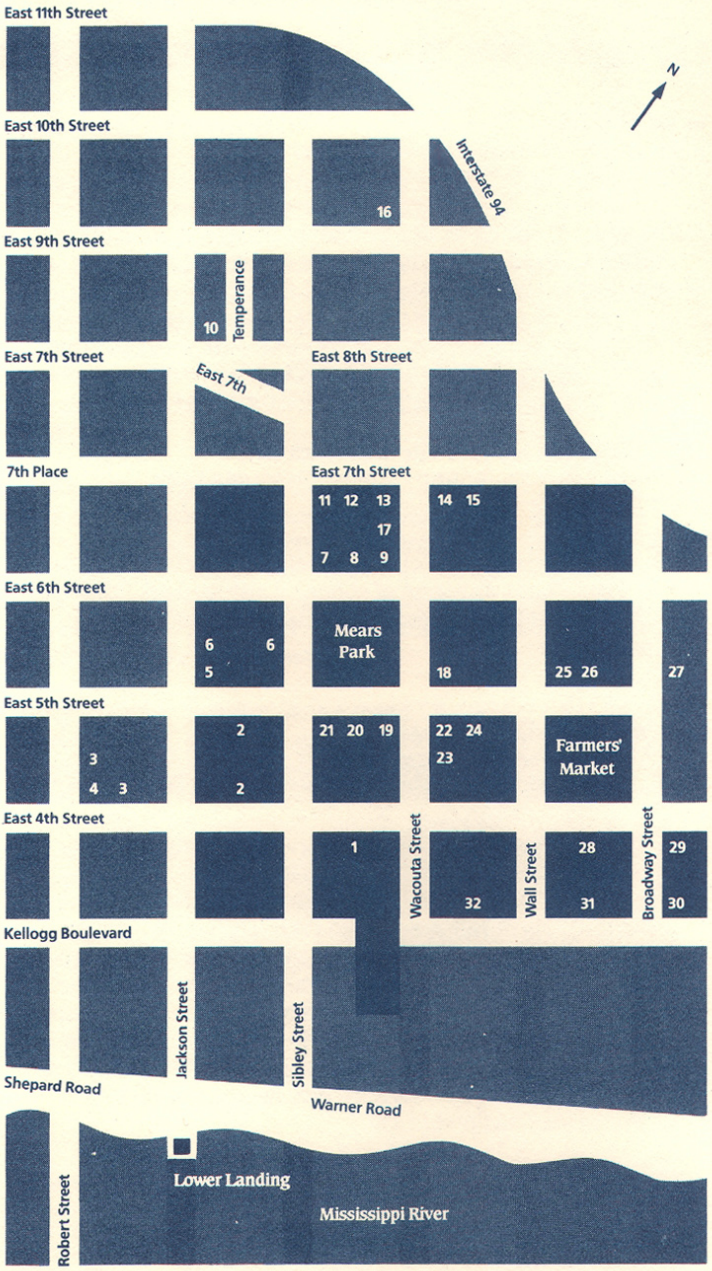
HISTORIC LOWERTOWN

A Walking Tour

The Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission hopes that this tour will help you look more closely at Lowertown. Take an hour for the entire route, or visit one or two buildings as time allows. Among the layers of Lowertown history, you may find ghosts of the warehousemen, railroad tycoons, and other colorful characters who worked here.



Saint Paul's

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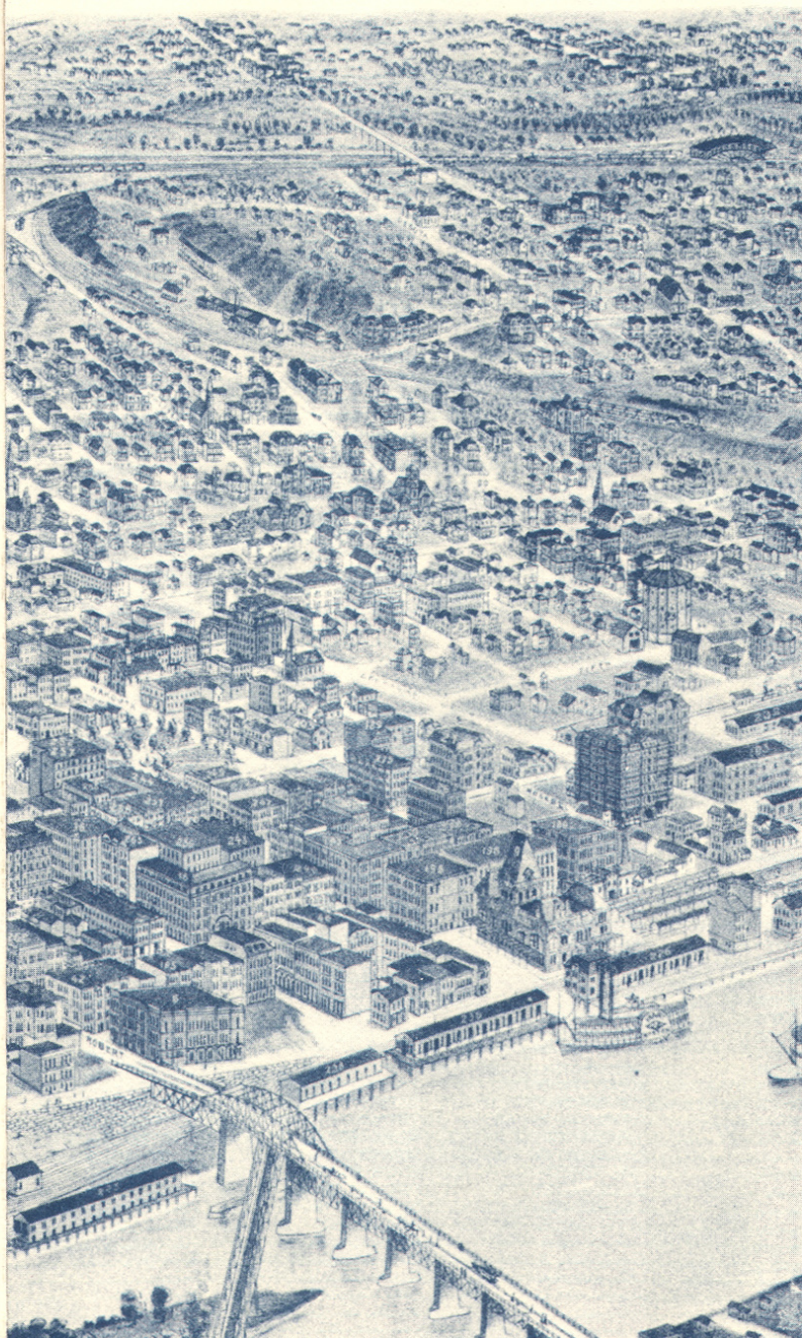
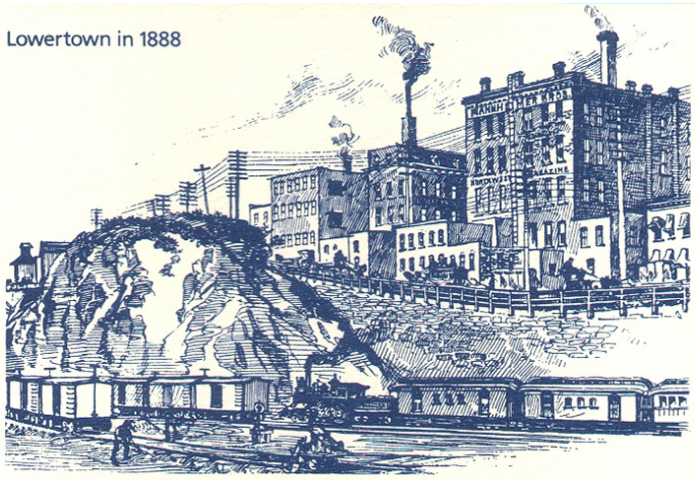


Lowertown in 1888



Layers of history give Lowertown its unique appeal. The Saint Paul neighborhood that sprouted at the "Lower Landing" on the Mississippi River grew into a major warehouse and distribution center serving the entire Upper Midwest. Lowertown's railroad, manufacturing, and wholesaling companies expressed their sense of pride and permanence in the structures they erected nearly a century ago. In 1983 Lowertown was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, giving the area protection under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The next year, the City of Saint Paul created The Lowertown Heritage Preservation District. Thanks to restoration and adaptive use, Lowertown enjoys new vitality in the mix of commercial and residential activities that make up this urban village.

Begin your tour in front of the Union Depot on Fourth Street between Sibley and Wacouta. Use the map on the back panel as a guide.

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1 Union Depot/*Depot Place*
214 East Fourth Street *(between Sibley and Wacouta)*
1917-23, Charles S. Frost

Riverboat traffic gave Saint Paul its start, but with the railroads, the city grew into a major freight transfer center. By the early 1880s, more than a dozen rail companies operated out of separate stations in the city. This spacious building replaced the first Union Depot, lost to fire in 1913. A promising future seemed assured by the bustle of travelers. Freight workers handled thousands of cans of milk and 750 tons of mail each day. But the Panama Canal, opened in 1914, diverted the transcontinental freight traffic that formed the backbone of the railroad industry. The "Good Roads Movement" of the 1920s improved automobile travel. The echo of the stationmaster's voice fell silent in 1971, but adaptive use restored the cavernous space with its grand skylit atrium for the enjoyment of restaurant patrons.

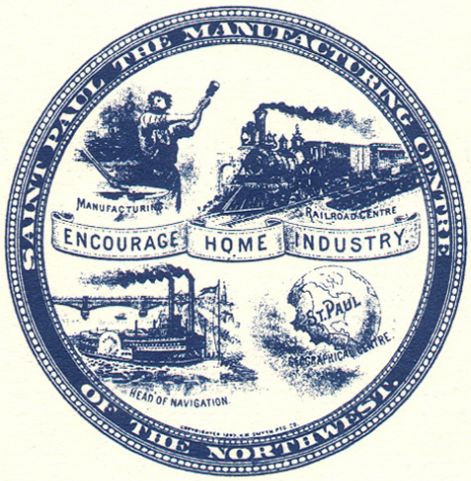
Cross Fourth Street; walk west one-half block and enter the Railroad and Bank Building.

2 Railroad and Bank Building/*First Trust Center*
176 East Fifth Street *(enter on Fourth between Jackson and Sibley)*
1914-16, Charles S. Frost

James J. Hill crowned his extraordinary career with a plan to build one office building for his Great Northern and Northern Pacific railways and First National Bank. This sixteen-story Classical Revival structure was the largest office building in the Twin Cities until construction of the fifty-one story IDS Center in Minneapolis (1968-73). The simple, functional exterior masks innovative internal systems that fascinated Hill, who experimented with natural air conditioning in his Summit Avenue home before introducing it here. A six-mile network of pneumatic tubes enhanced internal communication. The elegant banking floor in the central atrium has been restored for use as an indoor plaza.

Return to Fourth Street; cross Jackson and walk west. Note the eagle statue by Saint-Gaudens.

Cass Gilbert



3 Endicott Buildings
141 East Fourth Street *(between Robert and Jackson)*
and 350 North Robert Street *(between Fourth and Fifth)*
1891, Cass Gilbert

Cass Gilbert, architect of the State Capitol, designed the Endicott Buildings as an arcade to wrap around the Pioneer Press Building, then under construction at Fourth and Robert streets. The Italian Renaissance facade with floral designs carved in red sandstone earned early appreciation from the historic preservation movement. But misguided efforts to clean a century's accumulation of soot from the facade taught preservationists the painful lesson that sandblasting can damage fragile details.

Enter Endicott on Fourth Street; pass through arcade into the Pioneer Building; or return to Fourth and enter on Robert Street.

4 Pioneer Building
340 North Robert Street *(at Fourth)*
1889, Solon Beman

The Pioneer Building's owner boasted on his stationery that the building stood "At the Business Heart of Saint Paul." The high value of land in the "100 percent block" demanded a tall building, so the Pioneer Press looked to Chicago for an architect familiar with the new metal skeleton-frame construction technique that made skyscrapers possible. The twelve-story walls rose higher than any others in Saint Paul. An elevator ride to the top floor offers an excellent view of the inner workings of the lift mechanism, the steel bracing that reinforces the four floors added in 1910, and the only surviving example of an open light court in the Twin Cities.

Exit on Robert Street. Turn right to corner; walk east on Fifth Street to Merchants National Bank.

5 Merchants National Bank/*McColl Building*
366-68 Jackson Street *(at Fifth)*
1892, Edward P. Bassford

When the Merchants National Bank opened in 1892, its two-story lobby attracted a great deal of attention. Public appreciation for the warm red stone and lively architectural treatment led to protest when a proposal to widen Jackson Street threatened this jewel of Romanesque Revival design with demolition in 1967.

The diminutive building could easily have been overpowered by Galtier Plaza. However, Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation took up the challenge to develop guidelines for new construction that would complement historical structures. They recommended dropping the height of the new building and adding an arch detail on the Fifth Street facade to echo the bank's design.

Enter Galtier Plaza on Jackson Street; walk through arcade to exit on Sibley. Cross at Sixth Street corner to Mears Park.

6 Galtier Plaza
175 East Fifth Street *(enter on Jackson between Fifth and Sixth)*
1985, Miller, Hanson, Westerbeck, and Bell

Galtier Plaza contributes to inner-city revitalization by mixing activities traditionally separated in urban life. Here, retail and office space overlap living and recreational space, creating what city planners refer to as an "urban village." The soaring residential towers rise from opposite corners of the block to reduce the impact of their mass. Terraces step down gradually to meet the reconstructed historic facades facing Mears Park and to maintain the scale of other buildings around the park.

View buildings #6-9 from northwest corner of Mears Park.

from Noyes Brothers and Cutler catalogue, 1887

BLESSING TO SUFFERING. CONVENIENT FOR RETAILERS.

James J. Hill

7 Noyes Brothers and Cutler Building/*Park Square Court*
400 Sibley Street *(at Sixth)*
1886, 1889, 1906, J. Walter Stevens

Noyes Brothers and Cutler, importers and wholesale druggists, moved into their new five-story building at Sixth and Sibley in 1886. Pharmacists mixed medicines in the laboratories on the upper floors while clerks on the ground floor filled orders from new drug stores as far away as Montana. Noyes Brothers and Cutler grew into the largest wholesale drug firm in the Northwest and found it necessary to add three additional bays to the building in 1906. In the 1970s Minnesota Public Radio broadcast the Prairie Home Companion from a tiny theater on the second floor until the show's popularity called for larger quarters.

8 Konantz Saddlery Company Building/*Railroader Printing House*
227-31 East Sixth Street *(between Sibley and Wacouta)*
1893, J. Walter Stevens

The Konantz Saddlery Company started making harness and saddles in Quincy, Illinois, in 1871. They opened a Saint Paul branch in 1876. Later, from the early 1920s until the 1980s, this building was the home of the Railroader Printing House, producer of thousands of tickets, menus, and railroad promotional materials.

9 Koehler and Hinrichs Company/*Stevens Building*
235-37 East Sixth Street *(at Wacouta)*
1891, J. Walter Stevens

Koehler and Hinrichs established a wholesale house for butchers' and meat packers' supplies at Fourth and Saint Peter streets in 1884. This Sixth Street location offered better access to railyards. By 1901, they had outgrown this building and moved to 255 East Kellogg. Many Lowertown wholesalers followed similar relocation patterns as railroad development expanded their markets.

Cross Sixth Street; walk north on Sibley to Seventh. View building #10 from this corner.

Profiles in Prosperity

James J. Hill, Saint Paul's legendary "Empire Builder," came to Minnesota Territory from Rockwood, Ontario, in 1856 and took a position as warehouse clerk at the Lower Landing. A successful businessman by his mid-forties, Hill went into railroading. With astonishing energy and imagination, he built his Great Northern Railway into the centerpiece of a railroad network that dominated the Northwest.

Conrad Gotzian came to Saint Paul about the same time as Hill. A German immigrant, Gotzian established a shoe manufacturing firm that continued to flourish into this century. The two men were fast friends and built neighboring houses in the residential area surrounding the First Baptist Church (#16).

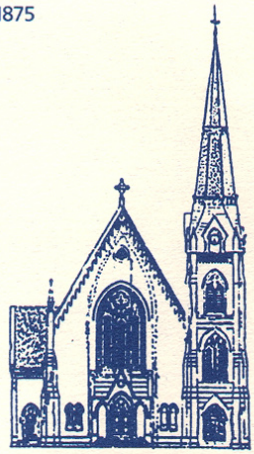
Women as well as men recognized the profit potential of investing in construction in Lowertown. Celestia Gilbert, Alice Jackson, and Carol Currie owned adjacent buildings (#8 and #9), which they rented to wholesale firms.

Fashionable Facades

Between 1880 and 1920, the boom period for Lowertown, changes in building materials enabled engineers and architects to create taller and larger buildings. The form they developed to give visual organization to these buildings imitates a column. The first stories are the base, intermediate stories the shaft, upper floors the capital. Later changes, such as removal of a cornice or storefront remodeling, can completely obscure the integrity of this design scheme.

Size and decoration are clues to the age of a building. Ornate styles such as Renaissance Revival and Romanesque Revival were popular during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century, buildings in the Classical Revival style, which had less ornamentation, came into favor.

First Baptist Church, 1875



Building Blocks of Lowertown

The impressive cast-iron columns at the entrance to Park Square Court date this addition to 1889. The manufacturer, Saint Paul Foundry, operated two cupola furnaces on Como Avenue, casting architectural ironwork for building facades and internal supports. Cast-iron architectural elements provided an inexpensive way to decorate storefronts with intricate details. Some of the few surviving examples of cast-iron storefronts, on buildings #14, #15, and #24, offer a glimpse of what much of downtown Saint Paul looked like in the 1880s.

The visual unity of Lowertown arises from similarities in construction materials. Much of the brick and stone came from local sources. Red brick came from a brickyard in Lilydale, a few miles upriver from Saint Paul. Cream brick came from Chaska, on the Minnesota River southwest of Minneapolis. Both yards shipped their brick by water, making this an inexpensive as well as durable building material.

Nearby quarries supplied facing stone. The pink granite in the Pioneer Building (#4) came from Rockville. The pale stone at the base of the Railroad and Bank Building (#2) is Hinckley sandstone. The striking decorative effect of the Merchants National Bank (#5) derives from the combination of Saint Cloud granite with easily-carved Portage Entry sandstone from the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan. Foundations and side walls were often built of local limestone, cut from the bluffs along the river. Manufactured cornices and many other building supplies could be purchased from suppliers located here in Lowertown.

10 Walsh Block
191 East Seventh Street *(at Temperance)*
1888, Edward P. Bassford

The Walsh Block illustrates a multiple-use plan typical of shops on a commercial street. Three families could live above the first-floor storefront.

Cross Seventh Street and walk east to Wacouta. View buildings #11-16 from this corner.

11-15 Buildings on the south side of Seventh Street
208-66 East Seventh Street *(between Sibley and Wall)*
ca. 1875-87

The extroverted designs of the historic buildings on Seventh Street caught the attention of shoppers and workers riding the streetcars and farmers hauling produce along the bustling thoroughfare.

16 First Baptist Church
499 Wacouta Street *(at Ninth)*
1875, William Boyington, adapted by master builder Monroe Sheire

The First Baptist Church links Lowertown with its earliest history. The congregation built its first chapel in 1851 on a prominence called Mount Pisgah which soon earned the nickname Baptist Hill, now Mears Park. The present church replaced a second "meeting house" on Wacouta near Eighth Street, built at the center of Saint Paul's residential area. The original 190-foot spire proved too heavy for foundations based in swampy ground, so it was removed in 1945. Norman Mears supported the church's commitment to stay in the inner city as part of his vision of a Lowertown revival, symbolized by the steeple reconstruction in 1965.

Cross Seventh Street; walk south on Wacouta.

T.L.BLOOD & CO.

(INCORPORATED 1903.)

MANUFACTURERS AND WHOLESALE DEALERS IN

PAINTS AND PAINTERS' MATERIALS

17 Wacouta Street Warehouse/*Gilbert Building*
413 Wacouta Street *(between Sixth and Seventh)*
1893-94, Cass Gilbert

The Boston Northwest Realty Company saw great money-making potential in the commercial expansion of Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth in the early 1890s. They built a warehouse in each city, choosing Cass Gilbert to design the Saint Paul structure. The handsome corbelled brick cornice and graceful windows demonstrate the attention to detail that earned Gilbert his national reputation. More important to the first tenant, T. L. Blood's Northwestern Paint Works, was the "slow-burn" construction. Exterior walls of brick support massive, fire-resistant timbers. Cast-iron columns provide interior support without taking up valuable space. Today, tenants choose this building for its meticulous renovation and ready access to the skyways.

Continue south on Wacouta to the southeast corner of Mears Park. View buildings #18-23 from this corner.

18 Finch, Van Slyck, and McConville Dry Goods Co./*Cosmopolitan Building*
366 Wacouta Street *(at Fifth)*
1911, James F. Denson, architect; C. A. P. Turner, engineer
1923 addition, Clarence Johnston Jr., architect

Finch, Van Slyck, and McConville started as a dry goods store in 1856 and moved into wholesaling by the early 1860s. By the turn of the century, they had become the largest dry goods wholesaler in Saint Paul. Thanks to C. A. P. Turner, an innovative Minneapolis engineer, Finch, Van Slyck, and McConville were able to consolidate their citywide operation in one new warehouse in 1911. Turner's revolutionary reinforced-concrete construction technique called for flat slabs supported by mushroom-capped columns. The system could support heavy loads across broad spans and soon became standard practice in reinforced-concrete construction. Today, the voluminous space provides ample room for 255 condominiums.

John Wann Building

19 Powers Dry Goods Company/*Mears Park Centre*
230-36 East Fifth Street *(at Wacouta)*
1892, J. Walter Stevens

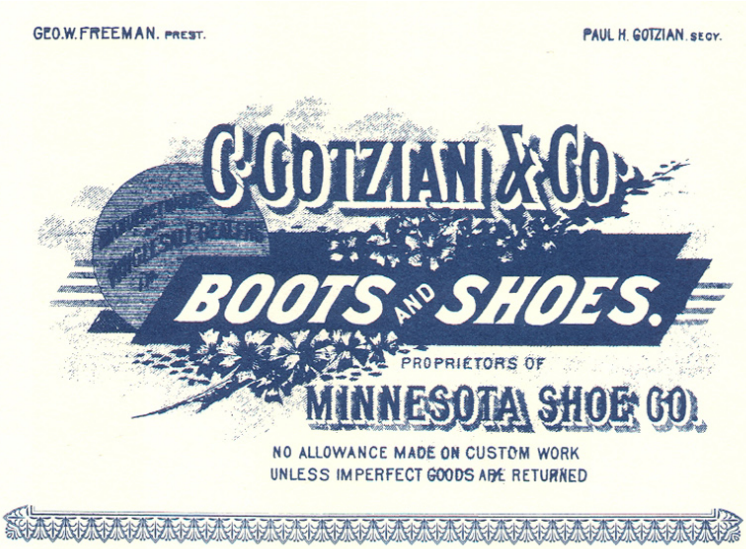
20 Fairbanks-Morse Company/*Mears Park Centre*
220 East Fifth Street *(between Sibley and Wacouta)*
1895, J. Walter Stevens

21 John Wann Building/*Spin Knits Fabric Company*
350-64 Sibley *(at Fifth)*
1882, attributed to J. Walter Stevens

The buildings on the south side of Mears Park share many business connections. Noyes Brothers and Cutler rented the John Wann Building before constructing their own building a block to the north. After only a few years, they built the Powers Dry Goods Company building, apparently with that tenant in mind. Powers grew into a major Twin Cities department store before Donaldson's (now Carson Pirie Scott) bought them out in a struggle to keep pace with Dayton's.

Noyes Brothers and Cutler employed Stevens to design yet another wholesale house. The Fairbanks-Morse Company, makers of scales, windmills, pumps, and engines, took over this building in the 1920s. Adaptation for use as Metropolitan Council offices required expanded space, so renovators combined this structure with its neighbor. By strategic location of elevators and connecting stairways, they were able to compensate for different floor heights in the two buildings.

The Wann building, with its neighbor, illustrates the evolution of decorative fashions in architecture. The Wann building still retains the rounded window hoods characteristic of its Italianate design, although the original heavy cornice and elaborate entrance disappeared years ago. The Fairbanks-Morse building demonstrates the more subdued features of the Classical Revival style, using contrasting brick and stone for decorative effects in place of fancy carving or brickwork.



22 Gotzian Shoe Company/*Parkside*
242-80 East Fifth Street *(at Wacouta)*
1892, Cass Gilbert

23 Paul Gotzian Building/*American House*
352 Wacouta Street *(between Fourth and Fifth)*
1895, Cass Gilbert

Adjacent buildings illustrate Cass Gilbert's commercial work in the 1890s. After nearly forty years of steady growth, Gotzian Shoe Company could afford to hire one of Saint Paul's most prominent architects to design a new factory and wholesale outlet. Paul Gotzian turned the outlet into rental property soon after its construction. Years of use by the American Beauty Macaroni Company gave the building its familiar name. In the 1980s, the factory was renovated into residential space.

Walk east on Fifth Street to Farmers' Market.

24 J. H. Mahler Company
258-60 East Fifth Street *(between Wacouta and Wall)*
ca. 1883

This narrow storefront preserves the scale of Saint Paul buildings from the generation preceding the warehouses that dominate Lowertown today. Italianate details like the tall windows and heavy cornice brackets enjoyed great popularity. Such buildings rarely survive the competition for space except in small towns. Cast-iron columns still bear the founder's stamp: Washington Foundry, Adams and Isher Co., Saint Paul. The building housed James H. Mahler's carriage and buggy dealership until 1889, when it became part of the expanding Gotzian Shoe Company complex.

25 Crane Building
281-87 East Fifth Street *(at Wall)*
1904, Reed and Stem

In 1897, Crane and Ordway Company led the Northwest in the manufacture of valves, fittings, and supplies for steam engines. Their engines probably powered the hoists used in constructing Lowertown buildings and drove the freight elevators that made the multistory structures practical. A year after the completion of this building, Lucius P. Ordway gained control of Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing, which became 3M, now one of Minnesota's most important corporations.

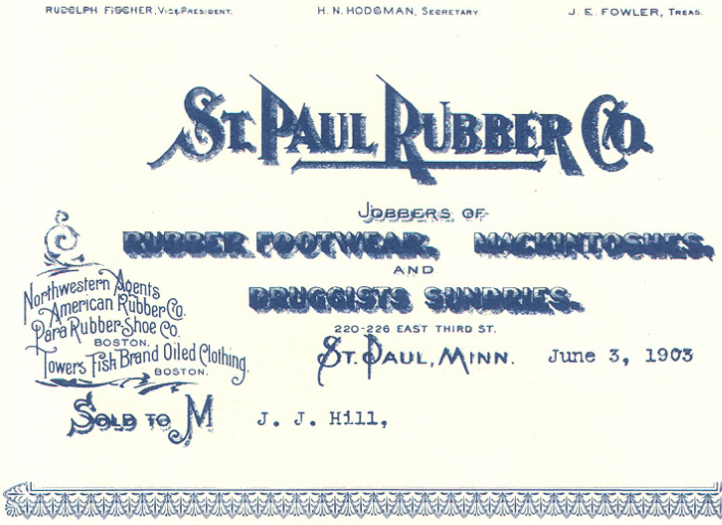
26 Tighe Building/*Market House*
289 East Fifth Street *(between Wall and Broadway)*
1902, J. Walter Stevens

Like many others in Lowertown, this warehouse was built as a rental property with considerable unheated space for storage. Ambrose Tighe, who married one of Conrad Gotzian's daughters, apparently considered capital investment in Lowertown a good way to make his money work.

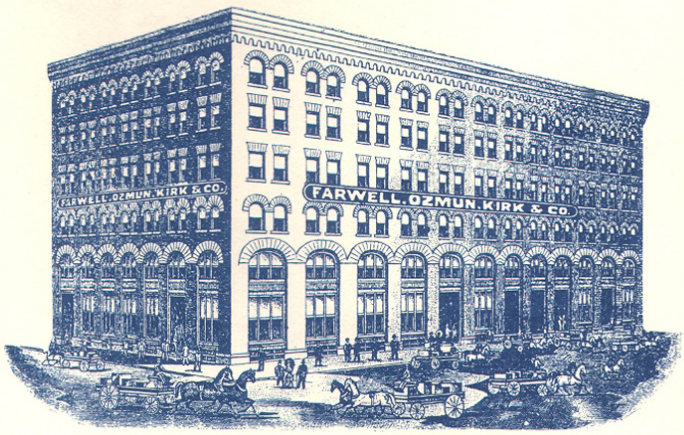
27 Gillette Factory
310 East Fifth Street *(at Broadway)*
1969

Gillette Company bought the Toni permanent-wave business from its Saint Paul inventor, R. N. W. Harris, in 1948. The Toni factory stood on the site of the Farmers' Market. In 1969, Gillette built this four-square-block manufacturing and distribution center. This welcome investment came at the lowest ebb of Lowertown's fortunes; it helped to keep the district viable until the historic preservation movement gained enough momentum to trigger restoration efforts in the 1970s.

Walk south on Broadway to Fourth Street.



Griggs and Foster's F. O. K. Building



28 Saint Paul Rubber Company/*Lowertown Commons*
300 East Fourth Street *(between Wall and Broadway)*
1905

Originally built for the Saint Paul Rubber Company, this building supported the tremendous weight of E. W. Honza Printing Company's presses and type for many years. Redevelopers found that rot and foundation settling had taken a toll by the mid 1980s. They had to rebuild nearly one-fourth of the structure to make it fit for reuse as apartments. A beautiful central atrium transforms former industrial space into desirable living space.

29 Northern Pacific Railway Warehouse/*Northern Warehouse Building*
308 Prince Street *(at Broadway)*
1907-08, Northern Pacific Railway Company

The Northern Pacific Railway completed construction to the West Coast in 1883. Thereafter, the line played a key role in supplying merchants in North Dakota and Montana with goods from Lowertown wholesalers. Lines connecting with Great Lakes shipping routes created an efficient link with the East Coast. Beyond this warehouse stands one row of an earlier generation of railroad freight houses, the last survivors in Lowertown of a structure once common to all rail centers.

Continue south on Broadway to Kellogg; walk west to Wall.

30 Griggs and Foster's F.O.K. Building
300 Broadway Street *(at Kellogg)*
1894, Edward P. Bassford

Real estate investors financed this warehouse for use by Farwell, Ozmun, and Kirk, hardware wholesalers. At the turn of the century, F.O.K. salesmen canvassed a territory stretching west to the Pacific Coast and south as far as Arkansas. Today, the company lives on as the national chain of OK Hardware Stores. This massive warehouse illustrates the pleasing effect of rhythmic Romanesque Revival designs in commercial architecture.

31 Great Northern Building/*James J. Hill Office Building*
281-99 East Kellogg Boulevard *(between Wall and Broadway)*
1887, James Brodie

James J. Hill's success at building a railroad empire made him Saint Paul's most famous citizen. He earned his place in history with a combination of aggressive business sense and incessant hard work. His Great Northern Railway had its headquarters in this building until it moved to the Railroad and Bank Building shortly after his death in 1916. The archway on Broadway where Hill entered the enclosed courtyard of his office building has been a local landmark for over a century.

32 Wells Fargo Express Company/*Johnson's Service Station*
271 East Kellogg Boulevard *(between Wacouta and Wall)*
1907, J. Walter Stevens

Since before the Civil War, Wells Fargo expedited national parcel delivery in areas beyond the reach of railroads. By the time this building was constructed, Wells Fargo had become part of American Express, organized principally to enable immigrants to send money to their families overseas. Conveniently located near the Depot, this building served largely clerical functions, which may account for its small scale.

Walk north on Wall to Fourth Street and west on Fourth to return to Union Depot.

Finish your tour by surveying the buildings in Lowertown as they preside over the banks of the Mississippi River. Modern air and automobile travelers miss the impressive view that greeted steamboat and rail passengers in the last century, but in the historical fabric of Lowertown, they can still find evidence of the energy and enterprise that built Saint Paul.