

Capitol Area

**Minnesota State Capitol Mall Historic District:
An Evaluation of the Cedar Street and John Ireland Boulevard Approaches
and Boundary Delineation**



The Minnesota State Capitol Mall and Approaches in 1983
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Background

In 1995, the State Capitol Mall was evaluated as part of the Cultural Resources Investigations for the Central Corridor project. At that time it was placed into a historic context that was called Urban Renewal in Saint Paul.¹⁷ It was recommended for National Register listing under Criterion A for its significance in community planning and development. The State Capitol Mall was characterized as originating from a plan by Cass Gilbert that was modified by Clarence Johnston, Jr., and Arthur Nichols, and brought to fruition by the impact of urban renewal.¹⁸

The area that was reviewed was bounded by University Avenue on the north, Robert Street on the east, Twelfth Street on the south, and Rice Street on the west. Seven contributing buildings were identified:

Minnesota State Capitol Building, 1893-1904,¹⁹ Cass Gilbert, National Register listed
Minnesota Historical Society, 1915-1917, Clarence H. Johnston, Sr., National Register listed

State Office Building, 1932, Clarence H. Johnston, Jr.

Veterans' Administration Building, 1953, W. Brooks Cavin, Jr.

Transportation Building, 1956, Ellerbe Architects

Centennial Building, 1958, Thorshov and Cerny

Armory Building, 1961-1962, Bettenburg, Townsend, Stolte, and Comb

The evaluation also listed the following sculpture, as identified in the 1986 survey of public buildings in Minnesota by Patricia Murphy²⁰:

John A. Johnson, 1912, Andrew O'Connor

Knute Nelson, 1928, John K. Daniels

Christopher Columbus, 1931, Charles Brioschi

"The Promise," 1955, Alonzo Hauser

"Earthbound," 1956, John K. Daniels

Governor Floyd B. Olson, 1958, Amerigo Brioschi

"Memorial to the Living," 1981 Roger Brodin

Charles A. Lindbergh, 1985, Paul Granlund

It also noted the Vietnam Memorial, erected in 1992 and designed by Richard Laffin, architect; Stan Sears, Jake Castillo, and Nina Archibald, sculptors. Memorials have been

¹⁷ "Phase I and II Cultural Resource Investigations of the Central Corridor, Minneapolis, Hennepin County, and St. Paul, Ramsey County," July 1995, 8-15 – 8-26.

¹⁸ Cultural Resources 1995, 9-89 – 9-91.

¹⁹ These are the dates given in the 1995 report. The dates more commonly used are from 1895, when Gilbert received the commission for the building, until 1905 when the building opened.

²⁰ Patricia Murphy, *The Public Buildings of the State of Minnesota: An Architectural Heritage* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986), 58.

added to the Mall commemorating Roy Wilkins (1995), Peace Officers (1995), and Korean War Veterans (1998).²¹

There was no specific boundary proposed or boundary map attached with this evaluation.

In 1995 study, the proposed CCLRT route would have run through a tunnel under the lawn in front of the capitol. With the DEIS that was released in 2006, the route had been changed to extend along University Avenue on the north side of the Capitol. The change in route required further evaluation of components of the State Capitol Mall as well as the State Capitol Power Plant, designed by Cass Gilbert and located at the southwest corner of University Avenue and Robert Street. It was recommended that the Power Plant be included in the boundaries of the State Capitol Mall Historic District .²²

In the review of the DEIS, SHPO concurred that the Minnesota State Capitol Mall and the State Capitol Power Plant are eligible for the National Register, but stated that a boundary map was needed and concurred that the Power Plant be included in the historic district. In October 2007 MnDOT-CRU and SHPO concurred on a boundary map. Subsequently, public review of the preliminary engineering studies for the route of the CCLRT in the area of the State Capitol Mall, especially along Cedar Street, has raised further issues about the historic nature of the approaches to the State Capitol and whether they should be included in the boundary of the historic district.

²¹ See Minnesota State Capitol Mall Map on the website of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board, www.caapb.state.mn.us/capmap.htm.

²² “Phase II Architectural History Investigation for the Proposed Central Transit Corridor, Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, Minnesota,” submitted by the 106 Group Ltd. to Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority, September 2004, 246-251.

The Minnesota State Capitol Mall and Its Approaches

When Cass Gilbert designed the State Capitol, he envisioned his grand Beaux-Arts building in a setting inspired by the contemporary City Beautiful movement with plazas and axial and radial avenues that would culminate at the Capitol building. Even though the building was sited on a hill above downtown Saint Paul, the Capitol Commissioners were initially unable to acquire the amount of land needed for such a setting, and Gilbert's commission was limited to the building only. As the Capitol building was taking form, Gilbert began a campaign to advocate for a plan that would provide a proper setting. The earliest Gilbert plan dates from 1902, and it was refined and expanded in 1903.²³

The latter had sufficient support that the Saint Paul City Council appointed a citizens' committee to investigate the Capitol approaches proposed in Gilbert's plans. "The Report of the Capitol Approaches Commission to the Common Council of St. Paul" was issued in 1906. The plan envisioned three approaches to the capitol: a central approach on axis that would lead from the front of the Capitol downtown to Seven Corners; a Cedar Street mall with formal gardens between Cedar and Wabasha with governmental buildings facing the gardens; a Summit Avenue or Cathedral mall that would lead from Summit and Dayton, the site of the Cathedral of Saint Paul, then being constructed, to the front of the Capitol. Cedar Street was in place, but street widening, realignment and some other improvements were necessary for the approach to be realized. The other two approaches would require major land acquisitions, demolition of existing buildings, and new construction.²⁴

The following year, the legislature authorized a commission to acquire additional land to add to the Capitol grounds and oversee their beautification. Despite these powers, it took between forty and fifty years for the ideal of the Capitol approaches to be realized.

Historian Gary Phelps, among others, has chronicled the financial and political setbacks that kept Gilbert's plans from realization. The Minnesota Historical Society Building (1915-1917) was the only building constructed along what would have been the Cedar Street Mall. In a 1909 version of his plan, Gilbert had sited a building there. Cass Gilbert himself maintained a keen interest in the realization of his grand plan, and he was brought back to Saint Paul in 1931 by a coalition of business groups, the Saint Paul City Council, the Saint Paul Planning Board, and the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners to again advise on the plans in response to a proposal by Governor Theodore Christenson to build a utilitarian office building north of the Capitol. Nothing was done about the approaches, but the Minnesota State Office Building was built in 1932 on the west side of the Capitol,

²³ Gary Phelps, *History of the Minnesota State Capitol Area* (Saint Paul: Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board, 1985). Phelps's study is now available on the CAAPB website: www.caapb.state.mn.us/history. See "Gilbert's 1902 Plan" and Gilbert's 1903 Plan."

²⁴ George Herrold, "Capitol Approaches, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1903 to 1956," unpublished typescript, available in Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society.

opposite the Historical Society Building. Meanwhile the area around the Capitol had deteriorated into crowded slum-like conditions.²⁵



Minnesota State Capitol and the surrounding area in 1930. Wabasha Street extends diagonally across the lawn.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Finally some action was taken on implementing plans for the Capitol area during World War II. In 1944 the Saint Paul Planning Board hired the firm of Clarence H. Johnston, Architects-Engineers, and landscape architects Morell and Nichols, Inc., to develop a new master plan. The two firms had long experience working together at the University of Minnesota, among other projects, where they had also brought together components of a Cass Gilbert design. Clarence H. Johnston, Jr., and his associate Edward Nelson and Arthur Nichols reported to the planning board in November. Their plan incorporated Gilbert's scheme for radial avenues along Cedar Street and a new route towards the Cathedral. The central axis would only extend south as far as Park Place, where a new State Veterans Building would be located. The planners were also informed of a new federal highway route that would form a boundary south of the Capitol. Governor Edward Thye organized the State Veterans' Memorial Committee and the Capitol Approach Committee to implement the Saint Paul Planning Board Study and create a memorial to honor the veterans returning from the war. The committee recommended that a veterans' building be sited in accordance with the 1944 master plan on axis with the front of the Capitol. Morell and Nichols, Inc. was retained to implement the report's recommendations. The Morell and Nichols plan is the basis of the Minnesota State Capitol Mall as it exists today.²⁶

²⁵ Phelps, "Gilbert's 1909 Plan"; "Gilbert's 1931 Plan"; Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *St. Paul's Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 169-172.

²⁶ Phelps, "Johnston/Nelson/Nichols Plan, 1944"; "Nichols/Nason Plan, 1945"; Cultural Resources Investigation 1995, 9-90.

The central mall had been truncated by the placement of the Veterans' Service Building and the route of what became Interstate 94. However, the Cedar Street Mall, leading downtown as far as Tenth Street, and the Summit Mall, leading to the Cathedral, were important elements of the 1945 plan, even though they took about twenty years to be fully realized. Both the Cedar Street mall and the Summit Mall were depicted as wide formal avenues with planted center medians flanked by tree-planted boulevards.²⁷

The new Capitol Mall plan could not be implemented until the city of Saint Paul dealt with an acute postwar housing shortage. The Federal Housing Act of 1949 made funding available for new housing. The Housing and Redevelopment Authority proposed the demolition of 2,500 buildings on 119 acres of land surrounding the Capitol. The plan was approved by the federal government in 1953. Demolition began and new public housing was constructed elsewhere. With the site cleared, four new government buildings were constructed between 1953 and 1962 in the Capitol Mall area, sited in accordance with the Nichols plan. The first sections of the radial streets, Cedar Street to Twelfth Street and Summit Mall (renamed John Ireland Boulevard in 1961) to Saint Anthony Avenue, also began to be implemented in 1953. Both streets were configured with planted center medians and flanked by tree-planted boulevards. The boulevards on the Summit Mall were wider than those on Cedar Street, since they were newly created without the constraints of earlier street patterns and buildings as was the case on Cedar Street.²⁸

The passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956 provided the funds for the implementation of the new highway south of the Capitol. Controversy over the route west of the Capitol area led to extensive delays, but Interstate 94 south of the Capitol was opened in 1967. Cedar Street and John Ireland Boulevard with their planted center medians were carried on bridges over the freeway and extended as far as Tenth Street and the intersection of Summit and Dayton Avenues. The flanking boulevards were continued beyond the bridges, but were much narrower than those on the Capitol grounds.²⁹

The two approaches retain their formal qualities, providing grand views to and from the Capitol. These views are accentuated by the width of the two streets and the planted center medians. The flanking boulevards have been retained through the Capitol grounds, but have been minimized or removed beyond the bridges because of more recent building construction.

²⁷ Newspaper articles of the period show "Summit Mall" superimposed on aerial photographs of the site, and projected "before and after" photographs. The area around the Capitol was still heavily built up with residences and commercial buildings that would have to be removed before the plan could be realized.

²⁸ Cultural Resources Investigations, 8-23 – 8-25; 9-91; Donald L. Empson, *The Street Where You Live: A Guide to the Place Names of St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 143.

²⁹ Cultural Resources Investigations, 8-25; Phelps, "Brief Chronology, 1950-1967." Contemporary aerial and other photographs available through the Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database illustrate the progress of the construction of Cedar Street and John Ireland Boulevard.

The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Commission was established in 1967 and renamed the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board in 1975. It is charged with “preserve[ing] and enhance[ing] the dignity, beauty, architectural integrity of the Capitol, the buildings immediately adjacent to it, the Capitol grounds, and the Capitol area.” Both the full length of John Ireland Boulevard and Cedar Street as far as Tenth Street are within the area of its jurisdiction. The 1992 improvements to the highway approaches around downtown Saint Paul and the Capitol and the rebuilding of the bridges on Cedar Street and John Ireland Boulevard were reviewed by the CAAPB.³⁰

³⁰ Phelps, “The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Commission.”



Cedar Street in 1953 as demolition began.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Cedar Street in 1954 after the planted medians have been installed.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Aerial view of the Capitol with Summit Mall ending at St. Anthony Avenue at the left and Cedar Street at the right, ca. 1954.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Aerial view of the Capitol looking towards downtown along Cedar Street. A bridge crosses Interstate 94 in the middle ground.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



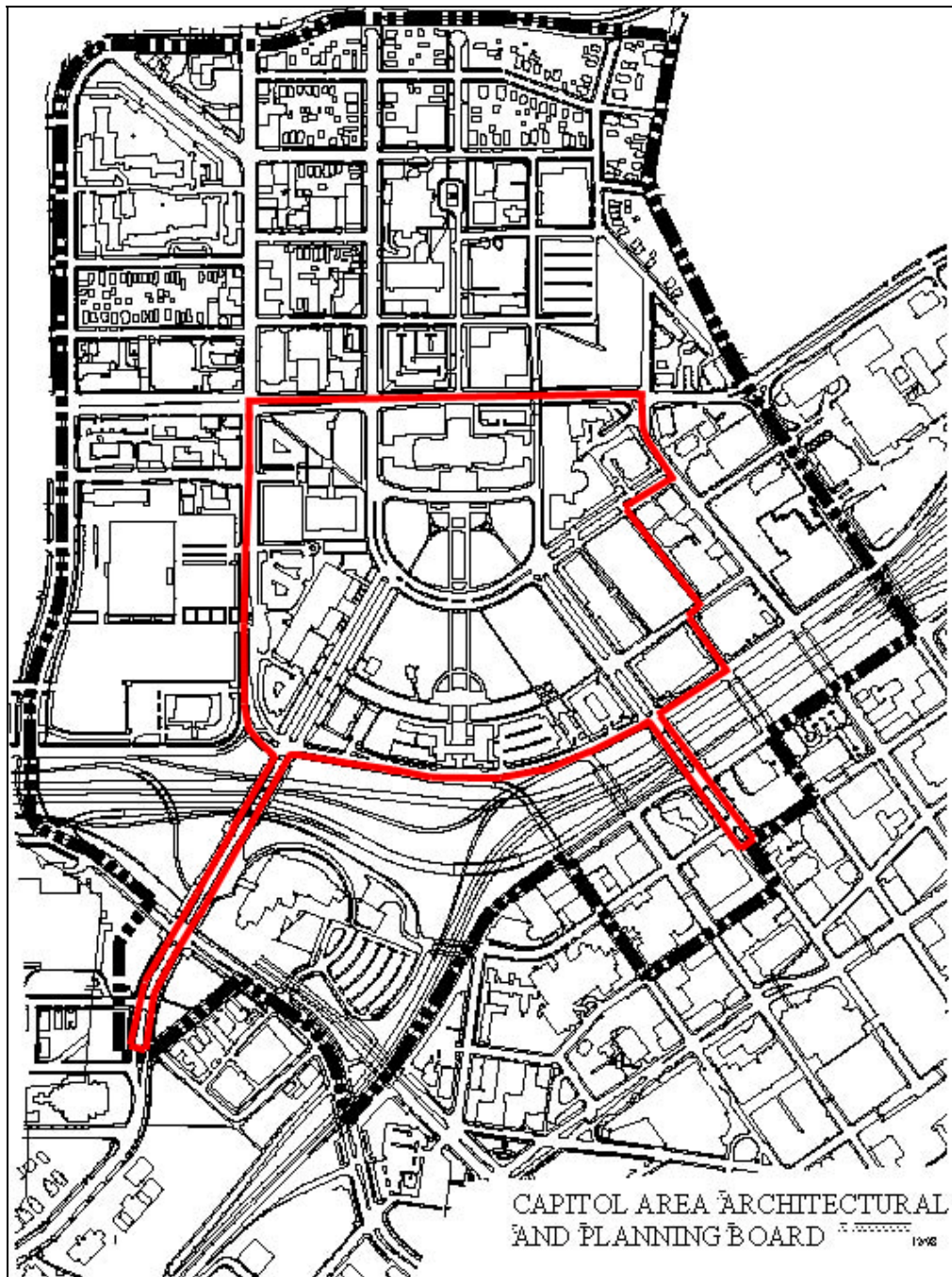
John Ireland Boulevard from Constitution Avenue (now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard) to the Cathedral of Saint Paul in about 1970.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Rebuilding the Cedar Street bridge over Interstate 94 in 1992.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



The dotted line indicates the jurisdiction of the CAAPB. The red line indicates the boundaries of the Minnesota State Capitol Mall Historic District including the approaches along John Ireland Boulevard and Cedar Street. The line is based on discussions with Mn/DOT-CRU and SHPO.

Recommendations

The 1995 report recommended that the Minnesota State Capitol Mall is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A in the area of community planning and development because of the role that urban renewal under the Federal Housing Act of 1949 and the Federal Highway Act of 1956 played in bringing Cass Gilbert's vision for the Capitol area to fruition.

The reasoning of the 1995 report is valid but perhaps too limiting. A more inclusive view will also identify the State Capitol Power Plant as a contributing building to the proposed historic district, as well as being eligible for listing in its own right.

Additional areas of significance under Criterion A could include politics/government for the role played by the local and state governments in the realization of the Capitol Mall plan.

It would also seem appropriate to recommend listing under Criterion C in the area of landscape architecture, in recognition of the importance of a succession of landscape architects and planners to the realization of Cass Gilbert's original design. Such a listing would include the area generally associated with the Mall, as well as the formal approaches, with their grassy medians and flanking boulevards, created by John Ireland Boulevard from the Cathedral to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and by Cedar Street from Tenth Street to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Leif Erikson Lawn in the State Capitol Mall Historic District: A Historical Study

Summary

Present-day Leif Erikson Lawn sits on the state capitol grounds in Saint Paul at the corner of University Avenue and Park Street North/Reverend Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard, immediately west of the capitol building. From about 1890 to 1950, at least four streetcar lines (and probably earlier horsecars) traveled a diagonal route along Wabasha Street, which extended in front of the capitol and bordered the park site on the south. Around the turn of the twentieth century, several attached dwellings were built east of Saint Peter Street, which bisected the parcel north-south. A three-story commercial building was constructed on the smaller triangular parcel west of Saint Peter Street. The residential buildings were razed and the east side of the site was designated as part of the capitol grounds by the mid-1920s. The west side of the site vacated and Saint Peter Street removed by 1936. The angled section of Wabasha Street bordering the site was removed around 1950, when the capitol approach was redeveloped and the area's streets realigned.³¹

The Minnesota Leif Erikson Monument Association was organized in March 1931, just one month before a state bill designating October 9 as Leif Erikson Day was signed by Governor Floyd B. Olson. The date was associated with the first organized immigration from Norway to the United States. In October of that year, a statue honoring Christopher Columbus was unveiled and dedicated on the east side of the capitol mall. The rivalry between Columbus and Erikson supporters seems to have been a motivating factor in the drive to erect a monument to Leif Erikson. In the 1930s and 1940s, the monument association sponsored radio broadcasts, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and other materials that compared the exploration achievements of Erikson and Columbus.³²

The Leif Erikson monument was formally dedicated on October 9, 1949. The dedication ceremony was attended by dignitaries from Norway, Iceland, and Alaska, and a crowd of between 3,000 and 5,000 people. Speakers at the dedication ceremonies proclaimed the event a “testament to truth.”³³

The monument was designed and sculpted by John Karl Daniels over a period of fourteen years. The twelve- or thirteen-foot bronze sculpture of Erikson stands atop a twelve-foot high, polished-granite base that is angled on the west side like the prow of a ship. Erikson's gaze also looks westward. A copper box containing a list of the sponsoring organizations and contributors

³¹ John W. Diers and Aaron Isaacs, *Twin Cities by Trolley: The Streetcar Era in Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), reviews the history of streetcar lines through the area. *Insurance Maps of Saint Paul, Minnesota* (New York: Sanborn Map Co.) vol. 1, 1885, vol. 4, 1903, vol. 1, 1926, updates 1939, 1951.

³² Leif Erikson Monument Association, “Articles of Incorporation, May 7, 1931,” available at Minnesota Historical Society; Vestfoldlaget, Amerika, Organizational Records, 1925-1958 (P2234), available at Minnesota Historical Society.

³³ “Erikson Fete Set Today,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, October 9, 1949; “Norse Leaders Fly In For Leif Erikson Statue Fete,” *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*, October 9, 1949; Reuben Monson, “5,000 Pay Tribute to Explorer Leif Erickson at Unveiling of Statue on Capitol Grounds,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 10, 1949; “Leif Erikson Statue Unveiled,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 10, 1949; “Statue of Leif Erikson Unveiled at State Capitol,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 10, 1949; “Erikson Statue Up, Medic Ends 1-Man Fund Drive,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 10, 1949.

to the monument fund and a copy of *Voyage to Vineland*, a narrative account of Erikson’s journey, was sealed into the base of the monument. The inscription on the east side of the base reads:

Leif Erikson, Discoverer of America, 1000 A.D. Erected through popular subscription sponsored by the Minnesota Leif Erikson Monument Association Inc. Presented to the State of Minnesota during its territorial centennial October 9, 1949. Designed and executed by John Karl Daniels, Sr.

The Leif Erikson monument was installed around the same time that the redesign of the capitol grounds got underway. The design of the lawn park evolved as plans for the capitol mall took shape, but there is no evidence that the monument has ever been moved or disrupted. The approximate dimensions and configuration of the lawn—a half-block, triangular, open area north of the State Office Building grounds—were established by 1954. The western half of the block was also used as a parking lot by this time and the diagonal route of Wabasha Street was still open to vehicle traffic as late as 1959. The removal of Wabasha and the extension of Leif Erikson Lawn to the State Office Building grounds took place between 1960 and 1980.³⁴

The landscape elements at the site also have changed. Photographs taken during the dedication ceremony show only deciduous trees on the site. Now, several mature conifers—which appear to be Norway pine and Norway spruce—frame the monument on three sides and are clustered closely together on the north, as if protecting Leif Erikson from University Avenue. Two wide, concrete sidewalks—one leading from the monument directly to the south and another angling towards the front entrance of Christ Lutheran Church on the opposite side of University Avenue—were added in the early 1950s. A third walkway on the former site of the Wabasha streetcar route was in place by at least 1980. A paved area with benches, about halfway between the monument and the State Office Building, was also in place by that time. The walkway south of this seating area passes under an archway of ornamental trees. Light standards and mature deciduous trees stand along both sides of the former Wabasha streetcar route. The triangular surface parking area on the west half of the block is bordered by a mature evergreen hedge.

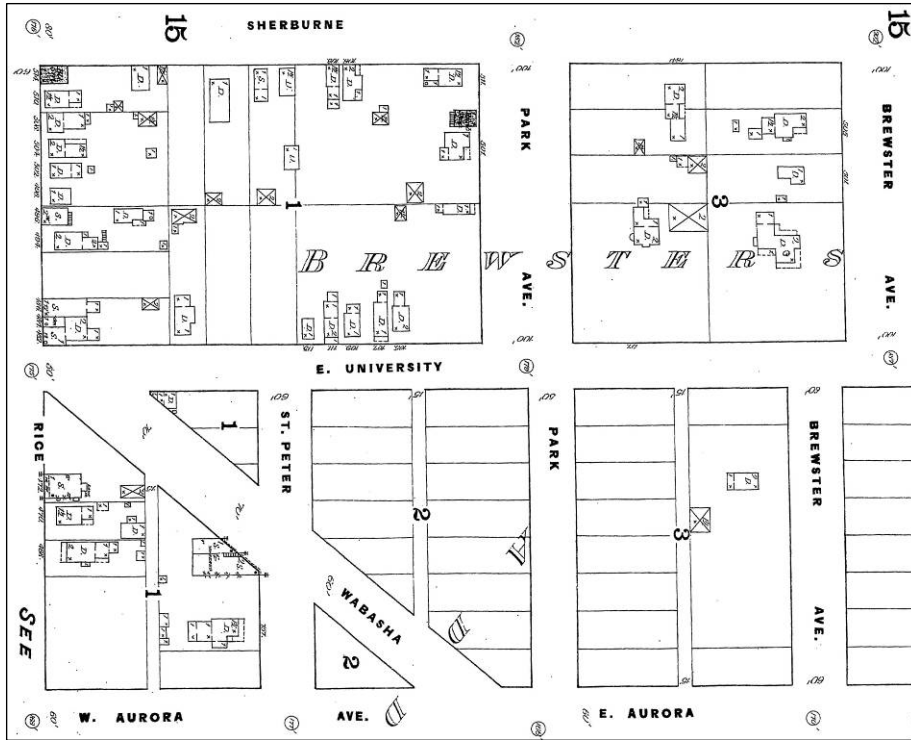
Timeline

ca. 1890	Horsecar and streetcar lines were well established along Wabasha Street North near the intersection with University Avenue. Lines that utilized the diagonal tracks bisecting the park area include: Saint Paul-Minneapolis (University), Como-Harriet-Hopkins, Hamline-Cherokee, and Rice.
1896-1905	State capitol building under construction
ca. 1899	Commercial and residential buildings built on site at Wabasha and Saint Peter Streets

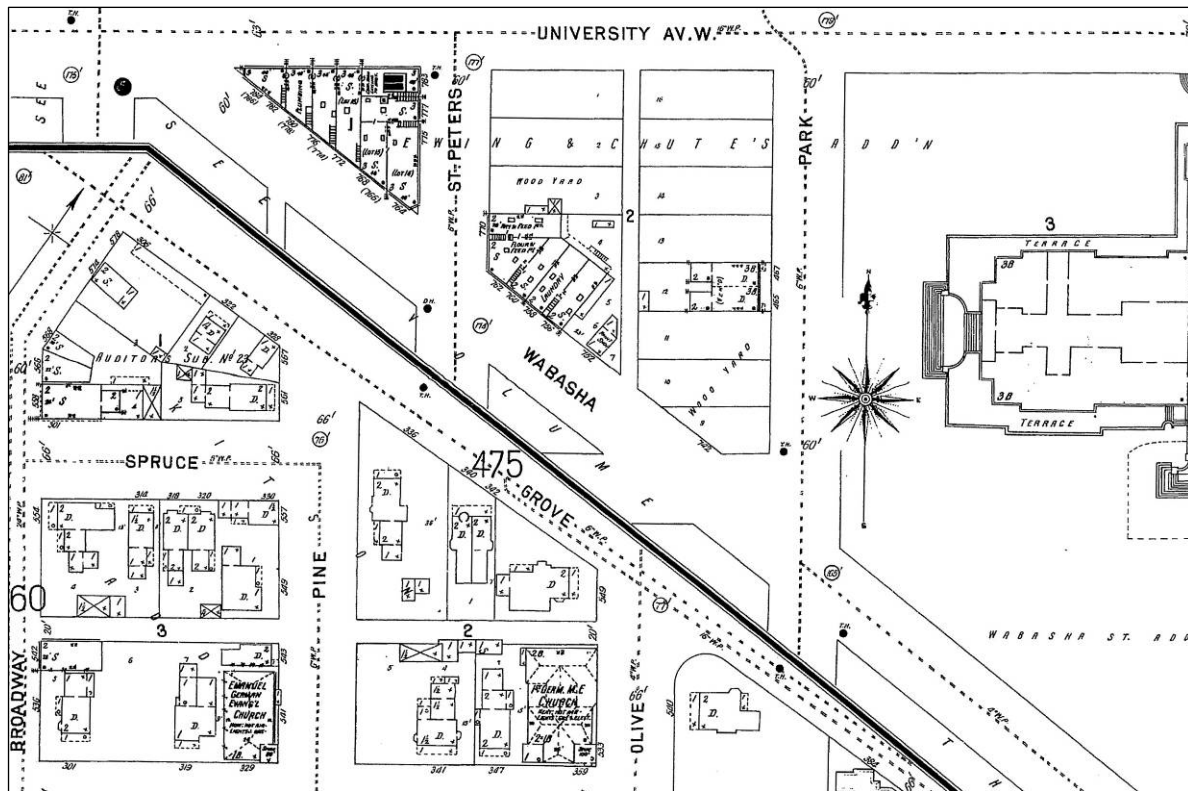
³⁴ Gary Grafenberg, *An Updated Capitol Area History* (Saint Paul: Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board, 1996).

1906	Cass Gilbert co-authored report to Capitol Approaches Commission, recommending a more symmetrical form to the capitol grounds Capitol approach sidewalk extended to Wabasha Street; streetcar cables readily visible in historic photographs
1907	Capitol Grounds Commission formed, charged with acquiring land to develop “a more symmetrical form” to the grounds per Gilbert’s recommendation
1911	State purchased a few lots west of the Capitol building for a small park (now Leif Erikson Lawn)
March 17, 1931	Minnesota Leif Erikson Monument Association organized, incorporated May 7, 1931
October 1931	“Columbus: A Collection of Historical Facts” published by Columbus Memorial Association of Minnesota upon the occasion of the dedication of a state monument to Christopher Columbus
October 12, 1931	Statue of Christopher Columbus unveiled and dedicated on state capitol grounds
1932	State Office Building built directly south of future Leif Erikson Lawn
September 18, 1934	Radio address given on K.S.T.P., “Leif Erikson and Christopher Columbus”
ca. 1935	Residential buildings and large trees cleared from east side of park area
June 1940	Park area used for milking contest
1946	Vestfoldlaget i Amerika, a social and cultural organization of Norwegian-Americans, involved in a campaign to erect a statue of Leif Erikson on the state capitol grounds in Saint Paul
Summer 1949	Buildings in area south of the capitol building demolished to construct new capitol approach
October 1949	Statue installed; “Amerika in the Making,” an eight-page pamphlet, distributed in advance of statue dedication
October 9, 1949	Dedication of Leif Erikson monument
December 1949	Streetcars still operational on Wabasha Street
1952-54	Entire Twin Cities streetcar system converted to bus

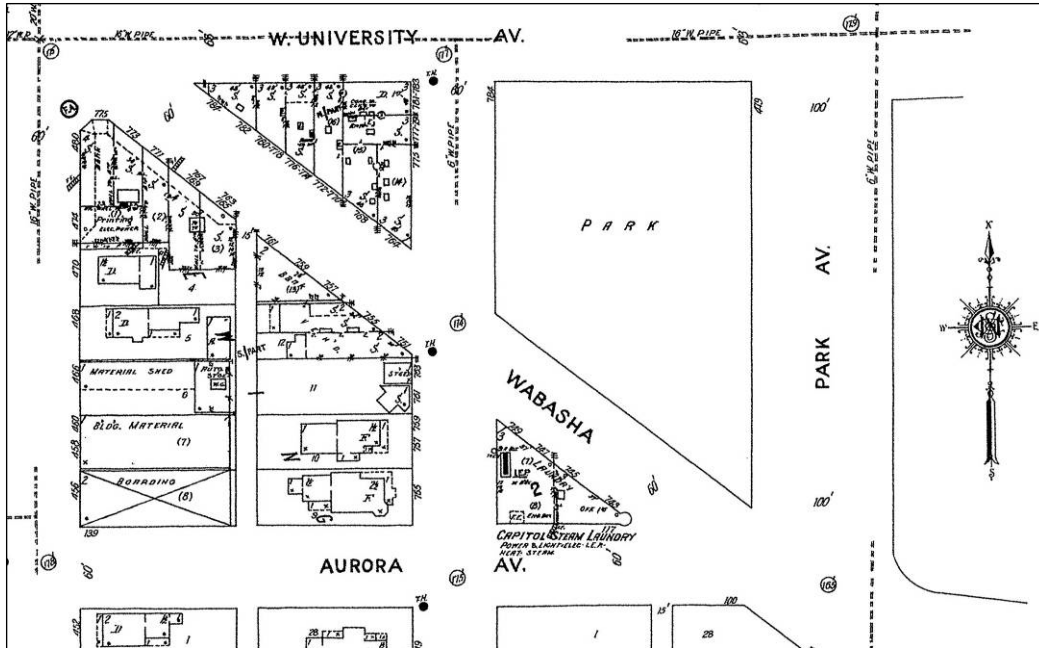
- ca. 1960 Capitol approach redevelopment completed; tree cover added to Leif Erikson Lawn
- ca. 1981 Wabasha Street closed and replaced with sidewalk; present paving configuration in place and heavy tree cover around monument established by 1984



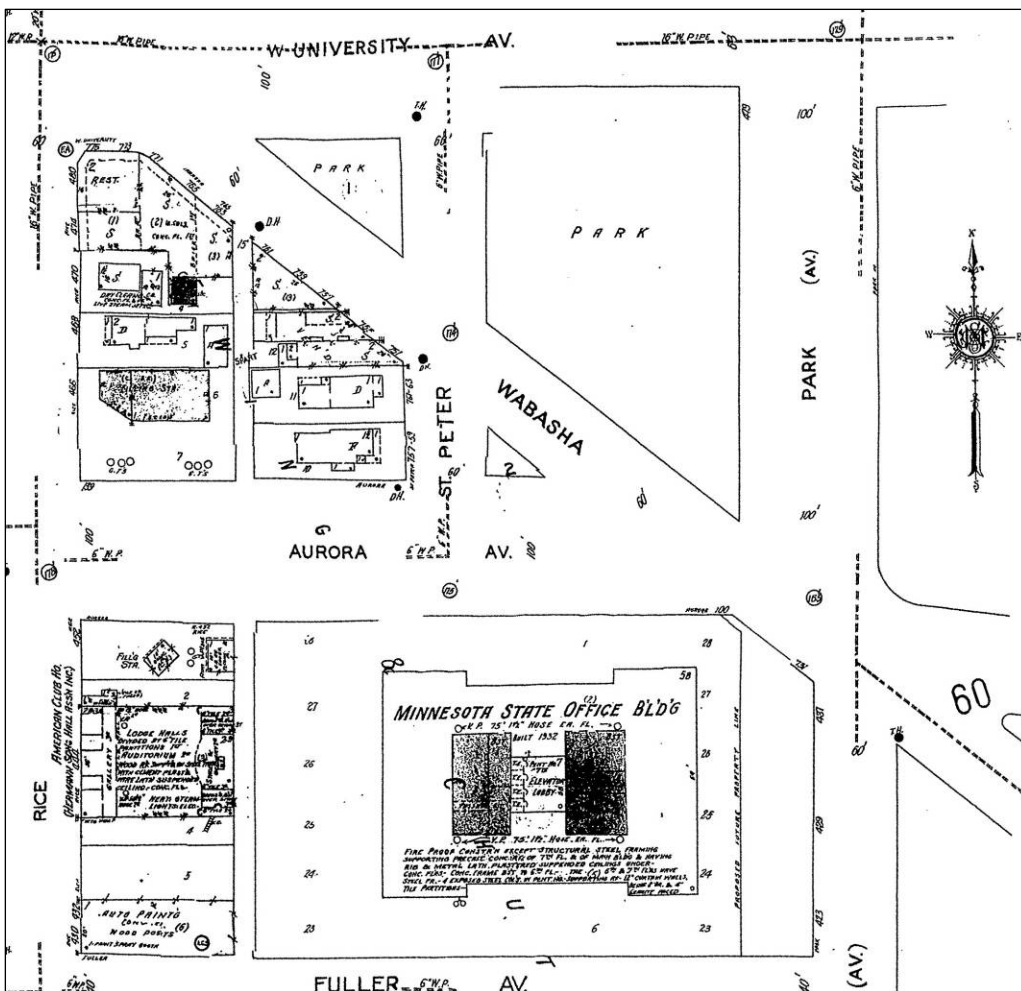
Vicinity of present-day Leif Erikson Lawn, intersection of University Avenue and Park Avenue (presently Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard), Saint Paul (Sanborn Map Company, 1885)



Area of present-day Leif Erikson Lawn, Saint Paul, State Capitol grounds at right (Sanborn Map Company, 1903)



Area of Leif Erikson Lawn, Saint Paul (Sanborn Map Company, 1926, updated to 1939)



Area of Leif Erikson Lawn, Saint Paul (Sanborn Map Company, 1926, updated to 1951)



State capitol building with Wabasha Street streetcar in foreground, 1910. *Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



State capitol grounds, Saint Paul, ca. 1930; area of present-day Leif Erikson Lawn at center left. *Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



State capitol grounds, Saint Paul, 1936;
area of present-day Leif Erikson Lawn at center left.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



State capitol area during redevelopment, ca. 1950;
Leif Erikson Lawn at upper right, prior to abandonment of Wabasha Street.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Sculptor John K. Daniels working on statue of Leif Erikson, ca. 1948.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Installation of statue at State Capitol Grounds, October 1949.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Two images of the Leif Erikson Monument unveiling and dedication, October 9, 1949.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections





Leif Erikson monument, state capitol grounds, Saint Paul, 1950

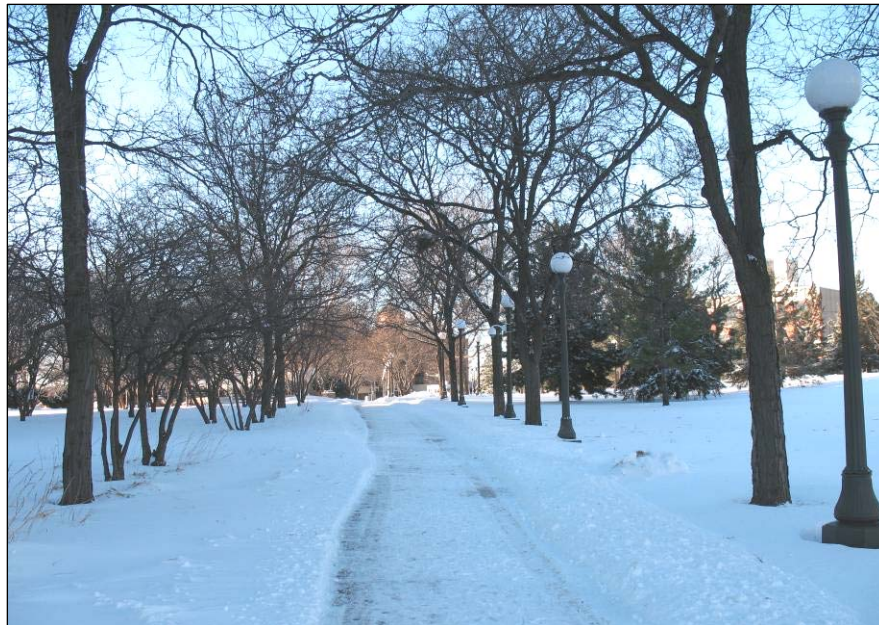
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections



Leif Erikson Lawn, looking west from atop State Capitol, 1959.

Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections

Note deciduous trees, sidewalks through park,
and vehicles along Wabasha Street.



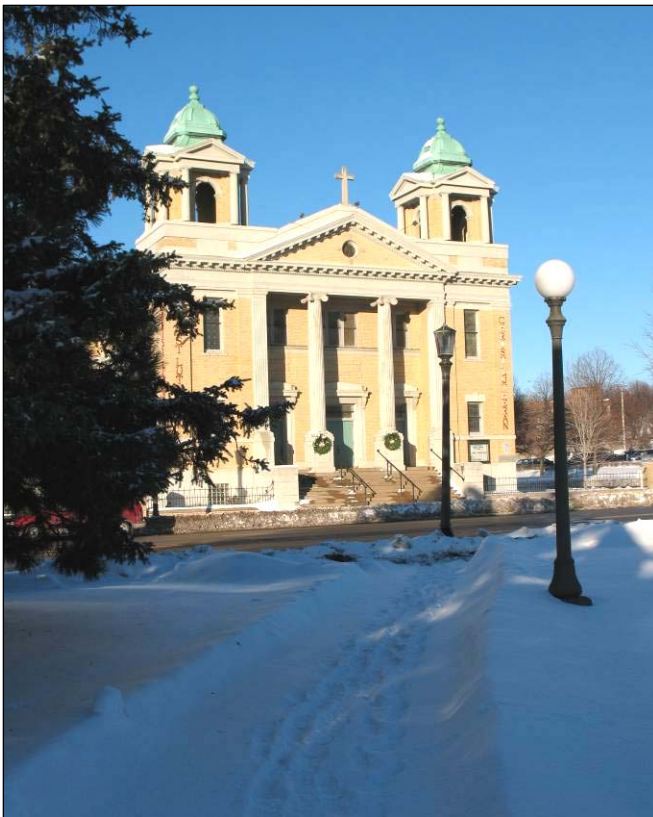
Looking northwest towards University Avenue and Rice Street from near southeast corner of Leif Erikson Lawn, December 2007. Leif Erikson monument stands within the grove of trees in the center of the photograph.

Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg



Leif Erikson monument,
looking north from diagonal
sidewalk at southern border
of park, December 2007.

Photos: Erin Hanafin Berg



Looking northeast along
walkway leading from
Leif Erikson monument to
Christ Lutheran Church,
December 2007.



Leif Erikson monument, looking east toward State Capitol, December 2007.
Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg