

# Midway East

**MINNESOTA MILK COMPANY BUILDING (RA-SPC-3877),  
TIP TOP TAP (RA-SPC-3906), AND  
QUALITY PARK INVESTMENT COMPANY BUILDING (RA-SPC-3912):  
CONTEXT STUDY AND NATIONAL REGISTER EVALUATION**



## INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on the Minnesota Milk Company Building; the commercial building at 1575-1579 University and 490 Snelling (sometimes called the Quality Park Investment Company Building); and the Tip Top Tap. It discusses the three buildings in the context of the development of University Avenue and Art Deco and Art Moderne architecture. The Saint Paul HPC has previously prepared historic context studies that have addressed University Avenue: “Transportation Corridors: 1857-1950” and “Neighborhood Commercial Centers: 1874-1960.” Aspects of these studies were further expanded in the Phase II Architectural History Investigation to develop a historical context for the Midway Industrial District of Saint Paul.<sup>35</sup>

Hess Roise conducted additional field work and research to confirm the construction dates and learn the early histories of the Minnesota Milk Company Building, Tip Top Tap, and the commercial building at 1577-1579 University Avenue. These buildings were constructed or remodeled between 1931 and 1945, a historical period that typically is associated with the Great Depression and World War II. Privately funded construction and development are perceived to have been stagnant during this period, due first to economic constraints and then to wartime materials shortages. Since the preparation of the Saint Paul HPC historic context studies and the Phase II historical context, more research has been carried out and published on development in Saint Paul and architectural trends between the 1920s and 1940s, both downtown and especially along University Avenue, one of Saint Paul’s principal thoroughfares. In addition, more work has been done on several important architects from that period including Charles Hausler, Ellerbe and Associates, and Toltz, King and Day.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carole Zellie and Garneth O. Peterson, “Saint Paul Historic Context Studies: Transportation Corridors: 1857-1950,” 2001, prepared for the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission; Carole Zellie and Garneth O. Peterson, “Saint Paul Historic Context Studies: Neighborhood Commercial Centers: 1874-1960,” 2001, prepared for the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission; Phase II Architectural History Investigation, 35-48.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *Saint Paul’s Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 165; Larry Millett, *AIA Guide to the Twin Cities: The Essential Source on the Architecture of Minneapolis and Saint Paul* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007); Richard Hemmings, “Minnesota Building,” Historic Preservation Certification Application—Part 1 Evaluation of Significance, October 2006, prepared for Leo M. Sand, MNB Development, LLC, available at Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office.

## ART DECO/ZIGZAG MODERNE

The Art Deco style (the name is derived from the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs, held in Paris in 1926) is also called the Zigzag Moderne style because of its chevron and ziggurat forms. Hess and Larson cite Saint Paul architects Charles Hausler and Toltz, King and Day as among the “most active exponents [of the style]. They created some of the most distinctive buildings of the Depression era in the city.”<sup>37</sup>



The Saint Paul Casket Company Building has been found eligible for National Register listing under Criterion C as an early example of the Art Deco style.

*Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

Early Art Deco examples and precursors to the style are present along the corridor and have been previously recognized for their importance. The **Saint Paul Casket Company Building** at **1222 University Avenue** was constructed in 1922, but displays elements that became hallmarks of the Art Deco style such as vertical emphasis, facade setbacks, symmetrical massing, and a prominent tower. The building was designed by architect A. H. Stem and has been found to be eligible for the National Register for its architectural significance.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the **Krank Manufacturing Company Building** at **1885 University Avenue** is a three-story design by Toltz, King, and Day Architects, with Roy Childs Jones as chief designer.<sup>39</sup> Polychromatic terra cotta and brickwork patterning enliven a facade composed primarily of narrow pilasters that separate vertical lines of windows. The Krank Building (1926) was listed in the National Register in 1983 under Criteria A and C. These buildings and later prominent examples of the Art Deco style such as the **Minnesota Milk Company Building, 370-378 University** (see more detailed analysis that follows), and the 1930 Cinderella Cosmetics Building at 2218 University (demolished) appear to have influenced and periodically reinforced the visual language of the street’s architecture during this surprisingly active period of development.



The Krank Manufacturing Company Building was listed in the National Register in 1983.

*Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

<sup>37</sup> Hess and Larson, *Saint Paul’s Architecture*, 156.

<sup>38</sup> The 106 Group Ltd., “Phase II Architectural History Investigation,” 191-196.

<sup>39</sup> Hess and Larson, *Saint Paul’s Architecture*, 142.

## ART MODERNE

Hess and Larson describe two trends of the Moderne movement as expressed in Saint Paul's architecture. One version of the style was assertively anticlassical, with an inventive use of materials and informal arrangement of elements, and was usually reserved for small to midscale buildings like clubhouses, restaurants, theaters, and neighborhood businesses. A second, more formal interpretation borrowed heavily from classical styles, often with a symmetrical exterior arrangement that expressed the structural frame, a clearly articulated base and crown, understated classical details, and traditional materials such as limestone, granite, and marble. Although this style, which Hess and Larson termed Classical Moderne, was usually reserved for much larger buildings such as the Ford Twin Cities Assembly Plant (1924, an early local example), the Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse (1932), and the historic Northern States Power Company Building (1932) in downtown Saint Paul, neighborhood commercial buildings also reveal the style's broad influence.

At the corner of University and Snelling Avenues, a two-story commercial building at **1577-1579 University Avenue**, also known as the **Quality Park Investment Company Building, now Midway Book**, stands as one of the best Classical Moderne examples along the corridor and effectively represents the economic and development trends under which the style was propagated. (See discussion that follows for a more detailed analysis.)

## STREAMLINE MODERNE

As the hardships of the Depression waned, University Avenue experienced vigorous redevelopment, evidenced in the large number of buildings constructed during the late 1930s through the early 1950s. A number of these University Avenue buildings are Streamline Moderne in style. The style is typified by rounded corners, horizontal lines, and sleek materials such as metal, polished stone, and glass.

The **Tip Top Tap** (now Town House Bar) at **1415 University** was remodeled in the Streamline Moderne style in the early 1940s by noted designer Werner Wittkamp. (See further discussion in the following section.)

**MINNESOTA MILK COMPANY BUILDING, 370-378 UNIVERSITY AVENUE (RA-SPC-3877)**

The Minnesota Milk Company Building was remodeled in the Art Deco style around 1932. The two-story building has a limestone facade with a base of polished black granite. Characterized by narrow pilasters with ziggurat capitals, vertical bands of multi-light windows (now enclosed with concrete block), a chevron frieze, and a square tower with a relief sculpture of two children flanking a milk bottle, the building is recognized as one of local architect Charles Hausler's distinctive Art Deco designs. Although its integrity has been diminished by window alterations and an addition to the rear, the building retains its historic decorative features and it is easily identified as a product of the early 1930s. Furthermore, its role as a dairy is readily apparent through its facade ornament. Hess and Larson characterize it: "The new plant skillfully blends the concrete slab-and-pilaster look of Albert Kahn's factories with the chevron friezes and ziggurat tower of Zigzag Moderne. It illustrates the facility with which a leading designer of the period could move from the picturesque historicism of the 1920s into the severe geometries of the newer fashions."<sup>40</sup>



The Minnesota Milk Company Building at 370-378 University Avenue displays many characteristics of the Art Deco style.

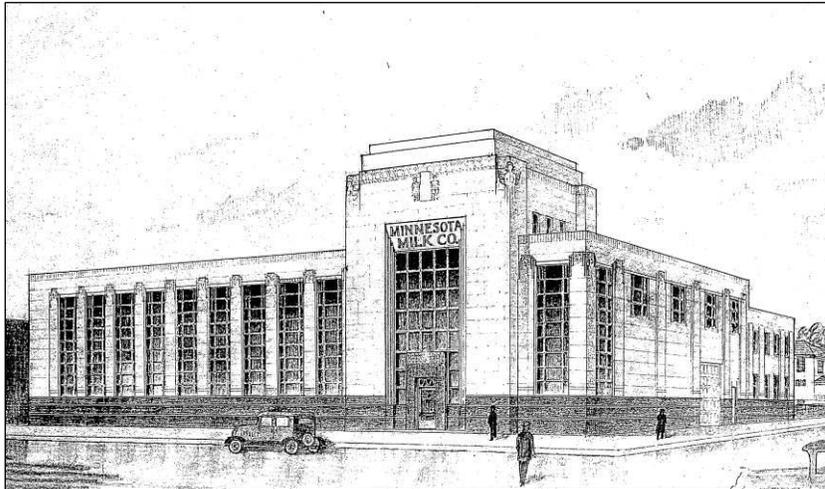
*Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

Hausler had been Saint Paul's first City Architect from 1914 to 1923. (He also served as a member of the Minnesota Senate, a part-time position, from 1922 to 1938.) He designed many schools, branch libraries, fire stations, and park buildings during his tenure with the city, and evidently accepted several commissions while in the Senate; his remodeling design for the Minnesota Milk Company Building was completed in 1932. Hausler also designed the Minnesota Building at Fourth and Cedar Streets, a ten-story, Art Deco skyscraper finished in 1930, before he left the Senate. After resuming his full-time architectural practice, Hausler remained active in the field until his death in 1971.

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<sup>40</sup> Hess and Larson, *Saint Paul's Architecture*, 156.

The Minnesota Milk Company has historical significance in the context of agriculture and industry. The company, one of several dairies in Saint Paul at the time, advertised itself as the home of “scientifically pasteurized” milk and cream at least as early as 1920. Pasteurization was not required by state law until 1949, although Saint Paul began to regulate the treatment of milk products by municipal ordinance in the 1910s. The Minnesota Milk Company distributed a booklet entitled *Safe Milk*, which appeared to be a customizable trade publication promoting pasteurization. In 1927, another booklet,



Charles Hausler’s rendering of the Minnesota Milk Company Building is in the collection of the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota.

*A Journey with Mr. B. Otte*, was published as “a short story dedicated to little children for their good health and happiness” but was really a marketing tool to promote the sale of pasteurized milk. The story included illustrations of children cheerfully drinking their milk and photographs of milk delivery wagons and the plant interior. The booklet concluded with a hope that customers would “remember Minnesota Milk Company’s pure, healthful products” and an invitation to visit the plant.<sup>41</sup>

As one of few remaining early twentieth-century dairies in the city, and the only building that can easily be distinguished as such (thanks to its exterior relief sculpture and long continued use as a dairy), the Minnesota Milk Company building is significant under Criterion A in the areas of agriculture and industry for its early promotion and distribution of pasteurized dairy products. The



Relief sculpture of a milk bottle is centered near the tower frieze.

Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg

<sup>41</sup> Other Saint Paul dairies that advertised in the 1933 Polk’s city directory were: Midway Creamery Company, 1565 West Como Avenue; Saint Paul Milk Company, 197-203 South Franklin Avenue; and Sanitary Farm Dairies, 888-890 East Minnehaha Avenue. The Twin Cities Milk Producers Association Plant, 710 Arcade Street, was also in operation at this time. Some of these buildings are extant, but altered. *A Journey with Mr. B. Otte!* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Milk Company, 1927); *Safe Milk* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Milk Company, 1920).

remodeled building in the Art Deco style became a powerful advertising statement for the Minnesota Milk Company and its pasteurized milk products. Despite the alterations to the building, it still conveys a strong image that relates to the original client.

### TIP TOP TAP (RA-SPC-3906)

The former **Tip Top Tap** (sometimes called the Tip Top Tavern), located at **1415 University Avenue**, is now known as the Town House Bar. This one-story brick building was remodeled in 1946 in the Streamline Moderne style popular at the time. The exterior design is marked by a distinctive marquee-like canopy of stacked, curvilinear slabs above a semi-cylindrical entrance bay. The front facade is clad with random-laid narrow courses of dressed limestone, which had been painted and was restored in 2006.<sup>42</sup>



The 1946 remodeling of the Tip Top Tap was the work of designer Werner Wittkamp. The Streamline Moderne exterior appears to be intact. *Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

The 1946 remodeling of the Tip Top Tap was the work of Russian-born set designer Werner Wittkamp. Wittkamp had worked in Hollywood and Berlin before coming to Saint Paul around 1930. He designed the Art Deco-style Cinderella Cosmetics Factory at 2218 University Avenue (demolished) as well as several significant restaurant and hotel interiors. The Lowry Ballroom, in downtown Saint Paul, stands as an excellent example of his work and is one of the most intact Art Deco interiors in the state. Some of Wittkamp's later works, including the Willwerscheid Mortuary on Grand Avenue in Saint Paul, are also intact.<sup>43</sup>

The exterior design of the Tip Top Tap is less notable, although distinctively Streamline Moderne in character. The interior has been extensively altered, although the curvilinear forms of the ceiling soffits are intact. Interior walls of lap siding, rustic posts and rails in the seating area, rectangular platforms, and a straight wood bar detract from any historic sense of the space. The stage, which was originally located at the north end of the room, has been relocated to the side opposite the bar.

<sup>42</sup> R. L. Polk's *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1946, 1949.

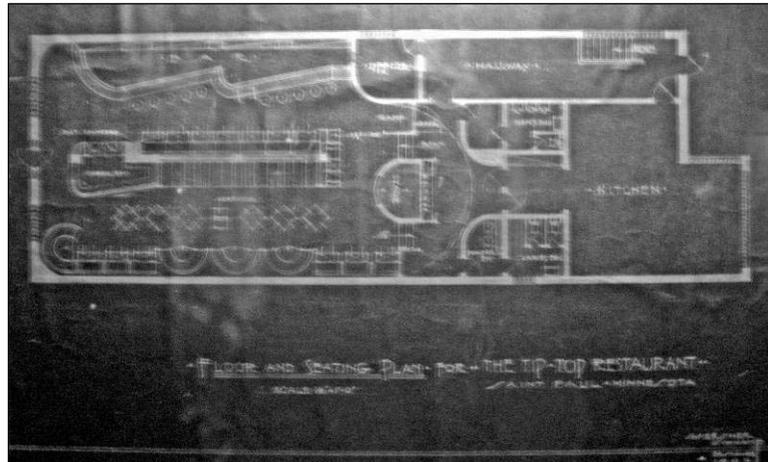
<sup>43</sup> The bar owner possesses original blueprints of the Wittkamp remodeling, two of which are framed and displayed in the bar. These are interesting primary documents of this period style. Hess and Larson, *Saint Paul's Architecture*, 155; Millett, *AIA Guide to the Twin Cities*, 501.



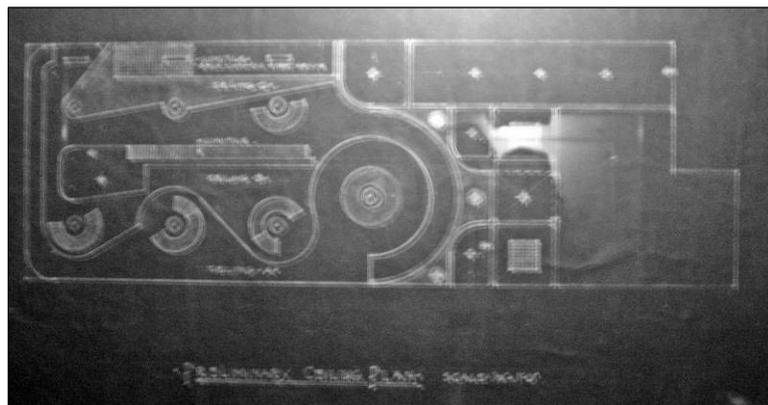
The interior of the Tip Top Tap has been altered; the only remnants of the 1946 remodeling are the curvilinear forms on the ceiling.

*Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

The exterior design of the Tip Top Tap does not appear to be particularly significant, and the altered interior does not contribute to the history of the building. The Tip Top Tap is not eligible for National Register listing under Criteria A, B, or C.



Wittkamp's blueprints of the Floor and Seating Plan (above right) and Preliminary Ceiling Plan (below right) are framed and on display in the Town House Bar. The floor plan is signed and dated. *Photos: Erin Hanafin Berg*



**QUALITY PARK INVESTMENT COMPANY BUILDING, NOW MIDWAY BOOK,  
1577-1579 UNIVERSITY AVENUE/490 SNELLING AVENUE (RA-SPC-3912)**

The building at the northeast corner of Snelling and University Avenues was constructed in 1934, replacing a two-story commercial building and rooming house that was demolished the previous fall. Notices in the *Improvement Bulletin* reported that the building was owned by the Quality Park Investment Company and the Brown and Bigelow Company, two prominent Saint Paul companies located in the Midway area that apparently weathered the early years of the Depression and reinvested in commercial real estate. The designers were local architects Ellerbe and Company. The corner storefront of the two-story building was leased to the Walgreen Drug Company prior to its completion. The location was the company's first in Saint Paul outside of downtown and only its fifth in the city.<sup>16</sup>

Walgreen's formula for expansion had a proven record of success by the time the store located at 1579 University Avenue. Charles W. Walgreen Sr. opened his first drug store in 1901 in a dense residential area of Chicago's South Side. After expanding to nine stores, the company was incorporated in 1916 and continued to grow dramatically within the Chicago metropolitan area. The company expanded to the Twin Cities in 1925, when it acquired four existing drugstores in downtown Saint Paul and several in Minneapolis.



The west facade of the Quality Park Investment Company Building at University and Snelling Avenues is visible in the background of this 1948 photograph.

*Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

<sup>16</sup> *The Improvement Bulletin*, October 27, 1933; *R. L. Polk's City Directory*, Saint Paul, 1939.

The Walgreen's store at Snelling and University Avenues was strategically placed to draw customers from the burgeoning residential areas of the Midway district and conveniently located along two major thoroughfares and streetcar routes. Then, as now, the company sited new stores in close proximity to competitors—in this case, diagonally opposite Courtney's Drug at 1580 University. At this location, Walgreens also conformed to its established practice of leasing only the corner store in a larger building—rather than acquiring the entire building and subleasing the remaining space—to minimize its financial risk.<sup>17</sup>



The new Walgreen's location was convenient to streetcar lines and automobile thoroughfares, as shown around 1935 in this view looking west on University towards Snelling. The Quality Park Investment Company Building is near the right edge of the photograph.

*Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

A passage in *Pharmacist to the Nation: A History of Walgreen Company* describes how the company historically chose locations for new stores:

Greatest reliance was placed on close observation of passerby traffic, not merely its size at varying times of a day but the percentage of likely patrons among them. Whenever he could, [Charles W.] Walgreen [Sr.] himself participated in those surveys . . . to use [his] eyes and get the feel of the location. . . . He himself seemed to have an instinct for picking good locations, as would become increasingly clear. . . . Generally, a store was established only when he and the other investigators came to agreement on a location's suitability and satisfactory rental arrangements were made.<sup>18</sup>

Most early twentieth-century drugstores included soda fountains, but they were made a fixture of Walgreen's stores, especially following the success of an in-house invention—the malted milkshake, first created by a Walgreen's soda fountain manager in 1922. Walgreen's stock went public in 1927 and the company weathered the stock market crash that preceded the Great Depression. In the following years, the company continued to expand and by 1934 had 483 stores and 12,000 employees throughout the United States.

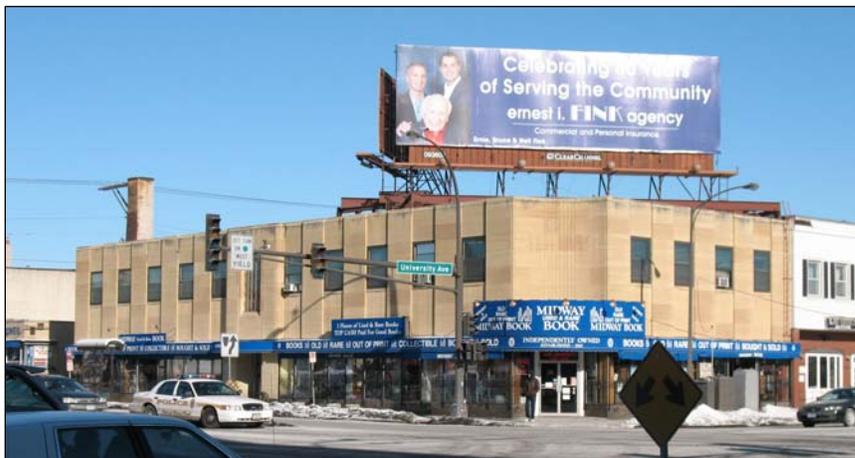
<sup>17</sup> Herman Kogan and Rick Kogan, *Pharmacist to the Nation: A History of Walgreen Co., America's Leading Drug Store Chain* (Chicago: Walgreen Co., 1989), 64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The commercial character of the Snelling and University intersection was well established when Walgreen’s moved into the neighborhood. The new building housed several small stores in addition to the chain drugstore. A liquor store shared the building’s University Avenue frontage, while the Snelling Avenue side was occupied by an independent businessman, a shoe store, a flower shop, and a dry cleaner. The second-story offices were slow to lease, but housed seven businesses in 1934. The following year, the offices were occupied by twelve businesses and practitioners, including two dentists, three physicians, a couple of credit agencies, a law office, and a partnership of structural engineers. By 1937, the upstairs office suites, which had their own entrance on Snelling Avenue, were identified as the “Four-Ninety North Snelling Building” in the city directory.

Although the building was designed by Ellerbe and Company, their rival Charles Hausler occupied a second-story office at 490 North Snelling when he returned to full-time architectural practice in 1939. As Hausler was a prominent architect in his own right, his decision to rent an office in a rival’s building and his relationship with the much larger Ellerbe firm are intriguing. Hausler competed with Ellerbe to be the local architect to partner with Chicago firm Holabird and Root for the construction of the Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. The job ultimately was granted to Ellerbe in 1931, after that firm set up a temporary office and showroom to display examples of its work in Hausler’s newly opened Minnesota Building.<sup>19</sup>

Compared to other Ellerbe designs, the building at 1577-1579 University is small in size. Nonetheless, it is successful in execution and is a good example of the Classical Moderne style. The exterior of buff limestone is animated by smooth piers separating the upper-story one-over-one windows, narrow, fluted panels below the windows, and a concave corner with a center section of vertical ribbing. The first-story show windows are set



The 1934 building design, by Ellerbe Associates, is typical of the Classical Moderne style. Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg

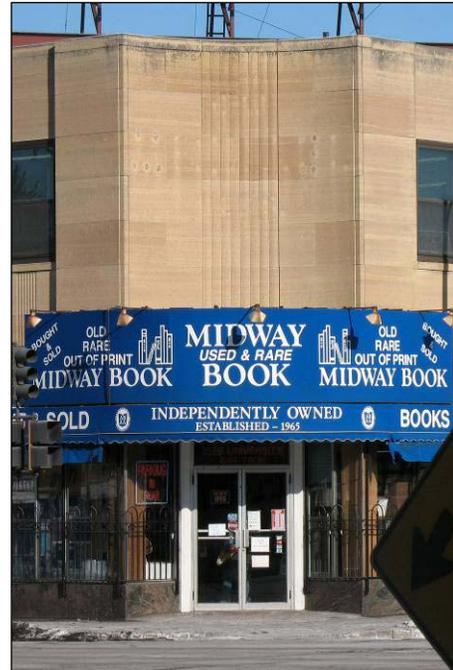
above a polished granite base. On the Snelling Avenue facade, the center bay projects from the upper-level facade, emphasizing the entrance to the second-story offices. The projecting section has ribbed, rounded edges and a multi-light, arched window located

<sup>19</sup> Hausler’s office was in the Minnesota Building, which he designed, after the building first opened. He might have been unable to keep up with downtown rents during the 1930s and moved to the Snelling Avenue office when he re-established full-time practice. Richard Hemmings, “Minnesota Building,” Historic Preservation Certification Application—Part 1.

above the door. While differentiated from its neighbors by its stylistic details, it is compatible with them in height, scale, and its relationship to the streets. Other period works by the firm include the aforementioned Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse and the six-story Northern States Power Company Building (1930) in downtown Saint Paul. The Northern States Power building is also Classical Moderne in style; although superior in design to the University Avenue building, its context in the commercial core of the city is also far different.

According to *The Ellerbe Tradition*, a biographical and historical account of the firm's rise to prominence, the company was able to survive the Great Depression better than most other architectural firms. The company had sixty-five employees at the onset of the Depression, and commissions in progress and planning contracts were sufficient to maintain a full work schedule for the entire staff for several years. After the company depleted its cash reserves, however, engineers, draftsmen, and architects were laid off and only the firm's principals were kept on staff. The University Avenue building, completed in 1934, might have been an example of what the company's history referred to as "financial first aid," as few other significant projects were completed during the mid-Depression years.<sup>44</sup>

The 1577-1579 University/490 Snelling building represents a period that is often assumed to have been stagnant or declining, yet is marked in this instance by speculative construction of a commercial building and the local expansion of a national corporation, the Walgreen Drug Store Company. The building design embodies the distinctive characteristics of this era in its type, materials, details, and architectural style. It is associated with the work of a significant architectural firm and is important in the context of commercial development of the city of Saint Paul. Consequently, it is eligible for National Register listing under Criterion C in the area of architecture.



The corner entry of the building exhibits features of the Classical Moderne style.  
*Photo: Erin Hanafin Berg*

<sup>44</sup> Thomas F. Ellerbe, *The Ellerbe Tradition: Seventy Years of Architecture and Engineering* (Minneapolis: Ellerbe, Inc., 1980), 48; Ellerbe Architects Papers, 1914-1959, Detailed Contents Online Finding Aid, Northwest Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, <http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/naa004.xml>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The **Minnesota Milk Company Building** at **370-378 University Avenue** is significant in the areas of agriculture and industry as an urban dairy that promoted and distributed pasteurized milk products. The building is eligible for National Register listing under Criterion A.

The Streamline Moderne design of the **Tip Top Tap** at **1415 University Avenue** is relatively intact on the exterior, but has been severely compromised on the interior. It does not appear to have any strong associations with historic events or historic persons to meet Criteria A or B for National Register listing. It does not have sufficient architectural character or distinction to meet Criterion C for National Register listing.

The commercial building known as the **Quality Park Investment Company Building, now Midway Book**, at **1575-1579 University Avenue/490 Snelling Avenue** is an intact example of the Classical Moderne style as executed by prominent local firm Ellerbe and Associates. The building appears to be eligible for National Register listing under Criterion C in the area of architecture, as it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, and style. It achieves further interest for its association with the Walgreen Drug Store Company and as a representative example of private Depression-era commercial development.

**ST. MATTHEW'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH (RA-SPC-0879)  
507 NORTH DALE STREET, SAINT PAUL: NATIONAL REGISTER EVALUATION**



## Introduction

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, now Rock of Ages Missionary Baptist Church, 507 North Dale Street at Sherburne Avenue, was surveyed in 1982 as part of the Historic Sites Survey carried out by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission. At that time it was described: "This small brick church, built in 1918, is one of several small brick churches in the Frogtown area, and one of the most intact. The original wood shingled spire and unusual blue-gray stained glass windows are especially interesting. The church should be preserved because of its high visibility along busy Dale Street and the relief the church provides from the heavily commercial Dale Street/University Avenue intersection one block to the south." It was subsequently identified in the final survey report as a site of major significance.<sup>45</sup>

In the "Historic Context Study of Churches, Synagogues, and Religious Buildings" prepared for the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) in 2001, St. Matthew's was cited as an example of the financial challenges faced by an immigrant congregation as it sought to construct a new building. It was also listed among the buildings recommended for further designation study.<sup>46</sup>

Because the site of the church building falls within the APE for the Central Corridor LRT project, within one block of a planned station stop, it was evaluated as part of the Phase I Architecture History Investigation. The report briefly considered the architectural and historic merits of the building: "This small brick church, built in 1918, is one of several small brick churches in the area, and one of the most intact. Although the original congregation may have been associated with the German immigrant community, this building was constructed later and does not appear to be significantly associated with early immigrants. Although designed by William Alban, it does not appear to significantly represent his work." It was recommended "as not eligible for the NRHP due to its lack of historical significance."<sup>47</sup>

The following discussion looks at the architecture and history of the church in greater detail.

## Description

The former St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church building in the Gothic Revival style is located at the southwest corner of the intersection of Dale Street and Sherburne Avenue. It is 40 feet wide by 80 feet deep with the facade fronting Dale Street. The structure, resting on a watertable of local limestone, is veneered with dark red-brown brick with contrasting stone detail (now painted). The gabled facade is dominated by a center entrance tower with a pointed-arch doorway set in a stone surround surmounted by a cross. The paired entrance doors with

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<sup>45</sup> Historic Sites Survey, Ramsey County Historical Society and Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission (RA-SPC-0879), available at Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO); Patricia A. Murphy and Susan W. Granger, *Historic Sites Survey of Saint Paul and Ramsey County, 1980-1983: Final Report* (Saint Paul: Ramsey County Historical Society and Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, 1983), 70, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Carole Zellie and Garneth O. Peterson, "St. Paul Historic Context Study: Churches, Synagogues, and Religious Buildings: 1849-1950," prepared for St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, 2001, 12, 21.

<sup>47</sup> "Phase I Architectural History Investigation," 43.

strapwork hinges are set below a transom containing art-glass panels with foliate patterns. The tower is flanked by pointed-arch window openings on the main facade. The tower is square in section as it rises above the roofline. Louvered openings are set on all sides. The tower rises to a crenellated parapet with finials at the corners. A shingled octagonal spire surmounted by a cross rises from the tower. The side walls of the church have regularly spaced shallow brick buttresses that flank pointed-arch window openings. Many of the openings retain their original translucent art-glass panels. The steep roof is shingled. The original cornerstone was replaced with one that reads “First Church of the Nazarene, 1950.”

To the south of the church building and linked to it by a brick-sided wing is the two-story Sunday school building with the address of 501 North Dale Street. The building is about 50 feet wide and 80 feet deep and faced with reddish brown wire-cut brick, although of a slightly lighter shade than the brick on the church building. Like the church, it has contrasting stone detail inspired by the Gothic style. A wide center bay projects slightly from the facade and has a triple window group set in a keyed surround and surmounted by a shallow gable. The main entrance, also in a keyed surround, is at the north edge at ground level. A recent sign reading “Midtown Business Center” above the entrance obscures some of the stone detail. A cornerstone by the entrance reads “A.D. 1932.” Shallow buttresses flank window openings along the sides of the building.



Former St. Matthew’s Evangelical Lutheran Church and Sunday School (at left),  
501 and 507 North Dale Street

*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*



Church looking west from Sherburne Avenue.  
*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*



Sunday School building, now Midtown Business Center  
*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*

## History of the Church and Buildings

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church had its beginnings in 1887 when the Rev. Dr. Edward Kaiser resigned the pastorate of St. Paul's German Evangelical Church at 11th and Minnesota and applied for membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States, one of the several branches of the adherents of the Lutheran Confessions in the United States at that time. (The Ohio Synod had been established in 1818 and eventually joined with two other Lutheran synods to form the American Lutheran Church.) Soon thereafter, Dr. Kaiser was appointed as a Lutheran missionary for the city of Saint Paul. He decided to establish a new church in the Frogtown area of the city where there were many German Lutheran immigrants. The congregation initially met in temporary quarters at 474 University Avenue but soon determined that a growing congregation needed a permanent home. On June 25, 1888, the congregation purchased a site at Dale and Sherburne. Due to limited funds, the first building, designed by Saint Paul architect Moritz L. Weiser, was a frame structure, 40 feet by 80 feet, that was to be veneered with brick when funds allowed. The cornerstone was laid on August 19, 1888, and the building was dedicated on November 28, 1888. The Sanborn Insurance Map indicates that the building was heated by stoves and lighting was provided by gas lamps. In 1890, the congregation built a separate building for a Sunday school at the south edge of its lot.<sup>48</sup>

According to a history of the church, in 1912, the congregation "succeeded in carrying out her original plan to make a more serviceable and imposing structure out of the old church. The church was raised, a full basement added, the steeple was given form to correspond with the structure, the walls were brick-veneered. To sum it up, the church was remodeled so completely that it gave the appearance of an entirely new building." The building was dedicated on December 1, 1912.<sup>49</sup> This description suggests many of the features of the existing building. The local limestone watertable, in particular, seems to be a remnant of the very first building.

On February 1, 1918, a major fire gutted the church building. The congregation resolved to rebuild immediately. Building permit records indicate that the architect for the rebuilding was William L. Alban. If, in fact, the rebuilt church largely replicated the 1912 building, Alban may have been the architect for that building.<sup>50</sup>

William Linley Alban (1873-1961) had studied architecture in Chicago. He had worked as the chief draftsman in the offices of Didrich Omeyer and Martin P. Thori. After Thori's death in 1905, Alban joined with James Fischer to buy the business from Omeyer who retired; the firm was called Thori, Alban, and Fischer. The neo-classical First Methodist Church (1909), 43 North Victoria, was a product of that firm. Between about 1910 and 1915, Alban was in partnership with Charles Hausler, who was appointed as the first Saint Paul City Architect. The Alban and

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<sup>48</sup> "A Brief History of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church," *The Visitor* 11 (December 1937): 3-5; the Historic Sites Survey form lists the original architect. For background on different branches of Lutheranism in the United States, see [www.biblehistory.com/Lutheran.html](http://www.biblehistory.com/Lutheran.html). Zellie and Peterson, 10, cite Dr. Kaiser's first church as an example of an immigrant church. *Insurance Maps of Saint Paul* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), vol. 3, sheet 326.

<sup>49</sup> "A Brief History," 4.

<sup>50</sup> The building permit for the 1918 work is No. 71399. William L. Alban is listed as the architect and Edward Birkholz as the contractor. Birkholz had also been the contractor for the 1912 building. The Historic Sites Survey form gives the permit information. "A Brief History," cites the contractor information for both building campaigns.

Hausler partnership was responsible for at least two church buildings, Central Baptist Church (1913), 420 North Roy Street, and Knox Presbyterian Church (1914), 1536 West Minnehaha Avenue, inspired by the design of Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple. They also designed a notable bungalow (1911) at 130 North Lexington Avenue and a house at 1259 West Hague (1913). Alban also designed the Fairmount Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church (1917) at 1523 West Fairmount, the Payne Avenue State Bank (1923) at 961 North Payne Avenue, and the Pilgrim Baptist Church (1928), 732 West Central Avenue, built for Saint Paul's oldest African-American congregation.<sup>51</sup>

The traditional and handsomely executed Gothic Revival features of the former St. Matthew's church are compatible with the liturgy and worship practices of the Lutheran church. The Voetteler-Holtkamp-Sparling organ installed in 1919 also enhanced the worship services. The art-glass windows installed along the sides of the sanctuary and above the entrance door are characteristic of Arts and Crafts design of the period.<sup>52</sup>

In 1931 the congregation decided that it had outgrown its original Sunday school building. Architect Carl Buetow, also a congregation member, was asked to submit designs for a new building. The cornerstone for the new Sunday school was laid on July 24, 1932, and the building was dedicated on November 23, 1932. Buetow's design reflected the Gothic details and materials of the church building. The two buildings were linked with an underground kitchen between the two.<sup>53</sup>

After the end of World War II, with changes in the Frogtown neighborhood, St. Matthew's decided to build a new church at 701 North Lexington Parkway at Van Buren Avenue, nearby the residence of its pastor, the Rev. Kurt Kerl, who lived at 623 North Lexington.

In 1950, the Dale Street church became the home of the First Church of the Nazarene, which changed the cornerstone when it took possession. St. John's Church of God in Christ took over in 1964. It has been owned by the Rock of Ages Missionary Baptist Church since the late 1970s, but the building is in poor physical condition and up for sale, as of 2007. The Sunday school building was sold to the Midtown Business Center in about 2000.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hess and Larson, 84-85, 97-98, 252 note 66, 253 note 82; Historic Sites Survey form; Larry Millett, *AIA Guide to the Architecture of the Twin Cities* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2007), 387, 486, 487, 550, 567, 572, 574.

<sup>52</sup> "A Brief History," 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> "A Brief History," 5.

<sup>54</sup> Historic Sites Survey form; Ramsey County property records. The Preservation Alliance of Minnesota listed the church building on its "10 Most Endangered Places List for 2008" because of the poor condition and limited financial resources of the congregation.



The spire of St. Matthew's is seen looking north across University Avenue in 1952.  
*Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



Children of St. Matthew's in front of the first Sunday School building in about 1913.  
*Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

## Significance and Recommendation

The former St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church does not seem to be eligible for National Register listing. As a religious property, the church requires evaluation under criteria consideration A and justification on architectural, artistic, or historic grounds. The congregation, which is typical of many ethnically based churches, does not appear to be associated with any major historic themes or events, which would qualify it for National Register listing under Criterion A. There do not appear to be any persons of sufficient historic significance to qualify it for listing under Criterion B. The Gothic Revival design and art-glass elements of the church are typical of their type, period, and style, but do not stand out within the local context, and the church does not possess high artistic value. Further, the building is not the work of a master. Consequently the church does not appear to be eligible for National Register listing under Criterion C.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1990, rev. 1991), 12-20, 26-28.

**UNIVERSITY AVENUE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH (RA-SPC-3342),  
507 NORTH VICTORIA STREET/868 SHERBURNE AVENUE, SAINT PAUL**



## Introduction

This church building falls within the enlarged APE for the proposed Victoria Avenue Station. It has been identified in a number of studies and surveys over the years. The first of these, in 1963-1964, was *Historic St. Paul Buildings*, a joint project of the City of Saint Paul Planning Board and the local American Institute of Architects chapter. It was inventoried in the Historic Sites Survey of the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission in 1982. At that time it was characterized: “The University Avenue Congregational Church is an excellent turn of the century example of the Carpenter Gothic phase of the Gothic Revival style. It is one of the more inventive and intriguing designs of one of Minnesota’s most prominent and intriguing architects, Clarence H. Johnston, Sr.” It was subsequently identified in the final survey report as a site worthy of designation. It was cited as one of the churches worthy of further investigation in the 2001 Historic Context Study. Most recently, architecture critic Larry Millett has called it “one of Frogtown’s gems. Designed by Clarence Johnston, it’s a sophisticated version of the so-called Carpenter Gothic style.”<sup>56</sup>

## Description

The church building is located at the southwest corner of the intersection of Victoria Street and Sherburne Avenue on a site that is approximately 100 feet along Victoria and 80 feet along Sherburne. The wood-frame building of Gothic design is 43 feet wide facing Victoria and 60 feet deep along Sherburne.<sup>57</sup> It is set on a basement of rusticated local limestone. The interior worship space is formed by two intersecting gable sections, which are punctuated by a corner tower with battered walls. The tower contains the main entrance which is approached by a flight of wood steps and sheltered by an overhanging hood carried on brackets. The tower rises to a drum with louvered openings that are flanked by console brackets and capped by an octagonal spire with flared eaves carried on brackets. The paired windows in the tower and the spandrels between them are replacements for the originals. Each gable end has a large pointed-arch window opening with art-glass set in wood tracery. The gable eaves are articulated by carved wood forms with trefoil motifs (symbolizing the Trinity) that create pointed arches. A small wing at the west end contains a residential apartment. The original wood siding of the church has been replaced by the current aluminum or vinyl siding, which closely matches the width of the original and has been carefully applied to retain the details of the carved woodwork.

A one-story wing of red brick extends along the south wall of the church. It was added in 1962 to create a street-level entrance and provide additional classroom and meeting space for the congregation. In 1966 the sanctuary was remodeled and refurnished to give it a more modern, up-to-date look. The Arts and Crafts style art-glass windows that light the interior were retained, as were the pews, but otherwise much of the early twentieth-century detail was removed.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> H. F. Koepfer, *Historic St. Paul Buildings* (Saint Paul: St. Paul City Planning Board, 1964), 108; Historic Sites Survey (RA-SPC-3342); Murphy and Granger, 70, 73; Zellie and Peterson, 16, 22; Millett, 497.

<sup>57</sup> *Insurance Maps of Saint Paul* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926 through 1939), vol. 3, sheet 341; Historic Sites Survey form.

<sup>58</sup> *Historic Saint Paul Buildings* describes it: “The structure is marred by a newly built brick side entrance which completely ignores the spirit of the church’s design.” *University Avenue Congregational Church, A Brief History of Our Church* (Galion, Ohio: United Church Directories, [1968]), np.



Former University Avenue Congregational Church, 507 North Victoria Street.  
View to southwest.  
*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*



Church as seen from Sherburne Avenue.  
*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*

## History of the Church and Property

The University Avenue Congregational Church had its beginnings in 1889, when a Sunday school was organized in the home of Mrs. Selina Stone on Milton Street. The congregants formally organized in 1895 and worshiped in a small building at Sherburne Avenue and Avon Street. As the congregation grew, a new building was needed. In 1907 Mr. R. R. Briggs donated the land at Victoria and Sherburne, and Saint Paul architect Clarence H. Johnston, Sr., was given the commission for a new church design. The Reverend Orville C. Clark was the minister at the time, and he helped raise the necessary funds to meet the \$8,000 budget. Several notable Saint Paul businessmen contributed including James J. Hill (\$1,000), Frederick Weyerhaeuser (\$500), and J. W. Dyer (\$100). The new building was dedicated on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1908.<sup>59</sup>

Clarence H. Johnston, Sr. (1859-1936) was one of Minnesota's most prominent architects by the time he received the commission for the University Avenue Congregational Church. Prior to receiving this commission, he had designed several notable religious buildings, including Grace Memorial Church, Wabasha, Minnesota; the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Portland and Kent, Saint Paul; and St. Mary's Chapel at St. Paul Seminary, Saint Paul. He also designed another Saint Paul church, Olivet Congregational, at Iglehart Avenue and Dewey Street in the Merriam Park area, during the same time period as University Avenue Congregational Church. Johnston, a native of Minnesota, had studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, worked in New York for awhile as a designer for the Herter Brothers interior design firm, and then returned to Saint Paul to set up his own practice in 1883. While starting his career largely as an architect of residences, he soon branched out to commercial and warehouse designs, as well as a wide variety of other building types. He served as the Minnesota State Architect between 1901 and 1931, designing state prisons, hospitals, and other public buildings. He was also the architect for the University of Minnesota Board of Regents, with the responsibility for the design of many of buildings on the two Twin Cities campuses, as well as other campuses of the university system.<sup>60</sup>

The University Avenue Congregational Church reflects Johnston's skill in creating an architecturally distinctive design that met the needs of his clients. The art-glass windows with their translucent pastel glass are another distinguishing feature.

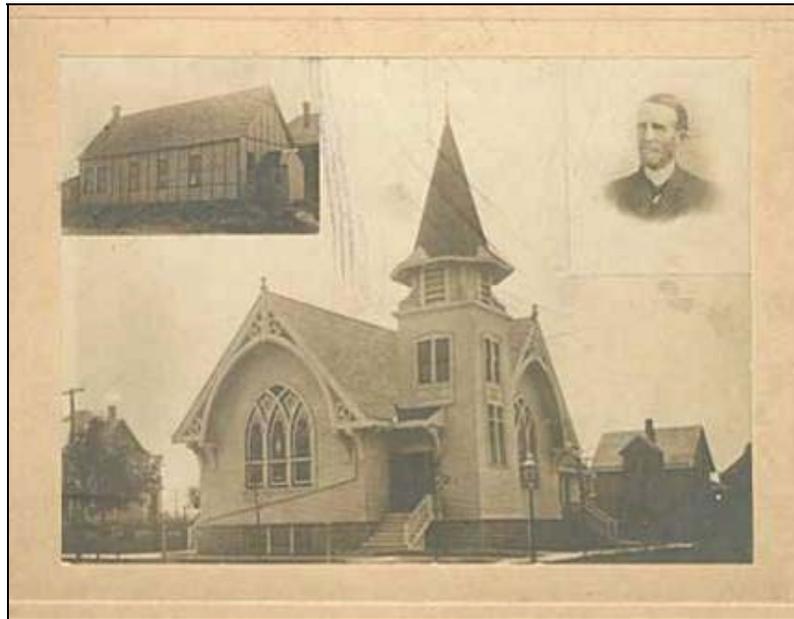
The University Avenue Congregational Church seems to have generally prospered at this location until the 1970s. By 1962, it had withdrawn from the St. Paul Area Congregational Union and had joined the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. It was at this time that the new wing was added, with the modernization work carried out in the sanctuary soon thereafter. University Avenue Congregational appears in the Saint Paul city telephone directories through

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<sup>59</sup> For the earlier church see *Insurance Maps of Saint Paul* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1903), vol. 3, sheet 324. "University Avenue Congregational Church," Draft National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1982, prepared for Historic Sites Survey, Ramsey County Historical Society and Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, available at Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Clifford Larson, *Minnesota Architect: The Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston* (Afton, Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press, 1996) is the most comprehensive source of information to date. For his religious buildings, see especially 105-109.

1983. Since 2002, the building has been occupied by a non-denominational Protestant Christian group called the St. Paul Fellowship.<sup>61</sup>



Historic view of church with first church in upper left corner.  
*Photo: Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



University Avenue Congregational Church in 1964.  
*Photo: Eugene D. Becker, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

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<sup>61</sup> “A Brief History”; *The Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the St. Paul Area Congregational Union 1887-1962; A Brief History of the St. Paul Area Congregational Union* (Saint Paul: J. McWethy, 1962); Saint Paul Telephone Directory (1970 through 1984); [www.stpaulfellowship.org](http://www.stpaulfellowship.org).

## Significance and Recommendation

The former University Avenue Congregational Church remains a notable example of the religious architecture of Clarence Johnson, Sr., and among his most distinctive church designs. The Gothic design, executed in boldly carved wood, reflects an Arts and Crafts sensibility that was very much in fashion for progressive architecture of the period. Unfortunately the significance of this work, while still very visible from the street, has been diluted by the very visible and unsympathetic brick addition on the south side and the well-meaning interior modernization work carried out in the 1960s. Aside from the overall plan, the fine art-glass windows, and the pews, little of the original interior remains.

As a religious property, the church requires evaluation under criteria consideration A and justification on architectural, artistic, or historic grounds. The church does not appear to meet National Register eligibility Criterion A or B, either for association with historic themes or events or for association with significant persons.

If it were not for the unfortunate brick addition and interior alterations which have adversely affected the building's integrity, it is likely that the building would merit listing under National Register Criterion C as a notable example of Clarence Johnston's work and as a notable example of the architectural style, period, and type, and as a work of high artistic value.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *National Register Bulletin 15*, 12-20, 26-28.

**VICTORIA THEATER (RA-SPC-3892), 825 UNIVERSITY AVENUE,  
SAINT PAUL: NATIONAL REGISTER EVALUATION**



## Introduction

The Victoria Theater has been previously evaluated in two surveys, both of which briefly explain its history. The first was the Historic Sites Survey carried out by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission in 1982. The exterior appearance of the building seems little changed, except for the painting (or repainting) of the brickwork, since it was described then as “a pleasing and surprisingly intact theater built in 1915 and designed by Franklin Ellerbe, the founder of Ellerbe Architects.”<sup>63</sup> This judgment was apparently applied only to the exterior of the building, which was in use as a theater for five or six years, although the articulation and arrangement of the facade details make clear its original theater use.

A much more detailed assessment was made of the building in the Phase II Architectural History Inventory. The evaluation concluded: “The Victoria Theater operated only a few years as a theater, and consequently is deemed not important in the history of the theater industry in St. Paul. The theater is recommended as not significant under Criterion A. The design of the theater appears to have been appropriate for its modest size and it is comparable, in terms of architectural presence, to other small theaters. . . . The theater is not an outstanding example of a theater building, does not have high artistic merit, and is not a significant example of the work of Franklin Ellerbe. It is recommended as not significant under Criterion C.”<sup>64</sup>

The Saint Paul HPC requested further review and analysis of the building as part of the CCLRT project.

## History of the Victoria Theater and Property

We have reviewed the information previously gathered and assembled more information to evaluate the building’s significance. When the Victoria Theater was built in 1915 as one of three theaters for Harvey Breilein, who was also the owner and proprietor of the Faust, 626 University, opened in 1912, and the Verdi, 302 University, opened in 1914, it was designed for the projection of silent motion pictures. Such theaters, often called “nickelodeons” because the admission charge was a nickel (later raised to ten cents), were usually long and relatively narrow spaces, with a projector at one end and a screen at the other with rows of movable chairs in between. This was the era of small-scale motion picture theaters throughout the residential neighborhoods of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. One local newspaper account described motion picture theaters springing up “as spontaneously as mushrooms.” Another stated: “The theater has become a neighborhood institution and a part of the routine of life rather than a luxury. . . . The fifty

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<sup>63</sup> Historic Sites Survey, Ramsey County Historical Society and Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, RA-SPC-3892. St. Paul Building Permit No. 66986. The estimated cost was \$10,000.

<sup>64</sup> Phase II Architectural History Inventory, 211-213.

theaters already in operation [in Minneapolis] are so well distributed that practically every streetcar intersection and every trading center has its show house.”<sup>65</sup>

All three of Breilein’s theaters were located on University Avenue, easily accessible by streetcar. By the time the Victoria was built in 1915, St. Paul had about thirty motion picture theaters, split between downtown and the neighborhoods, and oversupply was becoming a concern. The Victoria Theater was only in operation between 1916 and 1921, according to city directory listings. The building then seems to have stood vacant for several years.<sup>66</sup>

According to the Historic Sites Survey, the building was owned by the Twin Cities Amusement Company, in 1925, when architectural work was carried out. Hess and Larson state that the facade was redone at that time to keep up with current fashion, although without building plans or relevant historic photos prior to that date, this assessment is not certain: “On a smaller scale, theaters were the first class of buildings to apply new sidewalk-to-daylight facades in step with current fashion. The Victoria Theater at 825 University Avenue is a fine surviving St. Paul example. Franklin Ellerbe had designed a very simple, commercial style facade in 1915. Then the Roaring Twenties arrived, and with it a thirst for high style. An elegantly detailed brick facade was applied, and this was adorned with ornamental light fixtures and new marquee (now removed).”<sup>67</sup>

It seems likely that the Twin Cities Amusement Company was an outgrowth of or alternate name for the Twin City Amusement Trust Estate, formed in 1918 by motion picture theater owners Moses Finkelstein and Isaac Ruben with the backing of brewer William Hamm. The group built new theaters in the two downtowns and then in the 1920s began to buy out neighborhood theaters to extend its influence and reduce competition.<sup>68</sup>

In any case, the former Victoria Theater reopened in 1925 as the Victoria Cafe, with Moe Thompson as proprietor. According the directory listings, it also offered dancing. This use prevailed until about 1935. A black-and-white photograph from 1928 of the adjacent Ray-Bell Films Building, shows part of the Victoria Cafe. The decorative brick facade is a dark color. A marquee over the entrance is suspended from chains affixed below the cornice. A sign placard is visible on the right-hand side of the facade, where a window is now. There is no ornamental lamp above it.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The quotes are from the *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 7, 1911, and *Minneapolis Journal*, September 3, 1911, both cited in Dave Kenney, *Twin Cities Picture Show: A Century of Moviegoing* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>66</sup> Kenney, 41; *R. L. Polk’s St. Paul City Directory*, 1915 through 1921.

<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *St. Paul’s Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 165. No references are cited for the specifics of the remodeling. The Historic Sites Survey form lists the new owner and states that work estimated at \$2,000 was carried out.

<sup>68</sup> Kenney, 42-43, 51-53.

<sup>69</sup> *R. L. Polk’s St. Paul City Directory*, 1925; Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], Visual Resources Database, location no. MR2.9 SP3.1R r13, negative no. 07688-15.

Then in 1936, the building was remodeled again by Joseph Muska to accommodate the Edison Lighting Studio. Muska and other members of his family had previously operated the Edison Electric Fixture Company at 777 University Avenue. The building at 825 University is depicted as a store in the Sanborn insurance maps for Saint Paul. When the building was surveyed in 1982, it was still called Edison Lighting. The building has remained in commercial use but is currently vacant and undergoing interior remodeling.<sup>70</sup>

The most recent published mention of the building is by Larry Millett: “Beaded and patterned brickwork distinguishes the facade of this small theater building, originally known as the Victoria.”<sup>71</sup>

Even though the adjacent building at 823 University housed a thriving film production business (Ray-Bell Films) that specialized in industrial and business films, we have found no connections, aside from location, between the two properties.

### RECOMMENDATION

We concur with the previous assessment of the Victoria Theater, despite the interesting history of the building and its exterior architectural character. We do not recommend it as eligible for National Register listing.



Victoria Theater building. Rath, Mills and Bell, Inc. (Ray-Bell Films) is at right.

*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*

<sup>70</sup> Historic Sites Survey inventory form; see MHS, Visual Resources database for a photograph of the Edison Electric Fixture Company at 777 University Avenue, taken in 1925 by Charles P. Gibson; location no. MR29 SP3.1G p32, negative no. 1582-B. *Insurance Maps of Saint Paul* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926, updated through 1939; 1926, updated through 1950), vol. 3, plate 342.

<sup>71</sup> Larry Millett, *AIA Guide to the Twin Cities* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 499.

**RATHS, MILLS AND BELL, INC. (RAY-BELL FILMS) BUILDING,  
823 UNIVERSITY AVENUE, SAINT PAUL:  
NATIONAL REGISTER EVALUATION**



## Introduction

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the building was not inventoried by the Historic Sites Survey carried out by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission in 1982.

In the Phase I Architectural History Inventory, it was identified by its then current name of French Bakery and photographed. The recommendation was “not enough information,” and no SHPO number was assigned. It was not identified as a building requiring additional research.<sup>72</sup>

The Saint Paul HPC requested further review and analysis of the building as part of the CCLRT project.

## Description

This building, which was home to a pioneering film production company, is located midblock on the north side of University Avenue between Victoria Street and Avon Street. The property occupies lots 25 and 26 of Block 4 of the Syndicate No. 1 Addition. The building is on lot 25 at the west, while lot 26 to the east is a paved parking lot. The two-story brick building was constructed in two sections. The front portion, which is at the sidewalk line, is 26 feet wide and extends back into the lot about 60 feet. The rear portion occupies the width of the 40 foot lot and extends back to the alley line.

The front facade was designed by Saint Paul architect Mark Fitzpatrick in a rather fanciful Mediterranean-inspired style whose details are somewhat obscured by a uniform coat of paint.<sup>73</sup> The front is framed by a brick base, an intricate arrangement of keyed brickwork at the sides, and surmounted by corbelled brick parapet. The first story has a doorway, with a recent door, at the east side and two large window openings to the west. The original transoms have been filled in and the sash replaced. Originally each transom had five vertical panes of glass above a large plate-glass window. The main wall surfaces are stuccoed. A sign band is placed on the wall between the first and second stories. At the second story, three window openings, all with replacement sash, are framed by keyed brick surrounds that are linked by brick bands. The windows are sheltered by a shed-roof hood that is carried on wood brackets. The vertical sign affixed to the wall by the east corner was added in the 1940s.

The east side wall is of brick, painted to match the front, and punctuated by three ground-level doorways and three window openings at the second story. A sign reading BAKERY is affixed to the wall. A small extension at the rear of the front section is surmounted by a covered porch. Originally exterior stairs led up to this level, and the porch was confined

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<sup>72</sup> The 106 Group Ltd., “Phase I Architectural History Investigation for the Proposed Central Transit Corridor, Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, Minnesota,” August 2003, submitted to Hennepin County Department of Transit and Community Works, vol. 2, appendix B, 47.

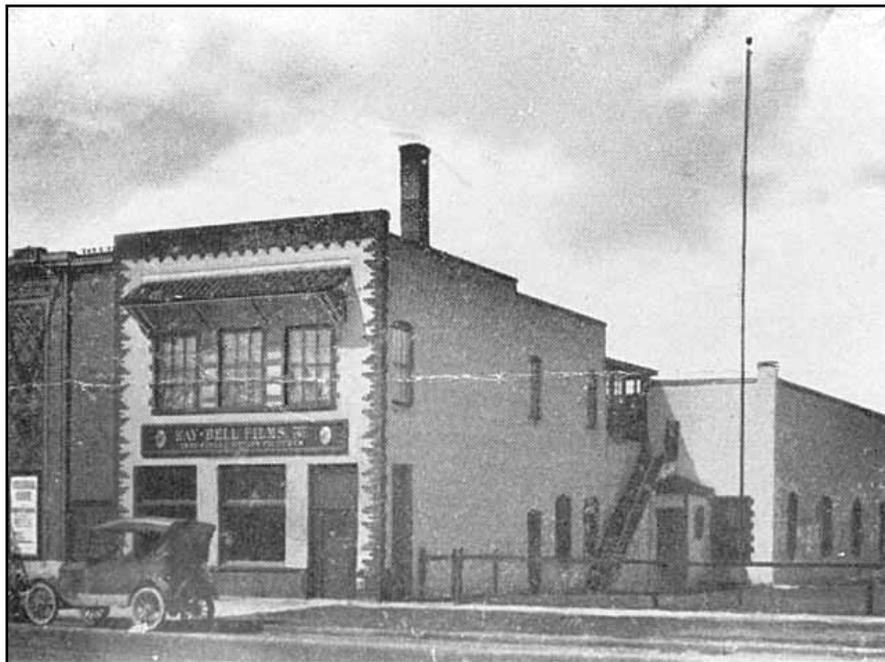
<sup>73</sup> For background information on Fitzpatrick (1866-1955), see Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson, *St. Paul's Architecture: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 91.

to the area behind the front section of the building. The rear section of the building, also of brick that has been painted, has a series of arched openings on the east side, some of which have been filled in. The remainder of the site is fenced in and paved for parking.



Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. (Ray-Bell Films), 823 University Avenue. A portion of the Victoria Theater building is visible at left.

*Photo: Marjorie Pearson*



Ray-Bell Films, Inc., in 1928. The Victoria Cafe is at the left.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections.*

## History of the Company and the Building

The building at 823 University Avenue was constructed in 1915 and 1921 to serve the needs of an early film production company that went through several corporate changes and expansions while at this location.

In 1914, Otto N. Raths (1876?-1947), a veteran of the Spanish-American War and the manager of the Gaiety Theater, located at 447 Wabasha, joined with Edward F. Seavolt, a photographer, to form the Raths-Seavolt Film Corporation. Raths was the president and treasurer; Seavolt was the vice-president and secretary. The business was located at 127 West 3rd Street (today's Kellogg Boulevard). The company was incorporated in 1915 as the Raths-Seavolt Film Manufacturing Company and relocated to a newly constructed building at 821-823 University Avenue. The *Improvement Bulletin* announced, "Mark Fitzpatrick, architect, 19 W. 9<sup>th</sup>, has furnished plans for a studio building, to be used by a film exchange, on University av., . . . Raths-Seavolt Co., owners."<sup>74</sup>

Raths must have been well-connected in Democratic politics because he was appointed Saint Paul Postmaster on March 15, 1915, while keeping his interests in the film manufacturing business. He and his family lived in an apartment that had the address of 821 University Avenue, probably located at the rear of the building on the second floor. (By 1920, they were living at 331 Sherburne Avenue.) Seavolt seems to have been eased out of the business, for in 1916 he was operating independently as a commercial photographer from his home at 111 Cambridge Avenue. Raths retained his company position as president and treasurer, while J. J. Flynn had become the vice president and secretary. The city directory describes the business as "motion picture manufacturers." In 1917, Raths' wife Nellie had taken the secretary position. Charles E. Bell, another photographer, joined the business as a manager in 1918, and late that year the business was reincorporated as Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. The board members were Otto N. Raths, Nellie Raths, W. Robert Mills, J. J. Flynn, Charles E. Bell, and Alma Mills. The general nature of the business was described as "to manufacture motion pictures of every description; to manufacture moving picture equipment; to manage theaters and theater companies; and to deal in lands, tenements, and personal property."<sup>75</sup>

Under the management leadership of Bell and with increased capital, the company was able to expand in about 1921, adding a large structure to the rear of the original building to house the motion picture studio and equipment for film processing. In a contemporary photograph, the sign band above the first story reads: RATHS, MILLS & BELL, INC., with "motion pictures" under the firm name and the address numbers "817" and "823" at either end. Before and after this construction campaign, the property east of the building

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<sup>74</sup> R. L. Polk's *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1910 through 1915; *Improvement Bulletin*, March 6, 1915, 17; April 3, 1915, 21. The latter number announced that a building permit had been issued to builder John Moline; the building was to cost \$5,000.

<sup>75</sup> R. L. Polk's *Saint Paul City Directory*, 1915 through 1920; U.S. Census for 1920; Reid Ray Films, Inc., Records, 1918-1972, Historical Sketch by Bonnie Beatson Palmquist (January 1986), manuscript collection (P1504), available at Minnesota Historical Society; *Business Motion Pictures: Reid H. Ray Film Industries, Inc.* (Saint Paul, 1953).

was used by the company to shoot outdoor scenes, as depicted in a photograph of the film crew. In 1923, Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. became Mills and Bell Motion Pictures, Inc., after Raths pulled out of the business. (He had kept ownership of the Raths-Seavolt corporation name, which he altered to the Raths-Seavolt Manufacturing Company, and applied to a real estate business located at 432 Wabasha.) Reid H. Ray joined forces with Mills and Bell at about this time, and the company was reorganized as Ray-Bell Films, Inc. in 1925. The building sign was changed accordingly to read RAY-BELL FILMS, INC., with “industrial motion pictures” underneath.<sup>76</sup>



The addition to Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. is being constructed at the rear of the site, 1921.

*Photo: Raths, Mills and Bell, Minnesota Historical Society Collections.*

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<sup>76</sup> MHS, Visual Resources Database, Location No. HD6.73 p56, neg. no. 45726, for addition; location no. N2.3 p44, neg. no. 44757, for film crew on side yard; N2.3 p38, neg. no. 44745, for film crew in front of building in 1925; MR2.9 SP3.1R r13, neg. no. 07688-15, for building in 1928. *R. L. Polk's Saint Paul City Directory*, 1923, 1924, for Raths. The Palmquist Historical Sketch also traces the name changes and dates.



Film crew in front of University Avenue building, 1925.  
*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections.*



Film crew in front of University Avenue building, 1932.  
*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

The 1926 Sanborn insurance map of Saint Paul, depicts the building on lot 25, with the front section labeled “Office,” steps on the east side, the porch on the second floor, and the rear section labeled “Motion Picture Studio.” Lot 26 to the east is depicted without buildings. The company photographed its own activities in the building. Films were cut, spliced, and wound onto reels in a workroom at the front of the building on the first floor. The office was on the second floor. Darkened studio sets were located in the mid-section and the upper floor of the rear section. The lower floor of the rear section was used for film processing and drying.<sup>77</sup>



Film crew on University Avenue site next to building,  
ca. 1923.

*Photo: Mills and Bell Motion Pictures, Minnesota Historical Society  
Collections*

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<sup>77</sup> *Insurance Maps*, 1926, vol. 3, plate 342. Photographs of the interior are in MHS, Visual Resources Database, location no. N2.3 p25, neg. no. 44750; location no. N2.3 r17, neg. no. 07687-5; location no. N2.3 r18, neg. no. 07687-2; for studio; location no. N2.3 p31, neg. no. 45721; for work room; location no. N2.3 p32, neg. no. 45723; for film drying room; location no. HF3 p143, neg. no. 45725.



Work room at front of building, ca. 1930.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



Ray-Bell Films office on second floor of building, 1934.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



Filming on a studio set at Ray-Bell Films, 1930.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



Drying film on racks at Ray-Bell Films, 1930.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

When Otto Raths and his partners went into the motion picture business, they may have intended to produce commercial films for the rapidly increasing number of motion picture houses, like the Victoria Theater next door. But the motion picture production companies in New York and Hollywood managed to keep tight control on that product, as succinctly described by Dave Kenney.<sup>78</sup> Instead Raths, Mills and Bell and then Mills and Bell specialized in films for business, industry, and organizations. Important early clients were the Minneapolis Community Fund, which resulted in filming at local settlement houses like Wells Memorial House, Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House, and Northeast Neighborhood House, and the Burlington, Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railways, for whom the company created the “Burlington Motion Picture Library.” The latter involved filming on location from Saint Paul to Seattle. When Reid Ray joined the company and it became Ray-Bell Films, it had begun to branch out with a wide variety of Minnesota-based industrial and business clients. Commercials for clients like hotels would be filmed in the studio, but much of the filming for companies like Caterpillar, McCormick-Deering, General Mills, Pillsbury, and Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing was done on location. Members of the company devised a number of solutions to aid location filming, such as mounting a generator on the rear of an automobile and putting a camera in an enclosed container (dubbed a camera blimp) mounted on a movable tripod on wheels. Like the makers of commercial motion pictures, Ray-Bell offered full motion picture services to its clients, from planning, to production and direction, to distribution.<sup>79</sup>

With sound becoming popular in films, the University Avenue location became inadequate, so the company relocated to a new building with more facilities, constructed

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<sup>78</sup> Dave Kenney, *Twin Cities Picture Show: A Century of Moviegoing* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 14-16, 64-69.

<sup>79</sup> The index of the MHS Visual Resources Database provides a good overview of Raths, Mills and Bell, Mills and Bell, and Ray-Bell Films clients. Photos of some of the filming innovations include location no. N2.3 p39, neg. no. 45724, for generator on rear of automobile; and location no. N2.3 p51, neg. no. 45924 and location no. N2.3 p52, neg. no. 45925, for camera blimp.

in 1935 at 2269 Ford Parkway. (The buildings are no longer extant.) In 1947, the company was renamed the Reid H. Ray Film Industries, Inc.<sup>80</sup>

By 1941 the University Avenue building had become a restaurant in the front section with a retail beverage distributor in the rear section.<sup>81</sup> The form of the large vertical sign is consistent with a date in the 1940s, and was added to announce the restaurant occupying the building. The front section has remained in restaurant use until relatively recently. The rear section houses a commercial bakery. Part of the building is in residential use.



Film crew working on location for Burlington Motion Picture Library, 1923. Burlington, Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railways was an important client.

*Photo: Mills and Bell Motion Pictures, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

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<sup>80</sup> Palmquist, Historical Sketch; *Business Motion Pictures*.

<sup>81</sup> *R. L. Polk's Saint Paul City Directory*, 1941. *Insurance Maps*, 1926, updated through 1950, vol. 3, sheet 342. In 1941, the restaurant was owned by Mrs. Ann Koonce and the beverage distribution business by Lawrence R. Merton.



Portable generator mounted on car to provide power on location, 1927. This was one of the innovations devised by the company staff.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



The company filmed at the General Sibley House in Mendota, 1928.

*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections.*



A scene at Union City Mission, Minneapolis, 1925.  
*Photo: Mills and Bell, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*



Playroom at Northeast Neighborhood House, Minneapolis, 1925.  
*Photo: Mills and Bell, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

These organizations were filmed as part of a Community Fund campaign.



Filming Caterpillar Tractor Company machinery on a road, 1930.  
*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Collections*



Harvesting wheat with a McCormick-Deering combine, 1930.  
*Photo: Ray-Bell Films, Minnesota Historical Society Collections*

## **Significance**

Despite its relatively modest appearance today, the Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. (Ray-Bell Films) Building at 823 University Avenue has achieved significance as the home for some thirty years of a pioneering film production company that documented and promoted the work of many Minnesota-based organizations, businesses, and industries. As such the building appears to be eligible for National Register listing under Criterion A in the area of communications.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

We recommend that the Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. (Ray-Bell Films) Building, 823 University Avenue, be considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.