Frogtown Park and Farm History

Prepared for the City of St. Paul by Bluestem Heritage Group
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Today, the Frogtown Park and Farm is a 12.7-acre site on a lightly wooded hill on the northern edge of the Frogtown neighborhood in Saint Paul. From the summit, one can see over a dense residential neighborhood to the downtown skyline. Visitors to the park enjoy the open fields, mature trees, and broad vistas, but this quiet, natural scene is relatively new. For over 150 years, this park was the location of diametrically different uses: the intense open-pit extraction of gravel, and the home to two social service agencies.

**Ice Age, Geology, and Pre-Settlement Vegetation**

The history of the Frogtown Park and Farm site begins over 10,000 years ago. During the various glacial periods, an ancient river or rivers cut through much of the area that is now Frogtown, scouring a valley that reached down through the Decorah Shale and Platteville and Glenwood Formations to the St. Peter Sandstone level. As glaciers retreated, the valley was filled with glacial till and gravel deposits. Eventually, the broader area was covered with additional deposits, and the Frogtown Park and Farm became a hill, which disguised the underlying geological formation. Local lakes formed as “ice blocks remnant from glacial lobes were often wedged in these bedrock valleys later becoming melted lakes, as is the case with St. Paul’s Lake Como.”

Pre-settlement vegetation at the Frogtown Park and Garden site was mostly oak openings and barrens. To the southwest was a prairie, and to the northeast was a swamp. According to the University of Minnesota, deposits of clay and loam just north of the site also indicate the previous existence of a wetland. Early maps note this small pond, too.
Dakota

The Frogtown Park and Farm site is about four miles northwest of the former village of Kaposia (near present-day South St. Paul), which was a seasonal home for about 400 Dakota from 1750 until 1837. The hillside (near the current intersection of Minnehaha and Chatsworth) and the land surrounding it were likely familiar landmarks to the Dakota as they hunted in and traveled through the area.

In 1837, the wooded hillside and all of the land between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers were included in the land ceded to the United States by the Dakota at a treaty in Washington, D.C. After the treaty, the village of Kaposia was abandoned as the Dakota were required to move to the western side of the rivers. Fourteen years later, after the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota (1851) the Dakota in Minnesota were further removed to a small strip of land spanning the Minnesota River.

Early Settlement

After the 1837 Treaty, the Frogtown hillside became federal property. The surveyors came through in 1847, noting the existence of the “Red River Road [Trail]” that connected the new settlement of St. Paul with St. Anthony (and beyond to the Red River), as well as the nearby swamps and woods.

The colloquial name “Frogtown” for the local neighborhood likely dates from this period. Alexis Hoffman, a Catholic priest working in St. Paul at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote in his journal, “You will not find the designation of Frogtown on the map; it lives in local, oral tradition and will live although the cheerful, monotonous warbling of the swamp canaries has been hushed forever.”

The original swamp had “abounded in frogs of all sizes and degrees of vocal power. On summer evenings a patriarchal croaker would entone a rich and unctuous `quonk,’ which would be followed by a long drawn, many-voiced response for hours and hours.”

The transition of the hill from native habitat and to city plat came in 1851, when Justice Ramsey registered a claim for the hill on January 10. He became the site’s first American landowner, later passing the property to his older brother, the first Governor of Minnesota, Alexander Ramsey.

The hill changed hands frequently during Minnesota’s early years, but by 1882 about two-thirds of the property was owned by a pioneer lumberman named Smith Ellison. Ellison also served in Minnesota’s first territorial legislature alongside Justice Ramsey, and his niece described him as “a land man.”

Neither Ellison nor the other property owners of the hill, Alice Hewitt and Henry Coffey, ever built on the site. When the Sisters of the Good Shepherd purchased the property in 1882, the closest buildings were one house two blocks east and another six blocks west.
The House of the Good Shepherd

The House of the Good Shepherd, soon after completion around 1880. (NHS Collections)

When the Sisters of the Good Shepherd arrived in St. Paul in 1868, their mission was to serve the needs of the homeless, wayward, and criminal girls and women—regardless of their religion. At 931 Blair Avenue, the Roman Catholic Sisters developed two distinct programs: the first, initially called the “Preservation Program,” was the care of girls who came from failing homes. The second was initially known as the “Penitent Program,” which served former prostitutes or delinquent girls, a majority of which were sent for reformation by the court. At the conclusion of their court-ordered stay, most women returned to their communities. However, many women accepted an offer to remain with the sisters in a semi-religious status as “Consecrates,” living at the House, praying, assisting with chores, and easily able to leave the House. Another option was to become a “Magdalen” nun, a strictly cloistered woman who led a contemplative life within the convent at the House of the Good Shepherd.10

The Frogtown hillside was the third location for the Sisters. Their first home had been a temporary residence at the corner of Smith and Leech Streets.11 It was just large enough for the four sisters who made the two-day journey from St. Louis and the handful of girls and women who soon came into their care. Within a week of their arrival, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd welcomed 15-year-old and 17-year-old girls; by the end of 1868, 18 girls had entered the home.12 By the end of 1868, it was clear that the Sisters would need a larger, more permanent home in order to pursue their ministry, and in 1869 they moved to Wilkin Street overlooking the Mississippi.13

The Wilkin Street site had only one significant drawback: it was adjacent to the railroad tracks belonging to several companies that ran along the levee just below the Good Shepherd property. For the Sisters and the women and girls in their care, rapid railroad growth during the 1870s meant a louder, smokier, and sootier home.14 The trains shook loose rocks and other debris and caused so much depreciation to Good Shepherd property that in 1873 the Sisters sued the St. Paul, Sioux City Railroad Company and the Milwaukee, St. Paul Railroad Company for $1,400 each.15 While the suit was pending the Sisters agreed to allow railroad workers to enter their property to clean up the damage. Even so, the Wilkin site was growing crowded; by 1877, 100 former prostitutes lived with the Sisters.16 In 1882, the Sisters decided it was time for a change: they sold the section of their property closest to the tracks to the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad Company for $2,800.17 They sold the rest of their Wilkin Street property to the Little Sisters of the Poor, who opened a Home for the Aged on the site 1883. Two months later the Sisters used the proceeds from the sale to help purchase the land at Minnehaha Avenue and Chatsworth Street from Alice Hewitt, Henry Coffey, and lumberman Smith Ellison.18

The absence of plumbing and the remote location, however, created significant challenges for a ministry that supported itself by providing laundry services to St. Paul residents. At first the Sisters hired workmen to haul water from several blocks away. Eventually, a well was drilled on Good Shepherd property, and in 1890 a generous plumber installed water pipes free of charge and connected them to the St. Paul water system.19

Work on the remainder of the main building did not begin until 1887. Minneapolis architect George Summers completed construction in the spring of 1888. By May 1888, the building had been “transformed outside and in, by a new roof, red paint, new and smaller windows, and partitions to make dormitories and washrooms for the penitents and preservation children.”21 At the Feast of the Ascension, on May 10, 1888, Archbishop John Ireland gave his blessing on the entire structure.22 In the 1890s, additional buildings were added to the campus, including two dormitories, a laundry, and a cottage. Additional buildings were constructed during the 1900s, including a greenhouse, school, storage house, summer house and garage.

The Mount Eudes site was set atop “the highest knoll in the area,” and in the1880s, it was situated on the most western outskirts of St. Paul.23 At first, there were no sewer or water lines, and few easy transportation routes to the Home. Isolation served the devotional practices of the Sisters, one of whom reportedly objected to the size of their new stained-glass windows by exclaiming, “God forgive those that built a house of glass for cloistered Sisters!”24 The absence of plumbing and the remote location, however, created significant challenges for a ministry that supported itself by providing laundry services to St. Paul residents. At first the Sisters hired workmen to haul water from several blocks away. Eventually, a well was drilled on Good Shepherd property, and in 1890 a generous plumber installed water pipes free of charge and connected them to the St. Paul water system.
Fortunately, a Good Samaritan arrived in the form of James J. Hill, who subsidized the Sisters of the Good Shepherd during a period in which they would otherwise have gone bankrupt. In 1907, he “took over the debt and assigned it to his private agent in New York.” Hill’s agent held the loan interest-free until 1914, at which point Hill voided the balance. Meanwhile, Hill sent the Sisters the laundry from his Great Northern Railroad Company, and his payments for the laundry service enabled the Sisters to pay $5,000 each year on the loan he was holding for them. Between 1891 and 1922 Hill and his estate also made $71,000 in cash donations to the Sisters.

By 1904, the landscaping around the House of the Good Shepherd was beginning to fill in. The Sisters established a large garden which was used for food, beauty, and contemplation. (MHS Collections) [MR2.9 SP7.2 r71]

Hill’s generosity, along with support from other community members, helped the Sisters to sustain their ministry at the Mount Eudes site into the twentieth century. Between 1887 and 1969, the imposing gothic brick structure on top of the hill overlooking Frogtown was home to over 8,000 troubled girls and women. Most were sent to the Sisters by Minnesota’s court system or by their overwhelmed or impoverished families, though some arrived voluntarily. During the Great Depression, many families sent their daughters because they could not afford to pay for their care. A handful came through religious institutions or were recommended by their parish priests.

By 1904, the House of the Good Shepherd had 41 Magdalens, 63 women in the “Reformatory Class,” and 77 girls in the “Preservation Class.” By 1912, there were 50 sisters or novices, 42 Magdalens, and 175 “inmates.” In 1913, the numbers had shifted slightly, and there were 50 Magdalens, 90 girls and women in the “Reformatory Class,” and 60 in the “Preservation Class,” which was “girls and women who have been exposed to moral danger from any cause whatsoever, and also girls committed by the court as dependents.” This mix of sisters, nuns, orphans, former prostitutes, and delinquents was unusual, and potential donors were assured that each group was “separate and distinct from the others at all times.”

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Christmastime at the House of the Good Shepherd, around 1900. The ages of these girls suggest they were residents within the “Preservation Class.” (MHS Collections)
In the early 1900s, life at the House of the Good Shepherd mirrored the education that most young girls and women received at that time. In 1893, that meant “Instruction based upon morals and study of the Bible is given to all; music, singing, painting and needle-work are also taught. School hours are observed daily for the younger ones, and for such older women as desire. The hours of employment for the older classes are varied by simple and wholesome recreation and amusement.”

Life was highly disciplined. Girls woke up at 5:00 a.m. for prayer and breakfast, followed by school for younger ones, and domestic skills instruction or chores for the older ones. Recreation was held outside, or within the Recreation Hall. Lights were out at 10:00 p.m. When girls first arrived they were assigned to a bed in the middle of a 20-bunk dormitory, but as they matured they were allowed to move to the beds with more privacy, closer to the walls. Attendance at Mass was required, regardless of the girl’s religious background. Some residents chafed at the rules, and strategized on ways to escape. As early as 1897, both girls and women were known to break windows to try to leave.42

In 1890, the Sisters took in one of their most notorious residents into their “Penitent Program.” Nellie King, famous for her criminal behavior, drinking, morphine addiction, alacra, cross-dressing, and beauty was arrested and sentenced to the House of the Good Shepherd in January. She was released on a technicality a day later, but re-arrested and sentenced again in March. Her ninety days with the Sisters appeared to have little affect on her, though – within a month of her release, she had taken up her old ways.43

Though Nellie King had a long history of scuffles with the law, not every woman within the House of the Good Shepherd was guilty of criminal behavior. In 1889, Jennie Hendrickson, a young white woman, was arrested in St. Paul on suspicion of prostitution, though the evidence was slim: one newspaper noted that she was simply in the company of another woman (likely a known prostitute). Another newspaper reported that her offense was being on the street with a “colored man.” Jennie was sentence to 90 days at the House of the Good Shepherd. African American lawyer Frederick McGhee took the case, and demanded that Jennie be released: she had committed no actual crime. The judge agreed, and McGhee won his first case for a white client.44

By the mid 1900s, the Sisters had shifted their focus away from serving former prostitutes, and were focused on sheltering and nurturing emotionally troubled girls. Laundry was still a significant source of income for the Sisters.45 By the late 1960s, the girls were studying cosmetology, travelling off-campus for field trips, and even attending proms. Expectations for behavior was loosening, too, and attendance at Mass was no longer required.46 One former resident described the loving care she received: “So much was being offered to me by such caring people that really wanted to help me. I was encouraged to try and trust more.”

Even so, the first night at the House of the Good Shepherd could be frightening. “SW” was just a girl when she arrived in October 1966. Later, she remembered the driveway was icy, and wrote that the brick building with the spires “appeared to be a very dark and dreary place.” On her first night SW went to bed without eating. “I remember some sort of goulash type thing. That night our group mother read from a book (I think Charles Dickens of some sort) and I fell asleep wondering what would happen next.”

However, “SW” soon grew to love the security of the rules. “After a childhood filled with abuse and neglect, she wrote “I was taught to educate myself, take advantage of the help I received, be grateful and offer help to others in need.” Girls who stayed at the Good Shepherd home were often able to finish high school, and many left with the confidence to find jobs and start families. For those who needed additional assistance, the “half-way” O’Shaughnessy home was built nearby.

The Sisters received letters and Christmas cards from girls who appreciated the way their time at the home shaped their lives. SW remembered, “so much was being offered to me by such caring people that really wanted to help me. I was encouraged to try and trust more.” For 80 years, the Mount Eudes building served as a space where troubled girls and women could recover from abusive pasts and learn how to move forward.47

By the 1960s, expectations for women’s behavior, the practice of social work and the role of the Catholic Church were all changing.48 There were new approaches for treating troubled adolescents, and local governments began to question the appropriateness of paying a Catholic institution for residential treatment. In 1969, the Sisters moved, along with 80 girls ages 14 to 17 to a much larger custom-built facility on 66 acres in North Oaks, 11 miles north of their Mount Eudes building.49 They sold their property to the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.
The Industry Next Door

The Good Shepherd’s closest neighbors at Mount Eudes were mining companies, dedicated to extracting the glacial deposits that formed the hill from which the Good Shepherd overlooked St. Paul. The first to arrive was the St. Paul Stone Company when Michael J. Lange was awarded a building permit at 868 Minnehaha Avenue West in April of 1906.53 He and his brother Frank expanded in 1923 and operated as the St. Paul Stone Company until the late 1930s, when they became Lange Brothers Sand, Gravel and Cement Block Company. The St. Paul Cement Works arrived on John P. Berchem’s land at 979 LaFond Avenue in April of 1910.54 The company grew rapidly and by 1924 the company’s campus included a new office at 965 LaFond Avenue. The Northwest Cast Stone Company also operated a factory on the site beginning in 1910.55

A topographic analysis completed by the University of Minnesota’s College of Design shows the impact that these companies had on the landscape by comparing profiles from 1896, 10 years before the companies arrived, 1951, during active mining, and 1967, near the end of the mining era. In 1896, the topographic survey revealed a fairly uniform, slightly convex slope over the local area. In 1951, after nearly 50 years of mining, the eastern and western sides of the hill had been carried away, creating a steep-sided plateau-like landform in the center, beneath the House of the Good Shepherd. By 1967, the deep pits had been filled in to street level, but a central hillside with fairly steep hills remains.

The Lange Brothers buildings were wrecked in November of 1971 and the St. Paul Cement Works buildings were wrecked between June 1972 and April 1973.57 The Northwest Cast Stone Company became state property in 1944. Today the site’s industrial legacy continues at the St. Paul Brass Foundry at Chatsworth Street and Minnehaha Avenue.
The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation bought the House of the Good Shepherd property in 1969 and established its headquarters on the site at 919 LaFond Avenue. The main convent, laundry, reformatory, and most other buildings were demolished, but the novitiate building was re-used as a central clinic. Additional buildings were constructed to house the Wilder’s Child Development Center, the Spencer House residential treatment program for troubled adolescents the Holcomb Center for Social Healing. The existing O’Shaughnessy Building was used for staff offices.  

In 1974, after the St. Paul Cement Works properties on LaFond had been wrecked, the Wilder Foundation was issued building permits for cooperative residential units between 955 and 971 LaFond.

The Wilder Foundation was a fitting successor to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, preserving the spirit of charitable service work that the Sisters brought to the hill for 80 years. The Wilder Foundation was founded in 1906 to effect a provision in Amherst H. Wilder’s will giving one-third of his estate to a trust fund that would “relieve, aid and assist the poor, sick and needy people of the city of St. Paul.” He further directed that the needy would be eligible to receive assistance “without regard to their nationality, place of residence, sex, color or religious prejudices.” Wilder’s wife Fanny and his daughter Cornelia established similar trusts in their wills, and in 1910 those were merged to become the Amherst H. Wilder Charity. In 1953 the organization changed its name to the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Frogtown Park and Farm

When the Wilder Foundation moved its headquarters to Lexington Avenue in 2008, they began accepting bids from developers to purchase the LaFond Avenue property. The bids were sealed, but the Wilder Foundation was clear that it “would prefer a variety of uses at the site, including some kind of community and green space next to residential housing.”

Neighborhood advocates began holding community meetings in 2009 to determine if there was support for establishing an urban garden on the site. When they were met with an overwhelming positive community response they partnered with the Trust for Public Land and began raising funds to purchase the property from the Wilder Foundation. The site had been appraised at between $4.5 and $5.4 million, but when the bidding process closed the Wilder Foundation agreed to sell property for use as an urban park and farm for the significantly discounted price of $2.2 million. In December 2013, the City of St. Paul purchased the 12.7-acre site through the Trust for Public Land, and in January 2014 it became St. Paul’s newest public park.
Bibliography

Books


Dissertation


Articles


Oral Histories & Interviews


Archives & Other Resources

Ramsey County Historical Society Archives
• Photo Archives
• Plat Maps
• Historic Building Permits

Minnesota Historical Society Archives
• Photo Archives
• Digital Sanborn Maps
• The Saint Paul Globe

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Research Archives
• Photo Archives
• Site Plans

Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Province of Mid-North America Archives, St. Louis, Missouri.
• Photo Archives
• Residence Statistics 1931-1967
• 1932 Fire Insurance Map

Appendix A

Maps, Photos, and Site Plans

This 1887 map detail shows what may be the earliest image of the House of the Good Shepherd on the Frogtown hill site. The artist took liberties with the appearance of the building, but its remote and isolated location is accurate. (LOC Marr Richards detail.)

Mother Bernard Flynn, first superior of the St. Paul House of the Good Shepherd (Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Province of Mid-North America Archives, St. Louis, Missouri)

Sanborne Maps (1903)
Sanborne Maps (1903)

Sanborne Maps (1926)
Sanborne Maps (1926)

House of Good Shepherd Site Plans

House of the Good Shepherd 1969 Site Plan (Wilder Foundation)

1932 Fire Insurance Map (Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Province of Mid-North America Archives, St. Louis, Missouri)
Jubilee celebration, Sisters of the House of the Good Shepherd. (Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Province of Mid-North America Archives, St. Louis, Missouri)

Classroom full of women studying to become sisters at House of the Good Shepherd in 1944. (Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Province of Mid-North America Archives, St. Louis, Missouri)
Endnotes

1. Discovering Frogtown, University of Minnesota College of Design, 2013, p. 3.
2. Original Land Plat Survey, 1847.
3. Discovering Frogtown, University of Minnesota College of Design, 2013, p. 3.
5. Journal of Alexius Hoffman, Frogtown: 1867-1875, Minnesota Historical Society (quoted by www.frogtownmn.org, “History,” available at http://www.frogtownmn.org/history). There are two other oft-cited origins of the “Frogtown” label. The first is that it emerged as an ethnic slur referring to the dense concentration of French settlers in the neighborhood. The second is that Frogtown was home to two railroad yards, and the neighborhood’s name derived from the term “frogger,” which is a tool used to switch cars or engines between tracks. (See Wing Young Huie, Frogtown: Photographs and Conversations in an Urban Neighborhood (MHS Press, St. Paul, 1996)).
7. Oral History Interview with Mrs. Hope Garlick Mineau and Mrs. Maud Carlgren, Sept. 14, 1955, by Helen McCann White (Forest History Foundation, Inc., St. Paul, Minn.)
11. Forliti at 10.
12. Id at 12.
13. Id at 15.
14. Id at 19.
15. Id.
17. Forliti at 20.
18. Id at 21-22.
19. No historic source confirms this, but the unlikeliness of the place name coincidentally matching that of the Saint who inspired the Sisters of the Good Shepherd points in this direction. An article on page 40 of the The Saint Paul Globe on June 19, 1904 describes John Eudes’ role in inspiring their work.
20. Forliti at 23.
22. Forliti at 25.
23. Id at 22. The location was still being described as the “outskirts of Saint Paul” in 1912, by author Henry Anson Castle in his book “History of Saint Paul and Vicinity.” (p. 523).
25. Id at 34-35.
26. Id at 34.
27. HotGS First 50 years at 223.
28. Id at 223.
29. Id at 223.
30. Id at 43, fn. 53.
31. Id.
33. Interview with Maureen Cannon.
Forbidi at 54. Of the first 1,000 girls to enter the Home of the Good Shepherd, about 40 percent came from the courts, about 30 percent came from their families, 20 percent came voluntarily and 10 percent came from religious organizations or through other referrals. In the twentieth century the majority of referrals continued to come from Juvenile Courts and family members. (See "The House of the Good Shepherd in St. Paul: A Retrospect of Fifty Years," p. 206.)


36 Personal Memoir of SW, Former Good Shepherd Resident (St. Paul, 2014).

37 Interview with Maureen Cannon.


40 A common rumor was that the adolescent girls at the House of the Good Shepherd were pregnant, but that is not true. In fact, on the occasions when girls did return pregnant from visits home they were transferred to other institutions (Cannon interview).

41 Maureen Cannon recalled that they were still cleaning linens for the Great Northern, as well as local businesses such as the Lexington Restaurant.

42 Interview with Maureen Cannon.

43 Personal Memoir of SW, Former Good Shepherd Resident (St. Paul, 2014).

44 Personal Memoir of SW, Former Good Shepherd Resident (St. Paul, 2014).

45 Personal Memoir of SW, Former Good Shepherd Resident (St. Paul, 2014).

46 Personal Memoir of SW, Former Good Shepherd Resident (St. Paul, 2014).

47 Interview with Maureen Cannon.


49 Ramsey County Building Permits Archives

50 Ramsey County Building Permits Archives

51 Ramsey County Building Permits Archives

52 Discovering Frogtown at 5.

53 City of Saint Paul Zoning Committee Meeting Notes, September 13 2012, at "http://www.stpaul.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/9086"

54 "Wilder History" at http://www.wilder.org/AboutUs/Wilder-History/Pages/default.aspx

55 "Wilder History" at http://www.wilder.org/AboutUs/Wilder-History/Pages/default.aspx
