

SITE NOMINATION FORM

SAINT PAUL HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION

1. NAME

Historic: Hamline Recreation Center
Common: (same)

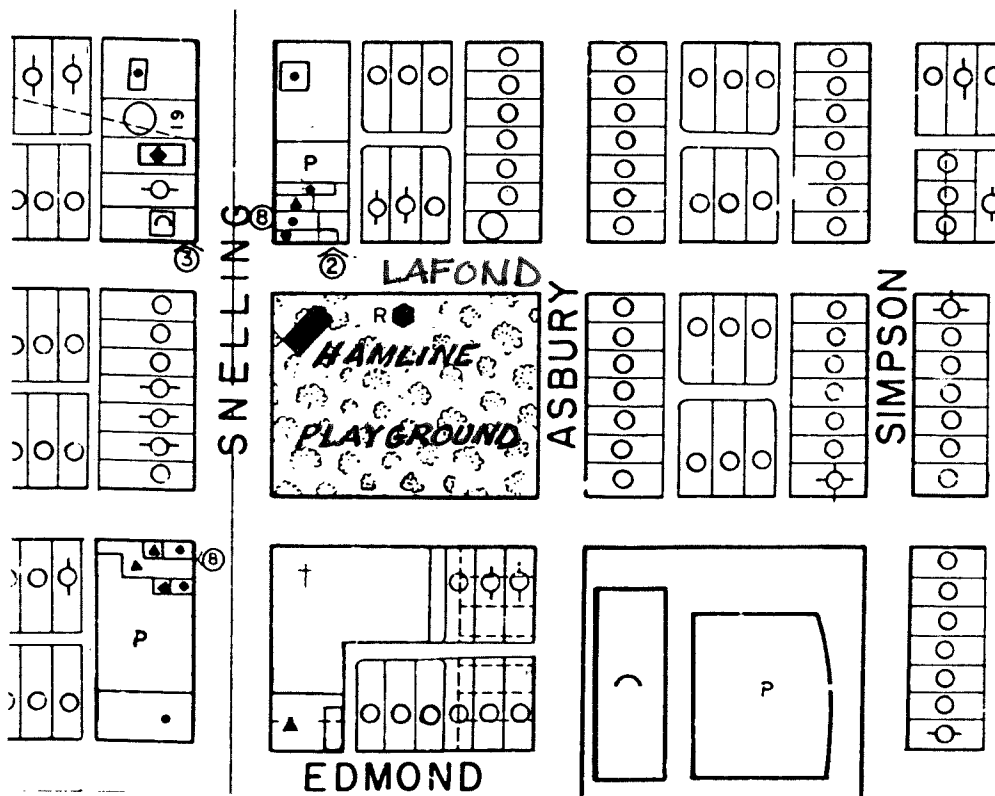
2. LOCATION

Address: 1564 Lafond Avenue
Legal Desc.: Lots 1 through 20 and alley, Block 4, Hamline Syndicate Addition No.2 to Saint Paul

3. PRESENT OWNER

Name: City of Saint Paul, Parks and Recreation
Address: 25 W. Fourth Street
Saint Paul, MN 55102

4. LOCATION MAP



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5. DESCRIPTION

The Hamline Park Playground Building is a small but sturdily built stone park building constructed in 1938 by the WPA in what has been variously described as an Art Deco or "WPA Moderne" style. It is located at 1564 Lafond Avenue on the southeast corner of Snelling and Lafond and in the northwest corner of the one-block square Hamline Park. Curiously angled away from Snelling on a line bearing lengthwise from southwest to northeast, the Hamline Building provides a "gateway" or buffer between a small commercial district, the redeveloping North Snelling Avenue extending northward from this crossing and a residential area of Saint Paul's Hamline-Midway.

The Hamline Park Building is a rectangular (55' x 28') one story building with a raised basement. It has a flat roof, slightly pitched to funnel run-off to an interior downspout in the west corner of the building. The exterior of the building is constructed of smooth-faced "Pink Mankato stone" - Kasota limestone - with a parapet of the same material. There are four sixteen-light windows and a door in each of the fifty-five foot elevations, two windows to each side of the central door. There is a stone lintel over each window and stone sill beneath each. There are smaller twelve-light windows in the southwest and northeast elevations and on the northeast elevation. These flank a stone chimney and fireplace. Six-light windows are to be found in the upper walls of all elevations of the raised basement except the northeast. The doors are double to the northwest and single to the southeast; over the northwest doors is a transom of an additional five lights.

Concrete platforms extend to the northwest and southeast from the doors. To the southeast, steps descend directly into Hamline park and are flanked by stone copings. On the northwest elevation the platform and stairs, flanked by stone copings, descend to a landing (set at the height of the raised park and from that landing steps further descend to street level (to the northeast and southwest) again flanked by stone copings. Metal marquees extend out from the wall over both doors; and in the parapet above the northwest double doors there is a stone turret which holds a flagpole. Stone pilasters, extending eight inches out from the face of the building separate the windows and doors of the northwest and southeast facades. A beltcourse of slanted stone separates the basement and first stories and set the first story wall back a few inches. From the east corner a wooden ice-skate ramp descends to double doors at the basement level. These doors, which provide entrance to a warming house are topped by a wide flat-arch.

All the lines of the Hamline Park Building are simple and geometric - the building itself is easily associated with grander works of "federal" architecture from the same period.

The design of the Hamline Park Building differs from those of the other WPA park buildings in Saint Paul. Its smooth stone face sets it apart from the "rustic" stone exteriors of the Baker and West Minnehaha Park Buildings (both constructed in 1938). The two later buildings, Wilder (1940) and the Harriet Island Pavilion (1942), are smooth stone, but only Wilder is nearest to the "moderne" flat-roof design. The Saint Paul WPA building most reminiscent of the Hamline Park Building in design is the much larger Holman field Administration Building constructed in

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5. DESCRIPTION (CONT.)

1937. Its "rustic" stone face is highlighted with the familiar smooth Pink Mankato stone.

6. SIGNIFICANCE

The Hamline Park Playground Buildings is a landmark for residents of the Midway neighborhoods clustered along Snelling north of University; it is a building of substantial historic and architectural significance. The Hamline Playground Building was built by the Works Progress Administration in Minnesota in 1938 and represents Saint Paul's place in a partnership between cities and the WPA during the Roosevelt Administration. In addition, the design of this building can be traced to two prominent architect in Saint Paul's history: Charles A. Bassford and C.W. "Cap" Wigington.

The Architects

The plans for the Hamline Park Building were all signed by Charles A. Bassford, the fourth City Architect of the City of St. Paul from June 3, 1930 to December 10, 1945.¹ As City Architect in that period he presided over public construction in the City of St. Paul, during the WPA. Charles Asher Bassford was born in St. Paul on November 4, 1879 and (according to St. Paul Historic Sites Survey) died in that city on September 11, 1945.² He was the son of the prominent St. Paul Architect Edward P. Bassford, who is notable as the designer of the "old Post Office" and the early St. Paul Courthouse. Edward Bassford also designed two other St. Paul buildings - the Merchants National Bank Building and the Germania Bank Building - which are presently on the National Register of Historic Places. Charles Bassford's uncle, Asher Bassford, was also an architect and contractor, whose developments included the Louise Block, 227 W. Seventh Street³ and the Union Park police substation at 478 Prior Avenue.

Charles A. Bassford studied architecture in New York under A.M. Bruno and served in his father's firm in 1902. He was City Supervising Architect form 1904-1908 but otherwise was engaged in private practice until appointed City Architect in 1930 by Commissioner of Park, Playgrounds and Public Buildings, Clyde R. May.

Among the numerous buildings ascribed to Charles A. Bassford are the St. Paul Holman Field buildings and the Harriet Island Pavilion - both WPA constructions.⁴ But it is this assertion of Charles A. Bassford's role in the design of these building (and the Hamline Park Buildings as well) which binds his name inextricably to that of C.W. "Cap" Wigington, whose connection with the City Architect's office spans an even greater period of time.

Born in Lawrence Kansas on April 21, 1893, Clarence Wesly Wigington studied architecture in the studio of T. Lawrence Wallace in Omaha, Nebraska and at the studio of Alfred Tuergeni in Omaha and Chicago. He "became the protege of the famous, internationally-know architect Thomas R. Kimball"⁵ and was involved in numerous projects until taking the examination for architecture of the city of St. Paul. He received the highest score ever achieved on that exam⁶ and subsequently was employed by the City Architect's office (August 23, 1915). At that time, according to an article by Dreck Wilson, C.W. Wigington was "the first negro architect to be

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6. SIGNIFICANCE (CONT.)

employed by the City of St. Paul" and perhaps the first employed by any city government nationally.⁷ He eventually became the Chief Architectural Designer for the City of Saint Paul.

Among the achievements of a career that continued until his retirement on August 29, 1949 were the Ice Palaces constructed that period for the Winter Carnivals in St. Paul, the Highland Park Water Tower (now listed on the National Register of Historic Places), the Municipal Auditorium, and many schools, public buildings, parks, and private homes. It is particularly important to note that numerous sources attribute to him the design of the Harriet Island Pavilion, the Administration Building at Holman Field and other structures designed and built under the official signature of the City Architect, Charles A. Bassford. A glance at the National Register Nomination form for the Highland Park Water Tower will give us some idea of why this is so. Putting aside questions of race, in this instance:

As with many architects working under the City Architect, Wigington did not receive much credit for his design until recently. On July 12, 1976 the St. Paul Board of Water Commissioners held a public ceremony honoring Wigington for excellence in design of the Highland Water Tower.⁸

In fact, the design of many of St. Paul's public buildings was "in charge of" Wigington and under the signature of the City Architect, to whom the buildings are often ascribed. Among these St. Paul WPA buildings designed "in charge of" C.W. Wigington are the Como Park Zoo (1935); Baker Park (1938); Minnehaha Park (1938); Wilder Park (1940); and the Hamline Park Building (1938).

No documentation has been discovered so far in this research to indicate what role, if any, the WPA itself took in the design of the building. According to comments by S.L. Stolte, State Administrator of the WPA in Minnesota, WPA engineers and architects took the lead in design only in those cases where the local sponsor was unwilling or unable to do so.⁹ Further research should confirm the leading role taken by Wigington and Bassford in the design of these and other WPA buildings in St. Paul

The WPA and the Hamline Park Building

The Works Progress Administration was created by Executive Order No. 7034 on May 6, 1935 to provide relief for the continuing large numbers of unemployed in the Great Depression. The intention was to establish a...:

permanent program aimed at distinguishing employment relief from other types of assistance, i.e. for aged, handicapped and other unemployables.¹⁰

WPA employment levels varied with local conditions and operated as described in an article "The End of the WPA" by S.L. Stolte:

one started with the available labor and planned projects around the use of that

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6. SIGNIFICANCE (CONT.)

labor...there was a limit in the moneys that were available (either from the federal government of the local sponsors) for the purchase of materials, equipment rental and similar non-labor items. So finally the ingenuity of the planner was challenged to draw plans and specifications that first afforded the necessary man-months of employment, secondly did not exceed a limited per cent available for non-labor purposes, and finally had to get a useful and beneficial project for the community...¹¹

The federal government took the position the "all plans and specification required were to be furnished by the sponsors..."¹² and that public projects not interfere with regular employment; that is, that project "must be additional to that planned or normally included in local budgets."¹³ Harry L. Hopkins, National Administrator of the WPA, wrote in 1938 that

each improvement is based upon the expression of local officials that it is needed and wanted by the community and is supported by local funds to help pay for the materials and other non-labor costs.¹⁴

The Hamline park Building stands as mute testimony to the impact of this program in the cities, town, and neighborhoods of an America in distress, S.L. Stolte claimed in retrospect that WPA "planning workmanship and techniques reached into all communities of the state and produced a product which is now the pride of the respective communities affected."¹⁵

Indeed when one speaks with life-time residents of the Midway - some who saw the building under construction - their first reactions include reference to how "solid" the building is - that the WPA built for permanence.¹⁶ Stolte's comments were written in 1942, and now fifty years later the Hamline Park Building stands alone in the neighborhood as a remnant of a work relief program that sought to bring something permanent and architecturally significant even to a simple neighborhood park.

It is of interest that in the construction of the Hamline Park Building the very stone used in its walls tells a story that strikes at the essence of this program. In his article "The End of the WPA" Stolte followed his description of the WPA's method of operation, quoted above, with an illustration. In order to provide employment work had to begin before plans were finalized for the various projects. Although a local sponsor had to provide materials, money could be saved in WPA workers were employed to salvage materials from abandoned sites or to reopen abandoned quarry sites. Workers reopened numerous quarries (among them: Montreal Ave., Fort Snelling, Mendota) and:

In looking around for material, several distinct finds resulted wherein beautiful Mankato pink stone was discovered in some abandoned bridge piers in the Mississippi River near St. Paul, which stone was sawed up and reprocessed for use in such buildings as the Hamline, Minnehaha, Highland, and Baker Playground Buildings.¹⁷

In his final report on the Minnesota Works Progress Administration, February 1943, S.L. Stolte mentioned that this and other stone was sawed and processed at an abandoned stone plant in St.

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6. SIGNIFICANCE (CONT.)

Paul and that many of the WPA workers who were employed there had been laid off from that very plant.¹⁸

Significance

That the WPA sought to combine work-relief with a significant contribution to local communities - a contribution which may never have been made without it - is reflected in the very architecture of the building. The solidity of the building's design attests to an expectation that the work undertaken was not only present "make-work" but also a contribution to the neighborhood's future.

The straight lines and subtle angles of its design combine classic elements (encastillations, pilasters) to the contemporary ideas of the "modern", the popular in Art Deco design. It is true that this building is small, and that in its simplicity it lacks the flourishes of larger Art Deco Buildings of the period. Indeed, were you to have set it down in the city center amidst grander Art Deco, Mankato stone buildings, it might have disappeared long ago, architecturally disregarded. But in its neighborhood setting, in amidst early 20th century residences and commercial buildings, its federal "modern" stone design stands out as it was meant to.

The cornerstone of the Hamline Park Recreation Building reads simply: "WPA, 1938." It is a brief but significant inscription. In an article on the WPA in the Historical Dictionary of the New Deal Martha H. Swain reminds us that "the initials 'WPA' are among the best remembered symbols of the 1930's. They are still visible in thousands of American communities as a reminder of the most ambitious undertaking of the federal government to provide employment for the jobless in a time of economic stress."¹⁹ Elsewhere she writes, "The legacy of the WPA is tremendous. Many impressive public buildings, parks, and edifices remain, although many have been destroyed or replaced by modern structures."²⁰ The Hamline Park Building as a recognizable and unique representative of that legacy in the Midway neighborhood of St. Paul, and as such deserves the protection of its citizens.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Official Photography, City Architect's Office, St. Paul City Hall.

² Historic Sites Survey of St. Paul and Ramsey County, Architect and Contractor File.

³ Historic St. Paul Buildings, (St. Paul City Planning Board, St. Paul, MN 1964), pp. 30-31.

⁴ Historic Sites Survey of St. Paul and Ramsey County.

⁵ From the program for the dedication of a plaque "Honoring Clarence W. Wigington" on the Highland Park Water Tower. Minnesota Historical Society Manuscript Division P939, Clarence W. Wigington.

⁶ File on Clarence W. Wigington, Northwest Architectural Archives.

⁷ Manuscript Chapter by Dreck Wilson. In file on Clarence W. Wigington, Northwest Architectural Archives.

⁸ National Register of Historic Places Nomination form, copy on file in Clarence W. Wigington file, Northwest Architectural Archives.

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6. SIGNIFICANCE (CONT.)

⁹ Final Report of the Minnesota Works Progress Administration, February 1943 by S.L. Stolte. MHS MSS Div. File: Stolte, Sidney L. Minnesota Works Progress Administration Records, 1935-1943. (27 L14.9B) Green Photograph Album - 2 articles at back. p. 98.

¹⁰ Olson, James. S.,ed. Historical Dictionary of the New Deal, (Greenwood Press, Wesport, Conn., 1985), p.548.

¹¹ Bulletin of 1943, "The End of the WPA" cited above, p.10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Harry L. Hopkins, Inventory an Appraisal of the Results of the Works Progress Administration (Washington D.C>, WPA, 1938), p.8.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.20.

¹⁵ "End of the WPA", p.11.

¹⁶ Merrill Robinson, et al.

¹⁷ "End of the WPA", p.10.

¹⁸ Final Report of the Minnesota Works Progress Administration, p.86.

¹⁹ Historical Dictionary of the New Deal, p.550.

²⁰ Ibid.

7. PRESERVATION PROGRAM

The exterior of the Hamline Recreation Center should be preserved in a manner consistent with the original design intent. All work should be of a character and quality that maintains the distinguishing features of the building and the environment. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced whenever possible. In the event of replacement, new materials should match the original in composition, design, color, texture and appearance, Distinctive stylistic features or examples of skilled craftsmanship characteristic of structures of this period should be treated sensitively.

The pink Kasota limestone exterior, multiple pane windows, transom, front (northwest) exit stair arrangement, arched lower level door opening, chimney size and profile, roof profile, and flagpole base are character defining architectural elements worthy of preservation. Regular maintenance of the building, including necessary tuckpointing, is encouraged.

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8. FROM PREPARED BY:

Name/Title: Larry Klueh/ Committee Member of Hamline Playground
Committee

Supervisor:

Date: December 1, 1988

9. DOCUMENTATION ON FILE:

National Register Form: None.

Introduction/Historic Sites Survey, March 1981.
Historic Site Survey/ Final Report, May, 1983.