

NEW HISTORY

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN LEGION MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Date: November 22, 2024
Written By: Lauren Anderson; anderson@newhistory.com
For: The City of South Saint Paul

The history of the American Legion Memorial Library is related to the history and development of South St. Paul. At the time that Minnesota became a state in 1858, the area that is today known as South St. Paul was largely an agricultural community located along the bluffs and west bank of the Mississippi River. Because the topography of the bluffs and susceptibility to flooding along the riverfront made farming difficult, the town experienced minimal development until the 1880s, when the area along the riverfront was developed for industrial use. The meat packing industry was particularly successful, and during the twentieth century, the Swift & Company (plant constructed beginning in 1897) and the Armor & Company (plant constructed beginning in 1919) dominated the local economy, drawing European immigrants and others to South St. Paul for jobs in meatpacking and related industries. Concord Street, which ran along the base of the bluffs to the west of the industrial area, became the community's main commercial thoroughfare, while land at the top of the bluffs was developed with houses, churches, and schools, as well as scattered commercial buildings. The meat packing industry supported the community's economy through two World Wars (1914-1919 and 1939-1945) and the Great Depression of the 1930s, and South St. Paul's population increased steadily from 2,322 in 1900 to 15,909 in 1950 and 25,016 in 1970. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the city experienced significant change as both the Swift & Company and Armor & Company meatpacking plants shuttered their operations. Urban renewal efforts led to extensive demolition of commercial buildings along Concord Street and the relocation of the railroad tracks serving the meatpacking plants.¹

The topography of the city, and specifically the ravines that transversed the bluffs, historically divided South St. Paul into several neighborhoods: from north to south, these included the North End, South Park, Central, Roosevelt, and South End neighborhoods, as well as Messer Street Flats to the southeast and Oak Park to the west.² As its name suggests, the Central neighborhood was located at the heart of South St. Paul's residential area and appears to have held many important civic functions and community gathering spaces. As noted in Lois A. Glewwe's *South St. Paul: A Brief History*,

One of the first areas of the city to attract new residents was the center of town, which basically started atop the bluffs above Concord at First Avenue South and extended to Fifteenth Avenue between Wentworth on the north and Fifth Street on the south. It included South St. Paul City Hall and the downtown retail areas that were beginning to open along Marie Avenue and Southview Boulevard. It was often distinguished from Concord Street by being identified as "on the hill."³

¹ Lois A. Glewwe, *South St. Paul: A Brief History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015), 17 – 128.

² Glewwe, *South St. Paul*, 73-106.

³ Glewwe, *South St. Paul*, 83.

According to Glewwe, “the families who built the graceful homes that line the streets in the center of town represented a diverse group of investors, business owners, educators and others, many of whom worked in the livestock industry but others who came to town for new opportunities.”⁵

A Sanborn Map prepared sometime after 1927 and before 1950 (possibly around 1932) shows that most residential development in the neighborhood consisted of one and two-story frame dwellings and a handful of two-story apartments and flats, which were often constructed of brick or brick veneered. Commercial buildings were scattered throughout the residential blocks and concentrated at the intersection of Grand Avenue and 3rd Avenue North and along the south side of Marie Avenue. Numerous institutional buildings were interspersed throughout the neighborhood, including the South St. Paul Junior and Senior High (at the northwest corner of 2nd Street North and 6th Avenue North); gathering spaces like the Serbian Home Hall, the Polish Hall, the Croatian Hall, and the Masonic Temple; the South St. Paul City Hall at the intersection of Grand Avenue and 3rd Avenue North; nearly a dozen churches; and the American Legion Memorial Library.⁶

The construction of the American Legion Memorial Library in 1927 was the culmination of a decade of community effort to construct a building for the public library. In 1916, the city established a library commission, which succeeded in obtaining a \$10,000 pledge from the Carnegie Foundation and two lots of land at the top of the bluff – at the northeast corner of Third and Marie Avenues – donated by the St. Paul Union Stockyards Company. In 1919, the city requested an additional \$25,000 from the Carnegie Foundation, but this request was denied in 1921. That year, the city authorized the library commission to purchase \$2,500 in books and open a small public library within the Fitzgerald Building on the north side of Grand Avenue, which opened to the public on December 1, 1922. In 1923, the South St. Paul American Legion Post began a fundraising campaign for a new library building. In 1926, city residents narrowly approved a \$25,000 bond issue in a special election, which was supplemented by \$7,500 from the Dakota County Commissioners and a \$500 donation from the American Legion.⁷

The city commissioned the St. Paul architectural firm of Ellerbe and Company to design the library. Designed in the Colonial Revival style, the two-story brick library had a rectangular footprint and massing, with a lower level raised partially above grade. Its gabled roof was clad with slate shingles and topped with an octagonal cupola with copper roof and finial. Façades were generally symmetrical in design, with stone belt courses and coping, dentiled wood cornices, and divided light wood windows in large arched openings with stone keystones. A projecting entrance vestibule on the west façade held the primary entrance – a wood entrance system in arched opening with leaded glazing at sidelights and transom and carved sign reading “Memorial Library” at the cornice – flanked by wood columns and beneath a wood balustrade with wood finials.⁸

⁵ Glewwe, *South St. Paul*, 83.

⁶ Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota*, Vol. 5, revised ca. 1932 (New York, NY: Sanborn Map Company, 1904), Sheets 664-686.

⁷ Lois A. Glewwe, *South St. Paul Centennial, 1887-1987* (South St. Paul, MN: The Chapter, 1987), 346-349.

⁸ Ellerbe and Company Architects, “Library Building: South St. Paul, Minnesota,” Job No. 183, November 6, 1926, Sheets 2-11, on file at the City of South St. Paul.



South St. Paul Library, west and south elevations, looking northeast, ca. 1930. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS).

Local contractor Anton Mleczo received the general contract for construction, with a bid of \$27,100. Groundbreaking ceremonies occurred on December 27, 1926, and the cornerstone was laid on February 22, 1927. By August 7, 1927, the building was complete, and it was officially dedicated on November 11, 1927.⁹ The building was the first purpose-built library in Dakota County – at the time, only Hastings and Farmington had public libraries, and both operated out of buildings constructed for other purposes.¹⁰

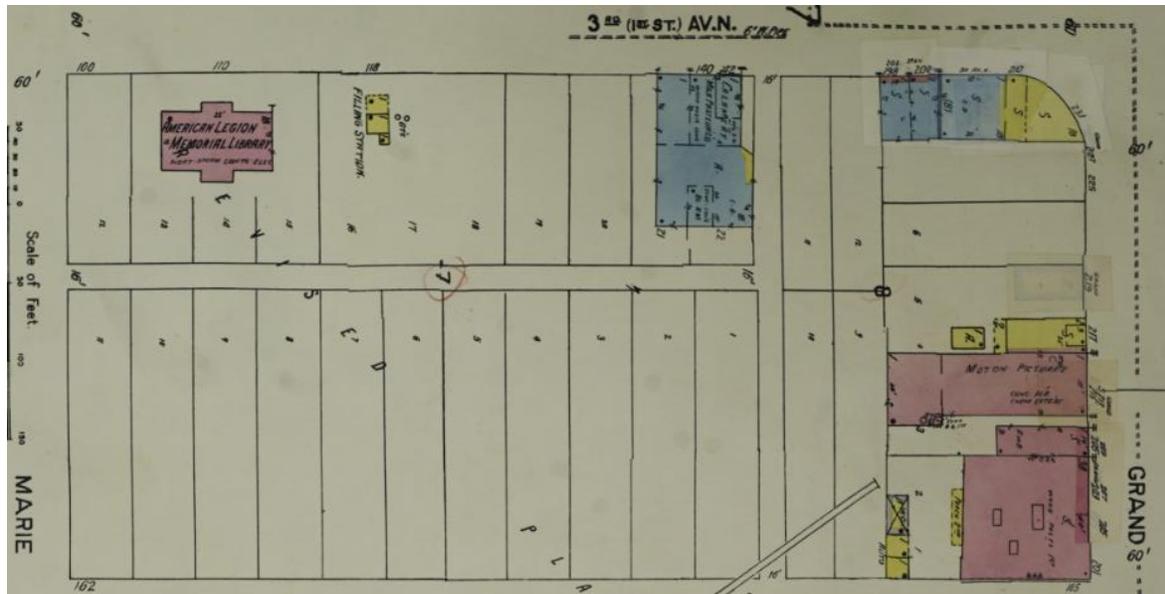
At the time of the library's completion, it appears that the building was one of the only structures on this block; the circa 1932 Sanborn Map shows a gas station and creamery to the north of the library along 3rd Avenue North (in the approximate location of the current Dakota County Historical Society building) and several commercial buildings along Grand Avenue West at the north side of the block (where the Grand Hills Condominiums are now located).¹¹ To the east, below the bluff, Concord Street was lined with commercial buildings. Adjacent blocks to the south and west were mostly filled with residential buildings, though some undeveloped lots remained. The South St. Paul City Hall was located to the northwest, kitty corner from the library, at the intersection of Grand Avenue and 3rd Avenue North (current location of Fred Lawshe Park).¹²

⁹ Glewwe, *South St. Paul Centennial*, 349.

¹⁰ Bill Wolston, "The Public Libraries in Dakota County," *Dakota County History* 22, No. 3 (August 2001), 2-3.

¹¹ Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota*, Vol. 5, Revised, ca. 1932 (New York, NY: Sanborn Map Company, 1904), Sheet 675.

¹² Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota*, Vol. 5, revised, ca. 1932 (New York, NY: Sanborn Map Company, 1904), Sheets 669, 675 – 678.



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing the American Legion Memorial Library (outlined in red) and other buildings located on the same block, ca. 1932. North is to the right.

Glewwe notes that following the library’s construction, “almost immediately the new building became a bustling center of activity.” The library “established its tradition of involvement in education and civic activity,” offering story hours and summer reading clubs for children and summer employment for high school students. Glewwe notes that “for many years,” the basement “was used for social events, wedding receptions, and civic functions.” The library was under the direction of a library board and a succession of head librarians: Grace Dorival from 1925 to 1943; Marie Knudson, Alice Lewis, and Doris Northenscold for short terms between 1943 and 1951; Dorothy Jorstad from 1951 until 1962; and Elva Miller from 1962 until 1973.¹³

In 1952, the library opened a “Children’s Room” in the basement, and a “mobilelibrary” program to distribute library collections across the community was established in 1961. The most significant change to the library building occurred in 1964, when overcrowding led to the construction of a new wing at the building’s south elevation.¹⁴ The one-story brick addition with partial mezzanine level, also designed by the architectural firm of Ellerbe and Company, had a roughly square footprint and a flat roof. The addition mirrored the Colonial Revival style of the original 1927 building, with a stone belt course, arched window openings with concrete or stone keystones and multi-light wood windows at the south elevation, a wood cornice, and a wood balustrade with wood finials. A projecting entrance vestibule at the west façade held the main entrance - a wood entrance system with double doors beneath metal letter sign reading “South Saint Paul Public Library” and an arched multi-light wood transom window, flanked by multi-light wood sidelights and wood columns. The east side of the addition included a garage for the bookmobile, which was accessed from Marie Avenue on the south.¹⁵

¹³ Glewwe, *South St. Paul Centennial*, 349-352.

¹⁴ Glewwe, *South St. Paul Centennial*, 349-352.

¹⁵ Ellerbe and Company Architects, “Additions and Alterations South Saint Paul Public Library, South St. Paul, Minnesota,” March 2, 1964, Sheets A-1 – A-6, on file at the City of South St. Paul.

Meanwhile, the surrounding parcels were changing as well. In the mid-1950s, the original 1890 city hall was demolished and the current St. Paul City Hall constructed to the west of the library across 3rd Avenue North. By 1970, the adjacent apartment building to the east of the library had been constructed, and the Lawshe Memorial Museum (also called the Dakota County Historical Society building) to the north was built around 1977.¹⁶

In 1975, the library became affiliated with the Dakota County Library System (organized in 1969), and the building continued to function as South St. Paul's only public library until 2023.¹⁷ Documented alterations over the past several decades have included replacement of most doors and windows in 1980 and front doors in 1993; installation of an elevator at the southeast corner of the 1927 building in 1996; conversion of the garage into offices in 1999, including removal of the overhead door and installation of arched windows at the south and east elevations; and roof replacement at the 1964 addition and 1927 building in 1992 and 2003, respectively.¹⁸

Potential Historic Significance

For a property to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), it must 1) demonstrate **historical significance** by meeting at least one of the National Park Service's (NPS) Criteria for Evaluation *and* 2) retain **historic integrity**.

The NPS Criteria for Evaluation define historically significant properties as properties:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory.¹⁹

Generally, only buildings fifty years of age or older are eligible for the NRHP.²⁰

Historic integrity is a property's ability to convey its historic significance through its physical materials and features. NPS defines seven aspects, or qualities, of historic integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. According to NPS, "to

¹⁶ Aerial photograph of South St. Paul, 1970, Borchert Map Library, Minnesota Historic Aerial Photographs Online, <https://apps.lib.umn.edu/mhapo/>; "Our History, Of Course!" Dakota County Historical Society, accessed October 10, 2024, [https://www.dakotahistory.org/history#:~:text=On%20April%2016%2C%201957%2C%20DCHS,museum%20had%20over%205%2C000%20items](https://www.dakotahistory.org/history#:~:text=On%20April%2016%2C%201957%2C%20DCHS,museum%20had%20over%205%2C000%20items;); W. G. Wolston, "A Brief History of South St. Paul," accessed October 10, 2024, <https://www.dakotahistory.org/images/HistoryMaps/South-St.-Paul-History-Map.pdf>

¹⁷ Bill Wolston, "The Public Libraries in Dakota County," *Dakota County History* 22, No. 3 (August 2001), 6.

¹⁸ Krech, O'Brian, Mueller, and Wass, Inc., "South St. Paul Library Remodel," November 2, 1998, Sheets A1 and A2, on file at the City of South St. Paul; LSE Architects, *South St. Paul Public Library* (prepared for the South St. Paul Public Library, 2011), 10-11.

¹⁹ National Park Service, *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*, 1997, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB16A-Complete.pdf>, p. 37.

²⁰ National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, rev. 1997, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf, p. 42.

retain historic integrity a property will always possess several, and usually most, of the aspects.”²¹

Based on our research, the American Legion Memorial Library appears to be **historically significant under NPS Criterion A** for its role in community education and civic life. As the city’s only public library from 1927 until 2023, and a public event space until at least 1952, the building appears to have played an important role in community education and recreation. Because the library continued in this location through 2023, the **property’s historic period (“period of significance”)** would be **1927 until 1975**, fifty years from the year in which a NRHP nomination could be submitted (2025), to account for the “50 year” rule. The building appears to **retain historic integrity** to convey its historic significance from this time period, including integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Character-Defining Features

Because the property’s potential period of significance is 1927 – 1975, **all features present by 1975 should be considered “historic,” including the 1965 addition.** “Character-defining” elements are those historic features and materials that express the historic significance of a resource and contribute to its historic character. While all elements installed by 1975 are historic, not all historic elements rise to the level of “character-defining”. The following is a list of **character-defining** elements present at the library.

Exterior

- Existing massing and footprint of 2-story, gable-roofed 1927 building with 1-story, flat-roofed 1965 addition
- Brick façades with stone detailing
- Projecting entrance vestibules and primary entrance locations at the west façade
- Colonial Revival design, including:
 - Symmetrical design of primary (street-facing) west and south elevations
 - Arched window and door openings²²
 - Classical detailing at primary entrances, including presence of columns, pilasters, fanlights, and sidelights²³
 - Presence of multi-light windows with hung appearance²⁴
 - Dentiled wood cornice at 1927 building and presence of cornice at 1965 addition²⁵
 - Cupola at 1927 building

²¹ National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, rev. 1995, p. 44, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/upload/NRB-15_web508.pdf.

²² Note: arched window openings at the former garage at the 1965 addition were installed in 1999 and are not historic; therefore, these are not character-defining features.

²³ Metal cladding at columns and pilasters and existing fanlights and sidelights are not historic.

²⁴ Existing windows are not historic and function as sliding rather than hung windows.

²⁵ Existing metal cornice at the 1965 addition is not historic.

Interior

- **Spaces and Sequence of Spaces.** Primary spaces are those that are most important to the building's historic character and are usually associated with a building's primary purpose. Sometimes, these are the most public spaces, and may be the spaces with the highest level of architectural detailing in a building.²⁶ At this building, primary spaces include:
 - Primary entrance vestibules at the 1927 building and 1965 addition
 - First level reading room (originally the juvenile, delivery, and reading areas) at the 1927 building
 - First level children's room (originally the reference room) at the 1927 building
 - First level reading room at the 1965 addition

The open plan and volume of the reading rooms are character-defining features of this building. The sequence from entry vestibules to reading rooms at both the 1927 building and the 1965 addition is also a character-defining feature.

- **Level of Finish.** With the exception of a few back-of-house mechanical rooms, and the exposed brick walls at the 1965 addition reading room, the historically finished character of the building is a character-defining feature of the library.
- **Finishes and Features.** Those finishes and features considered character-defining include:
 - Ornamental plaster elements such as the plaster niche, pilasters, and crown molding in 1927 reading room
 - Fireplace in 1927 building first level reading room
 - Decorative wood trim, such as baseboard, picture rail, and window and door frames/casings
 - Decorative wood built-ins, including paneled wood window stools/radiator covers and wood bookshelves²⁷
 - Wood entrance systems at the 1927 building and 1965 addition
 - Paneled wood doors at the 1927 building and multi-light double wood doors at 1927 interior entrance²⁸
 - Slate baseboard (1927 building and 1965 addition) and window stools (1965 addition)²⁹
 - Terrazzo floor and stairs in the 1927 entrance vestibule
 - Quarry tile in the 1965 entrance vestibule

²⁶ "Identifying Primary and Secondary Interior Spaces in Historic Buildings," National Park Service, last updated June 6, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/taxincentives/interiors-identifying-primary-secondary.htm#office-buildings>

²⁷ Bookshelves at the 1927 reading room are historic, though some have been modified. It is unknown if the remainder of the shelving in the building and addition is historic.

²⁸ Flat slab wood doors in hollow metal frames appear likely to date to the period of significance; however, these are not character-defining features.

²⁹ The extent of slate baseboard remaining in the building is unknown at this time.