

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*A Different
Sesquicentennial*

Remembering Fredrick McGhee

Paul D. Nelson

—page 13

Fall 2011

Volume 46, Number 3

Gone But Not Forgotten?

The Survival of Outdoor Sculpture in St. Paul

Moira F. Harris, page 3



In 1958 Sculptor Robert Johnson crafted a golden eagle as a corporate symbol for Minnesota Federal Savings and Loan. The eagle and rock weighed 1,100 pounds, stood eighteen feet tall, and the eagle had a twenty-three-foot wingspan. After the savings and loan merged with another financial institution, the eagle took flight in mid-1986 to the campus of Northwestern College in Roseville, where it was installed near the school's entrance gates. Eagle photos at Minnesota Federal by Jay Pfaender; at Northwestern College by Moira F. Harris.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 46, Number 3

Fall 2011

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

CONTENTS

- 3 *Gone But Not Forgotten?*
The Survival of Outdoor Sculpture in St. Paul
Moira F. Harris
- 13 *A Different Sesquicentennial*
Remembering Fredrick McGhee
Paul D. Nelson
- 15 *Growing Up in St. Paul*
The West End Neighborhood of the Thirties and Forties
Douglas R. Heidenreich
- 20 *Living la Vida en Ramsey County*
A Journey through Ramsey County's Mexican Past
Leila Renee Albert
- 25 *Book Reviews*

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Public art, like all reflections of popular sensibility, has changed over the years in Ramsey County. Molly Harris looks back at the evolution of our outdoor art, from zinc and cast-iron fountains and war heroes, to the Germania and eagle figures that graced insurance-company buildings, down to the colorful sculptures of Charles Schulz *Peanuts* characters. Leila Albert recounts the history of St. Paul's West Side, where people of Mexican descent were drawn by work opportunities and stayed to raise their families. Albert's accompanying book review essay and a current Landmark Center exhibit also highlight this community's struggles and achievements. Doug Heidenreich shares evocative memories of growing up in the West End neighborhood, where vacant lots acted as playing fields, and the coming of spring brought hollyhocks, rhubarb, and the trash man hauling away ashes produced by winter's coal-burning furnaces. And Paul Nelson notes the sesquicentennial of the birth of Fredrick McGhee, a pioneering African American criminal defense attorney and civil rights leader. As you settle down for a good read, don't forget that a membership makes a great holiday gift for anyone with personal Ramsey County memories.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

A Different Sesquicentennial

Remembering Fredrick McGhee

Paul D. Nelson

On October 28th of this year, I paused to reflect that Fredrick McGhee was born on that date 150 years ago. I remembered him that day because I admire the man so much, and because, as his biographer, I feel a personal connection to him.

But that's just me; is there any reason others should remember him, or care that he lived? Certainly there is no obligation to do so. To me, Fred McGhee was a great man, a unique figure in the history of our city and state, but interest in history is not a duty but a matter of individual choice.

Though we who enjoy history doubtless make up a minority of the human family, we are still plentiful. There may be an evolutionary explanation for this: we are a species that thrives in communities, and a sense of history may serve to enhance a useful feeling of solidarity, with family tribe, or nation. Solidarity aids enormously projects of exploration, endurance, and self-defense.

So a strong sense of history may help a community, a city, or a nation thrive. But we in Minnesota, Ramsey County, and St. Paul can have history-enhanced fellow-feeling without Fred McGhee. If he were forgotten tomorrow and forever, our lives would go on just as before.

We don't need to remember McGhee, but we may want to. His story is, if nothing else, an interesting one.

He was born a slave on the John A. Walker plantation near Aberdeen, Mississippi, in 1861. Union troops came to the plantation in 1864, and had they been more successful there might have been no Fred McGhee for anyone to take note of. But they were defeated, and as they scuttled back north to Memphis hundreds, perhaps thousands, of self-liberated slaves came with them—among these, Abraham, Sarah, Barclay, Matthew, and Fredrick McGhee.

They made their way to Knoxville,

where Abraham worked once again for the white McGhee family that had owned him and sold him into Mississippi. Fred got some schooling in the Freedmen's schools; then, at age twelve, he was an orphan. At sixteen he followed his brothers to Chicago.

In Chicago the most remarkable and mysterious transformation took place. Within a few years this lightly educated son of slavery got a legal education, joined the practice of Chicago's leading black attorney, married, learned to try a case, wear a tuxedo, and lead a society ball. By his mid-twenties he had about as bright a future as an African American man could have in the United States of the mid-1880s.

And then he gave it up to come to St. Paul. We can never know exactly why. He was recruited, certainly; but it is hard to see what he found attractive about leaving Chicago, with its huge black community, for St. Paul, whose black community, some 1,500, barely made up a village. And a poor one at that, with a handful, no more, of people with middle class incomes.

McGhee was a criminal defense attorney, so he had not only to make a living in a town with a black community too small and too poor to support him, but also in a legal community that had never seen anyone like him. No African American had ever appeared in a Minnesota court except as a party (usually a criminal defendant) or (rarely) a witness.

Once again, mysteriously and against odds, McGhee thrived. Despite or—who knows?—because of his dark skin, south-

ern speech, and Chicago ways, he had a winning way with St. Paul juries. Maybe they liked his take-no-prisoners approach.

He did not hold back. In his first celebrated case he had to make a young white girl look bad. In his greatest murder trial he destroyed the credibility of a St. Paul police officer. In another he basically told the jury, my client is not guilty of murder because that bad Negro he killed needed killing. He had a fistfight over a client with another lawyer, in the courthouse.

Fred McGhee was the first black Minnesotan famous among white Minnesotans. He got famous first for his courtroom exploits, and second for his political speechmaking. He came to St. Paul a Republican, and there were few who could equal him in precinct speeches ridiculing Democratic candidates. He got elected to the Republican state central committee and then, in 1892, was chosen a presidential elector. This was an honor, as the 1892 Republican National Convention took place in Minneapolis.

And then it was an honor taken away. Swedish Republicans protested that such an honor went to a black man when there were so many more Swedish than black Republicans. Suddenly McGhee was an elector no longer, and soon after the election no longer a Republican. In 1893 he became a Democrat and remained one—now blistering Republicans in speech after speech—for the rest of his life.

Fred McGhee was the greatest civil rights leader our state has ever known. He led every local chapter of the various attempts at a national civil rights organization that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1902 he brought the national convention of the National Afro-American Congress to St. Paul and with it the two giant figures of the day, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.

At this moment DuBois had not quite emerged as a potent rival to Washington, not even to McGhee. Booker T. Washington was then the unchallengeable leader of black America, self-made, shrewd, able to raise white money, and to get white politicians to say yes. McGhee had begged Washington to attend the NAAC convention; then watched in disgust as Washington manipulated the thing to serve his own interests.

McGhee broke with Washington before DuBois did, and then the two formed an alliance that lasted the rest of McGhee's life. In 1905 they formed the Niagara Movement, the first African American civil rights organization to challenge Washington—they cooked up the idea on a fishing trip in Wisconsin. Niagara eventually morphed into the NAACP.

McGhee's contrariness extended to matters of religion too. The son of a lay Baptist preacher, in St. Paul he fell under the spell of John Ireland and converted to Catholicism. He was one of the founders of St. Peter Claver Parish, and if you visit the Cathedral you can see his name in the book of donors. McGhee became a national leader of African American Catholics. He called the Church a "shelter in the mighty storm" for black Americans.

He was black, he was a southerner, and he came here as an adult, but Fred McGhee became a thoroughly St. Paul Minnesotan. He became a Democrat, a Catholic, a homeowner, he loved to fish, and he bought a cabin in Wisconsin.

In a way, the cabin killed him. He, with his wife Mattie and adopted daughter Ruth, had a place on the upper Apple River, and there he was Farmer Fred. He had a garden and kept turkeys. One day in summer 1912, chasing one of his turkeys, he suffered a leg injury. It did not heal and he called his resulting limp the Turkey Trot. A blood clot developed in his leg, then passed to a lung. He died of a pulmonary embolism September 21, 1912, a month shy of his fifty-first birthday. Too, too young.

We don't need to remember Fred McGhee, but we may want to. On one level, his life simply makes a tremendously entertaining American story—slave, orphan, lawyer, leader, and then a tragic death. You may see him, if you



Fredrick L. McGhee (1861–1912) in his prime, probably early to mid-1890s. Portrait reproduced courtesy of the New York Public Library.

wish, as confirmation of our image of Progressive Minnesota: while the rest of the country writhes in the horror of Jim Crow, in St. Paul the young black man rises to where his talents take him. Fred McGhee would serve perfectly well as an exemplar of traditional values: he was a family man, a man of faith, a social conservative, and a believer in the Constitution and the rule of law. He played entirely within the system, and in the system he thrived.

We may choose to remember Fred McGhee as homage. We owe honor and remembrance to those who came before us and built the good things that we enjoy today. Among the many things Fred McGhee did, one was helping to create a Minnesota where race means less than it used to.

Some may want to remember him because one of the indisputably useful things history can do is show us examples of lives well lived. Fred McGhee had

prodigious talents that he exercised in the face of prodigious obstacles. It would have been much easier and more profitable for him to remain what he was when he came here: Protestant, Republican, an acolyte of Booker T. Washington's. He put all of those aside, over principle. In the courtroom, he gave his all; in civil rights, he led; in religion, he followed his conscience. All of it came with a price. If you want to see an example of a life well lived, you don't have to look far: look to Fredrick McGhee.

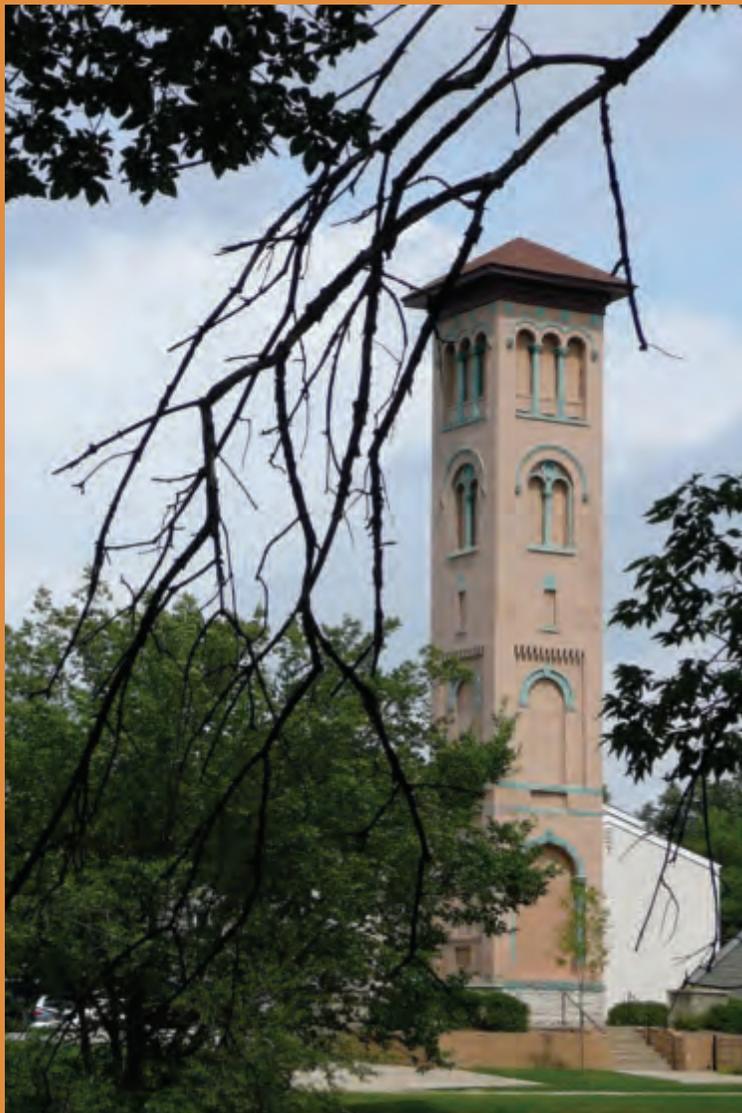
All of these reasons to remember Fred McGhee work for me. Readers, choose one, choose some, or choose none.

Paul D. Nelson's biography, Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912, was published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in 2002. He has been a frequent contributor to this magazine and serves on the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board.

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Torre de San Miguel (Tower of St. Michael) is a major landmark on St. Paul's West Side and a powerful emblem for Minnesota's first urban barrio. For more on the history of Mexican-Americans in this neighborhood and Minnesota, see page 20. Photo by Lelia R. Albert.