

tour  
**SAINT PAUL**

west  
side



the flats  
the bluffs  
district del sol

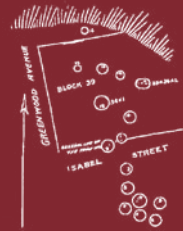
The contours of the earth define and set apart Saint Paul's West Side. On the north, the great swoop of the Mississippi forms the point and two sides of a rounded triangle; a line of limestone cliffs--the shore long ago of the glacial River Warren--forms the base. The low plain inside the triangle, the flats, has invited immigrants, industry, and floods for more than a century and a half. The immigrants and those who followed them eventually expanded the West Side south to the city limits at Annapolis Street.

It took a long time for this area to become part of the city. During the 1840s, settlers who were busy building a village and steamboat levees along the river (today's downtown Saint Paul) looked across the river at land that was legally beyond their reach. This land--and all of the land west of the Mississippi River--officially belonged to the Dakota people until treaties were signed in 1851. Connections to Saint Paul then came along slowly: ferries, a bridge, then two, and finally annexation to the metropolis in 1878. The West Side has been part of Saint Paul for more than a century but the Mississippi and those early years of independent growth still work to keep its identity distinct.

### What is no more:



At the corner of Isabel and Greenwood, just behind Roosevelt School, once stood sixteen low burial mounds. Built on a low ridge by a long-vanished people, they looked across the river gorge to the much bigger mounds of Indian Mounds Park.



# Why do we call it the WEST SIDE ?

It's all because of the Mississippi. The great river runs north-south almost everywhere, so everyplace on its west side is clearly west. But at Fort

Snelling the Father of Waters begins a loop east and north, so that when it reaches downtown Saint Paul it flows almost due east. Here is the source of the confusion. The West Side lies south of downtown, but on the west (or Minneapolis) shore. If one could tug the Mississippi taut, like a string, the West Side (and West Saint Paul too) would shift decisively west and lodge right below Minneapolis, unmistakably on the west bank.

Frequent flooding made the lowlands chancy for housing, hence a place for the poorest of immigrants, most enduringly Eastern European Jews, then Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The higher and drier ground above more resembles the rest of the city's neighborhoods. The cliffs marked a division of West Side residents physically, ethnically, and economically--a division much less evident today.

Industry and housing once grew side by side on the flood plain. American Hoist and Derrick, one of America's great industrial enterprises, thrived on the riverfront for most of a century. By the late 1970s it and most of the houses, schools, and other businesses had been swept away without a trace.

The West Side is being re-created once again—new commercial development and parkland on the flats; new immigrants and businesses along César Chávez Street; the creation of “District del Sol;” the expanding and thriving La Clinica; Neighborhood House and the Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center for Community Building. . Changing, but still the West Side.



# The Flats

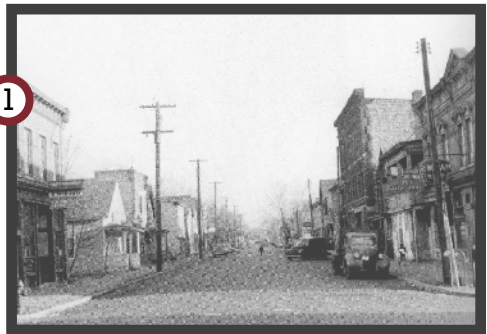
The first settlers on the flats were French-Canadian, followed by Germans and Irish, but they were few in number and they moved on quickly. The first known Jewish immigrants came to the West Side flats around 1880. Over the next few decades many more came and built an ethnic enclave--stores, schools, synagogues, clubs, a settlement house. It was urban, but not in a big-city way--low-rise, low-density, mostly frame buildings rather than brick or stone. Unpaved streets, patches of open land, and the occasional junkyard or dairy operation gave it a small town feel.



And physically it was small, bounded roughly by Robert Street on the west, Concord on the south, and the river everywhere else. State Street, the main drag, was just ten blocks long. One could pace off the whole neighborhood in an afternoon.

The flats had no upper-income areas. If you prospered, as many did, you got out. Jewish immigration effectively ended with World War I, and small numbers of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans moved in, changing change the ethnic mix. Still, this little zone kept its Old World flavor to the end, which came in the early 1960s. Weary of flooding and eager for industry, the city, in a controversial move, cleared it for redevelopment. Nothing of the old neighborhood remains except a few of the street names, but the forced removal of long-settled families, most of them Mexican American, inflicted pain still felt by many.

Looking today for the old flats requires imagination, perhaps aided by photographs. Go to the corner of State and Fillmore and look south. Fifty years ago you would have seen a busy neighborhood of houses, stores, and people, humble but thriving in its way. And today . . .?



# Harriet Island ②

Nature made it an island, but it's an island now only in name, its back channel filled in 1950 to connect it to the shore. Dr. Justus Ohage, the city's first health director and one of its great forgotten public servants, gave Harriet Island to the city in 1900 on the condition that it be used as a park. Its fortunes since then have waxed and waned with the health of—and interest in—the Mississippi.

It had its days of glory: swimming beaches (known as “the public baths”), playgrounds, exercise grounds, a zoo (moved in the 1930s to Como Park) and many thousands of summer visitors. But as sewage fouled the river, people turned away and the park languished into disuse. In 1935 Dr. Ohage even threatened to take it back. It has been revived from time to time, most notably in the late 1990s as public attention focused on the river once again.

Today, Harriet Island Regional Park offers fine views of downtown, walking access to the river, a B&B in a vintage towboat, paddleboats, vast grounds for festivals, a stage, and the refurbished WPA pavilion (1941) designed by the pioneering African American architect, Clarence Wigington. There are also trail links to Lilydale Regional Park. See <http://www.stpaul.gov/depts/parks> for amenities and events.



There he led in compulsory vaccination, pure food laws, and garbage disposal, among other efforts. Dr. Ohage died in 1935, leaving an unmatched public health legacy.

- **More Gifts from Dr. Justus Ohage**
- Born in Germany in 1839, Justus Ohage came to the United States at age 15, fought in the Civil War,
- married an American, became a physician, and moved to Saint Paul in 1881. Dr. Ohage was an innovative surgeon, a professor at the University of Minnesota, and the city's first public
- health officer, serving 1899-1918.

# Where Wabasha Turns ③

From downtown Saint Paul, Wabasha Street crosses the Mississippi and marches due south until the limestone bluffs force it to jog left. Here is a spot unlike any other in the city. Open caves gape. There are many, most now covered or filled, in which people once used to grow mushrooms,

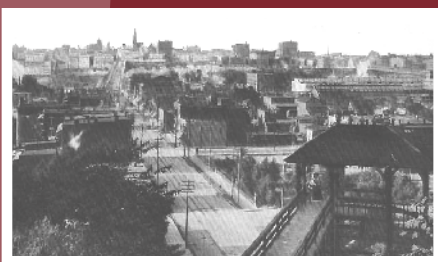


Today, the old Castle Royale nightclub offers Big Band and swing nights and history tours.  
[www.wabashastreetcaves.com](http://www.wabashastreetcaves.com)

age cheese, store beer (the Yoerg Brewery was built right into the bluffs a short distance to the west), hide who knows what, and even to entertain. A big cave right at the Wabasha curve has been a speakeasy and nightclub off and on for decades.

Most remarkable, though, is the staircase that leads to the bluff top. Built in 1916, eight stories tall, it was

a vertical connection of the disparate realms of the West Side: below, immigrants, industry, and floods; above, the fabulous views and fine houses of those who prospered. Living above had one disadvantage, however: isolation. The stairway gave bluff dwellers and their servants a direct, though taxing, connection to the busy streetcar route below. People still use it today, and the view from the top is terrific.



Just across Wabasha to the southeast one can just see the Torre de San Miguel. It is all that is left of the old Saint Michael's Catholic Church and school, a center of the long-gone Irish West Side. Given a Spanish name and a place of prominence in a public housing project with a high Latino population, it is now a symbol of ethnic change. It stands just above and to the east of the forgotten Colorado Street viaduct Old Concord Avenue once passed beneath.

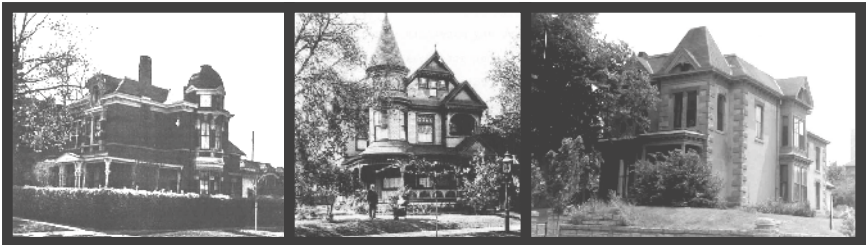
Wabasha skirts the bluff, then veers east . . . and becomes César Chávez Street. This used to be Concord, and is Concord again about half mile east. Concord follows the Mississippi south to South Saint Paul, once the site of some of the nation's biggest stockyards and slaughterhouses. Over generations, many thousands of Saint Paul workers rode the Concord streetcars to their jobs, moving and killing livestock, then turning their flesh into food for millions. The Concord streetcar line shut down in the early 1950s, then most of the stockyards themselves closed twenty years later.

César Chávez founded the National Farm worker Association, later the United Farm Workers in 1962. To many, Chávez was a hero who, with the union, sought recognition of the importance and dignity of all farm workers. He taught them to assert their rights through nonviolent protest and collective bargaining.

# On The Bluff ④

No site offers better views of downtown Saint Paul than the bluffs of Prospect Terrace, once the West Side's answer to Summit Avenue, Crocus Hill, and Dayton's Bluff. Some of the city's finest old houses were built here by prospering Germans such as Anthony Yoerg, Saint Paul's pioneering brewer. He built his big house on Isabel Street, on the edge of the bluff right above the brewery itself. (Old Man Hamm did the same across the river chasm above Swede Hollow. Inconceivable now: industrialists who lived within sight of their factories and the houses of their workers.)

The neighborhood bounded roughly by Prospect Boulevard, Isabel, Ohio, and George Streets comprises a museum of turn-of-the-century Midwestern residential architecture: Queen Annes, French Second Empires, Italianates, solid four-squares, bungalows, painted ladies, rowhouses, and tiny worker houses. *This is an excellent place for a walking tour. Follow Prospect Boulevard east toward Prospect Park; if you peer just right you can see some of the biggest and best backyards in all of Saint Paul.*



Edward and Elizabeth  
Heimbach House\*  
-64 Delos St

• Yoerg House\* -Home  
• of Pioneer Brewer  
• 215 Isabel

• Rau/Strong House\* -Built by  
• master stonemason Rau as a  
• gift for his daughter 2 E. George



## A nice stop on your stroll....(Stryker and Winifred)

In 1906, Czech immigrant Ed Jerabek opened a Saint Paul bakery that soon moved to the West Side. Four generations later, great-granddaughter Mellissa Deyo continues the tradition with Jerabek's New Bohemian Coffeehouse and Bakery. Old-world pastries, pies, cakes, and breads are still offered using many of the same recipes. Now it's a full deli, café, and gift shop including vintage clothing and local crafts. ([www.jerabeks.com](http://www.jerabeks.com))



**Why the West Side?** Many Mexicans began coming to Minnesota in the early 1900s, when Minnesota sugar companies were recruiting due to labor shortages during World War I. This established Minnesota as a stop on the circuit of migrant farm work. Eventually, migrants found the flats of Saint Paul's West Side to be a convenient place to settle. The streetcar lines provided access to winter employment in the meat processing industry at places like Armour and Swift, and there was easy rail access to farmlands in the south for summer work. Today third- and fourth-generation Mexican families are joined by newer Spanish-speaking arrivals, many from Latin and South America, who are attracted not only to decent work prospects, but to strong, well-established cultural support networks.

## District Del Sol ⑤

After the destruction of commercial buildings on the flats in the early 1960s, the intersections of Concord with State and Robert Streets became the retail center of the West Side. It also became progressively more Mexican. Some businesses, such as El Burrito Mercado and Boca Chica Restaurant, have prospered long enough to become city landmarks and have paved the way for the many other “mom and pop” restaurants, bakeries, and shops along the corridor.

Recently installed by local artist Seitu Jones, this wall serves as a new gateway to the West Side, reflecting the heritage of past and current residents. It features the word “home” in 12 languages. The Riverview Economic Development office at 176 César Chávez Street has a map of public art in the area, as does the Community Information Corps, a student-run arts and cultural history project: [www.westsidetic.org](http://www.westsidetic.org).



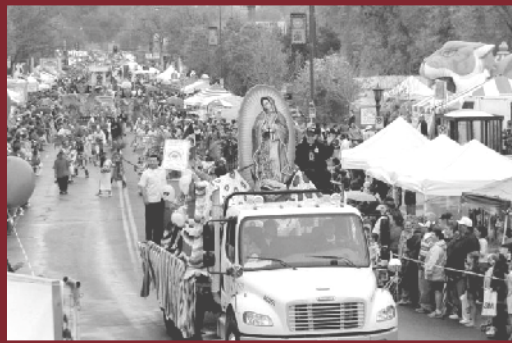
Other old-time neighborhood landmarks include Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (Concord and Highway 52) and Neighborhood House, the once humble settlement house for Eastern European Jews, transformed now into the magnificent new Wellstone Center. The church and Neighborhood House have been instrumental in holding the social and spiritual community together over the years, in spite of the loss of much physical community on the flats.

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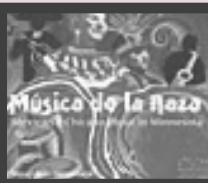
There is art all around--murals, sculpture, painted bridges. Works often focus on cultural pride, history, and community. And every Cinco de Mayo, César Chávez Street overflows with life as the entire city celebrates a patriotic holiday that has become more significant for those who have left Mexico than for modern Mexicans themselves.



Cinco de Mayo is the day of Mexico's Battle of Puebla in 1862, when a fledgling Mexican army defeated the larger, invading French forces. Cinco de Mayo festivals throughout the United States honor this part of Mexican history, and also celebrate Hispanic/ Latino culture and tradition. There has been a strong tradition of celebration on the West Side--(bottom: 1930s Mexican Independence Day Parade). Often what began as smaller neighborhood fiestas are now large productions. The West Side's Cinco de Mayo fiesta is the largest in Minnesota--one of the 10 largest in the United States! (top)



District del Sol sponsors many events including movies and music outdoors in Castillo Park in the summer and holiday events year-round. During warm weather weekends, La Placita marketplace at 189 César Chávez Saint features locally grown produce, ethnic food vendors, hand-made art and clothing, and ethnic dancing from around the world. For a schedule visit [www.districtdelsol.com](http://www.districtdelsol.com).



**Required Reading and Listening...and dancing. ¡Bailemos!** So much more can be understood about the history of Mexicans in Minnesota by enjoying **Música de la Raza: Mexican & Chicano Music in Minnesota**, by local cultural anthropologist and singer Maya López-Santamaria. (CD and illustrated history book, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1999)

**Left:** Neighborhood House (179 Robie Street East) was opened in the late 1800s by a group of Jewish women who sought to help immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe adjust to a new way of life. Since then, the center has helped people from all over the world. Hmong and East African refugees are the most recent participants at Neighborhood House, joining the large Latino constituency. The new facility--the Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center for Community Building--is the National Congressional Memorial to the late senator and his wife and a testament to their legacy of work on behalf of immigrant rights. It incorporates materials from its past and includes many new features --a full gym, weight room, theater, commercial kitchen, and soon a cafe. Neighborhood House welcomes the public and has rental spaces available. See [www.neighb.org](http://www.neighb.org)

# In The Neighborhoods

Those who could not afford the luxury of the bluffs built neighborhoods that resemble others in the city and throughout the Midwest. This area contains many gems for those who may wish to find them.

On Humboldt Avenue, St. Matthew's School\*, built in 1901 for a mostly German parish, is one of the city's oldest and most intact school buildings: a Second Empire construction with a rare non-residential mansard roof.



The Riverview Library \* on George Street at Humboldt is a fine example of a Carnegie Library, one of the 1,946 community libraries constructed across the United States between 1880 and 1917 and funded by U.S. Steel founder Andrew Carnegie. This one was built in 1917 and restored in 1989. It is one of three in Saint Paul and 64 in Minnesota.

Engine House #21 at 643 Ohio Street offers a great example of early adaptive reuse. Built in 1910 for horse-drawn equipment, it is a pleasing example of fire station design with a hose tower. . After its retirement from the fire service it housed for many years the Saint Paul Turnverein, one of the few remaining institutions of German culture that flourished in Saint Paul from the 1850s until World War I. The Turnverein (known today at The Turners) began in the old country as an anti-Napoleonic movement. Transplanted to America, it served immigrants to preserve their German culture and language, and as a place for young people to develop physical vigor, especially before public schools instituted physical education programs. Today the building is a private residence.



West Side Citizens Organization is an active neighborhood group that supports activities throughout the year such as the Front Porch Art Crawl, youth farmer's markets, and Westfest, featuring a 5K run and children's activities. See [www.wSCO.org](http://www.wSCO.org).

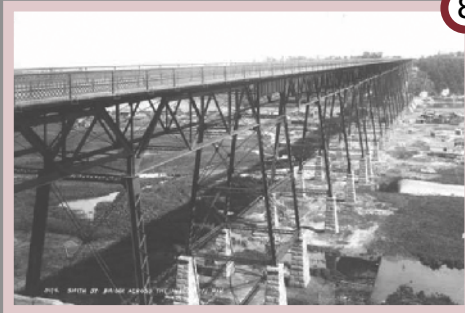
# The High Bridge and Beyond

The High Bridge and Smith Avenue form the natural western boundary of the West Side. Completed in 1889, the bridge has a storied past.\*

Its prime mover was Robert A. Smith—banker, postmaster, city councilman, state representative, senator, and Saint Paul's longest-serving mayor—fifteen years. Its main contractor was steel baron Andrew Carnegie, operating behind the name Keystone Bridge Company.

And it was a spectacular instant landmark: half a mile long, made of wrought iron, with four huge limestone river piers below, and a deck made of cedar blocks to muffle the sound of the iron-rimmed wagon wheels for which the bridge was designed.

It held together just fifteen years. Saint Paul's most violent storm, the Cyclone of 1904, took the south end down. But the bridge was promptly rebuilt and lasted eight decades more. Time, gravity, and corrosion required its demolition in 1985. The current bridge opened four years later and today is a favorite tailgating spot on Fourth of July for viewing the fireworks at the State Capitol.



Cherokee Park, on the bluff just west of the High Bridge, used to be a tourist camp and recreation hot spot, as shown in this 1920s photo. Today it's a lovely place for a picnic . . . and is a favorite spot for bird watchers. Check with The Audubon Society [www.audubon.org/bird\\_trails](http://www.audubon.org/bird_trails) for info or [www.oldmanriver.com](http://www.oldmanriver.com) for news on neighborhood outings.

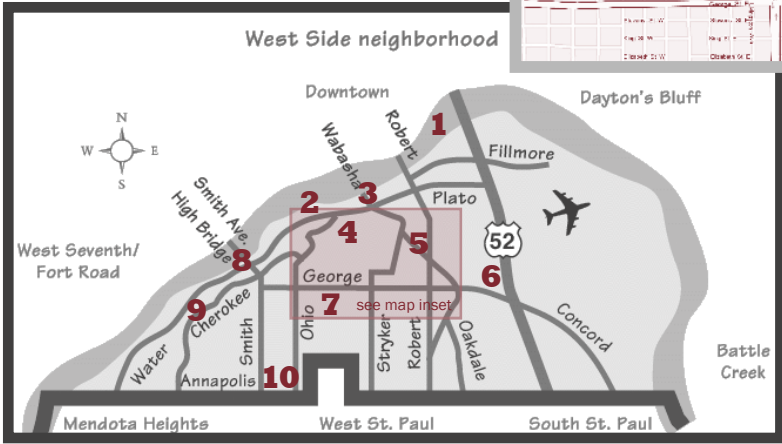
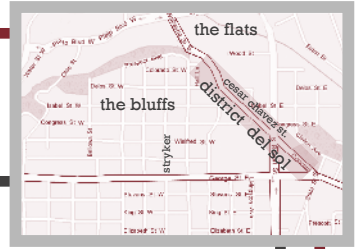
## End of the Line 10

Urban and economic development used to follow the street car lines . . . now it's our highways. . . extending today's metro area far out into what used to be farmland. When the streetcars ran up Smith Avenue, the turn-around was at Annapolis, which is a West Side boundary. This was a busy node. Even today, you'll find a handful of landmark restaurants, shops, and unique cafes here and in other spots along the corridor.



**KEY**

Bus Lines:  
[www.metrotransit.org](http://www.metrotransit.org)



This Guide was produced by Historic Saint Paul as part of the Tour Saint Paul interpretive guide series, highlighting the cultural and historic resources of the city's neighborhoods. It was made possible by:

Saint Paul Cultural Star Program  
Minnesota Humanities Commission in cooperation  
with the National Endowment for the Humanities  
National Trust for Historic Preservation with funding  
from the James J. and John L. Knight Foundation  
Riverview Economic Development Association  
West Side Citizens Organization



Many thanks to: Minnesota Historical Society and Ramsey County Historical Society for historic photos, Neighborhood Development Alliance, West Side Safe Neighborhood Council, Richard Schletty and Craig David for the use of their painting for the cover, and many residents and business owners who contributed insight and knowledge.

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**Minnesota  
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