

The Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot: Waseca, Minnesota Case Study  
By Maianne Preble  
Fall 2009

1. Intro

a. Building Typology

Following the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, rail transportation of both passengers and freight across the United States began to grow extensively. In Minnesota, many of the early railroads were built to transport raw materials, such as grain and timber, to various industrial centers throughout the state. As the state continued to grow in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, towns and cities sprung up along the various rail lines. As these towns grew, residents and business travelers were seen by the railroad industry as a viable market for expanded service. To cater to these travelers, companies began constructing local passenger depots. Depots were typically built in cities with larger populations, with access to other transportation routes (including other rail lines), and central to other area cities not on the rail line. A typical depot was designed as a long, rectangular single story building near the railroad tracks. An elevated platform linked the depot to the railroad, allowing for easy loading and unloading of the train cars. Early depots were also characterized by wide overhanging eaves to shelter passengers and freight from the weather. Windows let natural light into the depot, and provided a view onto the tracks. Due to the proximity to the railroad tracks and idling trains, most depots were constructed of fireproof materials including brick, limestone, and tile. The interior of passenger depots were often designed as large open lobbies with seating, a ticket window, and a few offices. Because of their utilitarian nature, depot exteriors were typically constructed with little ornamentation. In contrast, the interior spaces of historic depots can be quite grand in comparison to the exterior, with detailed lighting fixtures, tile or terrazzo floors, and various wall treatments.

b. Specific Building Intro

The Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot, located at 231 West Elm Avenue in Waseca, Minnesota is an excellent example of how a railroad depot can be reused for a new small business. The yellow Chaska Brick, single story traditional depot was constructed as a passenger depot for the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway in 1913. The building underwent its

first rehabilitation in 1960 when the building was purchased from the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway by the owners of Waseca Depot Liquor who operated a liquor store in the depot until the 2000. In 2000, the City of Waseca purchased the former depot and began a second rehabilitation of the property. The depot is currently leased by Tim and Tamie Collins, who operate a boutique called Zinnias.

## 2. History/Property Background

Construction of the depot began in 1912 when the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway decided to erect a passenger depot in Waseca. Prior to 1912, the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway served Waseca and the surrounding area at the Union Depot in downtown Waseca. The Union Depot was constructed in 1887 and served the area until it burnt down in approximately



**Figure 1: Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot circa 1920. Photo courtesy of Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, Waseca community file.**

1912.<sup>1</sup> The new passenger depot for the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway was constructed of Chaska Brick with limestone details. It featured a large passenger platform leading to the train tracks, a hipped roof with large overhanging eaves, and many windows looking out over the train tracks.<sup>2</sup> The exact reason for the depot's materials is not known, but it can be speculated that the fireproof properties of brick and stone were important in light of the Union Depot's fire. The design and construction of the depot was done through the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway, and the depot was open for service by winter 1912.<sup>3</sup>

From its construction in 1912 until 1959, the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Waseca Depot was owned and operated by the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway. In 1959, the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Waseca Herald*, March 14, 1912, 1, available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup> 1920 Waseca Depot Photograph

<sup>3</sup> *Waseca Herald*, December 26, 1912, 1, available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway discontinued passenger service at the Waseca Depot, due to a decline in rail passengers.<sup>4</sup> In 1958, the first 8 miles of Interstate 35 in Minnesota opened east of Owatonna, which greatly improved vehicular transit between south-eastern Minnesota and the Twin Cities.<sup>5</sup> The opening and ongoing construction of Interstate 35 was a major turning point in the number of passengers using the railway for travel. In 1960 the depot was sold to Waseca Depot Liquor, who rehabilitated the depot into a liquor store.

When Waseca Depot Liquor took over the depot, the store made a number of alterations to the interior of the depot to accommodate the daily traffic of store customers. These alterations included pouring a new cement floor on top of the original terrazzo to create a smooth surface, boarding over or bricking in many of the original windows to create additional wall space for displays, installing wood paneling to reflect the stylistic taste of the time, and installing a drop ceiling to lower the ceiling height.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Decline in Use/Disinvestment/Vacancy

In 2000, Waseca Depot Liquor closed after 40 years of operation. When the liquor store closed, no reuse of the building was proposed. The fear of losing this small town depot, located on a major east/west thoroughfare in downtown, to a slow demise due to prolonged vacancy, helped spur local advocacy for its restoration and eventual reuse by local citizens.

### 4. Advocacy

Following the closure of Waseca Depot Liquor, local residents, including eventual Mayor Tom Hagen, and city officials began promoting the former depot as an important local historic resource.<sup>7</sup> The significance of the passenger depot was explained within the larger context of the history of the railroad in the area and highlighted how the railroad contributed to the growth and prosperity of Waseca. Writing an article for *The Minnesota Preservationist*, Tom Hagen explained, “Waseca owes its existence to the arrival of the east-west Winona & St. Peter Railroad in the 1860s. In the late 1800s, abundant wheat crops in southern Minnesota prompted

---

<sup>4</sup> Les Tloughan, 2004 Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Award Nomination, available through Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>5</sup> Interstate 35 folders, Minnesota Highway Department Archives, Minnesota State Government Archives, Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>6</sup> Les Tloughan, email correspondence with author, St. Paul, Minnesota, July 22, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Hagen was elected Mayor of Waseca in November 2000. John Clemons was Mayor of Waseca at the time of Liquor Store closure.

Minneapolis milling interests to finance the building of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad between Minneapolis and Albert Lea.”<sup>8</sup> Hagen went on to discuss how Waseca served as a major junction for freight and passenger transportation on these two rail lines. Because there was no obvious private party to develop the property, the former depot was given a lot of attention by city officials. By the time Waseca Depot Liquor closed, the depot had begun to show its age, partially due to a lack of maintenance, but also due to structural shifts in and around the building. City officials knew that someone would have to step in and begin stabilizing the depot if it were to be saved at all. In November of 2000, the Waseca City Council authorized the city to purchase the depot for \$65,000.<sup>9</sup>

In 2002, Tom Hagen formed the Waseca M&StL Depot Society, a non-profit corporation, to aid in fundraising efforts to restore the depot.<sup>10</sup> The city of Waseca partnered with the Waseca M&StL Depot Society to fundraise for the depot, coordinate work to be completed on the building, and to amass a network of local volunteers to complete some of the restoration work.<sup>11</sup> Beginning in the summer of 2002, volunteers for the Waseca M&StL Depot Society began working on demolishing and removing the incompatible alterations that were installed during the liquor store’s use of the building. Over the next few months, volunteers put in over 150 hours to remove the wood paneling, drop ceiling, and concrete floor from the interior of the depot; as well as opening up the windows that had been bricked-in. The stabilization and restoration work of the depot was furthered by a \$12,000 Minnesota Historical Society grant, which was used to restore all of the depot’s exterior woodwork.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the extensive work completed by volunteers, the restoration of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Depot lost momentum when Mayor Tom Hagen was called to active duty in the National Guard in 2003. Hagen’s time away from Waseca left the city and the depot society looking for a new leader to continue the restoration efforts. Even with a full set of re-construction blue-prints, a full project plan, a second grant from the Minnesota Historical Society for \$30,000, and \$35,000 cash on hand, the project seemed to come to a grinding halt – perhaps

---

<sup>8</sup> Tom Hagen, Waseca Depot Society organized to save the city's 1912 railway station , *The Minnesota Preservationist*, vol 7, no 3, (2004): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Waseca receives MN Historic Preservation Award,” *Waseca County News*, Sept 28, 2004, available in the Waseca clipping file, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>11</sup> Hagen.

<sup>12</sup> 2004 10 most endangered nomination, available through Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

due to a lack of leadership, volunteer burnout, or a combination of forces.<sup>13</sup> In 2007 the depot was listed as one of the “10 Most Endangered Properties” by the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. The major threat to the project was that the Waseca City Council had begun to lose patience with the project, as no major progress had been made since Tom Hagen’s departure. The city council had begun looking into options to sell or demolish the property.

The attention the depot received from being listed as one of the “10 Most Endangered Properties” helped to attract additional interest in the preservation of the property. Press coverage about the depot was not limited to the initial press release from the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. The Waseca Country News, Owatonna People’s Press, and the Mankato Free Press all ran stories about the depot in May 2007, hoping to draw attention to the project. The Mankato Free Press article, “Endangered depot awaits savior” from May 21<sup>st</sup>, highlights Tim and Tamie Collins’ interest in the property as a possible facility for a new small business.<sup>14</sup> In June 2007, the Collins’ were able to strike a deal with the Waseca City Council to lease the building from the city for a period of 8 years. The lease would generate about \$2000 of rental income for the city, as well as place the responsibility to finish the rehabilitation on the Collins’ – including all day to day operating costs. In return, the Collins’ would have the option to buy the depot in 8 years for approximately \$15,000. The Collins’ lease was finalized in early July 2007.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Rehabilitation

Tim and Tamie Collins began the restoration of the Waseca Depot soon after signing their lease. Though they did not consider themselves to be “history buffs,” the Collins’ were very sympathetic to the value of the historic depot and chose to maintain much of the original architectural details while restoring the depot to be opened as a boutique home goods store.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the work completed by volunteers and members of the Waseca M&StL Depot Society, there was still a fair amount of work to be completed on the building when the Collins’ took over the restoration effort. Major repairs included a new roof and a new southwest wall. The Collins’ also restored the original brick and terrazzo floors, brick walls and brick archways on

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda Dyslin, “Endangered depot awaits savior,” *Mankato Free Press*, May 21, 2007, A1 and A7, available online at [http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local\\_story\\_141002403.html?start:int=0](http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local_story_141002403.html?start:int=0).

<sup>15</sup> “A new life for Waseca Depot,” *Mankato Free Press*, June 27, 2007, B1 and B3.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Dyslin, “Waseca depot has new look,” *Mankato Free Press*, [http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local\\_story\\_282224307.html](http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local_story_282224307.html).

the interior of the building.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary track lighting was installed, creating a contrast between the historic building fabric and the contemporary additions.

Restoration work at the Waseca Depot was completed over the course of three months, and the Collins' store, Zinnia's Boutique, opened on October 9, 2007. The couple held an official "grand opening" a month later. Following the opening of Zinnia's, the Collins' and their work were highlighted in a October 9, 2007 article in the Mankato Free Press by Amanda Dyslin entitled, "Waseca depot has new look: Zinnias grand opening is November." A second article in the May 2008 issue of Midwest Home by Ann Kohler entitled, "Saving Style" also highlighted the Collins' work and their store.<sup>18</sup> In 2008, the Collins' were also honored for their work on the Waseca Depot, when they received the 2008 Community Preservation Award from the Waseca Historic Preservation Commission.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The restoration of the historic Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot at 231 West Elm Avenue in Waseca demonstrates how a local government can help save an important local landmark. Local government involvement and intervention in the protection of a historic resource does not have to be long term; it can be used as a stabilizer – cleaning up a site to make it more attractive to redevelopment and then leasing the property and daily upkeep responsibilities to an investor – as demonstrated by the Waseca City Council with the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway Depot. This limited investment by the local government can be paramount to the protection of historic resources until a qualified investor and use can be found. The Waseca depot also serves as a reminder that preservation related projects come in all shapes and sizes, and can be completed by anyone.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ann Kohler, "Saving Style," Midwest Home Magazine, <http://www.midwesthomemag.com/media/Midwest-Home/May-2008/Saving-Style/>; Dyslin, "Waseca depot has new look."

<sup>19</sup> Waseca Historic Preservation Commission, "Past Winners, 'Historic Preservation' Awards," City of Waseca, <http://www.ci.waseca.mn.us/Community%20Development/Documents/HPCAwardHistory.pdf>; Additional information and photographs of the rehabilitation of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Depot in Waseca are available online through the City of Waseca at <http://www.ci.waseca.mn.us/Community%20Development/Documents/DepotInfo.pdf>.

Appendix 1: Table of Advocates

Organization/Company Name	Advocate Name and Contact	Advocacy Role
City of Waseca	Tom Hagen	Mayor, promoted city involvement
Waseca M&StL Depot Society	- (organization has been dissolved)	Volunteer organization for restoration work
Waseca City Council	A: 508 South State Street Waseca, MN 56093 Ph: 507.835.9700	Authorized purchase of building in 2000 and lease to the Collins' in 2007.
Preservation Alliance of Minnesota	Bonnie McDonald	Listed depot as a 10 Most Endangered in 2007.

Appendix 2: Table of Rehabilitation/Restoration Key Players

Company Name	Contact	Rehabilitation / Restoration Role
City of Waseca	Tom Hagen	Mayor, promoted city involvement
Waseca City Council	A: 508 South State Street Waseca, MN 56093 Ph: 507.835.9700	Authorized purchase of building in 2000 and lease to the Collins' in 2007.
Waseca M&StL Depot Society	- (organization has been dissolved)	Volunteer organization for restoration work
Roesler Construction	A: 34240 Woodville Blvd Waseca, MN 56093 <a href="http://www.roeslerconstructiondesign.com/">http://www.roeslerconstructiondesign.com/</a> Ph: 507.835.7932 E: <a href="mailto:d.roesler@mchsi.com">d.roesler@mchsi.com</a>	Contractor – involved with the Depot Society
ALM Builders, Inc	A: 2100 Brown Ave / POBox 191 Waseca, MN 56093 <a href="http://www.almbuilders.com/">http://www.almbuilders.com/</a> Ph: 507.835.1315 E: <a href="mailto:bradw@almbuilders.com">bradw@almbuilders.com</a>	Involved with the Depot Society
I & S Engineers and Architects, Inc	A: 1409 Riverfront Dr Mankato, MN 56001 Ph: 507.387.6651	Involved with the Depot Society
Waseca County Historical Society	A: 315 2 <sup>nd</sup> Ave NE Waseca, MN 56093 <a href="http://www.historical.waseca.mn.us">http://www.historical.waseca.mn.us</a> Ph: 507.835.7700 E: <a href="mailto:director@historical.waseca.mn.us">director@historical.waseca.mn.us</a>	Involved with the Depot Society
	Tim and Tammie Collins Ph: 507.833.5822 (store phone)	Owners of Zinnia's, current tenants of the depot. Completed the rehabilitation.
Simon Brick & Stone Co	A: 31285 241 <sup>st</sup> Ave Le Center, MN 56057 Ph: 507.665.5156	Involved with the Collins' rehabilitation
CJ Masonry	A: 29068 West Wilton River Rd Waseca, MN 56093 Ph: 507.835.3720	Involved with the Collins' rehabilitation
Comfort Systems	A: 308 South Minnesota Ave St. Peter, MN 56082 Ph: 507.934.4750	HVAC – for the Collins' rehabilitation

Appendix 3: Table of Funding

Funding Name and Contact	Type of Funding	Funding Amount	Year
City of Waseca Tom Hagen	Authorized City Funds	\$65,000	2000
Minnesota Historical Society Mandy Skypala 345 W. Kellogg Blvd. St. Paul, MN 55102 Ph: 651-259-3458 E: <a href="mailto:mandy.skypala@mnhs.org">mandy.skypala@mnhs.org</a>	State Capital Projects Grant (Matching Grant)	\$12,000	2002
Waseca M&StL Depot Society	Fundraising	\$35,000	2002- 2003
Minnesota Historical Society Mandy Skypala 345 W. Kellogg Blvd. St. Paul, MN 55102 Ph: 651-259-3458 E: <a href="mailto:mandy.skypala@mnhs.org">mandy.skypala@mnhs.org</a>	State Capital Projects Grant (Matching Grant)	\$30,000	2003
Tim and Tammie Collins	Personal Funding Yearly rent to the City of Waseca	- \$2,000	2007

## Appendix 4: Bibliography

2004 10 most endangered nomination. Available through Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

“A new life for Waseca Depot.” *Mankato Free Press*, June 27, 2007, B1 and B3.

Dyslin, Amanda. “Endangered depot awaits savior.” *Mankato Free Press*, May 21, 2007, A1 and A7. Available online at [http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local\\_story\\_141002403.html?start:int=0](http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local_story_141002403.html?start:int=0).

Dyslin, Amanda. “Waseca depot has new look.” *Mankato Free Press*, [http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local\\_story\\_282224307.html](http://www.mankatofreepress.com/local/local_story_282224307.html).

Hagen, Tom. “Waseca Depot Society organized to save the city's 1912 railway station.” *The Minnesota Preservationist*, vol 7 no 3 (2004): 4.

Interstate 35 folders, Minnesota Highway Department Archives, Minnesota State Government Archives, Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Kohler, Ann. “Saving Style.” *Midwest Home Magazine*, <http://www.midwesthomemag.com/media/Midwest-Home/May-2008/Saving-Style/>.

Thougan, Les. Email correspondence with author, St. Paul, Minnesota. July 22, 2009.

Thougan, Les. 2004 Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Award Nomination. Available through Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Waseca Historic Preservation Commission. “Past Winners, ‘Historic Preservation’ Awards.” City of Waseca. <http://www.ci.waseca.mn.us/Community%20Development/Documents/HPCAwardHistory.pdf>.

“Waseca receives MN Historic Preservation Award.” *Waseca County News*, Sept 28, 2004. Available in the Waseca clipping file, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

*Waseca Herald*, March 14, 1912, 1. Available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

*Waseca Herald*, December 26, 1912, 1. Available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.