

# On the Town

## Saintly record

St. John's history celebrates 134 years of doing Lord's work in Ramsey Hill

BY ROGER BARR

Since its first worship service in 1881, St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church has been a congregation on the move. Periodically over the years, the leaders of the Ramsey Hill church recognized that the congregation had outgrown its building. Five years ago they recognized that the congregation had outgrown its last written history, which was published in 1981, and commissioned the publication of a new book to tell the story of the parish and its 130-year relationship with St. Paul.

*For All the Saints: St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church* (Afton Press 2015, 312 pages) is a lavishly illustrated, oversize hardcover book written by James Frazier, the parish's music director and organist from 2004-13.

For Frazier, gravitating from musician to author was natural. "In many ways I'm an academic," he said. "I have training in both theology and music." He is also the author of *Maurice Durufle: The Man and His Music*, a 2007 biography of the French organist and composer.

Frazier completed the first draft of *For All the Saints* at the end of 2011. It took another three years to shepherd the book through the editorial and production process.

The book's 15 chapters weave a detailed history of the congregation, its members and their impact on city, state, national and even international events.

St. John the Evangelist held its first services in Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church at 217 Mackubin St. The first rector was Henry Kittson, son of Norman Kittson, the fur trader and steamboat and railway entrepreneur whose mansion once stood on the current site of the Cathedral of St. Paul.

Under Henry Kittson's leadership, the congregation built a new church at the northeast corner of Ashland Avenue and Mackubin. That structure received several major additions before the congregation commissioned prominent St. Paul architect Cass Gilbert to design a larger church. The new church was built on the east side of Kent Street just north of Portland Avenue. It was completed in 1895, the same year that Gilbert began work on designing the new Minnesota Capitol.

By the turn of the century, St. John's had outgrown that church, so the congregation hired another prominent St. Paul architect, Clarence Johnston, to design a large addition that extended south from the Gilbert structure and gave the church a new facade on Portland Avenue.

The first services in the expanded church were held in 1903. In 1919 the roof over the chancel was raised to allow the installation of a large stained-glass window designed by Charles J. Connick to memorialize the congregants who had lost their lives in World War I. An education wing was added on the north end of the Gilbert structure in 1956.

Through the decades St. John's has been

the spiritual home of some of St. Paul's most prominent families. Dusty Mairs, who served on the *For All the Saints* steering committee along with fellow parishioners Jim Johnson, Alden Drew, Fred Myers, Betty Myers and Patricia McDonald, was surprised by some of the names that popped up in researching the book. "The movers and shakers of St. Paul sat in our pews on Sundays," Mairs said. "That impressed me."

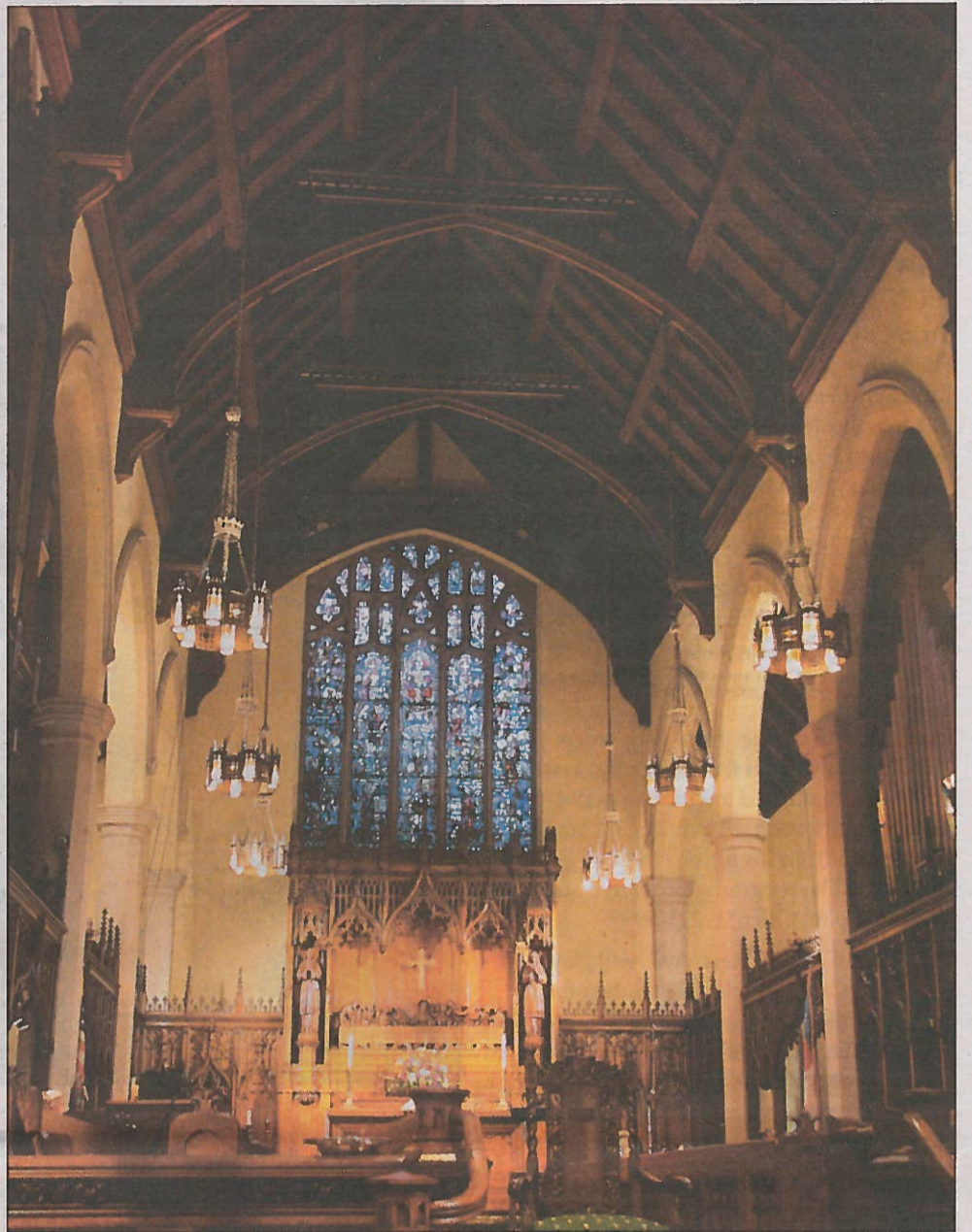
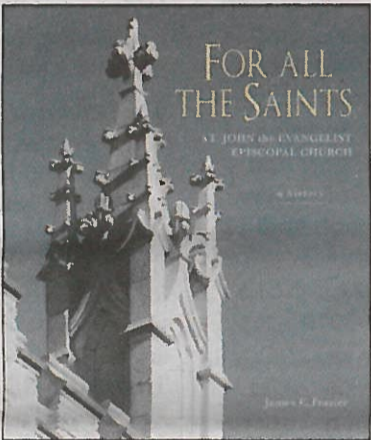
According to Betty Myers, the long list of former members includes Amherst Wilder, who made a fortune in transportation, lumbering, banking, insurance and real estate; Horace Hills Irvine, president of Weyerhaeuser Timber Company whose family home at 1006 Summit Ave. is now the Minnesota governor's mansion; Jule Hannaford Sr., who from 1913-20 served as president of Northern Pacific, forerunner of today's Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad; and Thomas L. Daniels, who was president

of the future food processing and global commodities giant Archer Daniels Midland Company.

The list also includes Betty Myers' late husband, John Myers, who served as president of Hoerner-Waldorf, the Fortune 500 company at I-94 and Vandalia Street that was purchased in 1997 by Rock-Tenn.

Perhaps the parish's most prominent member was Frank B. Kellogg, a U.S. Senator from Minnesota and U.S. Secretary of State who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1929 for co-authoring the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the international treaty of 1928 that renounced war and influenced the founding of the United Nations after World War II.

The presence in the pews of so many captains of industry certainly contributed to



The *Te Deum* window that graces the sanctuary of St. John the Evangelist was designed by stained-glass artist Charles J. Connick and dedicated on Thanksgiving Day 1920 as a memorial to those who gave their lives in World War I.

St. John's financial health. However, Frazier attributes the parish's success to its strong neighborhood focus. "Over the years, the clergy has taken a very serious interest in the neighborhood," he said. "When the large houses in the Hill District were being divided into rooming houses (in the mid-20th century), the congregation recognized that the neighborhood was changing and they had to take an interest."

For years, the parish sponsored a choir camp for neighborhood children. "Kids

joined the choir and sang on Sundays just so they could go to the camp," Frazier said. During the social unrest of the 1960s, the parish organized music and reading programs for neighborhood youths.

St. John's continues to strengthen its civic ties. The congregation has developed a sister church relationship with Holy Apostles, an Episcopal church on St. Paul's East Side where many Hmong-American families worship. Two years ago St. John's invited the 54-year-old Crocus Hill Preschool to relocate there when it needed a new home, and every February the church hosts Project Home, an overnight shelter for homeless mothers and their children that it sets up in the gymnasium.

St. John's also serves as the home of the Artaria String Quartet's school for high school string quartets. The student musicians play at church services, and the professional quartet presents concerts in the sanctuary.

"St. John's has always found a way to be relevant to its neighborhood," said Jim Johnson, a 40-year member of the congregation. He estimates the parish has about 1,000 members in 300 households. "The neighborhood has gotten younger over the years," he said, "and there are a lot of young families in our congregation now."

Although *For All the Saints* looks back at the church's 134-year history, the book is really about the future of the congregation and its continuing relationship with St. Paul, according to Mairs. "We're noted for our faithful response to the world we find ourselves in," she said. "We do a lot of outreach work. Our rectors have been great leaders. I hope the book sets a context for who we are as a congregation."



St. John the Evangelist hosted the consecration of the Reverend Douglas H. Atwill as bishop of the Episcopal Church of North Dakota.

ALL PHOTOS ARE FROM *FOR ALL THE SAINTS: ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH: A HISTORY*, AFTON PRESS, ST. PAUL, MN