

# Introducing The HILL HOUSE

Elisabeth W. Doermann and Ellen M. Rosenthal

*"Solid, substantial, roomy and comfortable is the new home of James J. Hill and family. . . . There has been no attempt at display, no desire to flaunt an advertisement of wealth in the eyes of the world. Just a family home . . . impressive, fine, even grand in the simplicity of design, but after all a St. Paul home. . . . Seated upon the brow of St. Anthony Hill, and commanding a glorious scope of view up and down the valley of the Mississippi river, the residence has two fronts, one facing Summit avenue, the finest thoroughfare of homes on the continent; the other looking out and down upon Pleasant avenue . . . and visible from almost every point in the business portion of the city."*

*St. Paul Pioneer Press, January 1, 1891*

THE GREAT HOUSE at 240 Summit Avenue in St. Paul is one of the most impressive and historically important homes in Minnesota. It was built by James J. Hill between 1888 and 1891, when Hill was at the peak of his career and was pushing the Great Northern Railroad westward to the Pacific. The brownstone mansion was placed high on the bluff overlooking the river, set back from the street behind an iron fence and approached by a circular driveway. It dominated the eastern end of Summit Avenue, at least until the completion of the Cathedral of St. Paul some years later.

James J. Hill lived in the house from 1891 until 1916, when he died at the age of seventy-eight. His widow, Mary, maintained the property until her own death in 1921. She was a devout Catholic and had expressed the desire that the house someday be used by the church. In 1925, four of the Hill daughters purchased the property from the estate and gave it to the Archdiocese of St. Paul

and Minneapolis. Sixty years later, when church officials decided to consolidate offices into other buildings, the house was offered to the Minnesota Historical Society. The society became the owner in 1978.

With ownership came the challenge to design a plan for the use and preservation of the house. Exhibits and tours could tell the story of Hill, the "Empire Builder," and present a story of late nineteenth-century St. Paul and the fast-growing Northwest. In addition, the house could provide needed space to meet other society and community demands: space for conferences, meetings, and special programs, for offices, and for changing art exhibits.

THE STORY OF James J. Hill is legend. He arrived in Minnesota in 1856 and during the next fifty years was the driving force in the economic development of the region.

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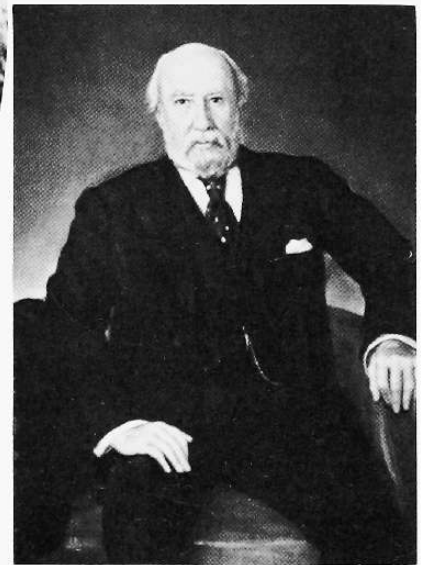
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—MIHS collections—



*PICTURED about 1898, the James J. Hill house, with its craggy exterior of Massachusetts brownstone, looked much the same as now. It was built between 1888 and 1891 for James and Mary Hill and their nine children.*

*THIS PORTRAIT of Hill at seventy-five was painted in 1913 by Henry Caro del Vaille. It hung in the music room of the house along with a companion portrait of Hill's wife, Mary.*



Under his leadership, the Northwest experienced dramatic growth in river and rail transportation, in finance and banking, in agriculture, education, and land settlement, and in the utilization of natural resources. In 1961, forty-five years after Hill's death, the United States Department of the Interior designated the house a National Historic Landmark because of Hill's major contribution to the transportation systems of the growing nation.

Born in southern Ontario in 1838 to a Scotch-Irish farming family, Hill left home when he was eighteen, making his way to New York and then to other eastern cities. He soon moved west, looking for a job and future opportunity. Upon reaching St. Paul, he quickly became involved in the riverboat business. Starting as a shipping clerk, he served a productive apprenticeship and within seven years was in business for himself.

As he sought new business, Hill offered efficient riverboat service and the lowest rates possible. He overcame a major problem in the transfer of freight by building St. Paul's first winter and weather-protected warehouse next to the levee, just below the grain

elevator and connected to the rail line by sidings. No longer did wagons have to be loaded and unloaded with freight for short trips of only a few hundred yards. And no longer were goods exposed to wind and weather.

Hill soon looked northward at trade with the Red River Valley and Canada and the shipping of goods and furs. In 1878 he and four partners bought the bankrupt St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, extended it to the Canadian border, and reorganized it as the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba. Hill became active in the fuel business, first with wood and then coal, recognizing the need for both as the railroads and the population of the Northwest grew. He studied and planned, and his business grew. Alternately, he fought, competed, and joined with eastern and Canadian developers and investors. Some became lifelong friends. By the time he died, Hill had extended the railroad — by then the Great Northern — all the way to the Pacific and had established St. Paul as the transportation and wholesale center of the Northwest.

He was a man of boundless energy and broad inter-

ests. "Direct, positive, straightforward, he knows what he wants and isn't afraid to ask for it," said one colleague. Others found him a hard taskmaster. Hill drove both himself and those around him relentlessly and with little tolerance for incompetence. His interests ranged widely. Not only a shrewd businessman, he was also an art connoisseur, a self-taught engineer, a farmer, a conservationist, and a historian.

IN 1867 JAMES J. HILL married a young St. Paul woman, Mary Theresa Mehegan. Ten children were born in the next eighteen years, nine of whom survived to adulthood. The family lived first in a small house on Pearl Street (later Grove Street) in St. Paul. In 1871 Hill purchased a cottage on Ninth and Canada Streets which was torn down in 1876 to make way for a larger house. There the family lived for thirteen years, but by the mid-1880s warehouses and railroad tracks were closing in around the neighborhood, and the Hills thought about moving again.

Many St. Paul families were on the move in the 1880s. The decade saw a great building boom within the city. Real estate sales soared and land prices skyrocketed. Summit Avenue, on the bluff west of the city, became the site of many fashionable new homes. Nearly forty houses rose along the mile-long stretch between Selby and Mackubin alone. Many others were built farther west, as well as on neighboring streets.

Not to be outdone, Hill bought two lots on the eastern end of Summit Avenue. It did not matter that, at the same time, he was enormously busy, organizing, financing, and directing the construction of the Great Northern Railroad. He faced constant challenges as he dealt with intense competition, new and constraining federal legislation, and the major physical obstacles which had to be overcome as the railroad pushed west and over the Rocky Mountains and the Cascades.

In spite of the demands of his business life, Hill started to plan a new house with the same care and attention that he devoted to the building of the railroad. He had chosen a site, high above the city, from which he could see both rails and river. He selected architects whose ideas represented his own. Peabody, Stearns, and Furber of Boston and St. Louis designed a massive stone house in the popular Romanesque revival style — strong, direct, well-matched to the man who was to live in it. With thirty-two rooms, thirteen bathrooms, and twenty-two fireplaces, the house was indeed a "family home," as the 1891 newspaper reporter has observed; but Hill requested, as well, a home for entertaining on a grand scale and a new gallery, larger than the one in his house at Ninth and Canada, for his ever-growing art collection.

A vast, 100-foot reception hall, decorated with richly carved oak paneling, formed the center of the house. A



*THE RECEPTION ROOM (c. 1922) featured an ornate table and chairs of the period. This room connected with the music room by the door at left.*

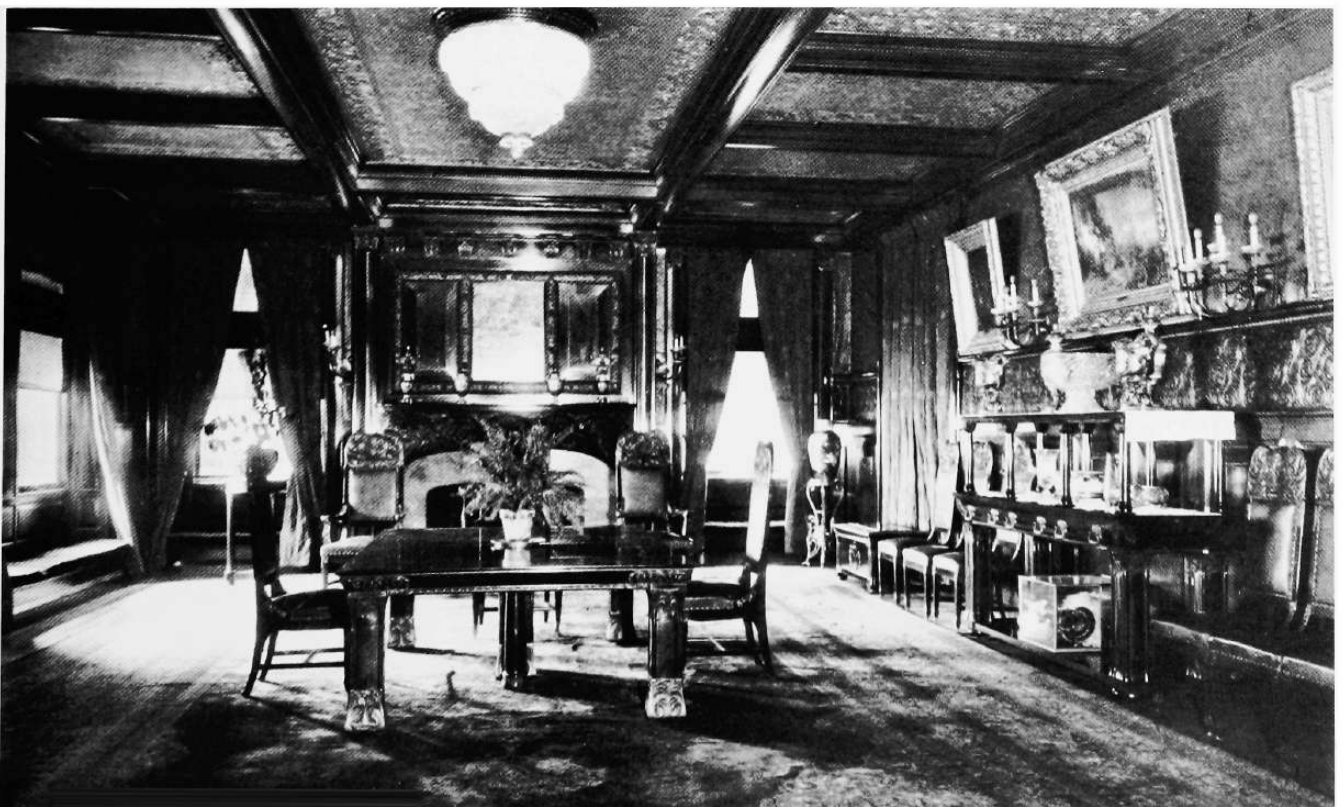


*THE MAIN HALL (left), shown in 1922, was designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Irving and Casson, Boston decorating firm. Carved panels, mantels, oak furniture, fine paintings, sculpture, and crystal chandeliers all contributed to a sense of subdued richness.*

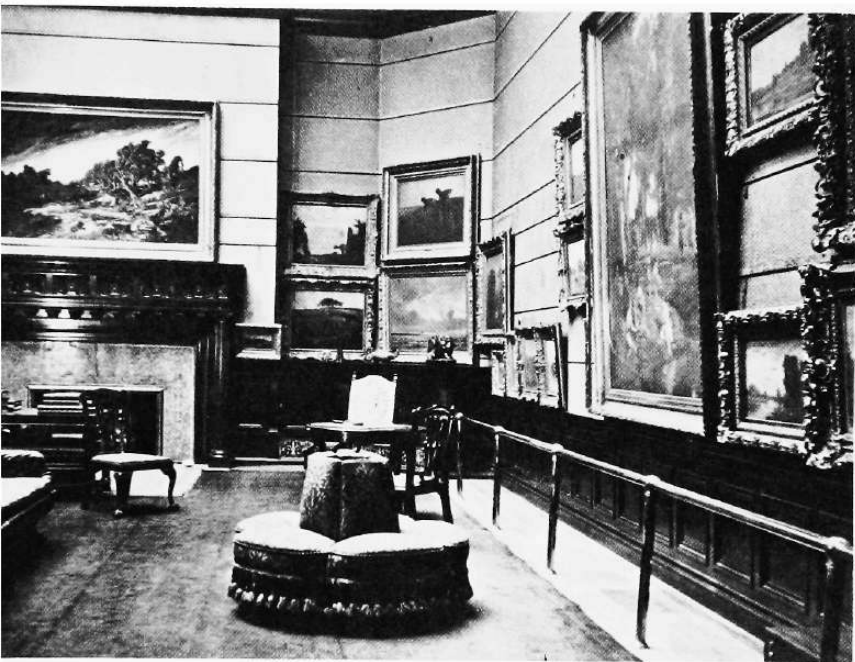


*THE LIBRARY (c. 1922) was where Hill liked to relax. Critic John Root, writing of a typical Midwestern home library for *Homes in City and Country* in 1893, also "caught" this room in the Hill house: "Its wealth of books and pictures, bric-a-brac its roomy tables and easy chairs make this the focus of family gatherings, the living room."*

*THE DINING ROOM is on the west end of the great hall. Designers Irving and Casson used elements of art nouveau, Moorish, and Celtic form in creating the patterns for carving in this room. The table, chairs, and sideboard, no longer in the house, were richly worked to match the woodwork and built-in furnishings.*



*THE ART GALLERY (c. 1922) was crowded with paintings by such famous artists as Courbet, Delacroix, Corot, Troyon, and Daubigny. Hill had one of the finest collections of Barbizon school artists in the country. Empty places on the wall indicate that dispersal of the collection had begun between Hill's death in 1916 and 1922. Several of his paintings are now in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.*



*A PIPE ORGAN fills the west wall of the art gallery. A large instrument built by George Hutchings of Boston, it was installed at the time the house was built. — MHS photo, 1979, by Elizabeth Hall.*

wide stairway faced the huge front doors, and stained glass windows lighted the landing. On the east end of the hall, the art gallery with its organ was flanked by the family music room and the parlor. On the west end was the formal dining room, along with the family breakfast room, the library, and Hill's office.

Comfortable bedrooms for the large Hill family and staff filled the upper floors. On the third floor, in the "gymnasium" or schoolroom, the younger children were tutored. On the fourth floor was a theatre where adults were entertained and children played.

The basement contained fourteen rooms, each with a special function, that supported the running of the house. Opening off a long, marble-tiled hall were the kitchen, pantries, wine cellar, cold storage room, laundry, drying room, boiler room and other servants' rooms. In a separate area were the bellows and mechanical system for the organ in the art gallery.

James J. Hill, the planner of railroads, demanded modern, but reliable, systems for his house. While most homes in St. Paul, including Hill's, were lighted by gas, the house at 240 Summit Avenue had its own electrical generating system, one of the first and largest domestic electrical plants in the country.

Ventilation and drainage systems were designed with

special concern for sanitation. Infectious diseases like diphtheria and pneumonia were much feared before the discovery of vaccines and antibiotics, and the Hills had seen their share of such illness. The air which was brought into the house for heating and ventilation was filtered through cheesecloth screens covering the foundation openings into underground air tunnels. To avoid other germ contamination, Hill's engineers designed two drainage systems, one for the ice water melting from food refrigeration areas, and one for the waste draining from bathrooms and kitchen. With two systems there could be no opportunity for germs to travel back up through drains into the family's food supply.

Hill knew what he wanted, and he kept close track of building progress. When for the second time Peabody and Stearns changed his orders to the stonecutters, Hill fired the architects. Hill disliked the sketches sent him from Tiffany's for the stained-glass windows and returned them with little ceremony. He studied the proposals of decorators from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Paul before selecting the Boston firm of Irving and Casson to design the interior.

The public was intensely curious about both the construction and decoration of the house. Many of the building techniques were new to the people whose city had so

*THE MUSIC ROOM* was originally finished in white, highlighted with gold paint — a style of decoration used in the most fashionable St. Paul houses.

One of two Steinway pianos made for Hill's new home appears at left in this 1922 photograph.



*MUSIC MOTIFS* in the music room include the mantel detail at left. Cherubim march to the music of a lyre and a harp in a frieze adapted from ancient Greek and Roman art.

— Hall photo, 1979.

recently been a frontier town. The *Pioneer Press* reporter, quoted earlier, described the house at great length for his readers:

The building is absolutely fireproof in the largest sense of the word. The roof is a mass of iron joists and beams, filled between with terra cotta and covered with three-eighths-inch Monson sawed slate. . . . The sewerage is carried in tunnels under the basement, is air tight and below the frost line. Great attention has been bestowed upon the heating and ventilation, and good judges pronounced the house beyond anything heretofore built in America in these respects. . . . there is a ventilator in every room and closet and a powerful exhaust fan in the attic. Nine miles of wire are necessary to feed the incandescent lights of the dwelling, while the electrical appliances throughout are said to be the best in the country.

P. C. Gooding, who in 1891 worked for P. H. Kelly Mercantile Company, Grocers, was one of many who sought access to the house. He wrote James Hill: "I have a lady visitor from the East and should be delighted to have the privilege of visiting your new house and showing her some of the good things our citizens af-

ford. " Hill's private secretary obliged by issuing tickets to see the work in progress. Once the family had taken up residence, Hill's secretary continued to provide interested individuals and students with passes to the art gallery. A brass rail, set in the floor at arm's length from the wall, restrained visitors from touching the paintings.

DURING 1979 much has been learned about the house: its design, structure, furnishings, and how it functioned. The discovery of many of Peabody and Stearns' original architectural drawings has made possible the careful study of the structure. Many drawings of interior design were found in the attic at the same time, but these proved to be plans Hill rejected.

Few furnishings from the Hill years were still in the house when the Minnesota Historical Society became its owner. The oriental rugs were gone, probably worn out with age. Photographs, however, had been taken of the rooms in 1922. Many of them appear on these pages. The Hill daughters wanted a record of the interior of the house before it passed out of the family. These photographs have been basic documents for research, for they show in considerable detail how the house looked in 1922.

Research has led to many sources. Hill kept complete

records about purchases made for the house. Building permits exist in city records which describe the original structure and later changes. Libraries and private collections contain photographs of other houses built in St. Paul during the same period. The homes of Hill's eastern friends provide clues as well.

People who knew the house when the Hills lived in it have shared recollections. Family members have been generous with materials, photographs, and memories. People who worked for the Hill family have offered photographs and reminiscences. Such recollections add life and color to the story of the house.

The elements of the building itself, its stone, brick, steel, and tile, its paint, plaster, and mechanical systems provide many clues to the story. Each tells of age and change, of ninety years of wear and adaptation.

During 1979 the Minnesota Historical Society completed the first phase of restoration. Initial work was largely devoted to repair, insulation, and safety. The roof was made tight, the attic insulated, plumbing repaired, and windows double-glazed and weather-stripped. Fire escapes and an elevator are being installed to meet mod-

ern safety standards and the needs of public access.

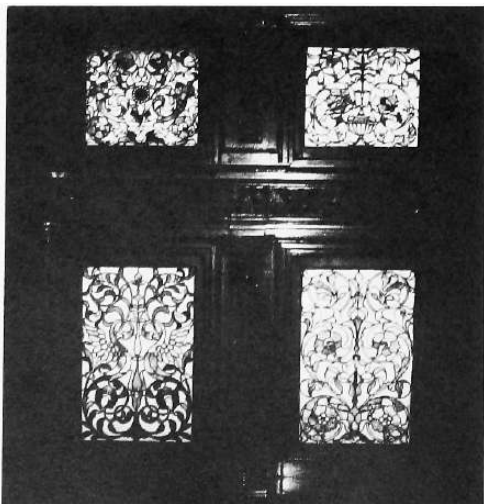
During the process, much of the house was opened up. While cutting into the elevator shaft, the attic, and the tunnels that run under the house, workmen uncovered long-hidden systems and clues about its structural history. When they removed marble slabs from basement walls, the original wiring from Hill's electrical plant was laid bare, either cemented to the brick walls behind or lying in wooden-tracked conduits. A section of heating pipe was brought up from an underground tunnel, covered with layers of insulating material and bound by a wrapping of hand-sewn canvas. Asbestos, hair padding and wired sections designed to produce dead air space were enclosed within the canvas. One can marvel, in 1979, at the man hours spent in constructing this most effective insulation and the miles of hand-sewn canvas that held it in place.

Hill's engineers found a way to cope with the familiar Minnesota winter problem of ice on roofs and in gutters. They designed a system to pipe hot steam into the copper downspouts. Only traces of this ice-freeing system still exist. Hangers that supported pipes leading outside

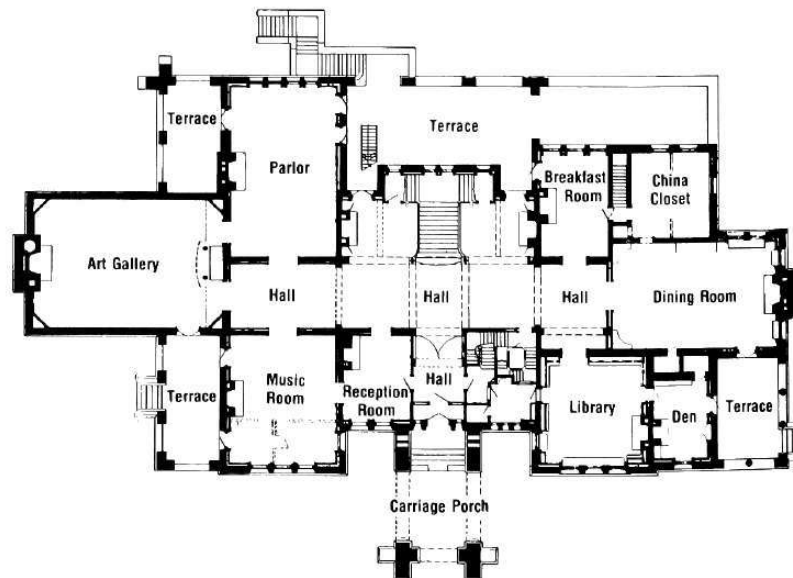


*THIS HALLWAY* on the second floor (c. 1922) was easily spacious enough for several pieces of furniture and more paintings. The second floor now houses MHS personnel.

*STAINED-GLASS* windows (below) over the stair landing and in the coat-closet doors have been removed, cleaned, braced, and replaced. — Hall photo, 1979.



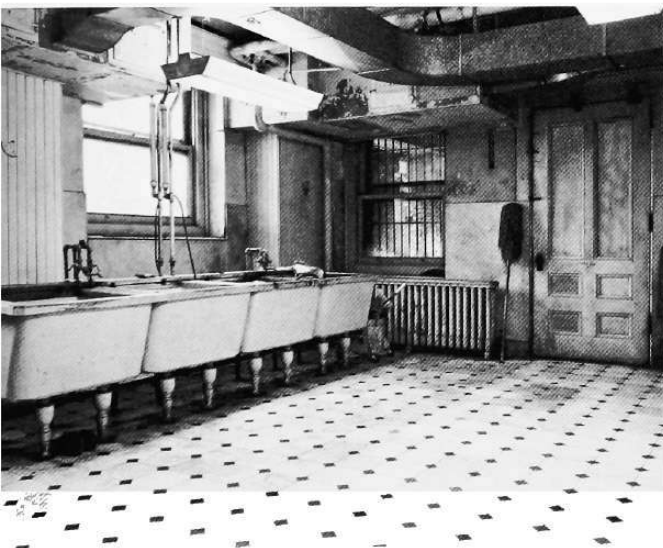
*THIS PLAN* for the first floor of the Hill house shows the location and interrelation of the various rooms. The east end is at the left.



can be seen on the walls, and valves still remain in the downspouts. Hill's system no longer functions, although the problem of ice remains. Huge amounts of coal must have been consumed in the heating of water and steam for Hill's house. But coal was readily available to James J. Hill, and for him his engineers designed an efficient system much to be envied today.

From studying the house closely, many insights are revealed about James J. Hill, the planner and builder, as well as about building technology of the 1880s. This house provides a workshop in which to learn about the man, what he found important, how he lived, and how he built the largest home in the Northwest.

**TWO RESTORATION PROJECTS** were completed in 1979. The stained-glass windows over the stair landing and in the coat closet doors were removed, cleaned, supported, and replaced. Also, the leather panels that decorate the dining room walls were taken down, re-backed, and restored. Eight wall-lighting fixtures were cleaned and rewired while the leather panels were being conserved.



*THE LAUNDRY is one of the several spacious rooms in the basement of the house. — Hall photo, 1979.*

*USING a third-floor bedroom as their shop, workmen at the Hill house place new glass and weather stripping in the original window sashes.*  
— Hall photo, 1979.

Still ahead is the cleaning of walls, ceilings, floors, and chandeliers. Painting and refurnishing will then be undertaken as soon as research is complete.

The Minnesota Historical Society intends to restore only part of the house with original furnishings, for use as a house museum. Tours will be designed for groups to see the first-floor rooms and the basement. An interpretive program will focus on how the house functioned and on the life and significance of Hill.

For other parts of the house there are several plans. To enable the society to show its collection of paintings which are now in storage, the Hill house gallery will be restored and adapted to display changing art exhibits. Other first-floor rooms will be used to accommodate constant requests for classes, conferences, and special functions. The shells of these rooms will be returned to their original appearance, but they will be equipped with adequate, hidden lighting and practical furnishings for public use. The second- and third-floor bedrooms are already being used as offices for the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society Education Division and the State Historic Preservation Office.



*WORN PANELS of embossed leather from the dining room were removed, cleaned, and reinforced by conservators at the Upper Midwest Conservation Association, Minneapolis, which furnished the photo.*





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