

## Minnesota Boat Club Boathouse, Raspberry Island, St. Paul



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE

Mississippi River, beneath the Wabasha Street Bridge, sits the boathouse of the Minnesota Boat Club, where the capital city's elite came to practice and test their athletic prowess in the sport of rowing.

Organized in 1870 and incorporated in 1873, the Minnesota Boat Club was the first formal athletic club in the state. A membership was a sign of societal achievement for many young businessmen, lawyers, and bankers of the late nineteenth century. It was, as one author put it in 1903, "a distinction highly prized and not easily won. It was not only a badge of social distinction but of real manhood." The club building reflected this lofty goal in its utilitarian yet handsomely detailed architecture.

Replacing an earlier, wood-frame boathouse that had existed since 1885, the Spanish Colonial Revival building that still stands today was constructed during the peak of rowing, in 1910. The architectural style—popular in the 1910s and 1920s—is solid yet ornate, with its distinctive clay tile roof, stucco exterior walls, decorative balconies, and arcades. Designed by H. G. Carsley and built by the Grant Construction Company at an estimated cost of \$26,000, the Minnesota Boat Club building was considered one of the nation's best rowing facilities of its time. Poised on the southern tip of Raspberry Island (also known as Navy Island) and clearly visible from the shore and the river, the boathouse encouraged a sense of athletic accomplishment and community.

The first-floor arcade features five sets of massive wooden double



*The Minnesota Boat Club Boathouse, on Raspberry Island in St. Paul. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*

doors, each solidly built of Douglas fir and measuring eight feet wide by 10 feet tall by three inches thick. Four of these doorways open into bays where rowing shells are stored. Upstairs, the second floor boasts a large entertaining area that leads to a balcony running the length of the building and offering panoramic views of the river and the city. This space served as a meeting, dining, and recreation center for club members from 1910 until approximately 1950, after which it was rented to various businesses.

The latter half of the twentieth century was a difficult time for the Minnesota Boat Club and its boathouse. In the 1960s, club membership began to fall due to changing tastes in recreation, and the boathouse suffered damage from multiple floods, the most severe in 1965. Plans to demolish the building were narrowly

averted in 1979. Today, however, thanks to multiple rehabilitations of the building and a renewed interest in the sport, the boathouse once again welcomes amateur rowers to enjoy both the art and the sport of rowing.

—Ginny Way

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