

Washburn Park Water Tower, Hennepin County



PERCHED ATOP one of the highest points in south Minneapolis, the Washburn Park Water Tower is one of the city's most visible landmarks. Ironically, you can't see it from nearby streets in the Tangletown neighborhood because houses and trees block the view. But pilots flying into the nearby Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport use the dome of the 110-foot stone tower as an unofficial beacon—that is, except on March 7, 1950, when a blinding snowstorm obscured the tower for Northwest Airlines Flight 307, coming in from Madison, Wisconsin. On its approach from the east, the twin-engine plane clipped a 70-foot flagpole at Fort Snelling, then passed the airport to attempt a landing from the other direction, but ended up dropping its left wing nearly at the base of the Washburn Tower and crashing into a house on West Minnehaha Parkway, killing two sleeping children and all 13 passengers and crew on board.

The original water tower on the site (325 Prospect Avenue), commissioned in 1893, pumped water from Minnehaha Creek through the 45-foot-tall tower to the Washburn Memorial Orphan Asylum on the corner of Nicollet Avenue and Fiftieth Street (where Justice Page Middle School is now). The City of Minneapolis bought the tower and connected it to the city water supply in 1915. The following year, it extended the tower's height by 25 feet to improve pressure, but soon the tower was not large enough to keep up with the demands of the growing neighborhood.

So, the city asked local architect Harry Wild Jones to design an upgrade. The illustrious Jones had previously given Minneapolis the Tangletown street plan, Lakewood Cemetery Chapel, and Butler Square, among other landmarks. Completed in 1932, the new, art deco tower stood 110 feet tall and had a capacity of 1.35 million gallons. Around the base outside, Jones placed statues of eight 18-foot-tall, hooded knights—Guardians of Health meant to protect against foul-smelling contaminants thought to cause typhoid fever from polluting the water supply. Eight



Washburn Park Water Tower, 325 Prospect Avenue, Minneapolis (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

eagles encircling the top serve as gargoyles. The story goes that they are modeled after an eight-foot eagle Jones hunted down after it attacked workmen clearing underbrush in his yard.

The Washburn Park Water Tower was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. These days, it no longer stores and supplies water, but the concrete silo reflecting a “medieval splendor” is used to regulate water pressure during the summer in south Minneapolis.

—John Rosengren



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