

## Washburn-Crosby A Mill / Mill City Museum, Hennepin County



ON FEBRUARY 26, 1991, a massive fire tore through the Washburn-Crosby A Mill, leaving only its masonry walls and a smoldering pile of rubble. The National Historic Landmark seemed headed for demolition. It would have been an inglorious end to one of Minnesota's most significant buildings.

The largest flour mill in the world when it was built, the 1880 Washburn A Mill could produce two million pounds of flour each day. It was where millers perfected a new process of flour milling that made Minneapolis the flour milling capital of the world. It was the birthplace of the Washburn-Crosby Company, which became General Mills in 1928.

After its shutdown in 1965, the mill sat mostly empty for decades. Coats hung from hooks as if the workers had left for the day. Rows of original milling equipment stood still. A few tenants used the complex for storage or art studios. Among them was architect Peter Nelson Hall, who created the first reuse plan for the building.

The Minnesota Historical Society led subsequent efforts to reuse the mill. It advocated for the creation of the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board in 1988, chaired by MNHS director Nina Archabal. The board's 1990 interpretive plan envisioned a heritage trail that would connect the historic resources of the area, with the Washburn A Mill serving as an orientation center.

The 1991 fire could have scuttled these plans, but instead it created momentum to save the mill. The morning after the fire, Archabal contacted city council president Sharon Sayles Belton to stop firefighters from demolishing the mill's unstable walls. According to Archabal, the fire made redevelopment possible: "It is a huge building. In some sort of strange way, the fire not only galvanized our attention but [also] it reduced it to rubble. This then became something with which we could deal." Within weeks, civic leaders envisioned a museum built within the walls of the ruin, with an open-air courtyard and a viewing deck on top.

Mill City Museum fulfilled that vision and more when it opened in 2003. Developed as a major attraction rather than an orientation center, the museum's mix of old and new—a historic site with modern exhibits—has attracted



*Mill City Live concert at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2005*  
(PHOTO BY DAVID STEVENS)

more than two million visitors to explore the history of Minneapolis. The mill's fire-damaged walls have been an ongoing preservation challenge. But the iconic Ruin Courtyard has been a popular gathering space for history programs, live performances, and weddings, and a gateway to the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone.

—David Stevens

### Sources

George R. Adams and James B. Gardner, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory–Nomination: Washburn A Mill Complex," Sept. 1978; Interview with Nina Archabal in St. Paul, MN, Minneapolis Riverfront Redevelopment Oral History Project, MNHS; Linda Mack, "Mill Ruin Presents Unique Opportunity," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Mar. 20, 1991.



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