



The Post-1890s History of the Justus Ramsey House: A New Context

By Tom Schroeder, October 2022

This rare surviving example of a solid limestone masonry cottage has a richer and more diverse history than has been documented to date. Despite its name, no primary source material provides any evidence that Justus C. Ramsey had anything to do with the Justus Ramsey House.¹ A brief tie-in with St. Paul's former eight-term mayor and prolific officer-holder Robert A. Smith has been established by the latter's wistful remarks 50 years after the fact to a newspaper reporter visiting Smith's mansion on Summit Avenue in 1903: "[T]hat [Christmas of] [18]53 was just as enjoyable and surrounded with as many comforts as the one you will celebrate in a few days.... I lived on Seventh Street, near Walnut, in a small stone house and, by the way, it is still standing[.]"² What has been overlooked are the people who lived in the house at the time Smith made those remarks. Their history, no less than his, is important to tell—and to preserve.

¹ At most, Justus Ramsey can be connected with the real estate underlying and surrounding the house. After 1852, he held an undivided ownership in approximately one-eighth of the lots in Rice & Irvine's Addition, including Lot 8 on which the house was or would eventually be built. Book K of Deeds 686, Ramsey County Recorder's Office.

² St. Paul Globe, Dec. 21, 1902.

It is not an easy history to pin down. The street address of the house remained in flux long after the pioneer era, being variously assigned as 254,³ 252,⁴ 252 rear,⁵ 252 ½,⁶ and 242 West 7th Street.⁷ But despite the potential confusion, one thing remains clear: between the late 1890s until 1933, almost all the residents of the house were Black men, women and children. From 1900 to 1908, the cottage was the home of George and Maria Perkins, formerly enslaved people from Kentucky and South Carolina respectively. George worked as a porter for the Pullman Company, headquartered in Chicago, while Maria raised the couple's sole surviving child—three others had died.⁸ During later times the small two-room home served as a multi-tenant boarding house. In 1920, John and Daisy Hall lived there with Hattie Key, her daughter Lucy, and Hattie's sister Alice Dean, all from Alabama, together with a lodger from Tennessee named Charles Alexander. Hattie and her daughter both worked as maids, Charles as a construction worker,⁹ and John Hall as a butcher for Armour Packing Co.¹⁰ At other times the house supported the one-story wood-framed retail shop that was built in front in about 1915 (**Image 2**)—as when in 1919, Lizzie Battles operated the latter as a hairdresser and millinery shop (**Image 3**) while residing in the stone house. In the decades between, the city directories list numerous other residents, most apparently unrelated and having a variety of occupations such as waiter, domestic servant, janitor, rail car cleaner, dishwasher, hairdresser and laborer.¹¹

But by far the most common occupation of residents of the Justus Ramsey House was that of porter—specifically, railway porters. An astonishing number boarded there. In addition to George Perkins, boarders Lee Barber,¹² James Thomas,¹³ and Charles Alexander¹⁴ also worked for the Pullman Company. Monroe Duncan,¹⁵ C.S. Page,¹⁶ Curtis James,¹⁷ Henry Reed,¹⁸ William Hines,¹⁹ and Victor Towles²⁰ all worked as porters for Great Northern Railway; William

³ Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota (“Sanborn Map”) plate 27 (Sanborn Map Co., vol. 1, 1885).

⁴ 1891 Rascher Insurance Map, vol. 3, p. 275; 1903 Sanborn Map, vol. 1, plate 20; 1926 Sanborn Map, plate 86 (see **Image 1**, below).

⁵ See, e.g., St. Paul City Directories 1895, 1899 and 1917 (R. L. Polk & Co) (“City Directories”).

⁶ See, e.g., City Directories 1914-1922.

⁷ This is the building's address today for property tax purposes. See Ramsey County Property Map, <https://maps.co.ramsey.mn.us/MapRamsey/>. The numerous references to the house after 1914 to “252 rear” and “252 ½” likely correspond to the construction at about that time of a small, one-story wood-framed building between the Justus Ramsey House and West 7th Street. This building housed a retail shop and still more boarders, and became the new 252 West 7th. It was clad with steel siding, bore a commercial false-front and functioned variously as a small restaurant, hairdresser's shop, and a fruit stand. See **Image 2**. See also City Directories, 1916-22.

⁸ 1900 U.S. Census, Ramsey County Minn., City of St. Paul, 5th Ward (Enum. Dist. 93, sheet 3); City Directories 1901, 1902, 1906, 1907 and 1908.

⁹ This appears to be the same Charles Alexander who boarded in the house in 1907, when he worked as a railway porter. See footnote 14.

¹⁰ 1920 U.S. Census, Ramsey County Minn., City of St. Paul, 5th Ward (Enum. Dist. 44, sheet 19).

¹¹ City Directories, var. 1900-1922.

¹² City Directories 1902-5, 1917.

¹³ City Directories 1901, 1904-5.

¹⁴ City Directory 1907.

¹⁵ City Directory 1899.

¹⁶ City Directory 1904.

¹⁷ City Directories 1906-7.

¹⁸ City Directories 1909-10.

¹⁹ City Directory 1901, 1904.

²⁰ City Directory 1916.

Manning worked for Chicago Great Western Railway;²¹ and the employers of porters Dixon Woods,²² George Williams,²³ Charles Parker and Joseph Lewers²⁴ were not specified in the directories. The history of the Pullman Company and of Black railroad porters generally is a major historical context in its own right. At its peak, Saint Paul's Union Depot served more than 280 trains and 20,000 passengers daily, and was a point of entry and major employer of Black job-seekers. Although most porters were confined to menial roles, their combined efforts ultimately formed the nation's first Black labor union ever to sign a collective bargaining agreement, thereby securing improved working conditions and a degree of upward mobility. Moreover, "[r]egardless of job status, black station employees were important ambassadors. They were often the first friendly face for a new arrival, and their networks of information about where to find shelter and a good meal were invaluable."²⁵ Porters typically travelled the rails for 400 hours or more per month covering as many as 11,000 miles. It is little wonder that census-takers and city directory writers often missed them at home.²⁶

In 1933 the City of Saint Paul vacated the south 20 feet of West 7th Street, obliterating many of the homes and businesses on that side—including the shop that once supported Lizzie Battles. But for decades before that time the Justus Ramsey House's residents were a vibrant part of a larger Black community that flourished around the "Uptown" neighborhood centered near Seven Corners, just prior to the boom of the Rondo neighborhood to the west.²⁷ Owen Howell, owner of the Uptown Sanitary Shop on Wabasha, organized a Black baseball team called The Uptowns that played throughout the region, including against Chicago teams.²⁸ The most recognized Black baseball team in Minnesota was the St. Paul Colored Gophers, from 1907-1910. **(Image 5)** The team's owner, Phil E. Reid, played for the team and operated an Uptown saloon at 4th & Cedar Street. Reid was a prominent St. Paulite; his funeral at Pilgrim Baptist Church was among the largest in Saint Paul history at the time.²⁹ A 1935 map of the "natural areas" of Saint Paul reflecting then-prevalent redlining trends characterizes most of residential Uptown as the "Rooming House District," juxtaposed to the white "Workingmen's Homes" to the south and west.³⁰ Of the approximately 3,200 Blacks living in the city in 1903, only 71 owned their own homes.³¹ With these few exceptions, the homes of most Black people, like the Justus Ramsey House, were built by and for someone else.

²¹ City Directory 1903.

²² City Directory 1917.

²³ City Directory 1910.

²⁴ City Directory 1914 (listing both boarding together at 252½ W7th).

²⁵ Arthur C. McWatt, "The Greater Victory: The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in St. Paul," *Minnesota History* (Spring 1997) ("McWatt"); "Points of Entry: The African American Heritage Guide to Saint Paul." "African American Pullman Porters," Saint Paul Historical (CultureBrokers Foundation, Inc. 2008) accessed October 25, 2022, <https://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/258>.

²⁶ McWatt at 204.

²⁷ Uptown was a sub-community of the larger Uppertown neighborhood, which began at the former steamboat landing at the foot of Chestnut Street and extended for more than a mile south and west down West 7th Street.

²⁸ *The Appeal*, July 16, 1921. See Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game: Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota* (Minnesota Hist. Soc. Press 2016), p. 51.

²⁹ Interview with Frank M. White, Saint Paul, October 25, 2022.

³⁰ Nicole Foss and Kelly Wilder, "Saint Paul African American Historic and Cultural Context, 1837 to 1975," 106 Group Project No. 2206, submitted to Aurora Saint Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (May 2016), p. 34.

³¹ Address by Frederick L. McGhee to Christian Endeavor Society, Central Presbyterian Church, reported in *Saint Paul Globe*, Mar. 9, 1903.

Yet despite these barriers, by 1900, Black people in Saint Paul had secured positions in the police and fire departments, sat on local juries, and established a Black company of the city militia.³² Simpson & Wills, the city's first Black undertakers, operated across the street and two blocks north of the Justus Ramsey House, at 234 West 4th Street (near today's Holiday Inn on Kellogg Boulevard).³³ One block east of the house resided Victoria Page, at 276 Chestnut Street, a Black female owner of a popular restaurant frequented by whites patronizing the saloons and brothels of nearby Hill Street—the only Black-owned restaurant in the city.³⁴ Page was born into enslavement in Tennessee, could neither read nor write and was unable to identify her parents to census takers.

The strength and courage of this community had diversifying effects in neighboring communities. Around the corner at 242 Eagle Street, Black families resided in the same complex with recent Italian immigrants—including Michael and Irene Cossetta, whose small fruit stand would grow into a multi-generation grocery and restaurant business that operates in the neighborhood to this day.³⁵ In Frogtown to the northwest, Black congregants of St. Vincent de Paul Church worked for racial inclusiveness by sponsoring the neighborhood's Chinese catholic converts.³⁶ The Saint Paul Labor and Trades Assembly—a powerful early labor union—elected Charles James, its first Black president that year;³⁷ and within the same decade the city would hire the nation's first Black municipal architect, Clarence Wigington.³⁸

By 1940, the widening of West 7th Street together with the commercial development of the city led to a declining residential population and gradual regentrification of the Uptown community. The Justus Ramsey House became incorporated into an antique shop (**Image 4**), and later into the outdoor patio of an adjacent restaurant (**Image 5**)³⁹—the rear of which is the same building once known as Poverty Flats.⁴⁰

Author's Note: I wish to express my gratitude to Saint Paul historians Jim A. Sazevich, who provided a wealth of primary resource material for this study, and Frank M. White, who greatly expanded my knowledge and appreciation of the Uptown community through the lens of the early Black baseball teams. This article was researched and written over the span of just three weeks following the news of the Justus Ramsey House's potential demolition. I am the first to admit that

³² Mary Lethert Wingerd, *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Cornell Univ. 2001) (“Wingerd”), p. 77.

³³ City Directory 1920.

³⁴ 1920 U.S. Census, Ramsey County Minn., City of St. Paul, 5th Ward (Enum. Dist. 44, Sheet 2).

³⁵ 1900 U.S. Census, Ramsey County Minn., City of St. Paul, 5th Ward (Enum. Dist. 83, Sheet 9).

³⁶ Wingerd at 109.

³⁷ Id. at 77.

³⁸ Kathryn Flynn, “The Outsized Architectural Legacy of Clarence Wigington,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, Nov. 2016, accessed October 25, 2022 at <https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-outsized-architectural-legacy-of-clarence-wigington#.Y1dqAHbMI2w>

³⁹ Tom Schroeder and Robert Frame, Pioneer Era Limestone Buildings Thematic Nomination, Part 3, Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission (2015) at 3-24.

⁴⁰ City Directory 1898. Formerly numbered 250 West 7th Street, this frame building forms the rear of Burger Moe's, and sits across the patio to the east from the Justus Ramsey House.

much more work needs to be done. In particular, more voices and diverse perspectives need to be included in this conversation. Let's hope there is time.

Image 1: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota, plate 86 (Sanborn Map Co., 1926).

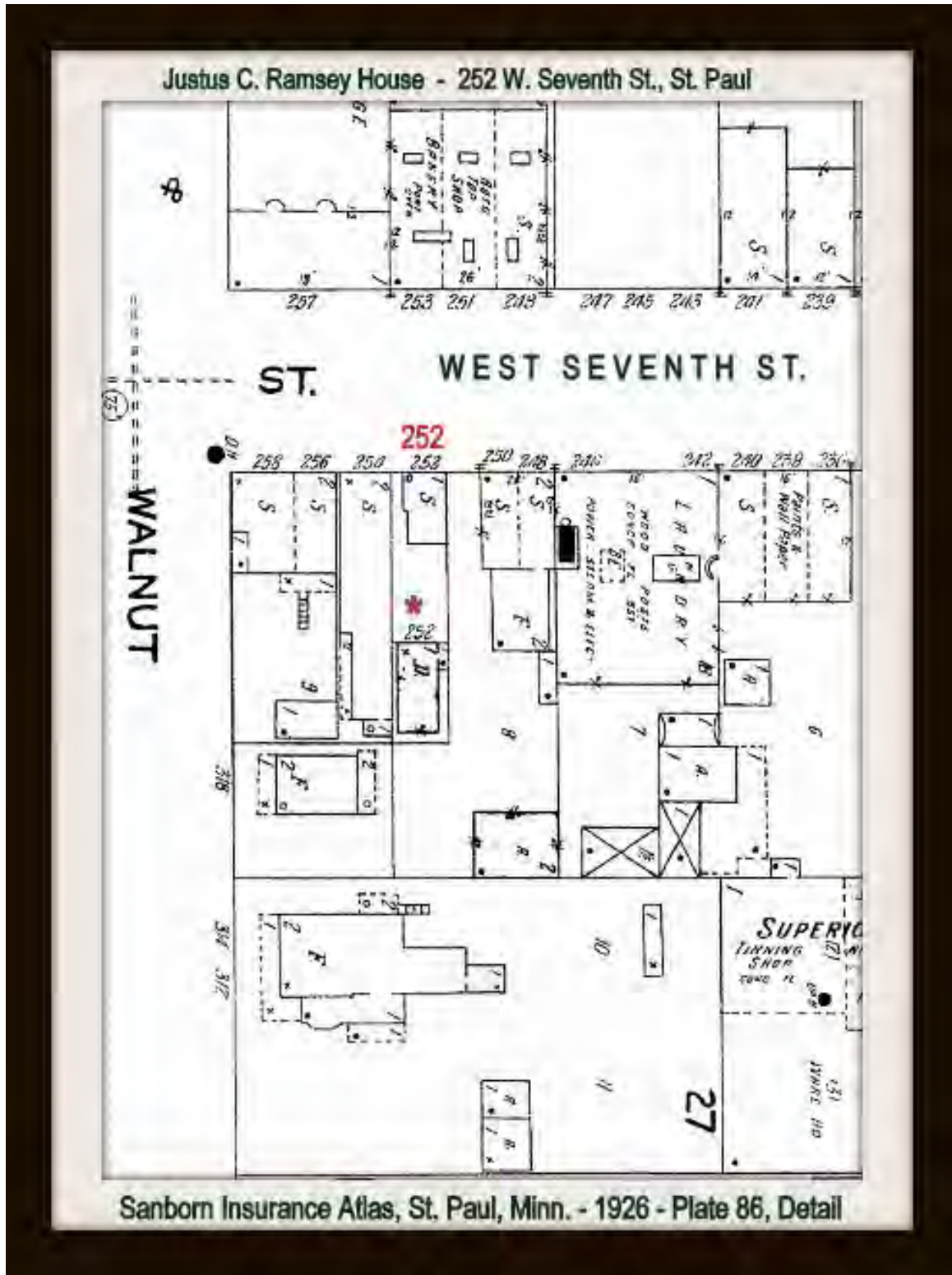


Image 2: 252 West 7th Street, front (St. Paul Public Works, 1933).



Image 3: Advertisement for Lizzie Battles' hair-dressers shop, 252 West 7th Street (front), The Appeal, Jan. 11, 1919.

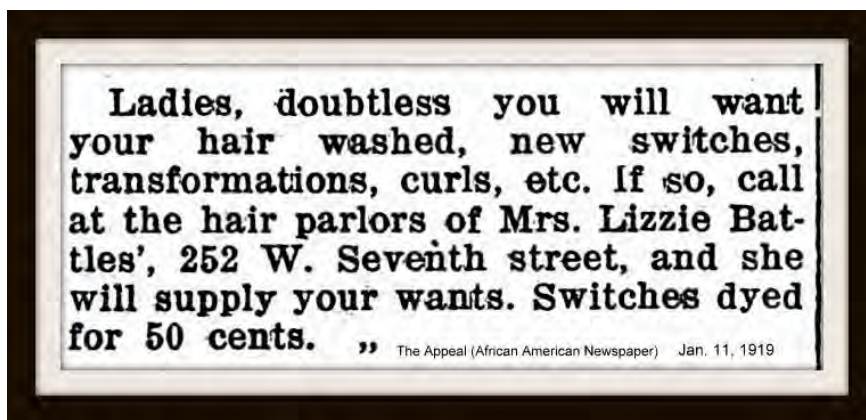


Image 5: The Saint Paul Colored Gophers, 1908 (MNHS collections).



Image 4: Wilm & Gregory Antique Dealers, 1936 (MNHS collections).



Image 5: Justus Ramsey House, interior, 2012 (J. Sazevich collection).



Justus Ramsey House Interior - Feb 2012