

# The Ford Building: An Historical Overview

In 1913, only 10 years after Henry Ford founded The Ford Motor Company in Detroit, plans were announced for building assembly plants in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The architectural firm Kees and Colburn of Minneapolis designed both buildings under the direction of Ford architect John Graham. The structures were built during 1913 and 1914, and share stylistic motifs. At ten stories in height, the Minneapolis plant, still standing at 419 N. 5<sup>th</sup> Street, was likely the tallest structure ever built for the purpose of manufacturing automobiles. The smaller sub-assembly plant in St. Paul, at 117 University Avenue, was more ornate than the utilitarian Minneapolis plant, in deference to its prominent location adjoining the new state capitol and its more sales-oriented purpose.

In anticipation of the new plants, Ford had already been assembling cars in leased space in Minneapolis, in a loft building at 616 S. Third Street. In the final three months of 1912, one hundred workers assembled 750 Model T's at this location. The movable assembly line had not yet been introduced, so the manufacture of cars was a fairly laborious manual process. Workers who started at the original facility recalled that the car parts were shipped in, seven to a boxcar, and were put together on wooden benches with just a few hand tools.

Ford had an even earlier sales presence in Minnesota. The second Ford dealership ever established by the company, Tenvoorde Motor Company in St. Cloud, received its franchise in March, 1903, three months *before* the company's incorporation. In Minneapolis, six weeks after the company was founded in Detroit, a distributorship known as the Northwestern Automobile Company received the 13<sup>th</sup> Ford car produced, and handled sales for the next nine years. Minnesota has the distinction of having more Ford dealers in continuous service for 50 years or longer than any other state.

A 1913 Ford Company newsletter stated:

*From the very first the Northwest was a very good market for Ford cars. There is something about the hardy life of the farmers, most of them descendants of the Vikings, that led them to appreciate peculiarly the clean-cut strength of the Ford. In a way, the Ford is like one of these farmers. . . As the years passed, the Ford cars rolled out of Minneapolis in numbers increasingly large. Year by year the business of the Ford dealers in that territory grew. Year by year the demand for cars became greater. This increasing demand made it absolutely necessary to establish a Ford branch in Minneapolis this year, with a sub-branch in St. Paul.*

The Minutes of the Ford Motor Company Board of Directors, April 15, 1913, report the company spent \$10,199 purchasing the St. Paul site on University Avenue and was projecting a construction cost of \$56,000 for the new building. The Minneapolis site cost \$66,803, and the building was projected to cost \$300,000.

The Minneapolis project ran into early difficulty. In January, 1913, a dispute over an alleyway issue was raised at a City Council meeting and threatened to stall the project. St. Paul officials immediately took advantage of that opening and lobbied hard to have the larger assembly plant located in St. Paul, as reported in an article in the St. Paul Dispatch, January 30, 1913:

*Factory Architect Graham of the Ford Motor Company came to St. Paul to look over the site recently purchased by the Ford people on University avenue. The land is just south of the North Central Commercial Club. It was originally planned to build a large retail store on the site and to erect a big assembling plant in Minneapolis. A difference over the running of an alley through the Minneapolis site has come up and the Ford people are now thinking of building the factory in St. Paul. Officials of the Ford company said today that all matters would be held in abeyance until it was a settled fact in which city the factory would be located.*

Needless to say, the threat of pulling out of Minneapolis led the City Council to quickly resolve the alley issue and allow for construction to proceed.

A lengthy article in the St. Paul Pioneer Press on February 1, 1914, described the St. Paul Ford building just prior to its opening:

*It is of reinforced concrete construction, 100 by 150 feet, with three stories and basement, and contains a total of 60,000 square feet of floor space, being the largest of its kind in the city. A unique feature of this newest of automobile branches is a tile roof constructed in such a way that cars can be tested, and worked out on top of the building, the walls extending nine feet above the tiling. . . The output of this company in St. Paul alone for 1914, is estimated at 500 cars. The local plant is but one of many. The Ford plant at Detroit alone would support a city of from 75,000 to 100,000 people. Branch assembling plants are located at Buffalo, Cambridge, Chicago, Columbus, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Kansas City, Long Island City, Los Angeles, Memphis, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Portland, Ore.; San Francisco, Seattle and St. Louis in this country. Besides those there is the Ford Motor Company, Ltd. of Canada with a factory at Ford, Ont., across the Detroit river from Detroit, and Canadian service stations at Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, London, Ont.; Calgary, Montreal, Hamilton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. Then there is the Manchester, England, factory, and service stations at Hamburg, Germany, and Paris France. The whole purpose of this gigantic system of branch plants is to facilitate manufacturing and shipping and to assure Ford owners in every part of the world the highest type of service after they have purchased their cars.*

An article in the St. Paul Pioneer Press, February 13, 1921 described an auto mechanics school that later operated at the Ford Building:

*A course of instruction for mechanics in charge of Ford cars and trucks for commercial houses has been started by the W. H. Schmelzel company, and the first session of school was held Friday at 7:30 P.M. at the Ford building, 117 University avenue. The subjects to be dealt with include front system, motor, transmission, rear axle, starting and lighting and general care and operation. The course may be taken free of charge by any mechanics handling Ford cars and sessions will be held at the Ford building, February 18, 25 and March 4. The Schmelzel Company has made 1800 hundred feet of animated film showing the operation of motor, cooling system, etc., to illustrate the points that will be made by the experts in charge of the course. The first session was attended by about 75 mechanics.*

During the time that the Ford buildings were being constructed, Henry Ford was experimenting in Detroit with the assembly line, which essentially made the multi-story gravity feed “factory” obsolete. A sprawling one-story assembly plant, incorporating the new assembly line “process,” opened in 1924 in the Highland neighborhood of St. Paul, and is still in operation today. Assembly operations at the 117 University Avenue plant ceased, but Ford Company continued to hold the building as a sales and service center for a number of years. City directories and photographs show the Ford Building was vacant from 1937 through at least 1941. In 1947, the Kedney Warehouse Co was listed as occupying the building. By 1951 the structure was converted to federal offices and housed the US Division of Conciliation, and the Division of Social Welfare. The State of Minnesota occupied the building in 1952 with offices for the Department of Labor, Taxation, and Barbers Examination, among others, and has owned it to the present day.

In a Historic Sites Survey done by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission in 1982, the Ford Building at 117 University Avenue was listed as historically significant and potentially eligible for designation on the National Register of Historic Places, and for listing as a St. Paul city landmark. Formal designation applications are currently being prepared and have received the support of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota and other groups.

Brian McMahon