

A SEARCH FOR THE LOST CONSERVATORY HISTORY OF MEDICINE LAKE

The ability to commune with nature, take-in deep breaths of fragrant, plant-filled air and feel the warm sunshine is a welcomed experience as we enter spring months. In Minnesota, these months can often feel too short-lived, and the innate desire to cultivate plants is a transformative way to pass the winter months. To experience this reprieve on a larger scale, we may take a visit to a nearby conservatory or greenhouse. From a historical lens, this care of plants in a protected atmosphere is a centuries' old desire and practice. Contemporary conservatories have their origins in the seventeenth-century when wealthy Europeans would return from foreign travels with "exotic" plants, primarily citrus, leading to the

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*Frederick Nussbaumer. Como Park Conservatory, St. Paul. 1915.
Photographed by Charles P. Gibson. c.1920.
Minnesota Historical Society Collection.*

PLYMOUTH WORKHOUSE GARDENS

By Jackie Vallette Uglow



Present day view of the Plymouth Workhouse building. Photo courtesy of Jackie Vallette Uglow.

Next to the Hennepin County Plymouth Corrections Facility off 1145 Shenandoah Lane North is the Community Garden plot of the City of Plymouth. For the past ten years, I have had a garden plot I rent. I enjoy growing fresh vegetables such as tomatoes, green peppers, French green beans, herbs, and flowers. As I pick out weeds or hoe my soil, I have often wondered about the interesting old corrections facility with its beautiful Art Deco style architecture and front entrance lantern lights known as the Workhouse. The property sits on a large tract of land across from Parker's Lake.

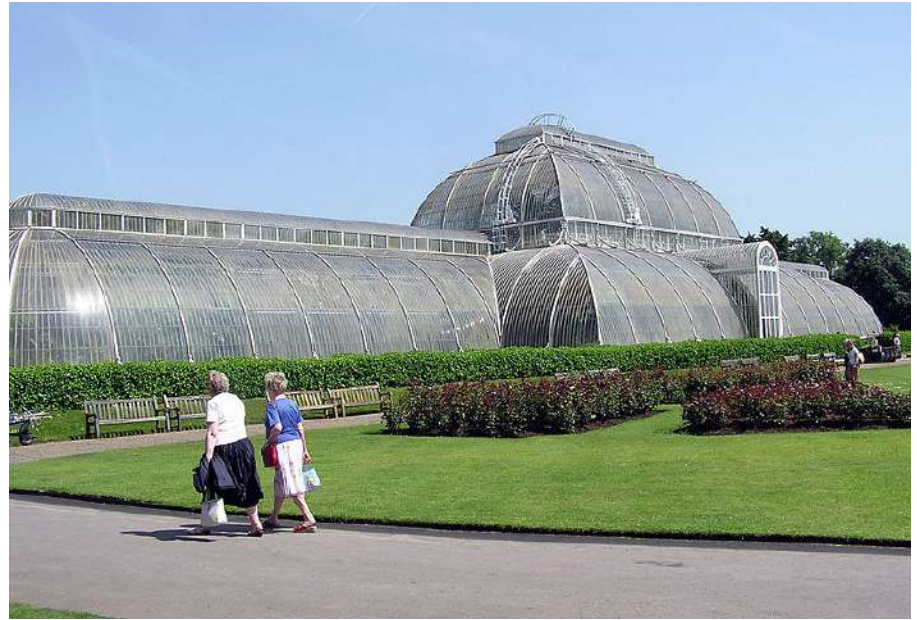
The Plymouth "Workhouse" has been reported in previous issues of the Plymouth Historical Society newsletters. John B. Gilfillan, a wealthy Minneapolis businessman, and his family had a beautiful, large summer Victorian house named Ben Avon Farm on a 500-acre plot across from Parker's Lake in the 1890s. The house had a livery,

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construction of Orangeries on large estate properties. From this origin, conservatories have had a functional distinction from commercial greenhouses in that they served as luxury spaces with imperial illusions of relaxation and wealth demonstration. This followed suit with general Victorian fashions of collecting, preserving, and displaying, desires that form the basis of many museums and nature preserves today. One of the world's best-known examples is Decimus Burton's Palm House at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in southwest London. Originally founded in 1840, the Royal Botanic Gardens is today a world heritage site and has one of the largest and most-diverse biological specimen collections in the world, with over 27,000 living taxa and over 8.5 million preserved plant and fungi species. The Palm House, constructed 1844-1848, is the first glasshouse built to such large scale and is known for housing numerous plants that are today endangered or extinct.

From a material standpoint, conservatories are typically constructed of glass with wood and/or metal framing. In the UK, for example, there are



Decimus Burton. The Palm House at Kew Royal Botanic Gardens, London. Built 1844-1848. Image Public Domain via Wikimedia.

legal parameters for what constitutes a conservatory based on a percentage of glass used in its construction, requiring at minimum 50% of walls and 75% of its roof to be translucent materials (anything else is just a sunny room!). Advances in industrial technology grew in tandem with growing interest in these glass structures. The buildings inspired fascination as they created an almost otherworldly and contradictory feeling of strength and delicacy through their interplay of exposed structural elements and light-filled atmospheres.

The Crystal Palace, constructed for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Hyde Park, exemplified the limits of this material advancement at the time, with its design completely oriented around the modularity of its glass panes. Created for an imperial display of people and cultures, not plants per say, the Crystal Palace was a stunning feat of engineering that stood over three times the size of St. Paul's Cathedral. This enormous structure also demonstrates conservatories' certain ephemerality and fragility due to their precarious construction and associated maintenance needs. The Crystal Palace was no exception after its move from the original exhibition site to Penge Common in South London and its eventual loss to fire in 1936.

Minnesota has had several historical

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View from Knightsbridge Road of The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park for Grand International Exhibition of 1851. Dedicated to the Royal Commissioners., London: Read & Co. Engravers & Printers, 1851.

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examples of this type of beautiful, transitory architecture. One rare extant example is St. Paul's Marjorie McNeely Conservatory. This building in fact holds a direct connection to Kew's famous Palm House through its architect, Frederick Nussbaumer. Originally from Baden, Germany, Nussbaumer worked at Kew Gardens in the 1860s before eventually making his way to Minnesota. He would introduce this local landscape to Horace Cleveland's carefully conceived landscape in 1913, with the stunning new building opening to the public in 1915.

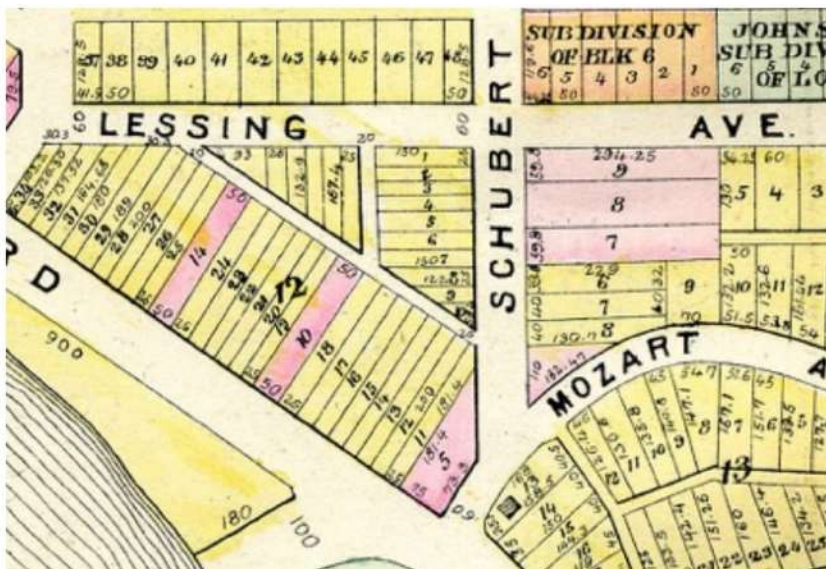
Como's conservatory has stood the test of time and remains a popular favorite for fair-weather Minnesotans looking for beautiful reprieve, especially in the long, cold winter months. However, most glass structures in Minnesota have not had the same good fortune. Local to Plymouth, a long-lost history, recently uncovered by PHS President Ted Hoshal, reveals a structure of similar purpose was once associated with the east shores of Medicine Lake. It would seem twenty-six years before Como's conservatory, a Minneapolis entrepreneur by the name of Jacob Barge had purchased 450 acres of Medicine Lake's shore, describing his property as the "Saratoga of the West." The land was subdivided into lots, with the first and third divisions marked for single-family ownership and the second retained for his own farm estate. Within Barge's many advertisements of the time, an article from the Minneapolis



Portrait of Jacob Barge. Courtesy of Ted Hoshal

Tribune dated June 30, 1889 reads:

Messrs. Strohmeier & Yetter, florists late of London, England, are now erecting one of the most modern and completely arranged conservatories. Flowers will now bloom at Medicine Lake Park 12 months in the year. Minnetonka and all neighboring towns will be supplied with choicest Italian flowers and roses at any time.



Hennepin County Atlas Map, detail. 1898. Medicine Lake Park, Third Division, Block 11, Lots 7, 8 & 9 (pink). Courtesy of Ted Hoshal.

Directory listings and advertisements of the 1890s reveal that property was indeed sold by Jacob Barge to a Hugo F. Jetter [Yetter] and Richard Strohmeier, who at the time were in their early twenties. Strohmeier came from a family business in jewelry, while Yetter was professionally listed at the time as a florist. Their ventures were short-lived, however, as records show Yetter selling his interest in the business to Strohmeier in 1891, and Strohmeier relocating to Aberdeen, SD by 1892.

We do know a conservatory was constructed, which is confirmed in a list-

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ing of the Minneapolis Tribune dated April 28, 1895 and several subsequent advertisements. However, no visual record of what the structure looked like has yet been found. Later listings reveal that in 1899 the site was purchased by John Ochs, who becomes listed as a florist for Henry Barsch in Minneapolis. However, there is little record of what took place after this final listing in 1903. Today, a visit to the site reveals a seemingly vacant, wooded lot. Like many of its glass predecessors, the Strohmeier and Yetter Conservatory is another impermanent, ephemeral part of our history reminding us of the many stories little-known still waiting to be unearthed.



2480 Lancaster Lane, 2021. Google Street View.

Special thanks to Ted Hoshal for his contributing research on the Strohmeier and Yetter Conservatory. If you have any memories, records or photographs of the conservatory while it was standing, the PHS is very eager to learn more!



*J.B. Gilfillan home at Ben Avon Farm. c. 1920.
Plymouth Historical Society Collection.*

(Continued from page 1) stable, and grape arbor. J.B. Gilfillan died in 1924. Earle Brown, the well known Sheriff of Hennepin County at the time and a family relative to Mr. Gilfillan, purchased the farm and the land as an investment. He had already had a large farm in Brooklyn Park he in-

herited from his grandfather in 1905 when he was 26 years old.

The Welfare Board of Minneapolis had a dilemma in the early 1920s. The Board oversaw the operation of the workhouse, Hopewell Hospital (a tuberculosis sanitarium), and crematorium (a garbage burner that generated power and lit street lights) in the Camden neighborhood of North Minneapolis. The workhouse was an old, dilapidated, and crowded dormitory with a farm and stable for milking cows, horses, and gardens to support and feed not only the workhouse inmates but Hopewell Sanitarium patients located nearby. The term "workhouse" comes from England where the poor were housed to work off their debts. According to the Post 9 City of St. Paul website, the primary purpose of the workhouse in Minnesota was to punish convicts through confinement and work, not to offer rehabilitation. The inmates in workhouses were put to work for sentences ranging from five days to a year for minor offenses. Workhouses were self-sustaining institutions. Inmates cared for livestock, and gardens to grow produce were common on *(Continues on page 5)*

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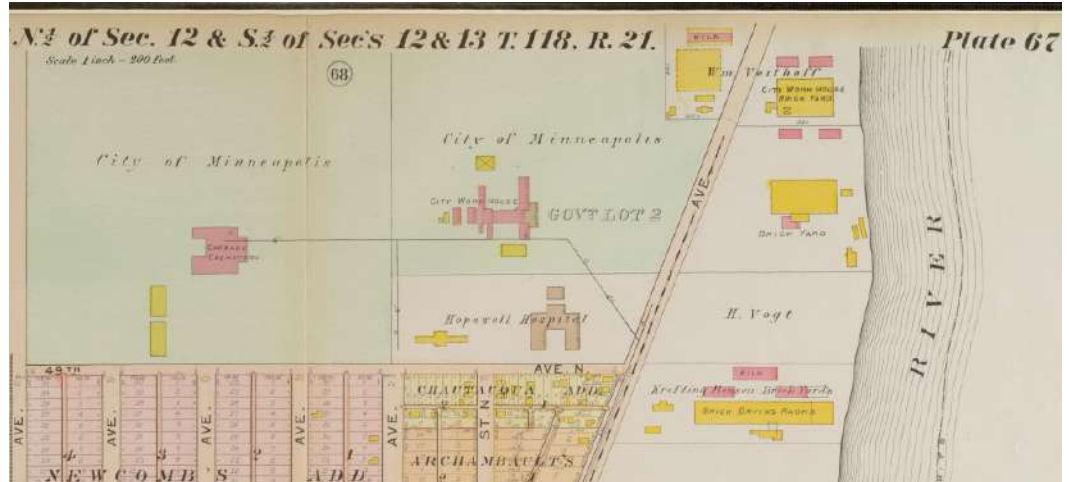
properties.

The Welfare Board wanted to move the workhouse and crematorium to new land. The current Camden workhouse soil was described as "worn out." The farm was not able to produce sufficient hay to feed their ninety heads of Holstein cattle or grow more produce. Hopewell Sanitarium, built in 1907, was getting crowded at its capacity of just ninety-three beds. Finally, the area was close to Bassett Creek, which was described as a filthy, open sewer waterway that emptied into the Mississippi River.

At the time, tuberculosis (TB) was the leading cause of death in Minnesota. It was easily spread through air as particles entered and attacked the lungs. According to Kirsten Delegard in an article about Halloween at Hopewell Hospital, TB spread easily in overcrowded quarters of American urban neighborhoods like Camden. At the time, the widely accepted treatment was to be institutionalized with access to fresh air. A healthy environment which was thought to stimulate the body's immune system. Today, tuberculosis is

treated with antibiotics, but this was not discovered until after World War 2. According to Mary Krugerud, author of *Interrupted Lives: Tuberculosis in Minnesota and Glen Lake Sanatorium*, the Welfare Board moved the patients to a new sanatorium called Glen Lake at Oak Terrace near Minnetonka in 1924. The new sanatorium would be able to provide their patients with an improved healing environment with larger living spaces, outside grounds, and a healthy diet- something the Hopewell Sanitarium sorely lacked in its current location. At one time, the Glen Lake Sanatorium housed over 700 patients. The state continued to care for TB patients at Glen Lake until 1976, and the building was later razed.

S.O. Lockwood, M.D, the superintendent of the Camden Workhouse at the time, had another reason to move the workhouse. He had recently been out east to tour newly reformed prisons and workhouses. Early prisons and jails were extremely harsh. Inmates were often crowded into dank, dormitory-type buildings. Meals were meager and lacked the nutritional quality of fresh produce or meat. Dr. Lockwood proposed a new type of workhouse that put the emphasis on reforming the prisoner or workhouse detainee to better health and opportunities after they served their sentence. There was a concern for humanity, adequate space and lighting and



Camden Neighborhood plot map, North Minneapolis. 1914. Minnesota Digital Library Collection.



Hopewell Hospital building, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hennepin Medical History Center Collection via Minnesota Digital Library Collection.

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Minneapolis Workhouse, Plymouth. c. 1939. Photographed by Lee Bros. Minnesota Historical Society Digital Collection.

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improved sanitary conditions.

The Welfare Board agreed to buy the Earle Brown Plymouth property off Parker's Lake in 1923 for 486 acres of land for the new modern workhouse and the crematorium. Families around Parker's Lake, primarily farmers, were not happy about the proposed crematorium and this plan was dropped. It was decided garbage would be moved via the Luce Line Railroad to garbage burners in Minneapolis. In 1931, the workhouse was constructed on the largest tract of land across from Parker's Lake. It would contain four main wings with ninety-nine individual cells in each wing with plenty of light and ventilation, primarily to house men. The women's detention home was not completed until 1953. The site included the new workhouse, a dining room, kitchen, bakery, cement block factory, and workshops for the inmates to learn trades. The surrounding land around the workhouse provided ample space to grow hay, grain, and gardens for produce. Aerial pictures in the 1930-1940s shows extensive rows of what looks like produce grown on the north side of County Road 6. Most of the vegetables which workhouse inmates ate were grown on the farm with additional sent to local hospitals.

A large brick house for the workhouse superintendent was built on the hill across from County Road 6. Today, this location is the Parker's Lake picnic shelter. Near the superintendent's house, a massive workhouse barn with silos and a piggery barn were built. This would

house the large number of Holstein cows to produce milk, cream, and butter, chickens for eggs, and meat from beef cattle and pigs. Finally, they also had a saw mill for sawing lumber for pallets. The entire Plymouth workhouse operation was seen as a model of penal reform in Minneapolis and the United States.

The workhouse barns were in existence until the late 1960s, when operations were dismantled, and were eventually torn down in 1986. The Plymouth playfields are currently located on the site. The crop land on the west side of the workhouse was converted to a golf driving range. The Luce Line Railroad bed on the south border of the property is now the Luce Line Trail for walkers and cyclists. The workhouse added a greenhouse in 1999 with a small tree farm. The inmates grew annuals for the City of Minneapolis, but this was discontinued. The tree farm was transitioned into a gravel bed with additional parking spaces in 2017. There is a small memorial garden with perennials in honor of Plymouth Correctional Facility employees next to the old entrance of the workhouse.

Community gardens have been popular additions to towns and cities in the past few years. There is an increased interest in growing your own fresh produce for people of all ages. The City of Plymouth added community garden plots to the southside of the workhouse between 1991 and 1998. The County still owns the land and the City of Plymouth pays for the water. Over eighty (14' by 14') plots are available to rent for a nominal fee. Gardeners are encouraged to do-



Inmates in the Workhouse Garden. c.1931. Hennepin County Library Collection.

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Community gardens in workhouses and correctional facilities continue today. In 2012, the Minnesota legislation passed a law to establish prison gardening programs. It requires correction facilities to start vegetable gardens if space and security allows it. Produce raised would be used to feed inmates or donated to local food shelves and charities. In a Star Tribune article dated September, 12, 2012, three state prisons are described with inmate-tended gardens: Willow River, Red Wing and Togo in Itasca County. The Willow River's CIP (Challenge Incarceration Program) focuses on life change, and tending a garden reinforces that according to Candy Adamczak, Program Director. The Willow gardens include a variety of fruit trees with a large portion of the garden for vegetables for the prison's kitchen and local food shelf. The Red Wing garden, called "Hope Garden" by the inmates who tend it, donate to a local food shelf and a women's shelter. County and Duluth prison has raised vegetable and annual plants to sell in plant sales to support their gardens and the community. Hopefully, the program will expand to other corrections facilities in time. So, the workhouse gardens continue to support communities today as they had close to 100 years ago. More than ever, the gardens provide so much for the community, the food shelves, and enhances the overall lives of many citizens in Minnesota and Plymouth.



Memorial plaque from the Plymouth Adult Correctional Facility Memorial Garden. Image courtesy of Jackie Vallette Uglow.

If you'd like to learn more, we will be sharing more context about the complex history of the workhouse at our upcoming Virtual Open House on May 13 at 4pm. If you have interest in contributing an article to the Plymouth Historical Society, please contact Historical Society Manager Rebekah Coffman at rcoffman@plymouthmn.gov.

Save the dates! Summer Virtual Open House registrations are now live. We look forward to continuing to share what's been happening at the museum and explore Plymouth's history together through our monthly virtual gathering.

More information and registration link can be found at: www.plymouthmnhistoricalsociety.org/visit/upcomingevents

4-5PM
WEDNESDAYS

JUNE 16
JULY 14
AUGUST 18

VIRTUAL

**OPEN
HOUSE**

SERIES

PLYMOUTH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUNTEER WITH US!

Do you love history? Do you love Plymouth?
Then we would love to have you volunteer!



We are always looking for help from people passionate about preserving and sharing history and making a difference in our community. Opportunities include virtual and in person options, including blog post writing, collections research, collections care, and more! To get connected, please fill out a volunteer application form on the City of Plymouth's website:

<https://www.plymouthmn.gov/departments/parks-recreation-/volunteer-opportunities/apply-now>

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