

The Corps of Engineers Centre Building: A Brief History

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The building that currently serves as headquarters for the St. Paul District of the Army Corps of Engineers enjoys a rich history, with ties to the flourishing fur trade industry of the 19th Century; nationally renowned Minnesota architect Clarence Johnston; famed polar explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd; and Minnesota's favorite son, Charles Lindbergh.



The Nalpak Building in 1959 (photo taken from Mears Park). Note the fire escape and the absence of a main entrance on 5th Street.

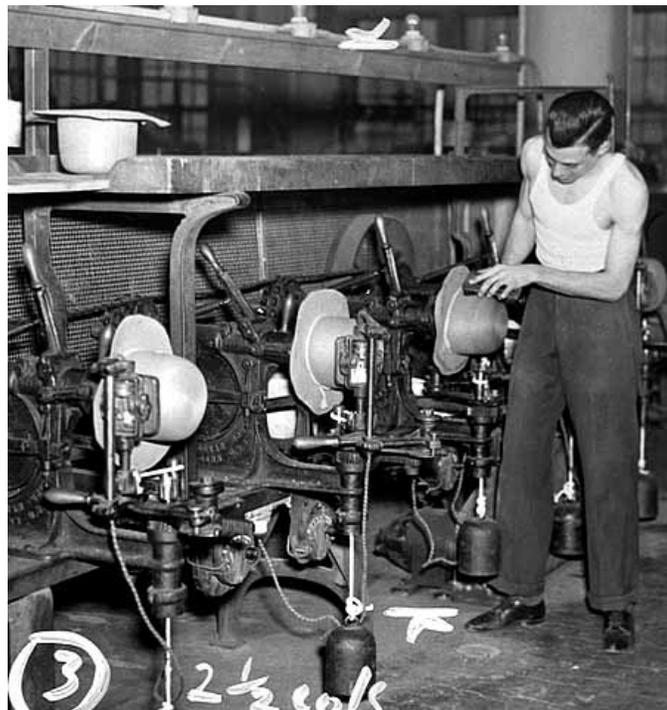
The Gordon and Ferguson Company, 1913-1944

The building at 333 Sibley in St. Paul originally served as the headquarters for the manufacturing and sales activities of Gordon & Ferguson, a prominent fur trading company founded by Richards Gordon (1829-1911) in 1871. Originally from Wexford, Ireland, Gordon immigrated to the United States in the 1840s, seeking his fortune. He moved to St. Paul in 1854 and opened a wholesale hat and cap business at 134 East Third Street. Four years later, he began manufacturing buffalo coats from hides collected by the tens of thousands from the herds that still roamed the unbroken prairies of the Great Plains. Gordon brought in Paul Ferguson in 1871 and changed the company name to Gordon & Ferguson. The business flourished and, in 1880, moved into a larger building at 216 East 4th Street. That same year, Richards Gordon brought his son, Charles, into the company, and the younger Gordon later became vice president under his father. In 1898, Richards retired to Rochelle, New York, and his son became the moving force behind Gordon & Ferguson. The company moved again in 1904, this time to 300 East 4th Street.

By 1912, Gordon & Ferguson had become a world-renowned furrier and set its sites on more lavish accommodations. Under the direction of Charles Gordon, the company began planning the construction of new offices at Sibley and 4th Street. They hired the famed Minnesota architect, Clarence Johnston, to build the new Gordon & Ferguson Building. Johnston also designed

virtually all of the buildings on thirty-five state-owned sites including the University of Minnesota's main campus in Minneapolis. In private practice, he designed numerous residences and public buildings, including forty-two houses still standing on Summit Avenue in St. Paul, one of the best-preserved, upper-class Victorian promenade boulevards in America.

The Gordon & Ferguson building was the largest manufacturing plant commission of Johnston's career. At a cost of \$250,000, the structure covered nearly half of a city block to the height of nine stories on 4th Street (eight stories uphill on 5th Street). The main entrance was originally located on Sibley Street, and it housed salesrooms on the bottom floors, with the manufacturing processes and the main fur factory located on the upper floors. The fleshing machines, fur-dressing shops, drying racks, cleaning drums and cases, tannery, dye house, and skin rooms were located in separate "out" buildings.



Gordon & Ferguson employee making hats in 1935.

The Gordon & Ferguson Company prospered throughout its residency at 333 Sibley Street. Because of its stellar reputation as a maker of fur coats, it was tasked with supplying the fur coats worn by Admiral Richard E. Byrd on his first expedition to Antarctica in 1928. The company also manufactured flight apparel, including fur-lined flight suits for open-cockpit bi-planes, and was selected by Minnesota native Charles Lindbergh to supply the flight suit he wore when flying "The Spirit of St. Louis" on the first solo non-stop flight from the United States to Paris. This suit, proudly bearing the Gordon & Ferguson label, is now on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The company later became a major supplier to the armed forces in the United States during World War II. By 1944, the Gordon & Ferguson Company had once again outgrown its residence, and it abandoned the building in favor of a new address one block to the east at 230 East 5th Street, currently the Mears Park Center.

The Nalpak Building, 1958-1993

The early city directories for the City of St. Paul indicate that Gordon & Ferguson occupied the building at 333 Sibley from 1913-1944. Western Electric Company purchased the building in 1944 and maintained offices there until the mid-1950s, when it fell vacant for a time. In 1958, John J. Kaplan, president and treasurer of Globe Paper Box Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, purchased, refurbished, and renamed the building, calling it the Nalpak Building (Nalpak is “Kaplan” in reverse). Under Kaplan’s ownership, the building housed the United Way of St. Paul, Dun & Bradstreet, Inc., and a number of state offices, including the State Department of Employment Security, the State Department of Revenue, and the Human Services Association.

The Corps of Engineers Centre, 1993 to present

The Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District, began leasing portions of the building in 1988 for 80 employees of the district’s Construction-Operations Division and adopted the building as the St. Paul District headquarters in 1993, after more than 53 years in the main downtown Post Office building. The Nalpak Building was completely renovated for the district and again renamed--this time after its largest leaseholder, the Army Corps of Engineers. In December 1999, the BGK Group of Santa Fe, New Mexico, purchased the old Gordon & Ferguson building for a reported \$11.17 million. BGK also owns, among others in the Twin Cities, the Norwest Center and the Metro Square buildings in St. Paul and the Lumber Exchange building in Minneapolis.