



## Hill Library Materials Podcast

James J. Hill was one of the legendary figures of the gilded age and a man of extraordinary business acumen. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, he transformed the near-bankrupt Saint Paul and Pacific railroad into an immensely profitable enterprise supporting the American expansion into the west and the opening of global markets in the Pacific. By the time of his death in 1916, Hill had amassed a fortune of over sixty million dollars.

Although Hill's railroad activities are well known, his family life and other business endeavors have received less attention. The Minnesota Historical Society opened Hill's massive stone house on Summit Avenue to visitors after it acquired the mansion in 1978. Our manuscripts and object collections contain a number of items relating to Hill and his family, some of them donated by descendants of the Empire Builder. The Society also has the records of the Great Northern Railroad. But the collections contain comparatively little about the man himself

This changed in March 2008 when the James J. Hill Reference Library transferred the papers of the Hill Family to the Minnesota Historical Society.

The Hill Reference Library is situated in 4<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown St. Paul, housed in a building designed in the Italian Renaissance style by a prominent New York architect. As early as the 1890s, Hill conceived of a public library in downtown St. Paul. The library would be jointly funded by Hill and the city, and would acquire books on most subjects excluding only medicine, law, genealogy, and popular fiction. Financial turmoil in the 1890s delayed the project, but as Hill neared retirement two decades later construction on the library finally began. Hill died only three years into the eight-year construction period, but his wife and his daughters stepped in to oversee the project to its completion. The new library opened in 1921, with one part of the building serving as Hill's reference library and the other part as the city library for St. Paul.

In 1976, the James J. Hill reference library changed its mission to serve the needs of the business community. Over the years, the Hill library had become the repository for the papers of various Hill Family members, but these historical collections did not fit well with the business library's mission. The agreement to move the papers to the Historical Society frees both institutions to do what they do best.

The transfer of the collection of family papers from the reference library to the Historical Society took place over March 17 and 18, 2008. On a cold, rainy Monday morning, four moving trucks arrived at the back door of the library along Kellogg Blvd. The trucks only had a half mile drive between the two buildings, but the logistics of transporting

nearly 1400 cubic feet of records and maintaining their organization was a bigger challenge. Staff from the Historical Society carefully checked every box against an inventory list before they were loaded onto book carts and rolled onto the trucks. Once at the Historical Society, the crew unloaded the carts, rolled them down the long hallway and finally to the History Center's library stacks. We surveyed nearly 2500 boxes of materials, noting additions and corrections to the original inventory.

The papers are divided into major four parts along with additional materials. The James J. Hill Papers detail Hill's many and varied business interests. The Great Northern Railway Company is the subject of many of the papers, but the papers also include details on a wide variety of other activities including politics, Native American relations, philanthropy, mining, finance, immigration and settlement. The Louis Warren Hill Papers document the activities of Hill's second oldest son who served as president and later chairman of the Great Northern Railway. Louis's business interests range across many parts of the country. The papers of Louis' wife Maude Van Cortlandt Taylor Hill and their daughter Maudie provide a glimpse into the domestic side of the famous family. Among their papers are letters, photographs, diaries, scrapbooks and correspondence. Finally, the Reed/Hyde Family papers contain personal and financial records relating to Samuel Reed, an engineer who worked on Erie Canal in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

With generous support of the Northwest Area, Jerome, and Grotto Foundations, the Historical Society will create up-to-date finding aids and a web site to help researchers make use of these extraordinary records. This work will take place over the next two years. In the meantime, limited access is available using existing finding aids in the reading room at the History Center in St. Paul.

I'm Jennifer Jones, Head of Collections at the Minnesota Historical Society.