

Superintendent William Berry's Office, Loring Park, Hennepin County

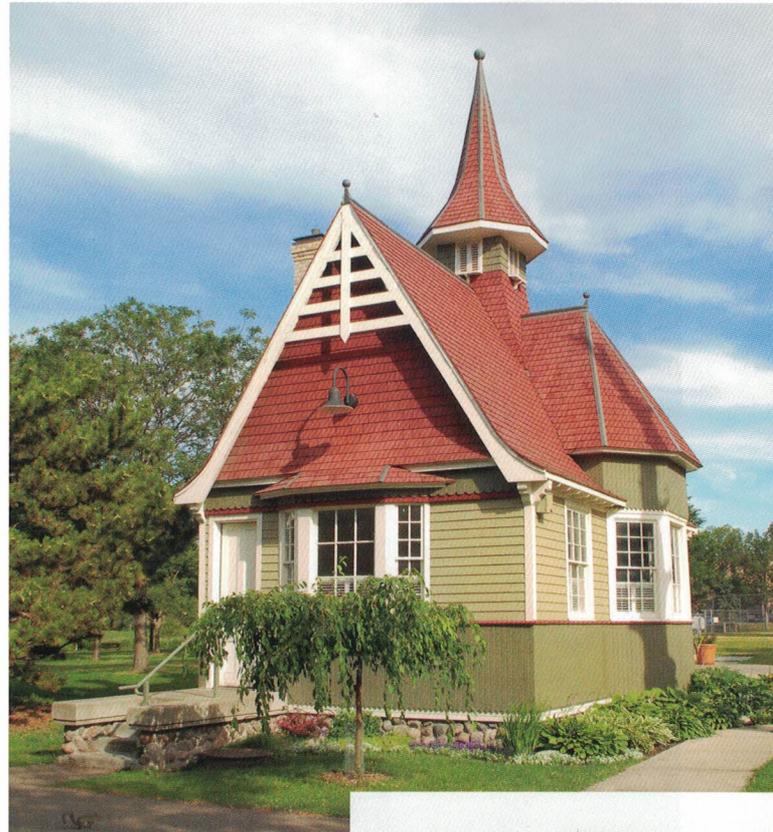


AT THE CENTER OF HISTORIC LORING PARK in downtown Minneapolis sits the oldest building in the city's park system. Local architect Harry Wild Jones (1859–1935) created this fairy-tale-like cottage in the late 19th century as an office for Captain William Morse Berry, Minneapolis's first park superintendent. Wild's colorful, front-gabled Victorian design featured steeply pitched roofs, three-sided bays, and a dramatic cupola topped with a witch's hat roof. Constructed in 1889 for about \$700, the building sat on a stone foundation in the park's southeast corner. Clad in wooden shingles, clapboard, and wainscoting, this landmark served as Berry's office until 1905, when he retired at age 78. His high-powered successor, Theodore Wirth, quickly moved to an office in City Hall, and the charming structure was downgraded to a toolshed.

The building languished for 70 years, gradually losing its cupola, vibrant colors, and decorative detail. In the late 1970s, it was briefly revived as Loring Picnic Place, selling sandwiches, salads, ice cream, and more. When the concession closed, the former office was completely abandoned, painted gray, and eventually boarded up to resist rodents.

During a 1998 Loring Park renovation, the city and Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board spent approximately \$450,000 to “tenderly” transport the cottage to the park's center, mount it on a new foundation, and painstakingly refurbish it inside and out. Drawing on a 1907 postcard and paint colors that were exposed during re-siding, workers restored the cupola and trim and coated the exterior in its original sage, cream, and terra-cotta shades using 60 gallons of paint donated by Hirshfield's, a local paint and decorating company. With the goal of creating a state-of-the-art performance venue for dance, theater, and music, contractors also upgraded the mechanics; installed a refrigerator, sinks, lavatory, mirrors, and strip lights; and erected a stage at the rear. Due to limited funds and local residents' concern about noise, the stage was substantially downsized from the master plan.

The exquisitely restored structure was named Performance Place and honored with awards from the Minneapolis Committee on Urban Development, the Minneapolis



The Superintendent's Office, now Performance Place, in Loring Park (COURTESY OF THE MINNEAPOLIS PARK AND RECREATION BOARD)

The postcard that guided the renovation of the Superintendent's Office (FROM THE COLLECTION OF DEAN BORGHORST)



Heritage Preservation Commission, and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. However, the building hasn't quite lived up to its new title. Although frequently used during events, it functions primarily as a support place for artists who perform elsewhere in the park.

In 2017, when Minneapolis launched a new park planning process, participants characterized the structure as underutilized and suggested it might be repurposed into a café with patio seating. Perhaps this beloved landmark will gain a new life in the not-so-distant future.

—Marsha Neff and Greg Gaut

This feature was made possible by the Henry and Donna Morgan Fund for Research and Publications.