

The Entrepreneurial Culture of the Forebears

Both the Mairs and Power families share a common heritage and have their roots in the land of the Yankees—the Hudson River Valley, and upstate New York, Boston, western Massachusetts, and Nova Scotia. When the forebears of today’s Mairs and Power families came to Minnesota in the last half of the nineteenth century, they brought with them commitments to entrepreneurship and trade, education, egalitarianism, and a Protestant religious conviction that so many of the people who were the original colonizers of the northeastern region of the United States had also valued.

The family roots for George Mairs III and his father, George A. Mairs Jr., lie in the small town of Argyle, New York, 50 miles north of Albany. In 1793, the Reverend George Mairs arrived from Ireland to take up pastoral duties at the United Presbyterian Church in Argyle, then a growing town with a population of more than 2,000. The congregation flourished under his watch. In 1823, one of his 11 children, Rev. George Mairs Jr., joined him and gradually succeeded him as pastor. Together, they ran “The Mairs Church,” an influential institution in and around Argyle, for 58 years. When Rev. George Mairs Sr. passed on in 1841 at age 81, the *Washington County Post* hailed him in a lengthy obituary. “At the beginning of his settlement, the surrounding country was uncultivated, and existed only in the wildness of nature. He was for years the father, the counsellor, the legislator of that district. He watched over its rising prosperity with the warmest interest and embarked in every measure calculated to advance its moral and spiritual prosperity . . . with sound judgment and the fervor of his capacious heart.”¹

THE MAIRS FAMILY'S JOURNEY TO MINNESOTA

A nineteenth-century publication provides insight into the Mairs family genealogy. It identified both father and son as abolitionists and suggested that the younger Mairs built an underground railway hide-away into the chimney of his home to accommodate enslaved people escaping the South during the Civil War.

A child of the younger minister, James Walker Mairs (1836-1893), married Amelia Ann Dyer (1841-1912) about 1870. James and Amelia relocated from Schenectady, New York, which is west of Albany, to St. Paul. James had run a grocery store in Schenectady and, according to Amelia's will, the family continued to own property there after they moved to St. Paul. James and Amelia had three children, a girl and two boys.² George Alexander Mairs, born in 1873, was the youngest child. No documentation exists that explains why James and Amelia Mairs came to St. Paul, but Amelia's brothers were already in the city, where they owned and operated the Dyer Music Store located initially at Seventh and Jackson streets and then later in a much bigger building at 148-150 East Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) in downtown St. Paul.³

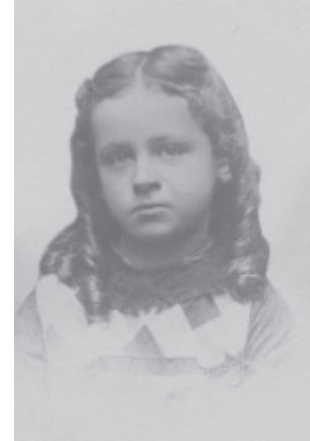
Rev. George Alexander (1843–1930), seated right, a celebrated Presbyterian minister in New York City, was the namesake for George Alexander Mairs (1873–1944), seated left, George Alexander Mairs Jr. (1901–1983), standing rear, and George Alexander Mairs III (1928–2010), the very young boy held by Rev. Alexander. This photo is undated, but it was probably taken in 1929 or 1930. Photo courtesy of Rob Mairs.



An obituary for George Alexander Mairs (born 1873), published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1944, reported that he came to the city in 1895 from Schenectady when he was 23 years old and that he had been an officer and director of the W. J. Dyer Bro. music store in St. Paul.⁴ The 1895 *St. Paul City Directory* identifies him as employed at the Dyer store as a travel agent. In 1898, George A. Mairs married Leontine Paradis (1875–1956), whose residence before her marriage was in St. Paul’s Lowertown neighborhood.⁵

The Mairs family ties to the senior member of the Dyer family, William J. Dyer (1863–1925), eventually became financially significant for George A. Mairs. When George’s mother, Amelia, died in 1912, she bequeathed to him 25 shares of preferred stock in the W. J. Dyer & Bro. Company. When his uncle, William Dyer, died in 1925, he left another 10 shares of Dyer preferred to George. The total value of these shares was \$3,500 in 1912—the equivalent of roughly \$95,000 today, adjusting for inflation.⁶

George Alexander Mairs Jr., the son of George A. and Leontine P. Mairs, was born in 1901. Although his parents were not wealthy relative to the members of the family of railroad baron James J. Hill, they were solid members of St. Paul’s middle class. Only a few years after the death of William Dyer in 1925, George A. Mairs Jr. would establish the investment firm that in the mid-1950s became known as Mairs & Power.



An undated photo of a youthful Leontine Elizabeth Paradis (1875–1956), who lived in St. Paul and married George A. Mairs in 1898. Photo courtesy of the Mairs family.

THE POWER ANCESTORS AND MINNESOTA’S EARLY DAYS

The other name in the Mairs & Power firm that of Power has as interesting a family history as does George A. Mairs. Family stories identify two Power brothers who came to the land that became the United States from Liverpool before 1700. According to Diane Power, the archivist for the family, many believe the Power family originally came from Ireland but documentation is lacking. Much is known, however, of the family history since the mid-1700s.⁷

The Power family member whose name is perpetuated in the firm of Mairs & Power was George Center Power Jr. His roots go back to the Berkshires in western Massachusetts and the Hudson River Valley

and later, to Minnesota's founders. Thomas Power was born in Rhode Island or eastern Massachusetts in 1753. His father moved the family to Adams, in western Massachusetts, in 1768. Thomas and his family moved on, to Hudson, New York, in 1786. He served with a Rhode Island unit in the Revolutionary War.⁸

Thomas's son, John, was a prominent merchant and boat operator on the Hudson River. John's son, William, became the first station agent in Pittsfield, in western Massachusetts, for the Boston & Albany Railroad. In 1849, the oldest of William's nine children, 17-year-old James Buel Power, left Pittsfield for opportunities in the then-emerging railroad industry. By the early 1860s, he and his family were in St. Paul. James went on to an illustrious career in railroading, agriculture, and education in Minnesota and North Dakota. For a time, he was a land agent for James J. Hill. Eventually, in 1878, he purchased a large cattle farm located southwest of Fargo in the Dakota Territory (the northern portion of the territory became the state of North Dakota in 1889) and plunged into experimental farming.

The farm, Helendale, became widely known for its scientific achievements in grain production and livestock breeding. With the purchase of Helendale Farm, Power helped to originate "bonanza" farming in the Red River Valley—very large, efficient, profit-focused farms that made use of the latest machinery, cheap and abundant land, growing Eastern markets, and emerging railroads. The earliest of the bonanza farms dotted the land along or near the Northern Pacific Railroad's tracks as they darted west from the Red River Valley through North Dakota. A booklet about Helendale, commissioned by George C. Power III (the son of George C. Power Jr. of Mairs & Power),

"Dakota" by Carl Gutherz (1844–1907). French artist Gutherz painted this scene of plowing on Helendale Farm in Dakota Territory, southwest of Fargo, in 1884. The 6,000-acre Helendale Farm was established by James Buel Power in 1878 and was one of the first bonanza farms in what later became North Dakota. Photo courtesy of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University Archives, Fargo.



noted that James B. Power generally embraced the advanced farming methods of the bonanza farmers, but he dealt more with community-wide concerns than many of them did.

James B. Power was the second president of the North Dakota Agricultural College (now known as North Dakota State University), served a term in the state's House of Representatives and was one of the six original inductees into the North Dakota Hall of Fame. George Power of Mairs & Power was his great-grandson.

George Power's mother, Anna Rice Dawson, was the daughter of Maria Rice and William Dawson. Maria's father, Edmund Rice, born in 1819 and raised in Vermont, lived in Michigan for 11 years, then came to St. Paul in 1849. Rice, a lawyer, was president of three different railroads at various times from 1857 to 1877, served in both houses of the Minnesota Legislature, and was elected as St. Paul's mayor in 1881 and again in 1885. His brother, Henry Mower Rice, was instrumental in establishing the Minnesota Territory in 1849 and, eight years later, in enabling Minnesota to become a state. He was one of the state's first two U.S. senators. Maria's father-in-law, William Dawson, was St. Paul's mayor from 1878 to 1881.

THE DYER AND MCLEOD FAMILIES

The history of the Mairs family is closely tied to those of the Dyer and McLeod families in St. Paul. Ultimately, the leaders of these two families, William Dyer and Angus McLeod, helped George Jr. start his business. Both men, originally from the Northeast, were ambitious achievers who resettled in St. Paul, built successful retail businesses in the city's downtown, and joined the ranks of the city's most prominent citizens. Dyer, born in Boston in 1841, came to Minnesota as a music teacher in Faribault and to open a music store there. Two years later, he moved to St. Paul to open a much larger store. His business prospered. At various times, his three brothers worked at the store, which became one of the leading music stores in the Midwest.⁹

When George Mairs Jr. married Angus McLeod's daughter, Jean, in 1925, the newlyweds tightened the family ties with the McLeods. Angus McLeod was born in 1859 near Halifax, Nova Scotia, which developed as a port city with extensive shipping ties to Maine and Boston. McLeod began his career as a carpenter and contractor in Halifax. He was a



Angus McLeod (1859–1924) was born in Nova Scotia, Canada, and emigrated to the Twin Cities, where he became a St. Paul real estate developer and retailer. He and two partners established the Emporium Mercantile Company, which built the Emporium Department Store. Lee Brothers photo from 1921. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



An undated photo of George A. Mairs Jr. Photo courtesy of the Mairs family.



A 1937 portrait in pencil of Jean McLeod Mairs by artist Carl Bohnen (1888–1977). Photo courtesy of the Mairs family.

professional cyclist who took part in races in Canada, the Twin Cities, and possibly elsewhere. In 1881, he came to Minneapolis where he organized the Angus McLeod Co., a construction contracting business. He and three partners built the Emporium, a downtown St. Paul department store that opened in 1902.¹⁰

DEFINING THE YANKEE HERITAGE

John Rice (no relation to Edmund Rice), a University of Minnesota geography professor, described the new arrivals from the Yankee region in an essay that was part of the Minnesota Historical Society’s 1981 book *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*. They were members of white European families who came to the state directly from abroad or in two steps: first, to the northeastern part of North America that is now mostly part of the United States; then on to Minnesota. “They differed from the newer immigrants who were part of the Great Atlantic Migration of the nineteenth century in at least two respects,” Rice wrote. “First, their culture was founded primarily, though not exclusively, on the cultures of the British Isles. Second, after the Revolutionary War, the regional subcultures of Colonial America [New England, Middle Atlantic and Southern] began to come together west of the Appalachian Mountains to form a distinctive national culture.”¹¹

Rice goes on to say that by the start of the nineteenth century, few Yankees had ventured beyond the shores of Lake Erie. But after 1830, they came in a “deluge” and by 1860, “nearly half of the Yankees then living had left New England.” When more fertile lands became available, “these New Englanders flocked to Wisconsin and Minnesota in droves. They were enthusiastically joined by [New] Yorkers, until in 1860 just over half of the total northeastern-born population of Minnesota was made up of these Yankees ‘one step removed.’”

Rice wrote that these new arrivals—New Englanders and New Yorkers, who he also describes as “Old-Stock Americans”—laid the groundwork for the future state of Minnesota.¹²

As he prepared to start his investment business, George Mairs Jr. had to benefit from his family ties with William Dyer and Angus McLeod, self-made men with extensive experience in business. Their downtown stores were highly visible exemplars of commercial success, admirable models to reshape so they would work in the investment

business. They also offered rich repositories of experience and advice on how to start and sustain a profitable enterprise in a highly competitive environment.

We don't know how much George Jr. learned from these caches of expertise, or in what ways, but it's difficult to imagine him not taking advantage of these opportunities. His father had become a senior manager at the Dyer store before George Jr. graduated from high school. His father-in-law, Angus McLeod, and Angus's brother, George, were widely known for their popular department store. The McLeods and William Dyer, joined by his brothers, had other business interests as well.

William Dyer was a tenor soloist and choir director when he came to St. Paul. His music store grew with the city. He built a four-story structure downtown. It featured state-of-the-art sound booths and other new technology, a staff that sold everything from records and sheet music to grand pianos, organs, and a complete line of musical instruments including many imported from abroad. It became a must-stop for visiting musicians. Dyer built close ties with church

A photo of the interior of the W. J. Dyer Bros. Music Company store, 21–25 West Fifth Street (between Wabasha and St. Peter streets), in downtown St. Paul, about 1900. The photo captures some of the size of the store and the extent of its music-related inventory. Photographer Anderson. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



and school music programs. His St. Paul store was comparable to the leading Midwest music stores in Chicago, Milwaukee and Cleveland and, according to the Minnesota Historical Society, “was said to be the largest music store west of Chicago.”¹³

Dyer’s life was widely chronicled when he died in 1925. He drew particular attention from the St. Paul-based *Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal*, a weekly newspaper circulated to the small African-American communities in the Twin Cities. In a tribute featuring his picture, near the top of the front page, the paper eulogized him for creating a business “built largely on its reputation for handling dependable high-grade lines of goods, square dealing and personal contact. Dyer was a man of deep religious conviction and lived a life of constructive usefulness. He was known to every noted musician in the country.” It was an extensive memorial that suggested Dyer placed a high value on developing a significant base of loyal African-American customers, unusual for a white-owned store at the time.¹⁴

St. Paul’s downtown was bustling at the turn of century. Angus McLeod, sensing that the heyday of downtown department store retailing

The June 27, 1925, edition of *The Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal* newspaper in St. Paul carried a front-page announcement of the death of William J. Dyer along with his photo. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.



was approaching, joined with partners J.T. and W.S. Kennedy and P. McArthur to build the Emporium. In her book about Minnesota department store retailing—*Thank You for Shopping*—Kristal Leebrick described the Emporium as a 35,000-square-foot store that featured 22 departments and employed 150 salespeople.¹⁵

“The ladies, in particular, will find much to interest them,” declared the store’s opening day ad in the *St. Paul Globe*. “Our styles are new, original and exclusive. Our store, with its various departments, stocked with beautiful, unique and useful articles, offers exceptional advantages to those who do not wish to waste their valuable time going about from store to store in a fruitless search of odd articles.”

Seven months later, the new store had a second opening of its expanded “‘beautiful daylight store,’ which was now double the size when it first opened,” Leebrick noted. She cited excerpts, touting amenities, from the Emporium’s July 1917 *News from the ‘Fresh Air Store’ Newsletter*; overnight Kodak film delivery service; Columbia Grafonola talking machines that enable listeners to hear great bands and orchestras, opera singers, comedians, and world-famous artists over and over again at less than the cost of hearing them once in person.

McLeod moved to St. Paul and quickly joined the ranks of the city’s business and civic leadership, becoming chair of Macalester College’s Board of Trustees. By the early 1920s, the store had expanded to many times its original size. When McLeod died in 1924, the *Pioneer Press* declared that the Emporium was the crowning achievement of his career. McLeod and William Dyer were also deeply engaged in charitable



St. Paul’s *Globe* newspaper for March 1, 1902, featured this lengthy announcement of the opening of The Emporium Department Store on East Seventh Street. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

This 1917 photo by photographer Charles P. Gibson gives some sense of the vast size of St. Paul's Emporium Department Store. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



activities. McLeod was president of the board of trustees of the Union Gospel Mission. Dyer was president of the Children's Home Society for 13 years.¹⁶

THE ROLE OF THE RAILROADS

Transportation first built and then drove commercial activity in St. Paul from its earliest days until the middle of the twentieth century. The city, situated just adjacent to the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers (the site of Fort Snelling) and at the head of navigable water on the Mississippi until early in the twentieth century, was founded before Minneapolis and was the commercially dominant twin in the nineteenth century. In 1858, the year Minnesota became a state, more than 1,000 steamboats docked in St. Paul, the state capital. Only after Minneapolis harnessed the waterpower at the Falls of St. Anthony for lumber and flour milling did the younger twin surpass its older neighbor in population and commercial activity.¹⁷

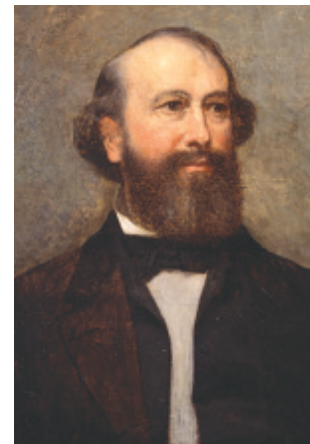
Neither St. Paul nor Minneapolis, however, would have achieved such dominance in the Upper Midwest but for the Indigenous peoples who had populated the future state of Minnesota for centuries prior

to the arrival of Euro-Americans. Native Americans first created the trade relationships and transportation routes upon which these great commercial centers were built. The numerous steamboats and railroad trains relied heavily on these routes and patterns of trade and transport that the native peoples had established in the region long before the invention of the steam engine.

Entrepreneurially minded men such as Edmund Rice were first drawn to St. Paul by business prospects initially tied to steamboat traffic. Later they seized financial opportunity by investing in the railroads. Although this early railroad building in Minnesota came a generation after the first trains in the Northeast began running, Minnesota hastened to catch up because its citizens immediately saw the advantages that the railroads had over steamboats and wagons. By 1880, the state had 3,100 miles of track.¹⁸

Edmund Rice is sometimes described as the father of railroading in Minnesota. Soon after he settled in St. Paul, he became the town recorder. In 1857, he was named president of the fledgling Minnesota & Pacific Railway Co. That year, the Minnesota & Pacific received a land grant that allowed it to earn more land if it would build rail lines connecting important river cities. In 1862, after several years of complex legal and financial maneuvering, another railroad—the St. Paul and Pacific, also led by Rice—laid the first track in the state over a 10-mile stretch linking downtown St. Paul and St. Anthony, near Minneapolis.

The four authors of *The Great Northern Railway* (Ralph W. Hidy, Muriel E. Hidy, Roy V. Scott, and Don L. Hofsommer) described meticulously the rise of the Great Northern, which was the creation of James J. Hill. They wrote that no other railroad shaped the landscape and society of the territory that runs from the Upper Mississippi River Valley to Puget Sound like the Great Northern did. As happened so often with the early railroads in Minnesota, the original owner often gave way to new owners, particularly after a period of financial distress in the state. In the 1870s, James J. Hill and his partners acquired ownership of the railroad that Edmund Rice and others had established. Reorganized first as the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad (in 1878) and later, in 1889, as the Great Northern, Hill's leadership and tight control over the railroad's finances resulted in its completion in 1893 of a transcontinental road running from St. Paul to the Pacific coast.¹⁹



Called by some the “father of railroading in Minnesota” because of his early involvement in three Minnesota railroads, Edmund Rice was an important political and civic leader in the state. He was also related to the Power family of St. Paul. This is an 1855 portrait of Rice painted by Eastman Johnson. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The authors opened their book about the Great Northern with an extended salute to Edmund Rice. “He suffered illness in lonely hotel rooms, rebuffs from bankers and disappointments when expected contracts did not materialize,” they wrote. Nonetheless, he persevered to emerge as “a remarkable railroad pioneer” who helped set the stage for the achievements of Hill and the Great Northern.

Hill consolidated various railroads, laid more track, built depots, and developed related interests as he assembled his Great Northern empire. The decades-long railroad boom, so much of which was centered in St. Paul, drew a massive flow of immigrants directly from Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and other European countries or in a two-step flow from these countries to another part of the U.S. and then on to St. Paul. The city’s population tripled, to 133,000 in 1890 from 41,000 in 1880. St. Paul would add another 102,000 residents, many of them immigrants, between 1890 and 1920.²⁰

The building of railroads in the last half of nineteenth century slowly fostered a national market economy for consumer goods; consequently middle-class families in St. Paul and elsewhere in the Upper

This 1912 photograph of James J. Hill, left, and his son, Louis W. Hill, captures two of Minnesota’s foremost railroad leaders. James Hill was a railroad pioneer whose Great Northern Railway went from St. Paul to the west coast. Louis became president of the GN in 1907 and chairman of the board in 1912. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Midwest were no longer dependent on buying goods that were produced locally. The buyers at the Dyer Music Store and the Emporium ordered goods from elsewhere that they judged shoppers in St. Paul would want. Even though these goods were produced in places such as New York City or Chicago, the railroads made it easy for the retailer to get them and sell them at an affordable price that was also profitable for the merchant in St. Paul.

George Mairs Jr., while studying at the University of Minnesota in the aftermath of the Great Crash of 1929, was calmly taking the measure of this environment and carefully refining his plans to enter the investment business.

This is a view of the railroad yards and St. Paul skyline adjacent to the Mississippi River and the Union Depot as seen from Dayton's Bluff in about 1925. The photograph captures the substantial volume of rail traffic in the 1920s and the close proximity of the nine railroads serving the city and the warehouses of the Lowertown neighborhood.





Here a locomotive is heading west from Chestnut Street in downtown St. Paul pulling a string of freight cars behind as it slowly makes its way upgrade toward Minneapolis. Photographer Helmut Kroening made this photo in 1932. Helmut Kroening Railroad Transportation Photographs, 1917–1947 (Album 2, page 69). Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.