

The Great War Boom: Housing people

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Washburn's population in 1917, at the peak of the Great War boom, was 6,038, an increase of 2,208 over its 1910 population of 3,830. This large and rapid population increase was due primarily to the huge expansion of the work force at the Du Pont Plant to produce war explosives for the federal government and Allied Powers. It created numerous challenges for the small city, among which was a serious shortage of housing. Many of the boarding houses constructed during the old boom had been abandoned and those which had escaped wrecking, or fire, were in poor condition. All of these old boarding houses were filled to capacity, people were renting rooms in private homes, and cots were even set up in the opera house and town hall auditorium.

Private contractors, seeing an opportunity to make money from the housing shortage, built a number of residences. Eight homes were constructed by the H.H. Peavy Company, behind the old town hall, around the intersection of Second Avenue East and Third Street, while the Washburn Dwelling Company erected several houses around the intersection of Second Avenue East and Fifth Street, and on the north side of Fifth Street,

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between Washington Avenue and Third Avenue West. The largest proposed project was Du Pont Park, occupying a quarter section of land east of Washington Avenue, between Superior Avenue and Oak Road, which was annexed to the townsite. The park was elaborately platted into large lots, avenues, drives, and boulevards. The main north-south thoroughfare was Grand View Boulevard, to be eighty feet wide and lighted by an ornamental lighting system. A fine park was laid out midway along this boulevard, which was to be beautified with flowers and shrubbery and ornamental lights.

Du Pont Park was probably a real estate scam intended to exploit the myth nourished by the boom psychology, that Washburn would at last achieve its destiny as a large port city on Lake Superior. In a barrage of publicity in the Washburn Times, the agent for the development tried to encourage this fantasy,

declaring that Washburn would have a population of 25,000 within three years, that it would be the distributing center for northern Wisconsin with the Twin Cities as its "staunch aids," while skyscrapers would crowd out the shanties. He urged people to buy lots as a speculative investment, which would make them rich when real estate prices rose as Washburn became a major manufacturing center and lake port. But people apparently did not believe this ballyhoo for only a few houses were built (one of which was moved to the northeast corner of Fourth Street and First Avenue East, where it still stands, although extensively remodeled).

The investors in the Du Pont Park development opened another subdivision named Residence Park, a forty acre tract bounded on the east by Eighth Avenue West and the south by Fourth Street, bisected by County Highway C. The company offered a home-owning made easy plan, by which a lot could be purchased for one dollar down and fifty cents a week. Only a small part of the addition seems to have been platted into lots, but no houses were built.

To help provide housing for its workers the Du Pont Com-

pany erected barracks for about 2,000 men along with a recreation building managed by the Young Men's Christian Association, near its plant. The company also built several houses for managers on the north side of Third Street, between Second and Third Avenue East, and several bungalows and duplexes along the south side of Third Street, between Central Avenue and Fourth Avenue East. Its largest housing project was the construction of 100 houses for workers on a tract at the east end of the city, between Fifth Avenue East and Superior Avenue and Bayfield Street and Fourth Street. These houses were never occupied, however.

In the summer of 1915 the company remodeled the Sheridan building, on the northwest corner of Central Avenue and Bayfield Street, as a clubhouse for employees. Named the F.T. Beers Club, in honor of the plant superintendent, it was opened in October, equipped with lunch counters, bowling alleys, and lounge rooms. In April 1918 the building was totally destroyed by fire. The company then erected a new building on the site, opened January 1919 with an elaborate dedication program, attended by an overflow crowd.