

Phalen Boulevard Redevelopment Project

St. Paul, Minnesota

“I’ve Been Working on the Railroad...”

Just north of where you are now standing, on Cayuga Street (now under I-35E), once stood a small neighborhood of residences and a boarding house. Many people who lived in this community were African-American porters, waiters and cooks who worked for the Pullman Palace Car Company of Chicago. This neighborhood provided easy access to nearby railroad facilities and inexpensive lodgings for the men on their short stays in St. Paul.

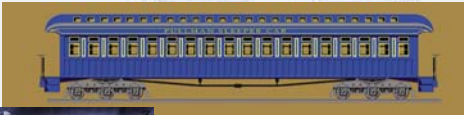
The Pullman Company began providing luxurious sleeping-car service in the 1870s that made coast-to-coast traveling easier and more comfortable. The service allowed passengers to buy tickets for Pullman cars, which were leased to various railroads. The Pullman cars would then be transferred from line to line, giving the passengers a seamless journey. Pullman porters, many of whom were recently freed African-American slaves who had moved north for work, provided personalized services aboard the cars.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

As an alternative to the low-paying field labor in the South, the Pullman Company offered one of the best available jobs to black men at the time. However, porters frequently logged 400 hours a month, got little sleep and would be away from home for months on end. Still, Pullman porters were proud of their regular-paying positions, which earned them respect and gave them a role as community leaders.

The Pullman porters across the country began to improve their working conditions in 1925, when the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union was founded. Against tremendous opposition from the Pullman Company, the BSCP was formally recognized in 1937, establishing the first African-American labor union in the country. The labor contract provided the St. Paul porters a raise in pay, a grievance process, and a work reduction to 240 work hours per month. But beyond labor issues, the union's nationwide network of social activism enabled the union and its members to make major contributions to American civil rights and social justice.



Photograph by Morgan and Marvin Smith, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

“The civil rights movement saw to it that black people were able to do things legally, like ride on a Pullman car, say. But the labor movement saw to it that black people had the money to buy the ticket to ride on the Pullman cars, see? What good is it to do something, if you don't have the money to do it? The labor movement gave black people the opportunity to do things that the civil rights movement gave the right to do.”

— E. D. Nixon
as published in
Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle:
Stories of Black Pullman Porters
(University of Illinois Press, 1989)

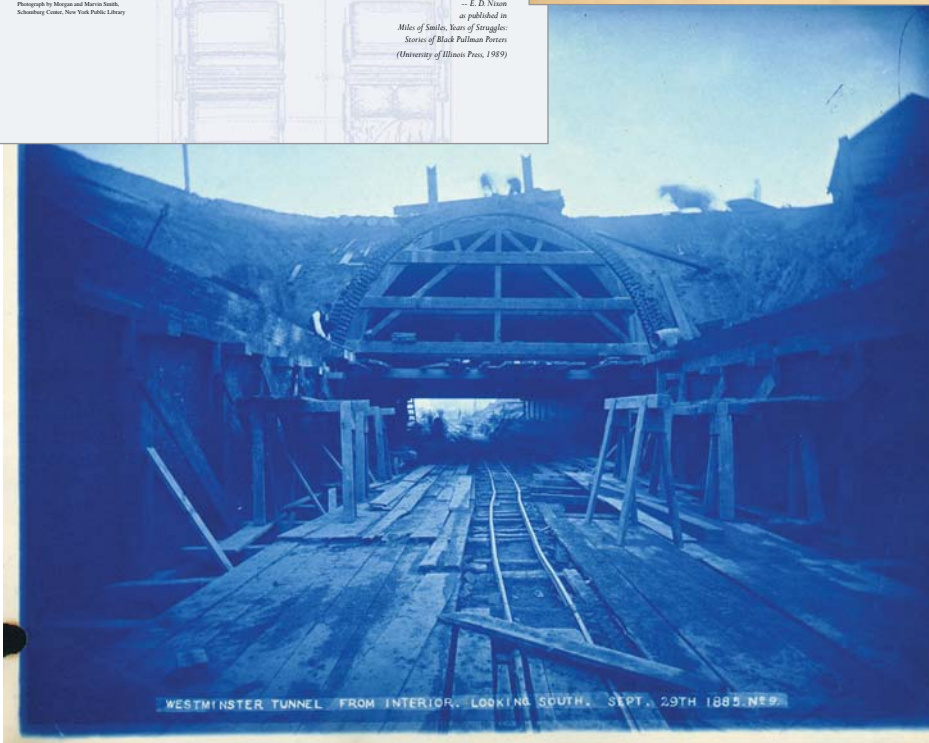
The 106 Group conducted all phases of cultural resources management related to the Phalen Boulevard redevelopment project. Staff archaeologists researched historic maps and documents, and employed geomorphological and archaeological testing to identify and assess a late-nineteenth century African-American residential area, a railroad station, and the site of a nineteenth-century malting company.

Research and historical context development was required for the evaluation of the historical significance of the Hamm's Brewery, the original 3M plant, and a rare railroad tunnel system.

Mitigation tasks included consultation with appropriate agencies, and preparation of effects documentation and a memorandum of agreement.



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