

Humboldt Flour Mill

1873, 1878, 2003

Since it was first built in 1873, the Humboldt Flour Mill has had several iterations. The first mill built at this location in 1873 was owned by the milling firm of Bull and Newton. The Bull and Newton Mill had the capacity to produce two-hundred barrels of flour per day.

On May 2, 1878, at a few minutes past 7:00 p.m., the Washburn "A" Mill exploded and burned, claiming the lives of eighteen mill workers and destroying the Washburn "A" Mill, the largest mill in the United States at the time. Several mills adjacent to it – the Diamond, Pettit, Zenith, Galaxy, and Humboldt Mill – were also destroyed or seriously damaged. The explosion was heard and felt ten miles away in St. Paul, where glass windows in homes were broken. A third of Minneapolis' mill capacity was destroyed. The explosion and subsequent fire were considered the worst single industrial accident in the history of Minneapolis. On May 3, *The Minneapolis Tribune* headlines included, "The Most Direful Calamity Which Has Ever Befallen the City of Minneapolis"; "Wild Despair of the Wives, Parents and Children of the Poor Victims"; and "The Force of the Shock in St Paul – Excitement and Consternation in That City."

Within four weeks, Bull Newton and Company had received an insurance settlement from the explosion. *The Minneapolis Tribune* reported on May 28, 1878, "This action will be received with pleasure by every citizen of Minneapolis, who will be prompt to remember the companies which are prompt to settle their losses by the late great calamity.... We are gratified to further be able to state that the proprietors of the Humboldt are energetically at work making arrangements for re-building, and they have already ordered the stones to go into their new mill."

Bull and Newton rebuilt the Humboldt Mill in record time, completing the structure by the end of the same year. J.T. Noyes and Sons of Buffalo, New York was the architect. The building was rebuilt in the Italianate style as a four-story, cream-colored brick structure with a limestone base that was four and a half feet



Source: Hennepin County Library

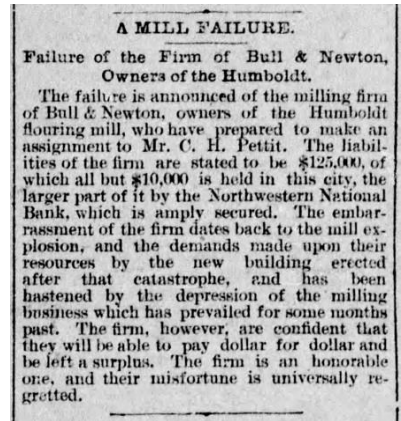
thick. A basement ran the length of the building. The walls were built twenty-

four inches thick at the street level. The Second Street South façade included a three-window bay monitor, or raised structure, running along the ridgeline of the roof, while the other three sides of the building were plain. The roof was tin clad when rebuilt in 1878 and later replaced with an iron roof. The building was water-powered with steam heat. The Mill had the capacity to produce barrels of flour per day and was best known for its "Bonanza Flour," "Supreme Flour," "Minnesota Chief," and "Banner" flours.

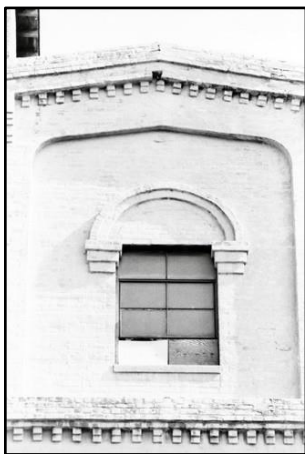


The Minneapolis Tribune
May 13, 1880

Unfortunately, the milling firm of Bull and Newton failed to thrive after the explosion and fire of 1878 and the expense of rebuilding. Their ultimate demise was also a result of depressed demand for their product. On June 3, 1880, it was announced that the firm had failed. The Humboldt Mill was sold to Hinkle, Greenleaf and Company. Washburn-Crosby began leasing the Humboldt Mill for their milling production in 1896, and in 1899 the mill was sold to Washburn-Crosby and renamed the Washburn-Crosby "E" Mill. John J. Gerard was appointed head miller at the new "E" Mill. Mr. Gerard had been involved in an accident at a mill in Canada and lost his right arm. He was nonetheless considered one of the most skillful head millers in Minneapolis. The new "E" Mill was producing one thousand barrels per day, and within a month of Gerard taking charge, production had increased to two thousand barrels of flour per day. Because the Humboldt Mill was built quickly after the 1878 explosion and fire, it was also the oldest mill in the Washburn-Crosby Mill complex.



*The Minneapolis Tribune
June 3, 1880*



*Source: Minneapolis Riverfront
Development Coordination
Board*

In 1913, Washburn-Crosby added a window bay on either side of the monitor at the top of the building, effectively creating a full fifth story. With the addition complete, the building had five vertical sets of arched window openings with decorative headers above each window. The Mill had a corbeled brick cornice at the top of the fourth floor and top roofline.

When flour production declined and Minneapolis lost its lead in the industry, many of the mills closed. Flour was produced in the "E" mill until 1965, when the Washburn-Crosby Mill complex closed in its entirety. Some mills were demolished, and others were vacated, left to decay and prone to vandalism. The Humboldt building served as warehouse space through the late 1970s.

The Humboldt Mill is today part of the Humboldt Lofts Condominiums. Restoration of the mill began in 2001. The arched portion of the windows, once covered with brick, was opened. An Annex building, designed by Julie Snow Architects, was completed in 2003. The Annex building is attached to the renovated Humboldt Mill building on its east side and contains thirty-seven loft-style condominium units in a contemporary structure plus a retail space on the first floor of the Annex.



At Minneapolis' Lakewood Cemetery, an obelisk-shaped monument, erected in 1885, honors the memory of the eighteen men who were killed in the 1878 explosion and subsequent fire. A plaque includes the names of the eighteen millers and engravings of a sheaf of wheat, a millstone, and a broken gear.

The Mill building is a contributing structure in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. In 1983, the Humboldt Mill was designated a National Historic Landmark as part of the Washburn Mill complex.

Minneapolis' Humboldt Mill was named after Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt, a Prussian scientist, naturalist, and geologist whose surname adorns streets and buildings across the country.

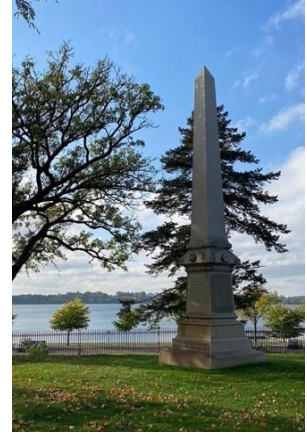


Photo by Lakewood Cemetery