

## Building History

### **A Million Dollar Headquarters**

According to well-known architectural historian Larry Millett, the V-shaped office building at 1667 Snelling Avenue North is “one of the last greatest examples of [Art Deco architecture] in the Twin Cities.” The ‘House that Flax Built’ was created by the Farmers Grain Union Terminal Association as the association’s signature headquarters. Built by the Walter Butler Company in 1947 at the astounding cost of over one million dollars, the office building and detached parking garage/laboratory were designed in a decorative Art Deco style. Though the Ray Gauger & Company is listed as the official architect of record, the building may have been designed by Harry Firminger, a St. Paul architect recognized for his mastery of Art Deco architecture. Unique architectural features include exterior walls joined by curved corners and faced with Indiana limestone and marble, bas-relief panels depicting corn and wheat motifs, and aluminum grills with geometric patterns. The Art Deco design is also present at the interior in the floor designs, elevator doors, and light fixtures – among other decorative elements.

### **Farmers’ Cooperatives: Challenging the Status Quo**

Originally, the building served as the headquarters of the Farmer’s Union Grain Terminal Association, or “GTA,” one of the largest and most successful farmer’s cooperatives in the United States. The GTA was founded in 1938 as a cooperative grain marketing organization for Midwestern farmers. Cooperative farmers’ associations first arose in the nineteenth century, fueled by concerns over low grain prices, high transportation costs, and manipulation of the grain trade by grain buyers. During the late 1800s, farmers attempted to exert control over the marketing and sale of their own grain through the establishment of “cooperative” country grain elevators, in which elevator ownership, profits, and risks are shared between members. By 1908, concerns over the power wielded by large, city-based grain exchanges led a group of Minneapolis-area farmers to establish the first version of the GTA, the Equity Cooperative Exchange (ECE). The goal of the ECE was to weaken the power of large grain exchanges such as the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce by creating a separate market for grain received from country elevators. By the late 1920s, the ECE had become the Farmers Union Terminal Association (FUTA); the FUTA, in turn, joined with the Farmers National Grain Corporation in the 1930s. In June of 1938, assisted by a one-million-dollar loan from the Farm Credit Administration, the FUTA was replaced by the Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association (GTA).

### **The House that Flax Built**

The GTA headquarters building at 1667 Snelling Avenue North shows the success of the organization. Like the earlier cooperatives, the GTA was formed to advance the interests of its members, processing and marketing their grain and grain products. When it started, the organization owned one grain elevator in St. Paul and had branch offices in Duluth, Minnesota and Great Falls, Montana. Within eighteen months it became the largest grain marketing cooperative in the United States and owned dozens of country elevators in Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana. During the early 1940s, the GTA constructed additional terminal elevators in urban areas, acquired two grain elevator companies, and launched a daily radio broadcast that would continue for twenty-five years. By the mid-1940s, the

organization's success in flax trading had supplied the necessary funds for the construction of its headquarters building at 1667 Snelling Avenue, known as 'The House that Flax Built.' The GTA gained international recognition after World War II, when it provided one-fifth of the wheat sent by the United States to Europe in the 'Mercy Wheat Campaign.' By 1952, approximately 150,000 grain farmers were members of the association, which controlled ten terminal elevators and handled over one hundred million bushels of grain per year.

### **The Largest Farmer's Cooperative in the United States**

The GTA's growth continued into the final decades of the twentieth century, as the association purchased and constructed grain elevators and grain processing facilities and acquired companies such as the Archer-Daniels-Midland elevator line, the Froedert Malt Corporation, and Holsum Foods. By 1974, the GTA marketed approximately three hundred million bushels of grain and oilseed per year and oversaw the operations of numerous feed, barley malting and oilseed processing plants spread throughout several states, as well as 119 lumber yards and 550 elevators. In 1983, the GTA joined with the North Grain Growers, Inc. to create Harvest States Cooperatives. Harvest States continued to utilize the GTA headquarters along Snelling Avenue, occupying the building through at least 1993. By 2001, the 'House that Flax Built' was occupied by the Technology and Information Educational Services organization, or TIES.

This building history was researched and written by PVN, a Minneapolis-based consulting company that specializes in the reuse of existing and historic buildings. For more information, contact Meghan Elliott, Founding Principal, at PVN at (612) 843-4140, or [elliott@pvnworks.com](mailto:elliott@pvnworks.com).