



*FIGURE 1. Contemplating the river. Wingdams below Nininger, Minn., 1891. Photo by Henry P. Bosse. Nininger lies just above Hastings, on the west side of the Mississippi River.*

### Novel and Familiar Places

The Dakota warriors who beached their canoes at the mouth of Phalen Creek, below Dayton's Bluff, in 1680, added another story to a deeply storied place. They landed in the shadow of ancient Native American burials on the bluff above and just upstream of the future village site of Kaposia, which their descendants would inhabit over a century later. Their French captives heralded the coming of Europeans, the impending transformation of the river and the addition of many more stories. Neither the Dakota nor the French could have imagined the fill, buildings, mills, railroad yards, and roads that would obliterate Phalen Creek.

Hundreds of places that harbor stories as rich and deep lie throughout the MNRRA corridor. When identified, preserved and interpreted, they possess the power to evoke a sense of romance and adventure, disgust and regret, amazement and community pride. They are places with the ability to teach children and adults about how the environment, landscape and economy of the place in which they live or are just visiting came to be, about what has been lost and what has been gained. They are places that define the identity of many communities within the MNRRA corridor. This study has identified many such places, but many others remain to be discovered and have their stories told.

#### Mis-Placed

People care most about places they can relate to. Unfortunately, too many people have forgotten what their connection to historic sites within the corridor is, or have not had the opportunity to learn about them. Some people may be new residents, from some other city, state or country. Or, the people who had the direct connection may have passed away long ago. The more historically distant a place or event is, the harder people may find it to connect to that place. They cannot feel the sense of place people who once lived there felt. In many cases direct connection is no longer possible. No jobs for log drivers remain. The water-powered flour and timber mills are gone, as are the Dakota villages, the natural river and the natural falls. People today cannot imagine the anticipation and excitement generated by the arrival of the first steamboat at Hastings or St. Paul or Anoka in the 1850s. (Granted, the more ancient a place is, the more romantic or mysterious many people find it.) The challenge today is to recover a sense of place, a sense of continuity. The evaluation, preservation and interpretation of historic sites and places offer a way to meet this challenge.

#### Recovering a Sense of Place

For residents of the Twin Cities metropolitan area, the MNRRA corridor is like a big, old house. It has many familiar rooms that they visit often and know intimately. Other

rooms they do not know as well. Some contain deep closets that they have never explored. Some hide old trunks, treasure chests, that they have yet to open. Each one reveals more about the people who have lived in the house. The smells each one emits, the texture of old clothes, the sight of tattered pictures of people they know, though much younger, and people whose names and faces are a mystery give them a deeper appreciation of the place they call home. The sounds of an old record (if they can find a place to play it) bring alive the voices and culture of another time. Their place is more than they knew it to be, and they value it more. By their association with the contents of each trunk, they are more than they thought they were.

The MNRRA corridor holds places with stories that can evoke all the senses. Imagine the sights and sounds of the glacial River Warren as it plummeted over its limestone bed in St. Paul some 12,000 years ago. People can see that limestone strewn along the valley floor or hanging at the bluff tops through much of the valley below St. Anthony Falls. They can walk up and touch it. They can crumble in their hands the fragile St. Peter Sandstone that underlies the limestone and allowed the falls to retreat. They may not want to imagine the smell of a river so rancid a person would bury her nose in her coat when passing by. Yet by remembering, they may commit themselves to making the Mississippi River cleaner and healthier. Try to imagine the river “free from everything that would render it impure, either to the sight or taste,” as Stephen Long described it in 1817.<sup>1</sup>

People can learn to appreciate what a place meant to someone long ago, and in doing so discover that a place holds a richer and deeper meaning than they had thought. David Glassberg, in his article “Public History and the Study of Memory,” suggests that “By and large tourists look for novelty in a landscape, what is not back home, whereas local residents look at the landscape as a web of memory sites and social interactions.”<sup>2</sup> Historic sites and landscapes in the MNRRA corridor possess the novelty to reward tourists for leaving their armchairs and the continuity to ground residents new and old.

Glassberg contends that “History offers ways . . . to orient oneself in the environment.” Different types of historic sites, he says, “connect stories of past events to a particular present environment.”<sup>3</sup> He uses environment in the broadest sense, meaning one’s surroundings. For people sitting on the riverbank anywhere along the corridor, the environment they see is far different from that which existed one hundred years ago (*Figure 1*). Residents and visitors are surprised to learn that their predecessors could wade across the Mississippi during low water. The idea of a steamboat with a draft of only 24 inches grinding on a gravel bar near St. Paul or Zebulon Pike walking his boats up the shallow, frigid, October river above St. Anthony Falls seems far-fetched. They see the river rise during floods, but they do not comprehend how the dams keep it from falling to its natural low-water stage. People have forgotten why navigation boosters pressed so hard to change the river. And they may not understand what has been lost and what has been gained. Understanding historic sites and their historical contexts is not just about neat places; it is about understanding how we got to where we are today.

Place stories reveal how the area’s relationship to the river has changed over the centuries. As the relationship between the Mississippi River and its inhabitants evolved, people treated it differently, and their concern for how they treated it changed. To the Dakota, the river was a highway and a source of natural resources, which they did not take for granted. The river and places along it (the Red Rock and St. Anthony Falls, for example) possessed spirits they prayed to. Steamboat pilots offered their own prayers to a river they believed had superhighway potential, if adequately transformed. Lumber and flour millers valued the river as a transportation route and for the waterpower offered, and not just at St. Anthony Falls but throughout the corridor. Transforming the river’s physical and ecological character was unquestionably good to them. To railroad builders, the river valley offered a level grade but little more. People began turning their backs to the river. It became a convenient gutter for their mounting quantities of personal and

industrial wastes. As people fouled the river, they tried to get even farther away. The beaches and bathhouses at Harriet Island closed. Few could stand the stench assaulting them if they tried to boat on the river, and some found it difficult to drive near it. To the residents of Little Italy, the West Side, Bohemian Flats and other floodplain communities, the polluted river meant cheap land. They stayed by it, weaving new stories. When Locks and Dams 1 and 2 stopped the pollution from flowing away, St. Paul became the first city on the Mississippi River to build a sewage treatment plant (on the village site of Kaposia). As the water has improved, people have turned to face the river again. A new view of the river is evolving, and the river's history is playing an important role.

Glassberg believes that the river's history can help "residents and visitors alike to see what ordinarily cannot be seen: both memories attached to places and the larger social and economic processes that shaped how the places were made."<sup>4</sup> Here Glassberg is referring to the historic context of a place. Because it would be impossible for this study to detail the individual history of each historically important place, the focus has been on the historic contexts within which many places in the MNRRA corridor gain their historical significance. The Mississippi River we see, hear, touch, smell and taste (many Twin Cities residents drink river water from their taps) is defined by past social and economic processes and by the people caught up in those processes. This is true of the land along the river as well.

This historic resources study reveals the great variety and depth of historic places within the corridor. It is just a beginning. Communicating the stories of those places to the corridor's visitors and residents in a way that helps them connect to the river is an important and challenging task. Identifying and preserving important historic sites and places so that the National Park Service and others can interpret them is equally important and challenging. As Congress found and as this study has reinforced, the MNRRA corridor holds many "nationally significant" historical and cultural resources. Because of their significance,

Congress declared that "There is a national interest in the preservation, protection, and enhancement of these resources for the benefit of the people of the United States."<sup>5</sup> Through research, management and protection of historic resources, and with interpretation, the National Park Service can help MNRRA communities better celebrate their unique and common heritage and share that heritage with regional, national and even international audiences.

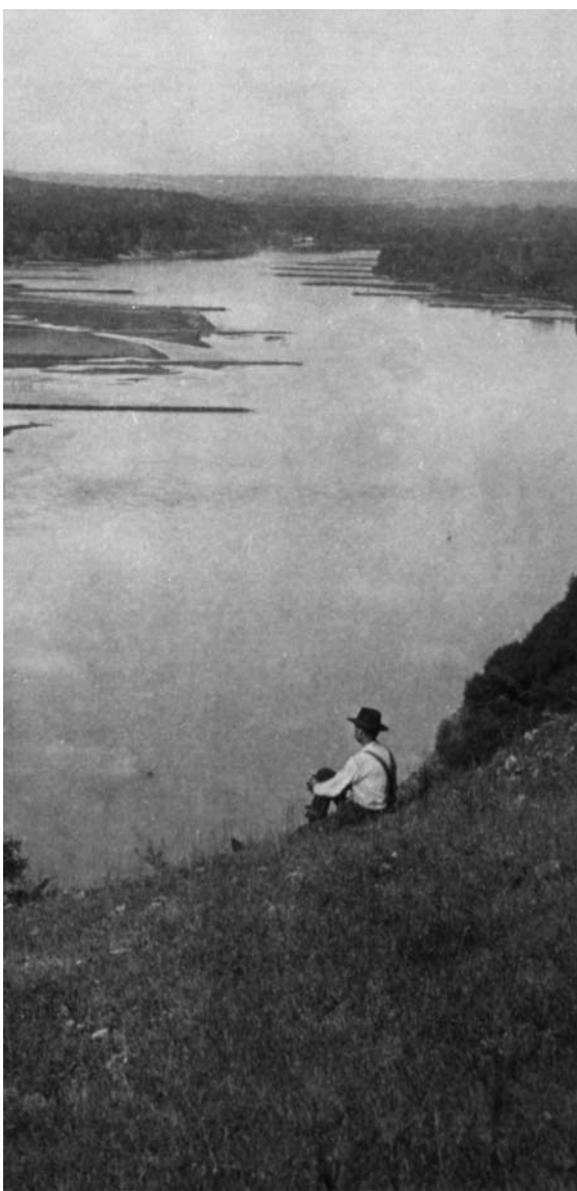


FIGURE 2. Detail, *Wingdams below Nininger, Minn., 1891*. By Henry P. Bosse. *St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers*.