

River of History

A Historic Resources Study of the Mississippi
National River and Recreation Area



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**US Army Corps
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St. Paul District

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JOHN O. ANFINSON

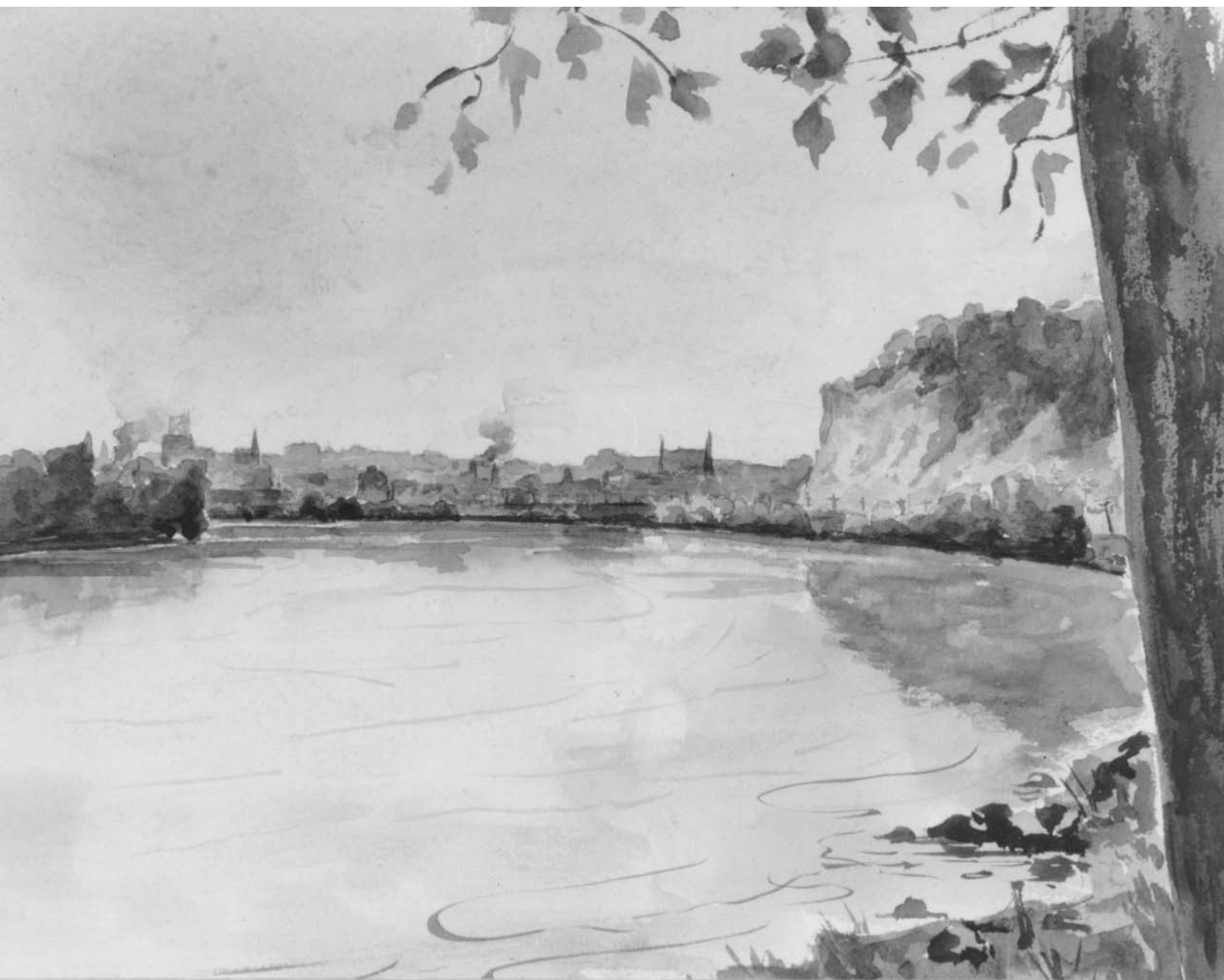


FIGURE 1. Looking upstream at Dayton's Bluff and St. Paul. Artist: Ferdinand Uebel. Minnesota Historical Society.

Preface

River of History

On about March 19, 1680, one hundred and twenty Dakota warriors beached their canoes at the mouth of Phalen Creek, just below downtown St. Paul. Daytons Bluff, with its large, ancient burial mounds, loomed above them to their right. To their left rose the hills and lowlands on which St. Paul rests today. The Dakota had sallied far down the Mississippi River to attack the Miami Indians of Illinois. They returned not with Indian prisoners but three Frenchmen: Michael Accault, Antoine Auguelle and Father Louis Hennepin. The captives had been traveling up the Mississippi hoping to be the first Europeans to discover the river's source and the fabled Northwest Passage, the all-water route to the Far East. They were part of an expedition headed by the explorer Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle. De la Salle, however, had been called back from his base camp near Peoria, Illinois, to Montreal, Canada. The Dakota did not give the Frenchmen time to contemplate their landing site, as they destroyed the Frenchmen's canoes and hurried overland to their villages around Mille Lacs Lake.

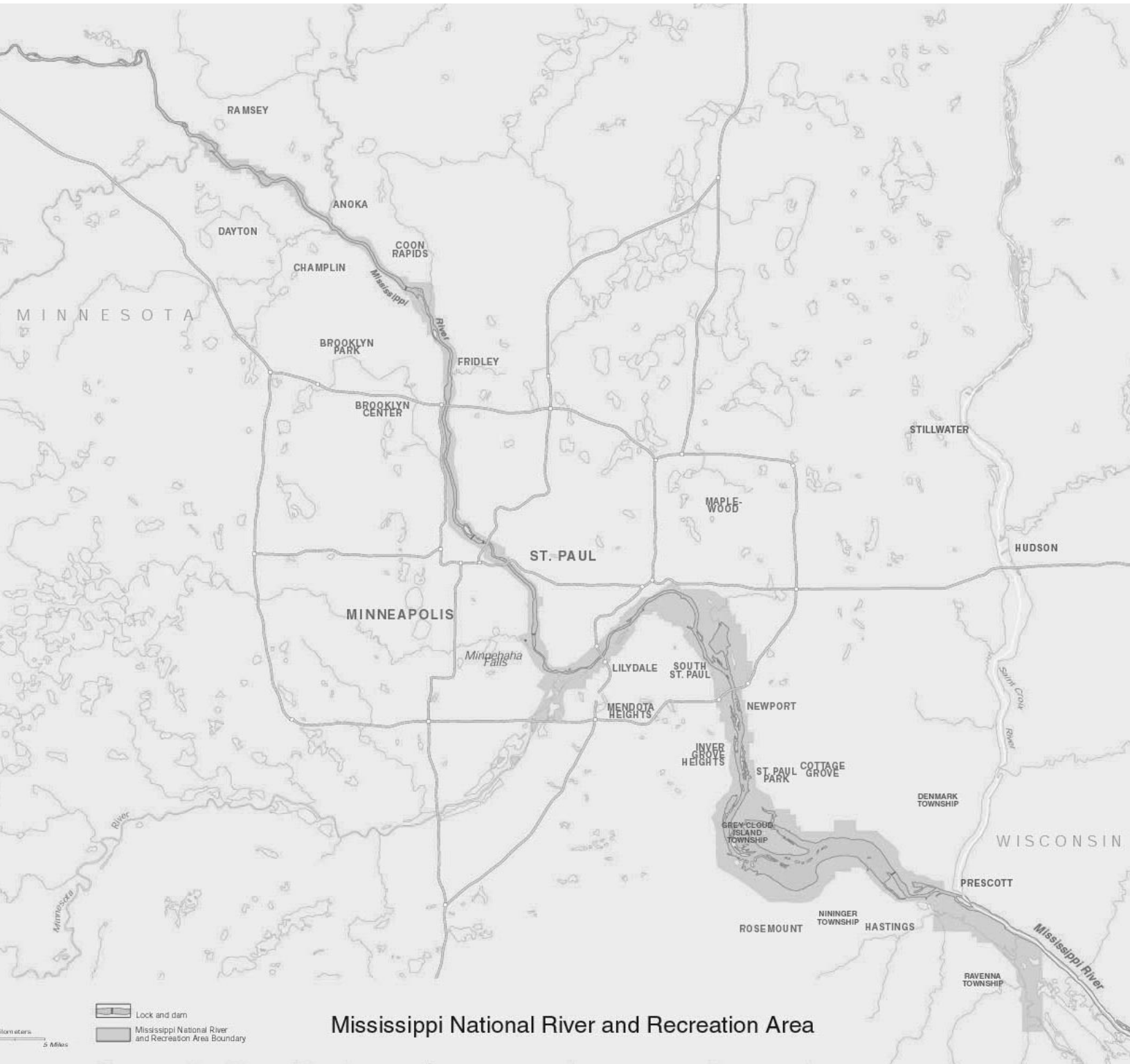
On July 1, 1680, the Dakota, taking the Frenchmen along, left their villages to hunt buffalo in southwestern Minnesota. Traveling in small groups, they rendezvoused at the Rum River's mouth, at what is now Anoka. Hennepin and Auguelle received permission to continue downstream to find de la Salle, who was to have sent supplies and reinforcements. Accault stayed with the hunters. As they pad-

dled with the current, they came to the great falls of the Mississippi, which Hennepin named for his patron saint, Anthony of Padua. Here they witnessed a Dakota ceremony to Oanktehi, the spirit of the falls. The Dakota pleaded for safe passage and success in their battles and headed downstream. The Frenchmen and some Dakota continued downriver well past the mouth of the St. Croix, but did not find de la Salle. The party then headed back to Mille Lacs. Just below the St. Croix, they met Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth (who later claimed he rescued them). In late September, the Frenchmen left the Dakota.¹

The encounter between the Dakota and the French marked a new epoch in the history of the upper Mississippi and in the history of what is now the Twin Cities metropolitan area. For 10,000 years Native Americans had had the river to themselves. From March 1680 forward, Europeans and then Americans would increasingly define human interaction and the river's physical and ecological character. The Dakota and their predecessors left many historically important places telling of their presence. Europeans and Americans would begin adding their own places. Transformed though it is, the place below Daytons Bluff where Hennepin, Accault and Auguelle landed is the first of these and deeply historic (*Figure 1*).

This historic resources study focuses on the archeological and historic resources in that part of the Twin Cities

FIGURE 2. The 72-mile-long Mississippi National River and Recreation Area extends from the confluence of the Crow and Mississippi Rivers at Dayton and Ramsey, south to the Vermillion River bottoms in Ravenna Township, just below Hastings.



Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

metropolitan area now included in the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. This 72-mile-long, National Park Service corridor extends from the confluence of the Crow and Mississippi Rivers at Dayton and Ramsey, south to the Vermillion River bottoms in Ravenna Township, just below Hastings (Figure 2). It also extends four miles up the Minnesota River valley. The corridor covers some 54,000 acres that are filled with places and stories of local, regional, national, and even international significance.

Congress established the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) as a unit of the National Park System (NPS) on November 18, 1988 (Public Law 100-696). In doing so, Congress stated: “(1) The Mississippi River Corridor within the Saint Paul-Minneapolis Metropolitan Area represents a nationally significant historical, recreational, scenic, cultural, natural, economic, and scientific resource.” And, “(2) There is a national interest in the preservation, protection, and enhancement of these resources for the benefit of the people of the United States.”² This study expands the story of the MNRRA corridor’s significance. It also identifies and provides the context for many sites of local and regional significance, sites that illustrate processes and events that tell much about our national development.

Acknowledging the importance of the corridor’s cultural resources, the Mississippi River Coordinating Commission (a MNRRA planning commission established by Public Law 100-696 and which sunset in November 1998) dedicated three of its six guiding purposes to the identification, preservation and enhancement of such resources.

“PURPOSE: Preserve, enhance, and interpret archeological, ethnographic, and historic resources.”

“PURPOSE: Improve the public’s understanding of the river and promote public stewardship of its resources.”

“PURPOSE: Recognize and strengthen people’s relationships with the river as a dynamic part of our heritage, our quality of life, and our legacy for future generations.”³

The significance of historical and cultural resources in the first purpose is clear. Understanding the river better and caring for its resources will follow from knowing the river’s history and the role various places and sites have played in that history. Likewise, knowing the river’s history, knowing what “a dynamic part of our heritage” it has been, will lead more people to care for it and realize what a legacy it is and will continue to be.

Within the NPS, a historic resources study is done for each unit of the National Park system. According to NPS guidance, “A historic resource study provides a historical overview of a park or region and identifies and evaluates the park’s cultural resources within historic contexts.” Historic context defines a site’s significance. This study cannot provide the specific context for every historic site in the corridor; there are far too many. The goal is to offer general contexts in which we can place most of the corridor’s sites. Some contexts are more thoroughly examined than others.

The historic resources study is also supposed to “synthesize all available cultural resources information from all disciplines in a narrative designed to serve managers, planners, interpreters, cultural resource specialists, and interested public as a reference for the history of the region and the resources within the park.” To gather all available cultural resources information for the MNRRA corridor and synthesize it will take many years. We have compiled an inventory of all known archeological and historic sites within the corridor as of January 1998, which will be available from the Minnesota Historic Preservation Office on a need to know basis. Historic preservation law protects specific site locations, but they are generally available to planners and cultural resources specialists as needed. The Minnesota Historical Society’s Historic Preservation Office is the repository for site locations. Each chapter of this study provides a reference for the history of the region and the corridor and offers both specific and general information on the corridor’s resources. Overall, the study is written for a general audience.

Chapter 1, literally and figuratively, establishes the foundation of the MNRRA corridor’s history, for the corri-

corridor's geologic history has closely defined its human history. This chapter explains why the Mississippi River has three dramatically different reaches in the corridor. The upper reach runs from St. Anthony Falls north to Dayton and Ramsey. Here the prairie used to run up to the river. No imposing bluffs line the riverbanks. No sprawling floodplain spreads across the valley floor. Below the falls down to St. Paul, the Mississippi enters its most confined reach on the entire river. This stretch is known as the gorge. Here the bluffs crowd in against the river, allowing little room for a floodplain. Below St. Paul the bluffs get higher and spread apart, hinting at the force created by the glacial River Warren as it sculpted the Minnesota River Valley and the Mississippi River Valley below the Minnesota River's mouth. Here, surviving fragments of the broad floodplain are ecologically rich. In some places along the corridor, geologic layers, millions of years old, lay exposed to see and touch.

As the last glaciers retreated, Native Americans began occupying the MNRRA corridor. While little evidence of their earliest presence remains, there is enough to say they were here. Chapter 2 reviews over 12,000 years of Native American history. Important archeological sites exist within the MNRRA corridor that provide glimpses of life along the Mississippi before Europeans arrived. The burial mounds on Daytons Bluff occupy one of the most dramatic settings in the corridor. Excavated in the nineteenth century, the mounds contained artifacts associated with the well-known and widespread Hopewell Culture (belonging to the Middle Woodland Era, which dated 2,000 to 1,500 years before the present (B.P.)). The Institute for Minnesota Archaeology Consulting wrote Chapters 1 and 2 on contract.

Native American life and the Mississippi River's ecosystems in the MNRRA corridor would change dramatically as Europeans and Americans entered the region. After Father Hennepin's visit in 1680, French fur traders spread quickly through the region, followed later by British and American explorers and fur traders. Traders introduced guns and other goods that upset the balance of power. They induced the Chippewa, Dakota and other tribes to focus on the

beaver, muskrat and other fur bearing animals, changing in fundamental ways their traditional economies and spurring the decimation of many species. The most striking changes would come after the Americans established their sovereignty in 1815. In only 36 years, the Americans forced most of the Dakota out of the MNRRA corridor. Covered in Chapter 3, the events of this era (1680-1851) represent national and international events and processes.

In 1823 the *Virginia* became the first steamboat to paddle up the Mississippi River from St. Louis to St. Paul. In doing so, it signaled a new era. Now traders and settlers could enter the region much more quickly and in greater numbers. As the Dakota and Chippewa lost their lands in the Treaties of 1837 and 1851, pioneers swiftly moved in. The Mississippi was the settlers' primary highway from and to the rest of the world, and they began calling for navigation improvements before the Civil War, with little success. Following the war, as railroads expanded across the river and throughout the region, settlers demanded navigation improvements to provide competition and hopefully reduce railroad rates. Their successful efforts to win navigation projects tie the Twin Cities and the MNRRA corridor to large regional and national events. For this reason and because these projects would physically and ecologically transform the Mississippi River more than any force since the glaciers, this study devotes two chapters (4 and 5) to navigation improvements.

In 1866 Congress authorized the Corps of Engineers to begin dredging, removing snags and clearing trees back from the river's banks. While this work helped, it was not enough to make the Mississippi a reliable highway for commerce. Responding to a national movement for railroad rate control and regional efforts to make the river a competitive alternative to railroads, Congress authorized the 4½-foot channel in 1878. To achieve this depth, the Corps used wing dams and closing dams. The wing dams, made of rock and brush, projected into the river from the shoreline. They focused the river's current into a single channel, like the nozzle on a garden hose being tightened down, so it could

scour away sandbars. Closing dams blocked side channels, directing all available water to the main channel. By 1906 channel constriction (as the Engineers called this work) had radically altered the river's landscape and ecosystems from St. Paul to St. Louis. By 1907, the Corps had completed the Meeker Island Lock and Dam and had begun work on Lock and Dam No. 1. These dams, both above St. Paul, would change the river's flow and appearance up to St. Anthony Falls. Chapter 4 examines the movements for the various navigation projects and the effect these projects had on the river.

Navigation boosters did not stop with these projects. In 1907, they convinced Congress to authorize the 6-foot channel project. Under this project the Corps added more wing dams and closing dams, raised the height of old dams, and extended some wing dams farther into the channel. The river between Hastings and St. Paul became one of the most intensely constricted reaches on the upper Mississippi. Still, railroads drew traffic away from the river. So navigation boosters pushed for more locks and dams. Congress again responded to the calls for navigation improvement. In 1917, the Corps completed Lock and Dam No. 1 near the Minneapolis-St. Paul border, and in 1930, the Corps completed Lock and Dam No. 2 at Hastings. These dams permanently changed the river's physical and ecological character. While Lock and Dam 1 allowed boats and barges to reach St. Anthony Falls, Minneapolis navigation boosters had long hoped to get the boats above the falls, where terminals would not be hemmed in by the bluffs of the gorge. The Upper Harbor Project fulfilled the city's dream. Under this project, the Corps finished the Lower St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam in 1956 and the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock in 1963. Chapter 5 examines the history of these projects.

The most dramatic physical and ecological changes in the Mississippi River occurred from St. Anthony Falls downstream. Private interests, however, built one important structure above the falls. Completed in 1914, the Coon Rapids Dam has a unique history and physically segments the upper corridor. The dam lies at river mile (RM) 866.3,

approximately 16½ miles above St. Anthony Falls (RM 853.9). To build the dam, the Northern Mississippi Power Company established a camp, a "little city," on the Mississippi's east bank in 1913. "Streets were laid out, a store, clubhouse, hospital, office buildings, school, dormitories, new houses, carpenters shops and storehouses were built." As the city met and exceeded the prediction of 1,000 workers, the company added a movie theater, dance hall and billiard parlor.⁴ Chapter 5 looks briefly at this history, as well.

St. Anthony Falls anchors the MNRRA corridor's national significance. The only large cataract on the Mississippi River, St. Anthony was a place of spirituality and power to Native Americans. To early explorers it became a "landmark in the wilderness."⁵ To settlers it represented a different kind of power, a power that when captured would become the economic foundation of a milling center to rival any back East. In this role, St. Anthony would make Minneapolis into the nation's leading lumber and flour milling center. Chapter 6 examines the history of St. Anthony Falls from its birth in St. Paul over 12,000 years ago through its heyday as a timber and flour milling hub to its abandonment after 1930.

Chapter 7 outlines the MNRRA corridor's economic development from flour and timber milling to brick making and beer brewing. It also surveys the development of the corridor's multi-modal transportation system and how that system changed the Mississippi and the relation of the area's people to the river. Unlike Chapter 6, which focused on economic development at St. Anthony Falls, Chapter 7 looks at the growth of business and industry from Dayton and Ramsey to Hastings. The MNRRA corridor's economic history is far too broad and varied to be covered in depth in any one chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of significant events and developments.

Flour and timber milling were important not only at the falls; most communities in the corridor had mills during their earliest years. Flour and timber milling were not the only regionally and nationally significant businesses. At

least three nationally recognized beers had their start in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Grain trading and the stockyards in St. Paul also attracted or yielded nationally recognized firms such as Cargil, Peavey, Swift, Armour, Cudahy, and Wilson.

Flour and lumber milling, grain shipping, the stockyards, brewing, and other industries depended upon the river, at least initially. The river's geologic history defined where these businesses located. Millers used the river for transportation and power and to carry their wastes away. Shippers depended upon the river to haul their grain or to provide an alternative to railroads as a way to keep rates down. The stockyards, to the chagrin of people downstream and to the detriment of the river's ecosystems, cast animal wastes into the Mississippi. And brewers used the valley's natural sandstone caves or excavated their own tunnels and caverns into the bluffs to store their beer. All of these aspects of economic history are discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 focuses on the process of urban growth in the MNRRA corridor. It examines what towns began where, when and why. It is not and cannot be a history of every community, every riverfront neighborhood, along the MNRRA corridor. Urban history in the MNRRA corridor is intimately tied to the history presented in preceding chapters. Geology and geography, the Native American presence, exploration and early military objectives, navigation improvements and economic activities all played a role in determining where towns located, how fast they grew, and how they related to the river. So the corridor's urban history draws on all these stories.

Some chapters in this study are more complex than others, depending upon your background. Chapter 1, on MNRRA's geology, and Chapter 2, on Native American pre-history, present many terms and information unfamiliar to most readers. We have tried to soften the jargon, but some is necessary. You do not need to read this study from beginning to end. However, the early chapters provide a foundation upon which subsequent developments make more sense.

The results of this study reaffirm Congress' decision to

establish the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. From the glacial River Warren to the latest lock and dam, this area harbors places with stories so rich and important they define who we are as a people, where we have come from, what we have to celebrate, and what we painfully cannot forget. The remnants of Native American villages, early European and American sites, and existing structures are more than archeological artifacts, wood, concrete or steel. They embody the local, regional and national trends or events that gave birth to them. They tell stories about the dreams and desires people in the Midwest have harbored since the region's beginnings and about how those dreams and desires shaped the region and reshaped the river.

The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, National Park Service and the St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers jointly produced this study. The study fulfills important historic preservation requirements for both agencies and will help both manage the Mississippi River better.