Remnants of the Built Environment

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One hundred and fifty years of change have left little of Minnesota that would be recognizable to a territorial-era pioneer or Native American. The great pine forests have been cut, the tallgrass prairies are agricultural fields, and the Big Woods exists only in small patches. St. Anthony Falls, once regarded as “a landmark in the wilderness,” is now a concrete spillway. The junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, known as Mendota to the Dakota, is the heart of a sprawling city. The estuary of the St. Louis River, where walleyes spawned in great abundance, is an international port where thousand-foot ships take on cargoes of wheat, coal, and taconite. A grid of tar, gravel, and concrete highways covers the state. Even the sky has intrusive contrails of jet aircraft.

There are a number of places in Minnesota, however, where remnants of territorial days still exist, places where you can stand and see what Henry Sibley, Little Crow, and Hole-in-the-Day saw. There are traces of roads and trails once traveled by wooden wheels. There are houses where the night was lit only by the embers of the fireplace, tallow candles, and kerosene lamps. There are remnants of forts, prisons, mills, missions, hotels, and
churches where the best and worst of Minnesota’s early written history occurred.

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) at the Minnesota Historical Society keeps records of the state’s structures and sites that have historic value. According to SHPO records, at least 225 buildings have survived since territorial days (1849–58). Of these, about 150 are houses. The remainder are commercial, industrial, farm, and public buildings, schools, churches, military structures, fraternal-organization lodges, and even a lighthouse. Some look very much like they originally did, and some are in ruins. Most are still in their first locations, but some have been moved. Some have been restored, some are unrestored, and others, significantly rebuilt.

It is more difficult to quantify the thousands of archaeological sites from territorial days. A listing of some prominent ones—where ruins are visible, where archaeological excavations have been carried out, and those on the National Register of Historic Places—would contain perhaps 50 sites. A more complete tally would include every village, every hunting, gathering, or special-use site, and every burial ground utilized by the Dakota and Ojibwe from 1849 to 1858. It would count every log cabin or dugout site, every fur post, every cemetery, every mill site, and every road used by early white settlers.

The preservation of territorial historic properties allows us reach out and touch the past, not just read about it. It allows us to view craftsmanship from an age when handmade was the rule, not the exception. It allows us to better understand ways of life during a time when daily survival was a matter of hard work, wise choices, and more than a little good luck. A sampling of surviving Minnesota territorial properties appears below. A complete listing can be seen in the SHPO office.*

**TERRITORIAL PRISON, STILLWATER**

As you drive north out of downtown Stillwater on State Highway 95, look to your left. Across from the railroad depot stand two old factory buildings in a small notch in the bluffs of the St. Croix River. If you look closely, you’ll notice that parts of the notch are lined with massive stone blocks forming a u-shaped wall. If you look even more closely, you’ll see ruins of masonry walls poking out of the gravel parking lot. These are the remains of Minnesota’s former territorial prison.

In 1849 the first territorial legislature selected Stillwater as the prison site. Two years later, four acres were purchased in a swampy hollow near the north edge of town. The first warden, Frank R. Delano, was selected in 1853, and the first structures were erected: a prison building surrounded by a 14-foot-high wooden wall and, just south of the wall on a higher elevation overlooking the prison, the warden’s house. In 1854 the first prisoners arrived. The following year, the grounds were drained and a workshop was constructed.

There are no photographs of Minnesota’s first prison, so it is difficult to describe it exactly, although prison records give us the basic arrangement and materials. All of the buildings were constructed of

limestone from local quarries. The main building, which contained the cell blocks, was three stories high, 45 feet long, and 30 feet wide. Nearby, within the walls, were a workshop and an office.

Until abandoned in 1914, the prison went through many changes. Major additions and new buildings were constructed in each decade. All of the original buildings except for the warden’s house were torn down in 1871. The grounds were continually expanded and the walls rebuilt until the prison occupied the entire hollow. A massive stone wall completed in 1892 linked with the bedrock bluffs on three sides and bridged the gap of the hollow on the river side.

There were no famous prisoners in territorial days, at least none of such notoriety as the members of the James Gang, sent to Stillwater in 1876 after their ill-fated Northfield raid. Most territorial convicts were thieves and murderers, both men and women. They were generally well treated but were used by area manufacturers virtually as slave labor. (Wardens were local businessmen until 1891 when the first professional penologist, Albert Garvin, was appointed.)

When a new prison was finished at Bayport just south of Stillwater in 1910, the old facility was gradually abandoned, with the last prisoners being transferred in 1914. The front wall of the prison was torn down in the 1920s, opening the first clear view to the inside from the street in nearly 70 years. In 1936 WPA crews demolished all of the prison buildings except for the shoe factory and leather warehouse.

The warden’s house, the only standing structure from territorial days, is now occupied by the Washington County Historical Society. Foundations of the early prison buildings can be seen in the gravel parking lot within the walls just northeast of this building. Caves that once stored food and other supplies pockmark the bedrock walls. Current plans are to turn the two remaining state prison buildings into a hotel.

GIDEON AND AGNES POND HOUSE, BLOOMINGTON

Along the bluffs of the Minnesota River just southwest of the foot of Portland Avenue in east Bloomington near the Mall of America is a small brick house hidden from 104th Street by a screen of trees. This house was built in 1856 by Gideon and Agnes Pond. Gideon and his brother Samuel had arrived in Minnesota in 1834 to be Christian missionaries to the Dakota. The brothers established their first mission at Lake Calhoun in what was to become Minneapolis, associating themselves with Mahpiyawicasta’s (Cloud Man’s) band of Mde-wakan-ton Dakota. In 1836 Gideon went to Lac qui Parle mission in western Minnesota, where he married Sarah Poage. He returned to Lake Calhoun in 1839, but conflict with the Ojibwe was making any area north of the Minnesota River dangerous for the Dakota. When Cloud Man and his people moved south, the Ponds followed them. Gideon and Sarah established a new mission on the north bank of the Minnesota River in 1842. They called this mission Oak Grove, and there they spent the remainder of their lives.

The Ponds first built a small log building on the top of the bluff overlooking the majestic river valley. When the Dakota were forced to cede their lands west of the Mississippi River to the United States in 1851, the missionaries decided to stay at Oak Grove and minister to white settlers. They built a pre-
Gideon and Agnes Pond, about 1854

Sarah Pond died in 1853, and Gideon married Agnes Hopkins the next year. In 1856, using brick that they made themselves at a nearby kiln, Gideon and Agnes Pond built a new house adjacent to their cabin. They dismantled the mission and used the timbers to build a barn. Gideon Pond served as the minister to Oak Grove Presbyterian Church until his retirement in 1873. He died in 1878 at the age of 68. Agnes Pond died in 1915 at the age of 90.

The Pond family has continually occupied the Oak Grove site in Bloomington since 1842. Richard St. Martin, Gideon and Agnes Pond’s great-grandson, still lives in the brick house, although it became the property of Bloomington in 1975. The city plans to develop the site as a historic facility, where the interpretation will extend beyond the house and the Ponds.

The Gideon and Agnes Pond house site is more than a standing structure. It is a complex of historic resources that could tell us much about territorial life in Minnesota. Archaeological loci include the mission house, the pre-emption cabin, the kiln and clay pits, and a variety of farmstead buildings. Cloud Man and his people lived on the lower terrace at Oak Grove and buried their dead on the upper terrace near the mission. Excavation of the lower-terrace village could reveal much about the Dakota during this period of great change.
The Oak Grove site is not a place to commemorate just territorial pioneers. It needs to be a place of healing. Most missionaries who journeyed to Minnesota to minister to the Dakota and Ojibwe were good people with good intentions; they hoped to make the lives of the Indians better. In retrospect, however, by attempting to destroy Indian religion and belief systems, they did more to harm Indian culture than Euro-American soldiers and settlers. Some Dakota remember Pond’s friendship. Others remember his “mission.”

Gideon and Samuel Pond developed the first Dakota alphabet in 1836. Working with missionaries Stephen R. Riggs and Thomas S. Williamson, the Pond brothers published the *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language* in 1852. Gideon Pond started the first Dakota newspaper, the *Dakota Friend*, in 1850. The Ponds established close friendships with Dakota people. Gideon and Agnes Pond raised a loving and hard-working family in territorial Minnesota. These accomplishments are all worthy of celebration at their Oak Grove home.

**THE RAMSEY AND GARDNER MILLS, HASTINGS**

Minnesota once led the world in flour production. This accomplishment was not due to the state’s agricultural prowess; others produced much more wheat. It also cannot be credited exclusively to the well-known mill owners in Minneapolis. The success story of Pillsbury and General Mills begins with territorial millers. It begins in southeastern Minnesota at Faribault, Dundas, and Hastings.

No visible remnants of territorial milling survive in Faribault. In Dundas, the low ruins of the first Archibald Mill (1857) can be seen only through careful examination of an island in the Cannon River. In Hastings, however, Minnesota’s territorial flour-milling legacy is clearly visible. The high wall ruins of the Ramsey Mill stand on the banks of the Vermillion River in a city park across from the Minnesota Veterans’ Home. Just upstream, the remains of the Gardner Mill are embedded in the giant Conagra Mill.

In 1856 Alexander Ramsey and Thomas Foster built a four-story limestone flour mill in the scenic gorge of the Vermillion River. They called it the Hastings City Mill, but it became known as the Ramsey Mill. By that time Ramsey had served as the first territorial governor from 1849 to 1853. Foster, a physician who had arrived in Hastings in 1851, was his close friend and political ally.

Ramsey was not involved in the day-to-day work of the mill; it was leased to operators. The business
was not especially successful, particularly in territorial times. Ledger books from 1857 and 1858 reveal that it sold limited quantities of wheat flour and corn meal. When Minnesota became a state in 1858, the Ramsey Mill was one of more than 80. Ten years later, some 200 flourished in the state. Ramsey sold his interest in the mill in 1877, and it burned in December 1894. It was not rebuilt.

A smaller and earlier mill had been constructed in Hastings in 1853 on the north bank of the Vermillion River, immediately adjacent to the waterfall at the head of the gorge. Built by Harrison Graham and William Le Duc, this mill was three stories tall with a gable-roofed upper story of wood and two lower stories of limestone. Le Duc became sole owner in 1856 and enlarged the mill. Stephen Gardner bought it in 1863 and significantly rebuilt the structure, incorporating the earlier mill into the new building. It was Gardner who is credited with introducing early middlings purifiers, a milling innovation that was copied elsewhere in Minnesota. The Gardner Mill was acquired by the Peavey Company in 1928 and by Conagra in 1973 and currently is one of the most productive in the world. The remains of the earlier Le Duc and Gardner mills can be seen near its downstream end, the gable outline clear below the modern flat roof.

Citizens of territorial Minnesota knew that in order to be taken seriously by easterners they needed more than productive wheat fields and pine forests. Minnesota needed to process its resources if it were to gain national and international influence. The ruins of the Ramsey Mill, its high stone walls open to the sky, are a powerful symbol of Minnesota’s past when almost every town had a flour mill.

The remains of the Gardner Mill, though more subtle to behold, have, perhaps, a more powerful meaning. The technology of flour milling had been brought to America from Europe, where centuries of wheat growing and grinding had resulted in slowly accepted innovations. The millers of southeastern Minnesota rapidly improved the process, and when these innovations were introduced into the massive mills of Pillsbury and Washburn-Crosby (General Mills) at St. Anthony Falls, Minnesota flour gained markets and respect throughout the world.

MINNESOTA POINT LIGHTHOUSE, DULUTH

The western shore of Lake Superior was sparsely populated when the Ojibwe ceded northeastern Minnesota in the 1854 Treaty of La Pointe. The fur trade had collapsed in the 1830s and trading posts had been abandoned. There were Ojibwe villages at Grand Portage, Beaver Bay, and Fond du Lac, near the mouth of the St. Louis River, and seasonal fishing stations at Grand Portage, Grand Marais, Encampment River, and, again, Fond du Lac. With the signing of the treaty, hundreds of
white settlers and prospectors staked claims along Minnesota’s North Shore, but when rumors of rich mineral deposits proved false and the financial Panic of 1857 hit, the tide of settlement temporarily waned.

The promise of a great port at Duluth, however, did not wane. As the agricultural fields of Minnesota and the Dakotas boomed and white pine forests yielded their great trees, eastern cities demanded the wheat and lumber. Moving products east was difficult before railroads reached the region. The Great Lakes offered an attractive water route, although the violent storms, cold water, and rocky coastline of Lake Superior were well known to sailors even in the mid-nineteenth century. Ways had to be found to make shipping safer.

At the mouth of Duluth harbor lies Minnesota Point, one of the longest bay-mouth sandbars in the world. In 1854 the St. Louis River swept east around Minnesota Point before it entered Lake Superior. This was the only entry into the great inner harbor at Duluth. Promoters immediately recognized the need for a lighthouse to guide sailors to the harbor entrance.

In 1855 the federal government appropriated $15,000 to build this lighthouse on the eastern end of Minnesota Point. Completed in 1858, it stood 50 feet high and was constructed of red brick shipped from Cleveland. Whitewashed mortar covered the brick to make the tower more visible. A 10-foot-high wooden turret with four large glass windows and a glass-paneled door capped it. Inside the turret was a kerosene-powered light with French-made lenses. A brick light keeper’s house was constructed adjacent to the tower.

In 1870 the city of Duluth ordered a channel cut through Minnesota Point near its western
end to give ships more direct access to the city's inner harbor. Although the eastern (Superior, Wisconsin) entrance grew steadily less popular, shifting sands at the east end of the point required the construction of a new light station in 1878 a quarter of a mile to the east. The lenses from the old lighthouse were moved to the new Superior entry, and the old Minnesota Point lighthouse was abandoned. The wooden turret, the interior stairway, and the light keeper’s house were also removed in 1878.

Over the last 120 years the Minnesota Point lighthouse has fallen into ruin. Only 35 feet of the tower still stand, the uncovered top layers of brick gradually succumbing to the freeze-thaw cycle. A thick patch of poison ivy hampers access to the broken cylinder. Though its light is gone and its tower shattered, the lighthouse still shines bright in importance. The Minnesota Point lighthouse was the first high-powered light beacon on Lake Superior. It was a landmark that became the zero point for all of the initial surveys of the lake. It allowed safe passage into a little-known harbor at the head of Lake Superior, a harbor that is now one of the busiest in the United States.

**TERRITORIAL ROADS**

When Minnesota became a territory, it already had an extensive network of overland transportation routes. Most of these were Indian trails. Largely impassable by wagons, they did not necessarily make the linkages required by Euro-American settlers. What may have been the first built road in Minnesota, linking the Falls of St. Anthony with Fort Snelling, was constructed by soldiers in the early 1820s.

Cart trails were developed in the 1830s to connect Fort Snelling, the head of steamboat navigation on the Mississippi River, with Euro-American settlements on the Red River in southern Canada. Known as Red River trails, these routes followed river valleys where possible. Major Red River trails went south from Winnipeg on both sides of the Red River and then diverged into three main routes across central Minnesota: the Minnesota Valley Trail along the Minnesota River, the Middle Trail along the Sauk River, and the Woods Trail along the Crow Wing and Mississippi Rivers. These had many spurs that offered local route options based on the weather or time of year. Red River trails featured very few improvements such as bridges, grading, or filling.

With the signing of the area’s first major Indian treaty in 1837, the land between the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers, known as the St. Croix triangle, was opened to white settlement, and the need for roads increased. Loggers developed an informal network in the triangle, linking sawmills and river landings to stands of white pine.

In the early 1850s when additional Indian treaties ceded more land, Minnesota’s population began to increase rapidly, and the new settlers demanded better roads. Congress
appropriated $40,000 in 1850 to construct “military” roads in Minnesota Territory; additional appropriations were passed in 1852, 1855, 1856, and 1857. Five major roads were specified in these appropriations: the mouth of the St. Croix River (Point Douglas) to the mouth of the St. Louis River (Superior); Point Douglas to Fort Ripley; the mouth of the Swan River (Little Falls) to the Winnebago Agency (Long Prairie); Mendota to Wabasha; and Mendota to the mouth of the Big Sioux River (Sioux City, Iowa). The Treaty of La Pointe in 1854 had also specified that roads be built from the mouth of the Rum River (Anoka) to Lake Mille Lacs and from the mouth of the Crow Wing River north to Leech Lake.

Surveys for the military roads began in late 1850, starting with the Mendota-to-Wabasha road. By the time of statehood in 1858, the authorized military roads had essentially been completed, although their condition and passability varied greatly. The worst section was the northern portion of the Point Douglas-to-Superior road. Like the Red River trails, the military roads followed favorable topography and existing trails wherever possible, but significant bridge building, swamp filling, and timber clearing were also done. Road beds were 25 to 50 feet in width with 100-foot cleared right-of-ways.

Local road-building initiatives were also common in territorial days. William Dodd got contributions to build a road from Traverse des Sioux (Nicollet County) to St. Paul in 1853. The Mendota-to-Big Sioux military survey crew encountered this road and drew their survey line along it. The alignment through Dakota County, still largely intact, is known today as Dodd Road. Stagecoach roads funded by private developers also began around this time, and by 1859 a network connected most towns in southeastern Minnesota.

While many territorial roads became state highways and county roads, there are not many places where the actual roads survive. Perhaps the best example of a Red River Trail segment is on the western edge of Goose Lake Swamp in Pennington and Polk Counties. A well-preserved segment of the Point Douglas-to-Superior military road is present in St. Croix Wild River State Park in Chisago County. In Kandota Township of Todd County, off County Road 92, is a surviving segment of the St. Cloud and Red River Valley stage road.

Unless maintained, the built environment goes back to nature. Historic buildings become ruins, and ruins become archaeological sites invisible at the earth’s surface. Walls and artifacts are precious resources. They demonstrate that the past is real, that the stories told in history books are more than stories, and that there are more stories than the books can hold. People lived in those houses, worked in those mills, traveled those roads, paced in those prison cells, and lit beacons in that tower to welcome white-winged schooners to a new world.

Territorial stories are pivotal to Minnesota history. In those 10 years, the transformation from “wilderness” to metropolis irrevocably began. The lives of native peoples, and those who came after, were changed forever. As we view those years, we must also view the present and decide what we will leave to the future. The fragile fabric of the past is a gift well worth giving.