

# Secrets in the Landscape

## 1 Ravines

Visit Mulberry St., ½ block west of Fourth St.

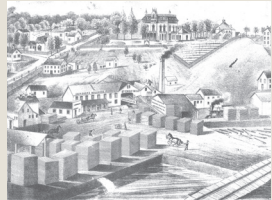
More than 10,000 years ago, a thick layer of glacial ice covered this region. The receding glaciers carved the steep bluffs and deep ravines that characterize Stillwater today. Natural and manmade activity shaped the ravines further. During the town's early years, street collapses and landslides were common along the steep slopes of the ravines. These accidental openings in the landscape and many of the natural ravines were filled to stabilize the landscape and create streets and building sites.



ca. 1932

## 2 Isaac Staples House

509 North Second St., at what is now Pioneer Park



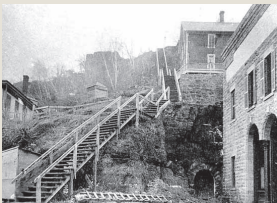
ca. 1874

Atop the natural bluffs in the North Hill neighborhood, the Staples House was built in the 1870s. From this elevated location, Isaac Staples could look down and see his St. Croix Mill near the river. The bluffs not only provided a commanding view, but also created a barrier from the smoke and noise that the mills produced.

## 3 Public Stairs

For instance, Chestnut St. between N Third and Fourth Streets

Early surveyors designed Stillwater's streets in a grid with little regard to the steep terrain. Extensive grading during the early decades of the settlement did little to improve the problem. Residents created footpaths to shortcut some of the city's hills until the first public stairs appeared in the 1870s. These wooden stairways linked residential areas atop the bluffs with the commercial district below. Wooden staircases were later replaced with stone and concrete.



ca. 1873

## 4 Point of Land

The riverfront at the end of Mulberry St.

Flooding and landslides reshaped Stillwater's landscape over the years. In 1852, heavy rains overwhelmed the dam at Lake McKusick, causing a landslide. The landslide flowed through the Mulberry Street ravine with enough force to move trees, bury buildings, and destroy a significant portion of the town. Debris deposited in Lake St. Croix created eight to ten acres of new riverfront in the vicinity of present-day Mulberry Point. A steamboat landing and additional riverfront land for mill construction resulted.

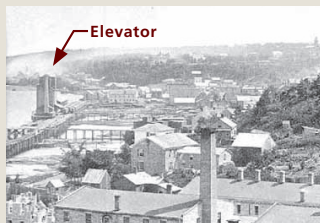


1879

## 5 Union Elevator

Lowell Park, north of the Commercial St. pedestrian plaza

In the late 1870s, the Union Improvement & Elevator Company constructed Stillwater's first grain elevators at the end of the Stillwater & St. Paul railroad tracks. Hovering above the St. Croix River, the grain elevator easily transferred wheat from barges to railcars for shipment north. At its peak, the elevator stored up to 300,000 bushels of wheat. The entire elevator complex burned down in 1898, just a few years before the lumber industry collapsed. Only remnants of the brick foundation and chimney stack footings remain today.



ca. 1875

## 6 Lowell Park

201 N Water St., downtown on the waterfront

Lowell Park didn't always look as it does today. Years ago this was a pivotal location in Stillwater's lumber industry. Imagine a place without sidewalks, landscaping, and the pavilion. Mills and



ca. 1920

factories rose around railroad tracks that divided the landscape. Following the decline of the lumber industry, the riverfront transformed. The initial development of Lowell Park in 1911 represented the city's new recreation and tourism focus.

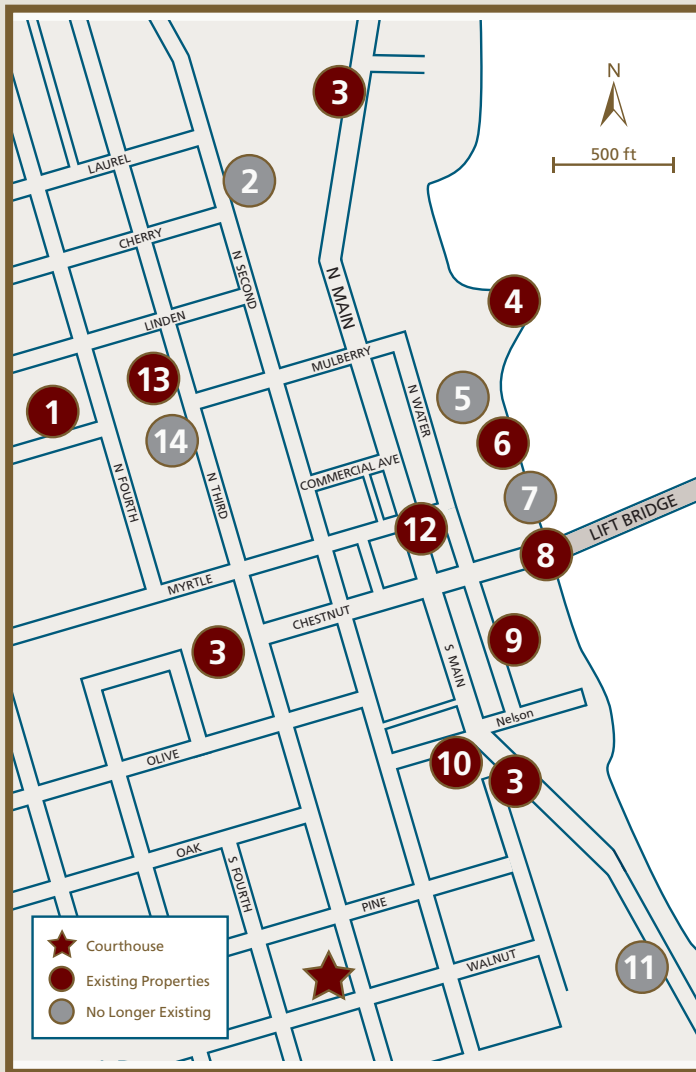
## 7 Stone Levee

Along the waterfront at Lowell Park

The riverfront was bustling spot with steamboats bringing passengers, freight, and mail. An early levee constructed between Myrtle and Chestnut streets protected the city from flood waters. A stone wall at the river's edge reinforced the levee between Chestnut and Nelson streets after 1875. By 1900, sixty years of accumulated sawmill waste covered the levee. Local lumbermen donated the land and, in 1913, the city began building a concrete seawall. Today, the stone levee sits approximately 3 feet east of this existing concrete wall.



ca. 1872



## 8 Lift Bridge

Crossing the river from E Chestnut St.

Stillwater shifted from an industrial town to a tourism destination focused on the river. The 1918 Plan of Stillwater was a blueprint for the town's new focus. The plan proposed new riverfront uses and introduced the idea of Stillwater as an automobile tourist destination. Although this specific plan was not implemented, the City's transition to a tourist destination continued. This resulted in the removal of the remaining industrial buildings, repurposing of historic buildings along Main Street, and development of the scenic landscape as an attraction. When the lift bridge opened in 1931, it became the centerpiece of the "new" riverfront and a gateway to the city.



ca. 1931

## 9 Freight House

Along S Water St., between Nelson St. and Chestnut St.

Rough roads and steamboats were the only way to reach Stillwater until area business leaders organized the Stillwater & St. Paul Railroad in 1867. This and other railroads provided reliable transportation for industry and secured Stillwater's position as a lumber center. Built in 1883, the



ca. 1976

Freight House bridged the two main forms of commercial transportation, connecting both with riverboats and railroads that ran alongside the river.

## 10 Brewing and Caves

Southwest corner of Nelson and South Main St.

Conditioning and storing beer requires consistently cool temperatures. In the era before refrigeration, caves offered this benefit for free. The Joseph Wolf Brewery (pictured), established on this site in the late 1800s, used the natural caves in the bluff to its advantage. (The Aiple Brewery did the same about 1/2 mile south and the Gerhard Knips' Brewery used the caves at the north end of downtown.) At its peak, this brewery produced more than 5,000 barrels of beer per year.



ca. 1912

## 11 Slab Alley

S Main St., below the St. Croix Boat & Packet Co.

Slab Alley, a two-block row of about 20 dwellings built in the 1870s, accommodated seasonal lumber workers and their families. The name may have derived from the lumber, or "slabs," piled around a lumber mill. The neighborhood lined the bluffs across Main Street from the Hersey & Bean Lumber Company. A road widening project demolished the neighborhood in 1932. Archeological investigations from 2004 to 2005 studied Slab Alley's working class population during the height of the lumbering industry.

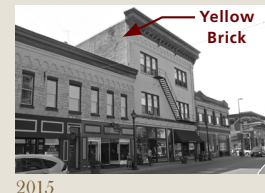


ca. 1932

## 12 Local Clay, Local Bricks

112 South Main St.

The young town needed building materials to grow. Fortunately, on the south end of town, nature provided good clay for bricks. Frederick Steinacker opened the first brickyard in Stillwater in 1859. At its peak, Steinacker's brickyard manufactured about 200,000 bricks per year, mining the clay, molding, drying, and firing at Lily Lake. Because local clays turned yellow during the firing process, they stood out from imported bricks. Look for them throughout downtown, and here at 112 South Main Street.



2015

## 13 Retaining Walls

Mulberry St. and N Third St.

Gray and buff colored limestone is a prominent feature of Stillwater. Stone quarries opened throughout the city soon after settlement. One of the most common uses for limestone was to secure edges of steep streets. Wooden pickets capped some of the limestone retaining walls. Others featured wrought- or cast-iron fences. Retaining walls respond to the landscape—some are just a few layers of stone while others reach several feet high. You can still see many of these walls today.

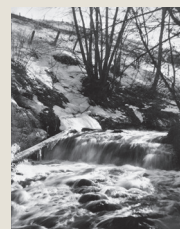


Stillwater quarry, ca. 1888

## 14 Engineering

Formerly down Mulberry St., including at the intersection of N Third St.

Few water resources could compare with Stillwater's spring-fed creeks. The city's engineering office began developing plans in the 1870s to take advantage of this natural resource. During the following years, the city channelized, straightened, and deepened the ravines and creeks. Lake McKusick became the city's drinking water reservoir, while the canal down the ravine and flume (on present day Mulberry Street) was closed. Buildings covered several creeks in downtown Stillwater. The city's modern water distribution system is an extension of this early network.



ca. 1922

# Secrets in the Landscape

## Uncovering Stillwater's Hidden History



Historic photographs are used with permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The publication of this field guide fulfills requirements of the St. Croix River Crossing Project.

(www.discoverstillwater.com).

To find information about restaurants and accommodations, contact Stillwater Convention and Visitors' Bureau.

Preservation Office (www.mnhs.org/shpo/local/hpc.php).

Other local HPC's can be found through the State Historic local preservation outreach, and public education activities. (www.stillwater.mn.us/hpc) conducts community history.

The Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission.

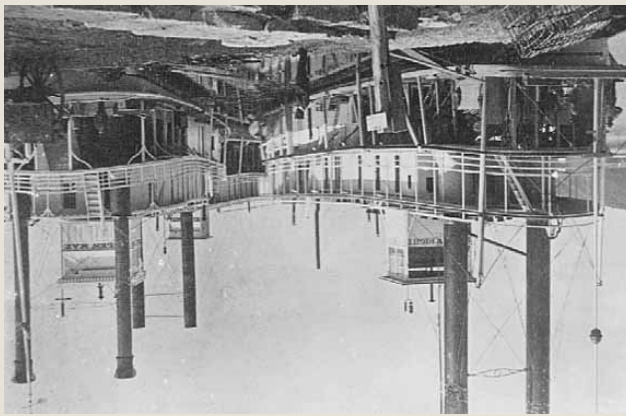
River Crossing Project (www.dot.state.mn.us/stcroixcrossing).

To learn more about Stillwater's past, visit the Washington County Historical Society (www.wchsmn.org) and the St. Croix River Crossing Project (www.dot.state.mn.us/stcroixcrossing).

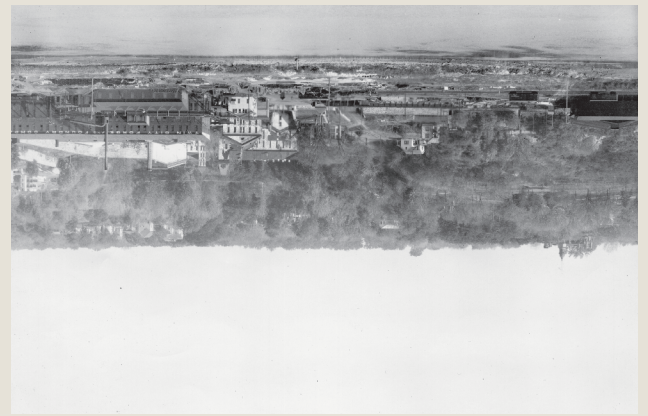
This guide was developed by Minnesota Department of Transportation, available online at www.dot.state.mn.us/.

For more information

ca. 1872



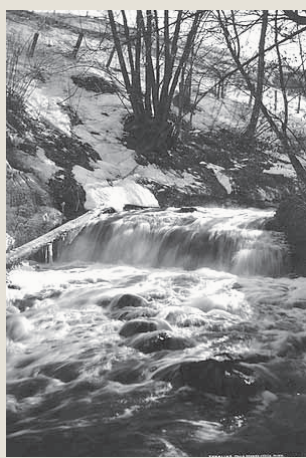
ca. 1910



# Secrets in the Landscape

People have long used Stillwater's landscape to their advantage and shaped it to their needs. From the cool caves of the limestone bluffs to the steady river, discover the relationships between the landscape and the history of the city as you explore hidden features of Stillwater's Cultural Landscape District.

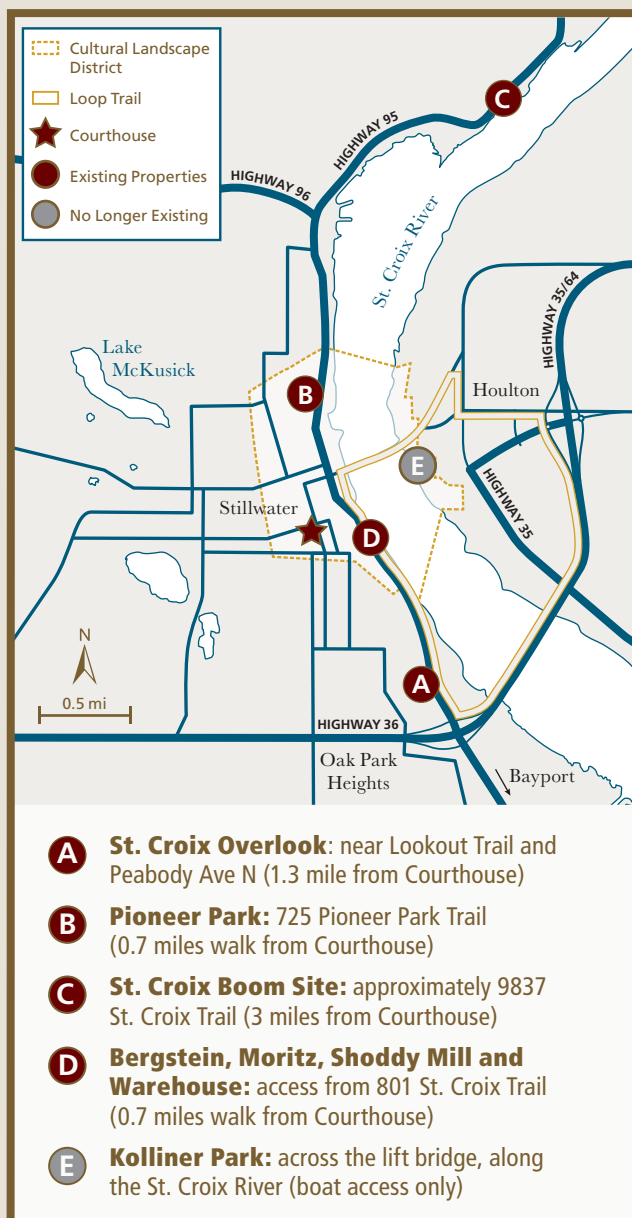
## Storied Landscapes



Stillwater's historic core and the natural landscape that forms it are defined together as the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District, eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register defines a cultural landscape as "... an expression of human adaptation to and use of the natural resources of an area." Stillwater's story provides a particularly clear expression of that interplay of place and people, but many of those stories are buried in plain sight. By visiting the sites on this tour—buildings, ravines, gutters, and crumbling walls—you will begin to find stories in details that may otherwise seem insignificant. Practice being a landscape detective. Please note that some properties on the tour are private and should only be viewed from the public sidewalk.

### First People

The first people in this area found a mix of dense forests and grassy prairies edging up against the steep bluffs carved by the river. The Dakota people lived here and encountered the first French fur traders. In addition, the Ojibwe people utilized the St. Croix River. The location that is now called Stillwater was a bowl-like basin (still evident in the view from the city's overlook, marked on the inset map as **A**, and at Pioneer Park, marked as **B**) that was a natural gathering area. It was an area rich in wildlife, a great place to camp and



meet. Archaeological evidence supports written records of generations taking advantage of this landscape and its bounties.

### Entrepreneurs and Settlers

By the mid-1840s, new people were pushing into the area and seeking opportunities.

One early observer noted that the steep bluffs dissected by ravines and gullies were not an ideal setting for a town, but a "perfect situation for sawmills." Within a few years, John McKusick and his partners opened the town's first operating mill. The town grew.

### Challenging Landscape

In Stillwater's early days, heavy rains frequently led to flooding and landslides that buried settlers' houses and damaged businesses. The lumber industry, however, relied on the high water. In the fall, logging crews living in Stillwater were sent north to log over the winter. In the spring, when the river level rose with the rain, loggers called "river pigs" drove the logs down the river. "Boom tenders"—loggers who worked on the water—stopped logs at the St. Croix Boom Site (**C**), one of the state's earliest and most important log storage and handling areas. Here workers stored, sorted, measured, and floated millions of logs downriver to Stillwater's mills.

### River Town

Stillwater became a picturesque destination on riverboat cruises up the Mississippi River to the St. Croix River. Access to water transportation also supported businesses and

shipping, making it possible to get goods from the East and to sell products made here. By the 1870s, this access increased as railroads came to town. Stillwater boomed as a diversified business center, with agriculture as well as manufacturing from windows to steam engines, from flour to furniture. Even the waste from industry created its own jobs, as the Bergstein, Moritz, Shoddy Mill (relocated in 2012 to **D**) recycled rags into mattress stuffing.

### From Lumber to Tourism

Stillwater saw dramatic changes in the early 1900s when the lumber industry collapsed, affecting the economy as well as the appearance of the riverfront. Stillwater gradually embraced recreation and tourism as its new economic driver. The redesign of the riverfront into Lowell Park in 1911 marked the transition from an industrial to a recreational focus for the city. The construction of the lift bridge created a gateway for automobile traffic and scenic drives brought tourists from around the region. It also created a connection to land donated to the city across the river to serve as Kolliner Park (**E**), with remnants of the swimming beach.