



**The Stillwater Cultural Landscape District
Stillwater, Minnesota**

Minnesota Department of Transportation

2011

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Prepared for the
Minnesota Department of Transportation
Office of Environmental Stewardship

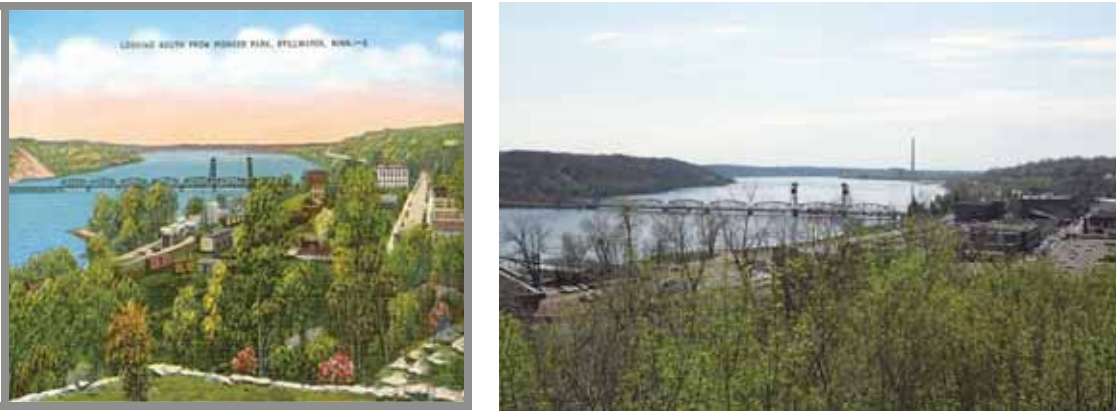
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2011

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Looking downriver over the Stillwater Lift Bridge and Lake St. Croix from Pioneer Park, 1935 (left); May 2010 (right)

Cover, top: looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010
Cover, bottom: looking upriver from the S. Main Street stairs, April 2010



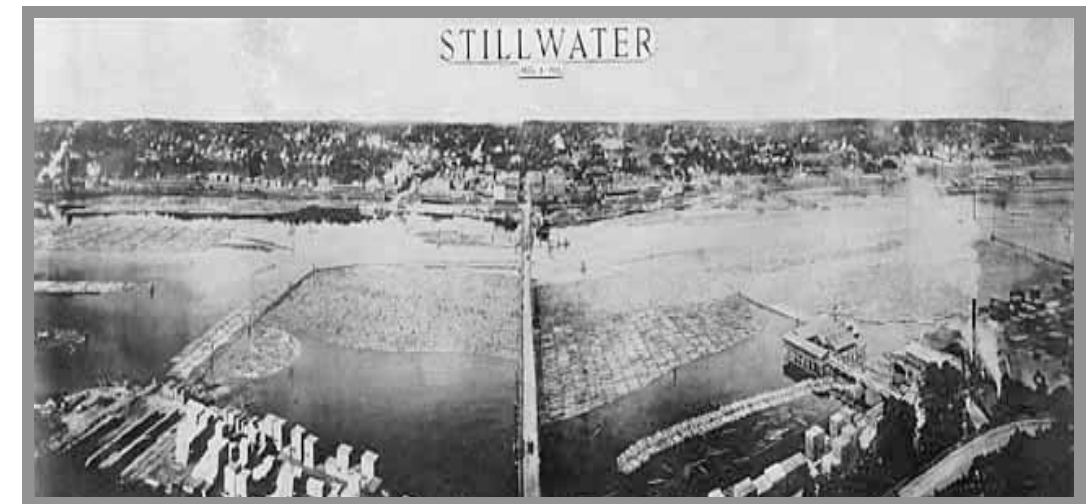
Introduction

The Stillwater Cultural Landscape District

Stillwater's cultural landscape is anchored by its Lake St. Croix setting and building traditions shaped by the lumber industry. As part of planning for the proposed St. Croix River Crossing Bridge, the Minnesota Department of Transportation commissioned this study to document the city's unique community landscape and further define the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District. Historic and contemporary photographs provide a framework for understanding, appreciating, and conserving the unique cultural landscape and historic character still evident today.



Top: Stillwater, looking west up Chestnut Street from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010; above: detail of view



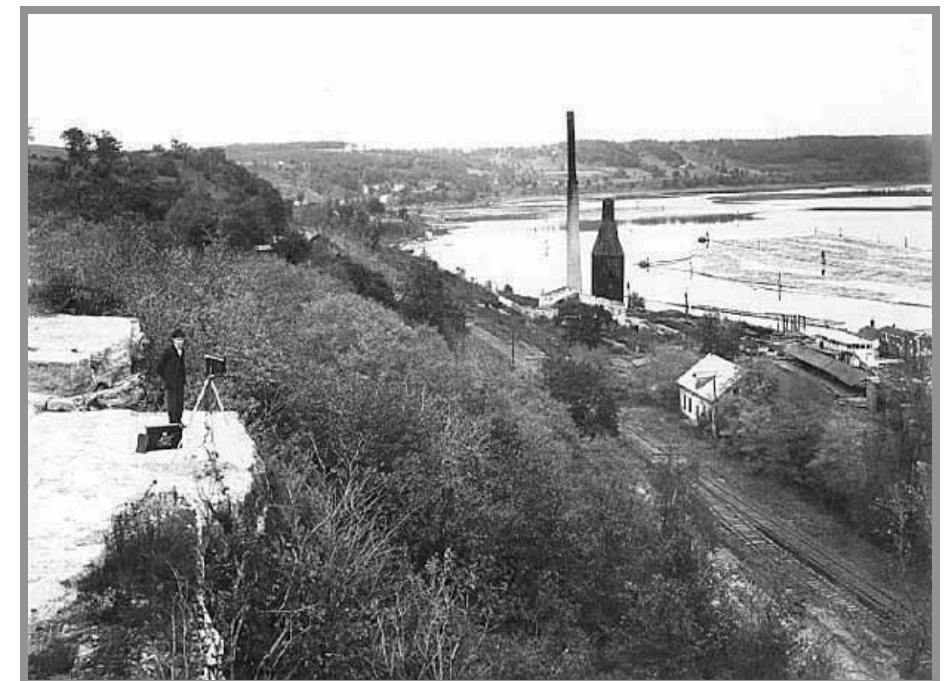
Stillwater from the Wisconsin side of Lake St. Croix, 1902



Stillwater is one of the oldest cities in Minnesota. Founded on land formerly belonging to the Ojibwe, a succession of European and American explorers and New England lumber prospectors were drawn to the level shoreline set below steep, rocky ledges and forested bluffs. This sandy point on the western shore of Lake St. Croix commanded a view of a broad, smooth sheet of water flowing to the south. Beginning in 1843 with John McKusick's riverfront mill, and for more than fifty years, this would prove an ideal setting for sawing and transporting an enormous volume of white pine harvested in Wisconsin and Minnesota forests.

Surveyors drew the original townsite plat in 1848 and the next year Stillwater was selected as the seat of Washington County. When the second Washington County Courthouse was placed atop Zion Hill in 1869, it announced the city's continuing significance as an important axis of the "St. Croix Triangle" lumber economy.

Despite its location on Lake St. Croix—a setting praised by some steamboat visitors seeking scenery—early investors focused on Stillwater's industrial potential. For New England lumber dealers, the riverfront offered an exceptional location for sawing and shipping lumber. In addition to mill, factory, and steamboat sites, the riverfront would also offer a platform for rail construction connected to a national network. Sheltering bluffs offered some degree of separation from the smoke and noise of industry, but everything that happened in Stillwater's industrial and commercial district was visible from the bluff edges: business owners looked directly down on their enterprises from their spacious residences. As the stage of one of the state's leading lumber centers and a supply depot for the St. Croix Valley, the city's riverfront was continually remodeled to serve industry. The first generation of simple frame houses and stores were replaced by districts of worker's houses as well as high-styled houses crafted for the owners of sawmills, banks, and manufacturing companies. On Main Street, Italianate and Queen Anne Style commercial architecture still reflects the robust economy that enjoyed its peak during the 1880s. The St. Croix Log Boom closed in 1914 and city leaders began to seek new uses for unused industrial land. New businesses, residences, and public space now fill spaces occupied by former sawmills and factories. Since 1931, when logging no longer dominated the river, the Lift Bridge at the foot of Chestnut Street has been the centerpiece of the city's downtown riverfront.



Nineteenth- and twentieth-century tourists were inspired by vistas of the city nestled in its bowl-like setting, and photographers such as John Runk (shown above in 1910) perched on the highest points to capture the big picture. Stillwater's history is anchored in these views. Historic images, as well as contemporary panoramas, help to understand the evolution of the city's past and present cultural landscape setting.

What is a Cultural Landscape?

Stillwater’s cultural landscape is a complex and dynamic system of natural and built features that reflect its unique settlement history. The term *cultural landscape* defines the relationship between the city’s historic features and the contextual setting of the broader St. Croix Valley. The National Park Service defines a cultural landscape:

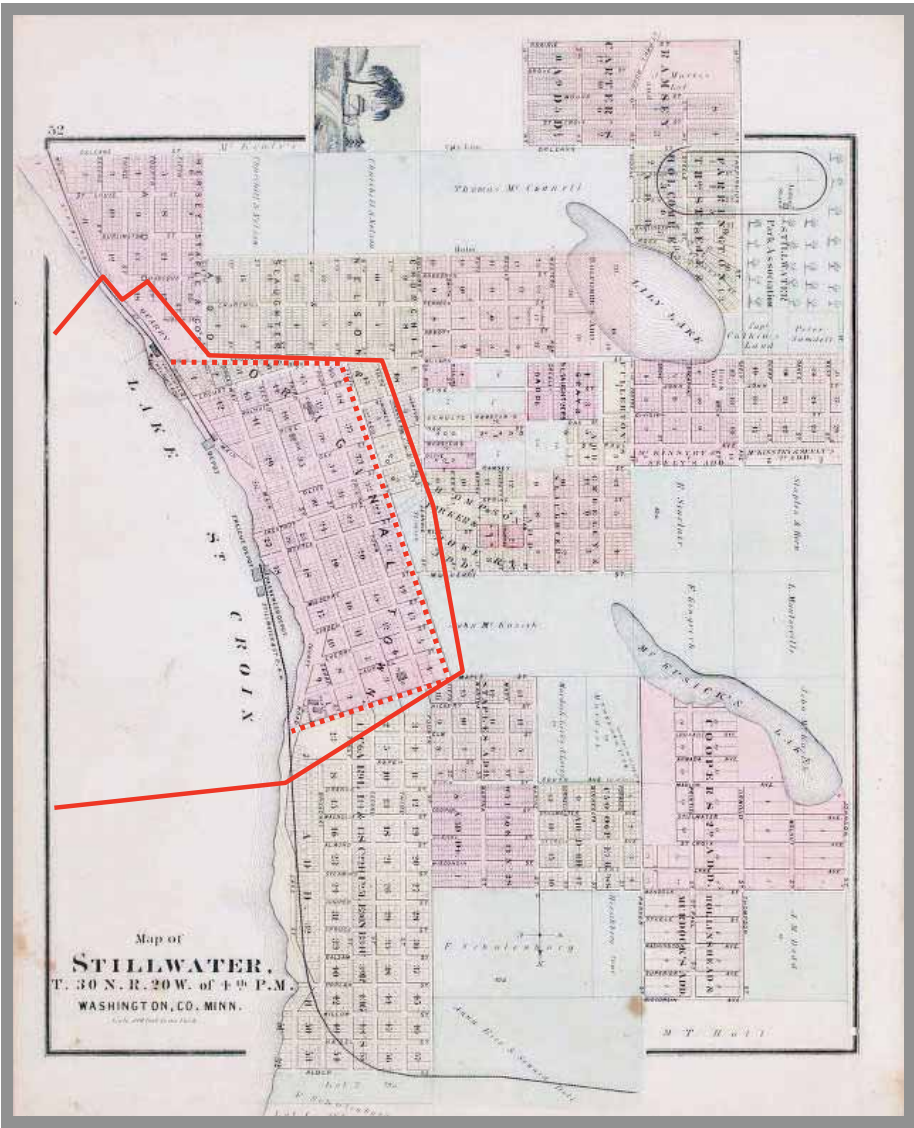
... a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources, associated with an historic event, activity or person. In the broadest sense, a cultural landscape is an expression of human adaptation to and use of the natural resources of an area.¹

The Stillwater Cultural Landscape District (SCLD) is anchored by the city’s bowl-like, natural basin, which is defined by bluffs, ravines, streams, terraces and the river shoreline. Outstanding examples of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture along N. and S. Main Street and in blufftop neighborhoods further define aspects of its setting and character. Historic architecture, however, is only one component of the broader landscape of vast Lake St. Croix, which also includes steep slopes framed by forest and ledge, and views of distant hillsides and water.

Many studies of the surrounding environment, including historic and visual resources and the cultural landscape, have accompanied the proposed construction of a new St. Croix River Crossing Bridge south of Stillwater. The *Cultural Resource Investigation for the St. Croix River Bridge* (1999) prepared for the Minnesota Department of Transportation determined the boundary of the SCLD.² Additional studies included archaeological sites and viewsheds. The SCLD boundary generally follows the alignment and area of the Original Plat of the Town of Stillwater (1848) and includes viewsheds located up, down, and across the St. Croix River. The city’s early industrial, commercial, and residential development is concentrated within this area. Some buildings date from the pre-Civil war period and hundreds of others trace the city’s progress into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bluffs, ravines, and the river’s edge reflect historic constraints and current assets for development. This rich composite of natural and manmade features shapes today’s Cultural Landscape District.



N. Main Street from the N. Main Street stairs, May 2010



J. T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 1874

By 1874, real estate investors had added many new blocks to the Original Plat of 1848. The Stillwater Cultural Landscape District (SCLD) is primarily defined by the Original Plat boundaries. The district boundary also extends across Lake St. Croix where it follows Kolliner Park and includes the Lift Bridge and its earthen causeway (not shown on map).

Original Plat Stillwater Cultural Landscape District —

Stillwater Cultural Landscape District

More than 250 properties have been determined to be contributing to the significance of the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District, including dwellings, commercial and industrial buildings, public stairways, and an archaeological site. The Stillwater Commercial Historic District (containing 82 resources) and the Stillwater South Main Street Archaeological District are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and eleven other properties within the district are individually listed on the National Register (see list, below right).

The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is the official federal list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. National Register properties have significance to the history of their community state, or the nation. Some of these properties are also locally designated by the Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission.³



Stillwater Cultural Landscape District Boundary ——— N ▲
United States Geological Survey [USGS] Stillwater Quadrangle, 1967, rev. 1993
Boundary Source: St Croix River Crossing Project 2006 Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, Fig. 11-6



S. Main Street from the S. Main Street stairs, 2011

National Register Properties within the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District:

- Stillwater Commercial Historic District (portion shown above; 82 resources in the vicinity of Main, Second, and Chestnut streets)
- Stillwater South Main Street Archaeological District
- Stillwater Lift Bridge over the St. Croix River
- Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Depot and Freight House, 305 S. Water Street
- Roscoe Hersey House, 416 S. Fourth Street
- Austin Jenks House, 504 S. Fourth Street
- Ivory McKusick House, 504 N. Second Street
- St. Croix Lumber Mills/Stillwater Manufacturing Company, 318 N. Main Street
- William Sauntry House, 626 N. Fourth Street
- William Sauntry Recreation Hall, 625 N. Fourth Street
- Territorial State Prison Warden's House, 602 N. Main Street
- Washington County Courthouse, 101 W. Pine Street
- Mortimer Webster House, 435 S. Broadway

Stillwater’s Natural Landscape:

Water

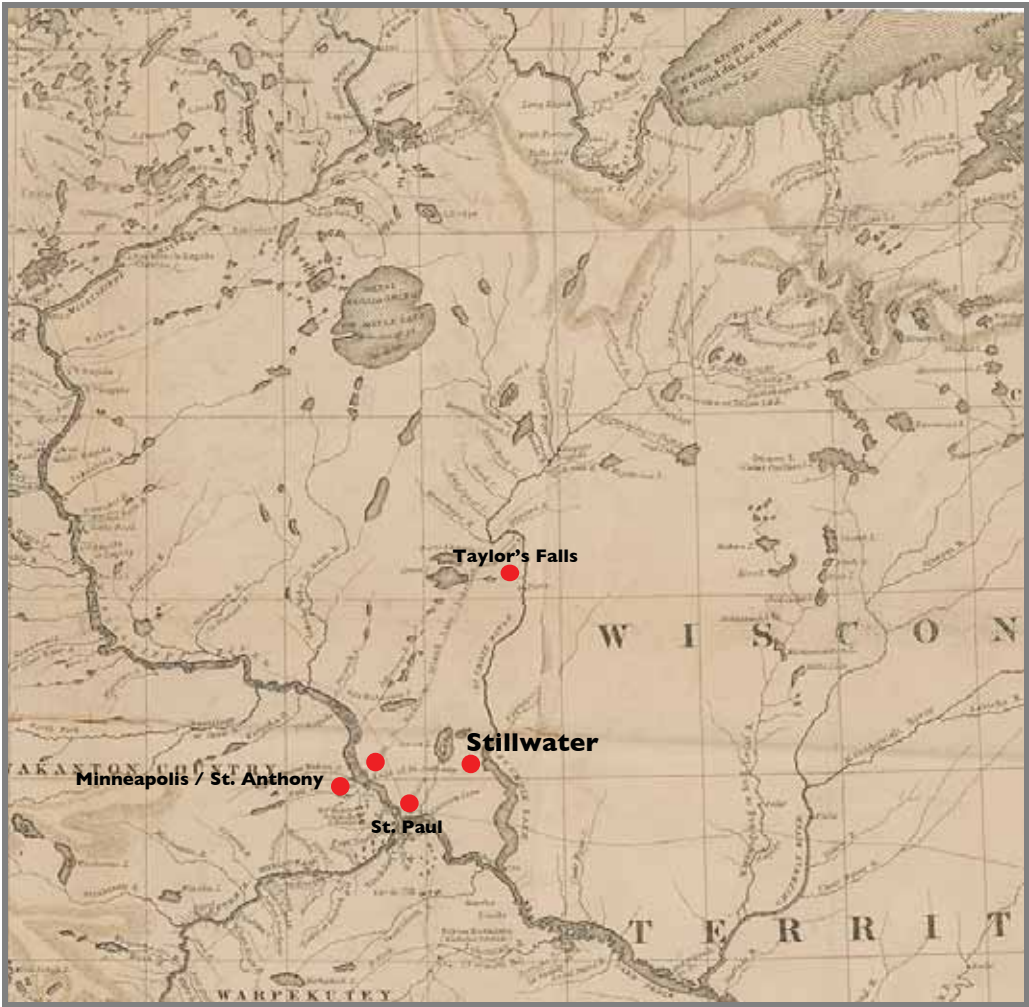
In 1843, Stillwater’s founders chose a sawmill site on a narrow plateau below steep bluffs on the west side of Lake St. Croix. The lake is a smooth-surfaced, 24-mile long widening of the St. Croix River extending south from Lookout Point at Stillwater to Prescott, Wisconsin. As evidenced by its many sandbars, it continues to fill with sediment from its advancing delta and tributary streams.^{iv}

The St. Croix River winds about 160 miles from the northwestern corner of Wisconsin out of Upper St. Croix Lake in Douglas County. It joins the Namekagon River in Burnett County, Wisconsin. The river forms the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin for another 130 miles and meets the Mississippi at Prescott. Its major tributaries flowing from the west are the Kettle, Snake, and Sunrise rivers. The St. Croix River watershed drains more than 7,760 square miles and originates in a northern spruce and pine forest, before flowing southwesterly through prairie and hardwood forests. The Apple, Willow, and Kinnickinnic rivers flow from the east. The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, which includes the Namekagon River and the Upper St. Croix, was established as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968. The Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway was added in 1972.^v This ecosystem supports diverse fish and invertebrate species as well as many types of wildlife.

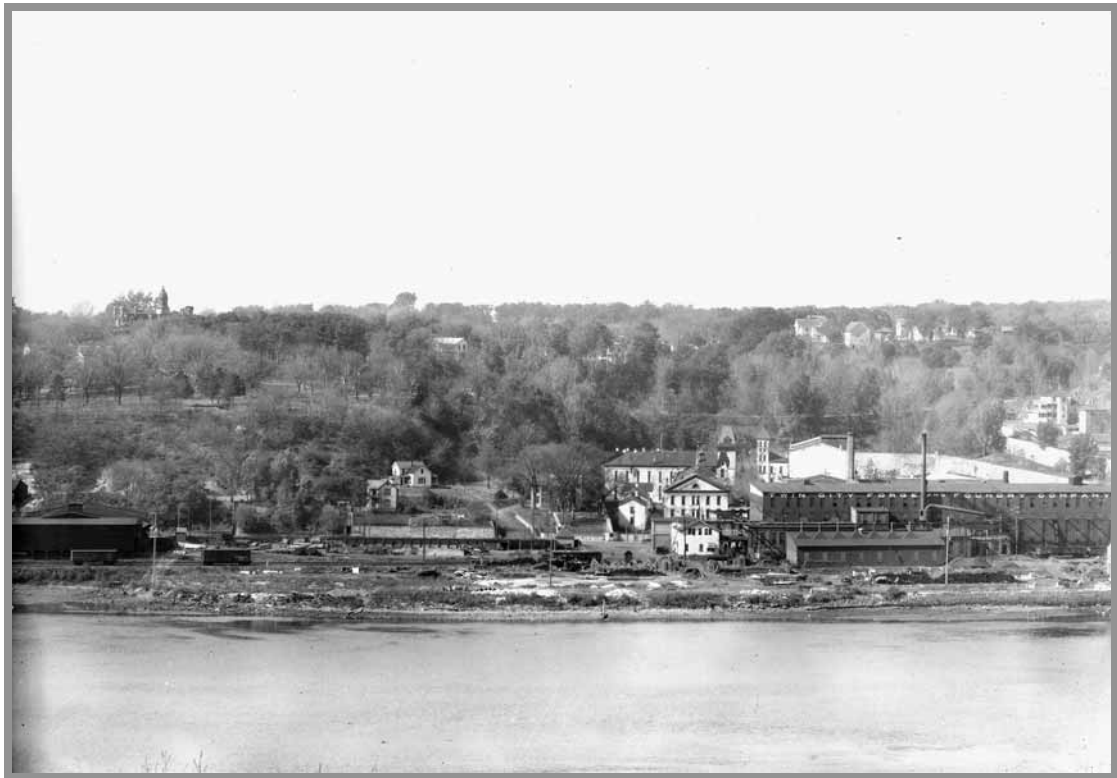
The Dalles of the St. Croix, located about 40 miles north of Stillwater at Taylor’s Falls, separate the Upper and Lower St. Croix. At this point there are narrow, bluff-framed stretches of river, including some marked by deep potholes and sheer rock walls rising more than 200 feet. The Lower St. Croix, which includes Lake St. Croix, is set in a broad valley with bluff lines typically set well back from the river. Stillwater’s viewshed to the south extends downriver beyond Bayport, Minnesota and offers long vistas of the low bluffs along the Wisconsin shoreline.



Looking upriver from the Stillwater Bridge, May 2010



A portion of the *Map of the Hydrographical Basin of the Upper Mississippi River* by Joseph N. Nicollet (1786-1843). This was the first detailed map of the northern headwaters and shows a wealth of Ojibwe and Dakota place names. It was published in 1843 after Nicollet’s 1836 exploration of the Upper Mississippi and St. Croix. (City locations added for reference.)



In 1844, mill developers directed water from Lake McKusick through a flume to power the now-razed Stillwater Lumber Company located between Myrtle and Mulberry streets. The success of this riverfront sawmill encouraged industrial investment and, until 1914, Lake St. Croix remained a steady conduit for the supply of rafted lumber. Since the construction of that first sawmill, the riverfront has been modified many times by floods and landslides as well as by new mills, factories, railroads, bridges, and parks.

At left, a portion of the sprawling riverfront property of the Twin City Forge and Foundry Company below North Hill is shown in 1910. Above, high water in April 2010 frames a flooded riverfront pavilion. Lowell Park, new housing and commercial buildings now occupy the site of former mills, factories, and railroads.

Shallow, 46-acre Lake McKusick provided waterpower for Stillwater’s first sawmill. The lake is perched more than 175 feet above Lake St. Croix near the center of the city and is drained by Brown’s Creek, which empties into the St. Croix at the city’s northern boundary. Most of the other small creeks and seeps that flow across steep slopes and through deep ravines have been channeled into the modern sewer system. The city’s early municipal spring-fed water system was distinctive, and in 1909 a writer remarked, “few cities in the country can boast of such an abundance of spring water that it is used for fire protection.”⁶



Lake McKusick, 1925



Lake McKusick, 2010

Spring floods and resulting landslides have reshaped Stillwater’s recent landscape. Record floods occurred throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the epic flood of 1966 outranking all others. Interest in improving and channelizing the river was introduced in the 1870s, but with little result. In 1900, the United States Army Corps of Engineers improved navigation by providing a 3-foot channel at low water from Taylor’s Falls to the Mississippi River. The 9-Foot Channel Project authorized by Congress in 1935 included 24 miles of the St. Croix. The St. Croix’s transition from industry to recreation occurred over many decades. In 1938 the Corps opened Lock and Dam #3 on the Mississippi River (upriver from Red Wing). Navigation Pool #3 resulted, and extends 24.5 miles up the St. Croix. Lake St. Croix is now flat to a point just north of the Stillwater Lift Bridge.



Stillwater aerial view, 1938. The *Guide to Minnesota* described the river in the 1930s when it was still recovering from years of carrying log debris and industrial waste: “old, nearly submerged floating logs . . . remnants of lumbering days, are frequent in the water.”⁷



Stillwater riverfront, 1930



Lift Bridge at high water, 1960

No town or city in the United States is better supplied with good and wholesome springs . . . Every few rods may be seen a pure spring gushing from the hillside and dashing onward over its gravelly bed.

J. Wesley Bond, *Minnesota and its Resources* (1857)⁸

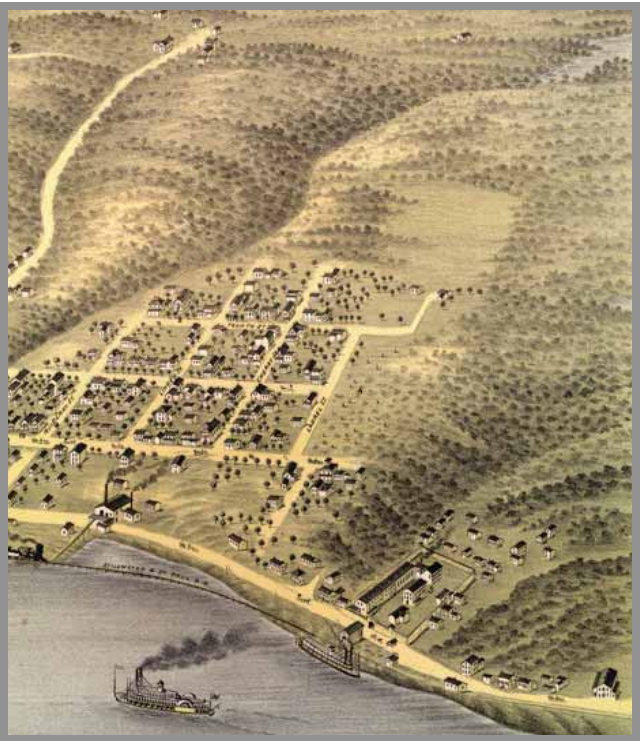
Bluffs, Ravines, and Outcrops

Stillwater’s steep bluff-and-ridge landscape and bowl-like river setting result from the retreat of the last glacier more than 10,000 years ago. The deep ravines edging the city’s hills were conduits for glacial meltwater flowing to the river. Soils traveling down Brown and McKusick creeks filled in the basin of the present-day townsite and created an alluvial fan along the riverfront. In 1843, John McKusick and his partners began a dam at Lake McKusick and built a flume to transport water directly to their riverfront sawmill. In 1852, when heavy rains breached the dam, the resulting landslide that rushed through the Mulberry Street ravine permanently deposited a six-acre island of fill into Lake St. Croix. A steamboat landing and additional riverfront land for mill construction resulted. During this period, street collapses and landslides along the city’s steep slopes and ravines were common. In 1918, landscape architects Morell & Nichols identified the ravines for potential use as public open space. Their *Plan of Stillwater* proposed that the ravines would “make a truly grandiose system of natural parks . . . rarely surpassed in splendor anywhere.”⁹

Today Stillwater’s ravines define the city’s neighborhoods and districts. Early real estate investors laid out many streets on paper without regard for the city’s steep slopes: at first, road builders skirted the primary ravines and dozens of smaller ones that drained the bluff lines. Later, portions of some ravines were filled and stabilized to create streets and building sites. Some streets were never opened or dead-end, and a few—built on the steepest grades—are closed to winter traffic.



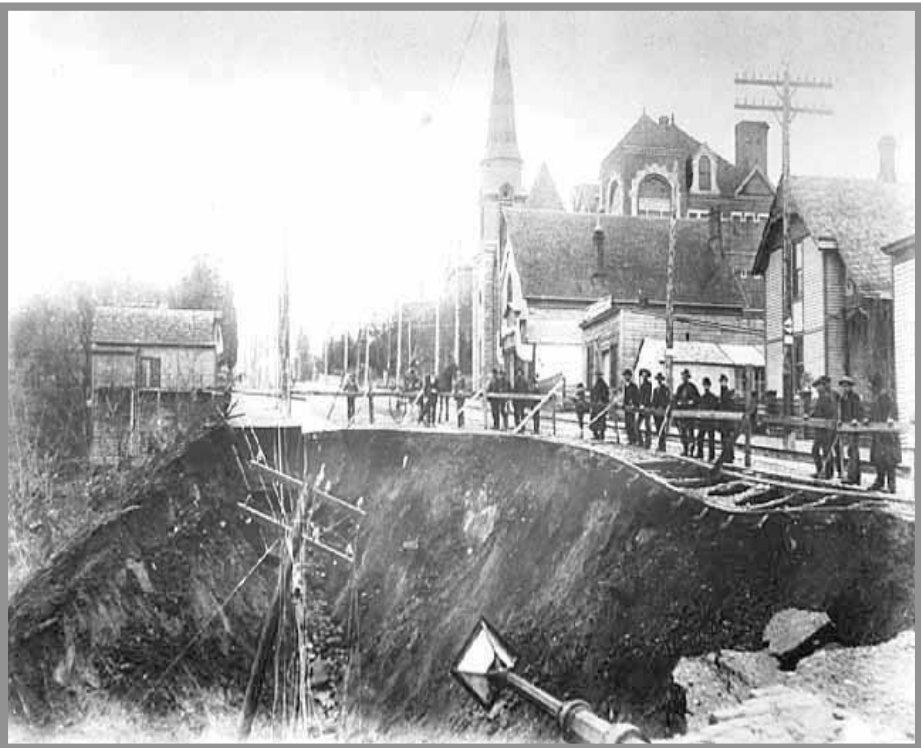
Mulberry Street ravine, 2011; part of the Brown’s Creek watershed



The riverfront and ravines as shown in 1870; the State Prison in Battle Hollow is at right



Brown’s Creek Ravine, 1923



Collapse of S. Third Street after cloudburst, 1894

Outcrops of gray and buff-colored limestone and sandstone frame Stillwater's setting and also provide the quarried stone that underpins its early architectural character. Stone quarries were opened soon after the townsite was settled: the Hersey, Bean & Brown Lumber Company opened their quarry on the South Hill bluff in the late 1850s. One of the first stone buildings erected in Stillwater was the hotel known as the Sawyer House. Completed in 1856 at the corner of N. Second Street and Myrtle, only one of its four stories was stone. (In 1927 this building was replaced by the Lowell Inn.) Following several downtown fires, by 1867 masonry construction was required for new business-block construction and local stone was employed. In the 1880s, the city's outcrops attracted the attention of State Geologist N. H. Winchell, who described some of the dolomitic limestone as useful for “ashlers [sic], pilasters, and copings.”¹⁰

Thick blocks of limestone underpin many houses, walks, and retaining walls within the Original Town. Some limestone retaining walls were capped with wood pickets or wrought or cast-iron fences. Early limestone curbs and sidewalks remain in a number of locations, although most have been replaced with concrete.

Frederick Steinacker founded Stillwater's first brickyard in 1859. Local clay deposits burned a yellow brick, which was used extensively in addition to “imported” red face-brick.



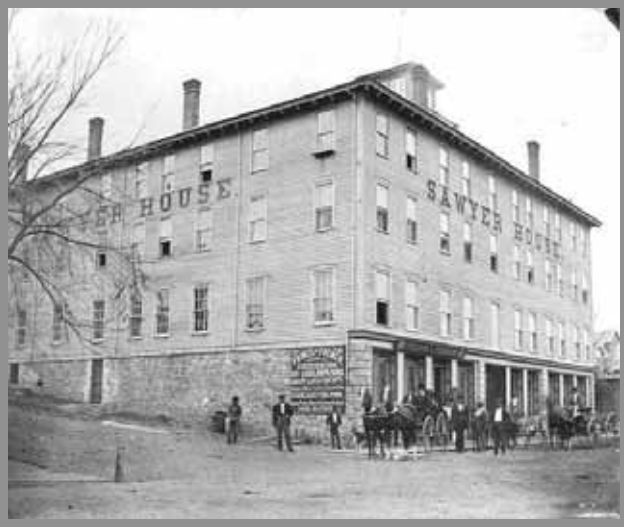
Elm Street limestone and sandstone outcrop, 2010



Stone quarry on South Hill above Hersey & Bean Sawmill, ca. 1898



Stone outcrop and wall, S. Second Street, 2011



Stone-walled first-story at Sawyer House, N. Second and Myrtle St., ca. 1870



Stone retaining wall, Judge William McCluer House, near N. Third and Mulberry St., ca. 1870



Construction of brick exterior at Lowell Inn, N. Second and Myrtle streets, 1927

Building on the Natural Landscape:

From Tribal Land to Townsite

In 1838, the Dakota and Ojibwe ceded the land comprising the St. Croix delta to the United States. This land triangle extended from the confluence of the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers, north to a line from the mouth of the Crow Wing River and then east to the St. Croix River. The forest resources of this property, in what was then Wisconsin Territory, were especially well understood by New England timber prospectors; the delta was regarded as the “richest white pine land on the continent.”¹¹

White settlement in the Stillwater vicinity began in 1839 when trader Joseph R. Brown platted the town of Dakotah at the north end of the present-day city. Dakotah occupies portions of present-day Schulenburg and Carli’s Addition, at the point where Brown’s Creek enters the St. Croix. It was briefly the county seat of St. Croix County, Wisconsin Territory, and Brown built a primitive log building that served as a courthouse.¹² This area would remain part of Wisconsin Territory until 1849, when the Minnesota Territory was formally organized, and St. Paul was named its capital.

In 1843 Jacob Fisher staked a claim that included the Stillwater riverfront, and industrial development and permanent settlement began after John McKusick, and associates Elam Greeley, Elias McKean, and Calvin Leach, purchased his property. They constructed a water-powered sawmill on a narrow plateau facing Lake St. Croix between Myrtle and Mulberry streets. Water supplied by Lake McKusick atop the bluff was conveyed along a canal cut from Brown’s Creek to the lake. It was then channeled to a ravine and a wood flume built along Mulberry Street and above the rooftops of the village. The water fell about 150 feet to the two-story mill.¹³ This was the first of a generation of mills that would line the levee.

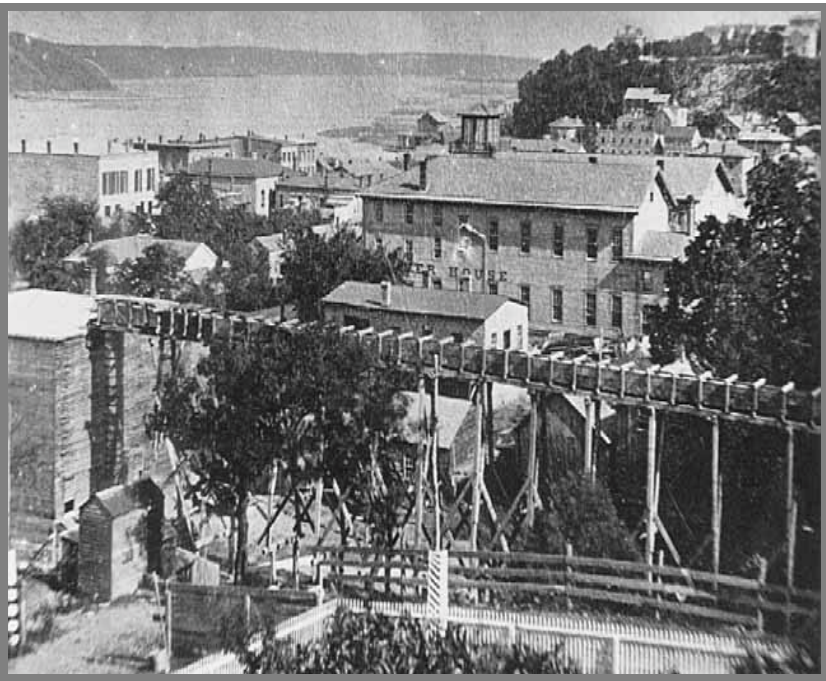
McKusick and his colleagues reportedly only planned to establish a sawmill, which they called the Stillwater Lumber Company after a town in Maine, but a small settlement quickly formed around it.¹⁴ By the time Washington County lands opened to public sale in the 1840s, the McKusick mill had already supplied lumber to markets in St. Paul and St. Anthony, including some of the plank used in the construction of the dam at the Falls of St. Anthony.¹⁵ Although flood-prone, the riverfront site provided a good harbor for steamboats bringing passengers, freight, and mail. The early levee was between Myrtle and Chestnut streets; after 1875, a stone wall was built to reinforce the section between Chestnut and Nelson streets.¹⁶



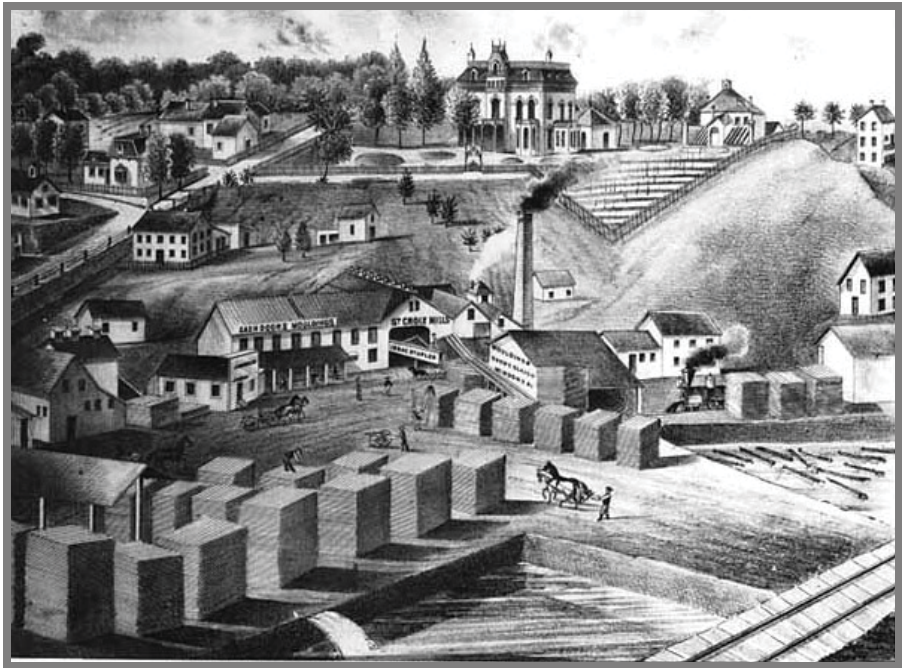
Steamboats at the levee, 1872



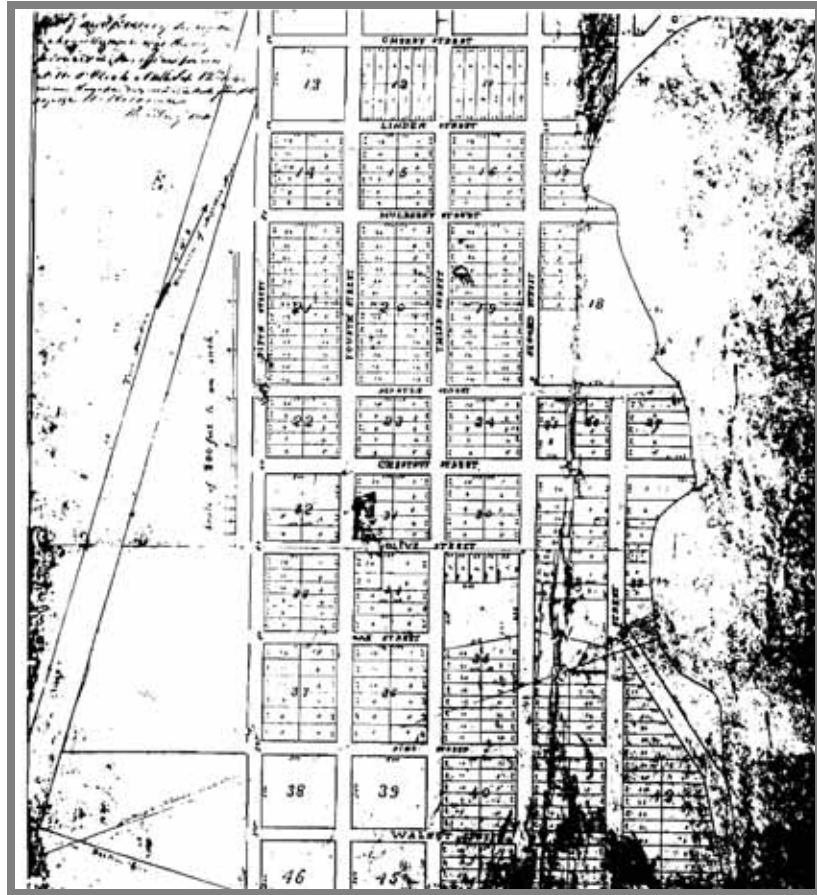
The Stillwater landscape, ca. 1873



McKusick Mill flume, 1873



Isaac Staples’ St. Croix Mill was located below North Hill and Staples’ own mansard-roofed mansion. A native of Maine, Staples (1799-1895) arrived in Stillwater in 1853. His extensive investments would include saw and flour mills, banks, and farms (J. T. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 1874).



Original Plat of the Town of Stillwater, 1848

In 1848 McKusick platted a 46-block grid-plan townsite; in 1857, an observer commented that Stillwater's bluffs "retreated from the lake in the form of a semi-circle," and reported that the townsite was placed only a few feet above high water mark, and compared the city's steep grades ascending from the river to those in Quincy, Illinois or Natchez, Mississippi.¹⁷ Another observer noted that with its bowl-like enclosure and high bluffs slashed with ravines, Stillwater was not a choice site for a town, but a "perfect situation for sawmills."¹⁸

The steep hills and ravines prohibited construction of some of the streets drawn on the original townsite plat. A few built on extremely steep grades, such as S. Second Street at Pine, are even today closed during the winter. As in many other Minnesota river towns, the surveyor oriented the plan to the river. Most subsequent additions were oriented to the cardinal points of the compass. The plan provided for regularly-spaced blocks of 10 to 12 lots, each about 60 feet wide. Blocks were arranged so that lots faced east and west along the numbered streets.¹⁹ Chestnut Street was placed approximately mid-point in the plan, and the main commercial streets parallel to the river contained a system of compact lots that would encourage building density. The Point Douglas and St. Paul (Olive Street) roads were among connections to the outside world.

At the time of permanent white settlement in the 1840s and 1850s, about one-fifth of the present-day city was covered with a hardwood forest that included oak, maple, basswood, and hickory. Prairie and oak openings as well as lowland meadows comprised much of the rest of the surface, along with marshland. Woodland tracts were cleared for agriculture, and there was little undisturbed grassland by 1900. Single specimens of deciduous trees such as oaks are all that likely remain from this landscape.²⁰



S. Main Street, looking north from the bluff, 1870



Looking south on Third Street toward South Hill, 1870



Looking southeast from Third and Myrtle, 1874

Lumber and the Landscape

Millions of big white pines crashed to the ground in the upper valleys, ran the spring drives, and were cut in Stillwater. ²¹

The McKusick Mill founded in 1843 marked the beginning of Stillwater’s first period of lumber manufacture, one that extended until the arrival of the railroad in 1871. Early businesses depended entirely on river transportation between November and late spring, and were subject to delays during periods of flood and drought. Early mills were initially powered by direct waterpower, which was replaced by steam technology in the 1850s.

With the opening of public land sales, farmers were drawn to outlying Washington County, but the county population in 1850 of 1,056 found 620 of the total in Stillwater, evidence of the importance of lumbering to the early economy. In 1851, Stillwater was selected as the State Prison site and the facility was placed in Battle Hollow (on N. Broadway between E. Laurel and Elm streets) at the edge of the sawmill district. In 1854 Stillwater organized as a city and elected John McKusick, its first sawmill owner, as mayor.

The city’s position in the St. Croix lumber industry soared with the creation of the St. Croix Boom Corporation. Isaac Staples and other investors incorporated the company in 1856 to collect, measure, and raft logs downriver, creating a distribution point for the entire St. Croix. Located about two miles north of Stillwater, rafts containing millions of board feet of lumber were directed to the city’s mills and were also bound for Winona, St. Louis, and other mill sites. The hundreds of men employed during the open-water season directly benefited the city’s early economy.²²

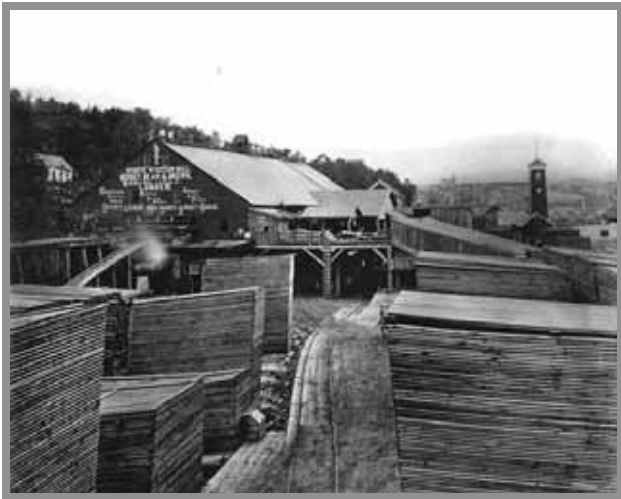
The price of land rose and then fell sharply, with Stillwater’s first cycle of growth following the speculative pattern of many Minnesota river cities just before the national Panic of 1857 and the Civil War. Inexpensive frame buildings made up much of the early commercial district. By the end of the Civil War in 1864, however, the owners of the six sawmills then in operation began to build enduring integrated business networks that also included real estate, flour milling, banking and insurance, manufacturing, and transportation. Lumbering financed new enterprises, and new buildings reflected increased investment.²³ Many early sawmill firms would remain in business until the end of the lumber era. Hersey, Staples & Co., for example, was established in 1853 and remained in business until 1906. This property, at the south end of the city, is now an archaeological site listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



View of Stillwater from near East Side Lumber Company, 1898



Looking south along the riverfront and rail trestle, ca. 1874



Hersey & Bean Lumber Company, S. Stillwater, ca. 1874



Logs in foreground above Mulberry Point; Steamer Purchase at rear, 1914



St. Croix Boom, 1886

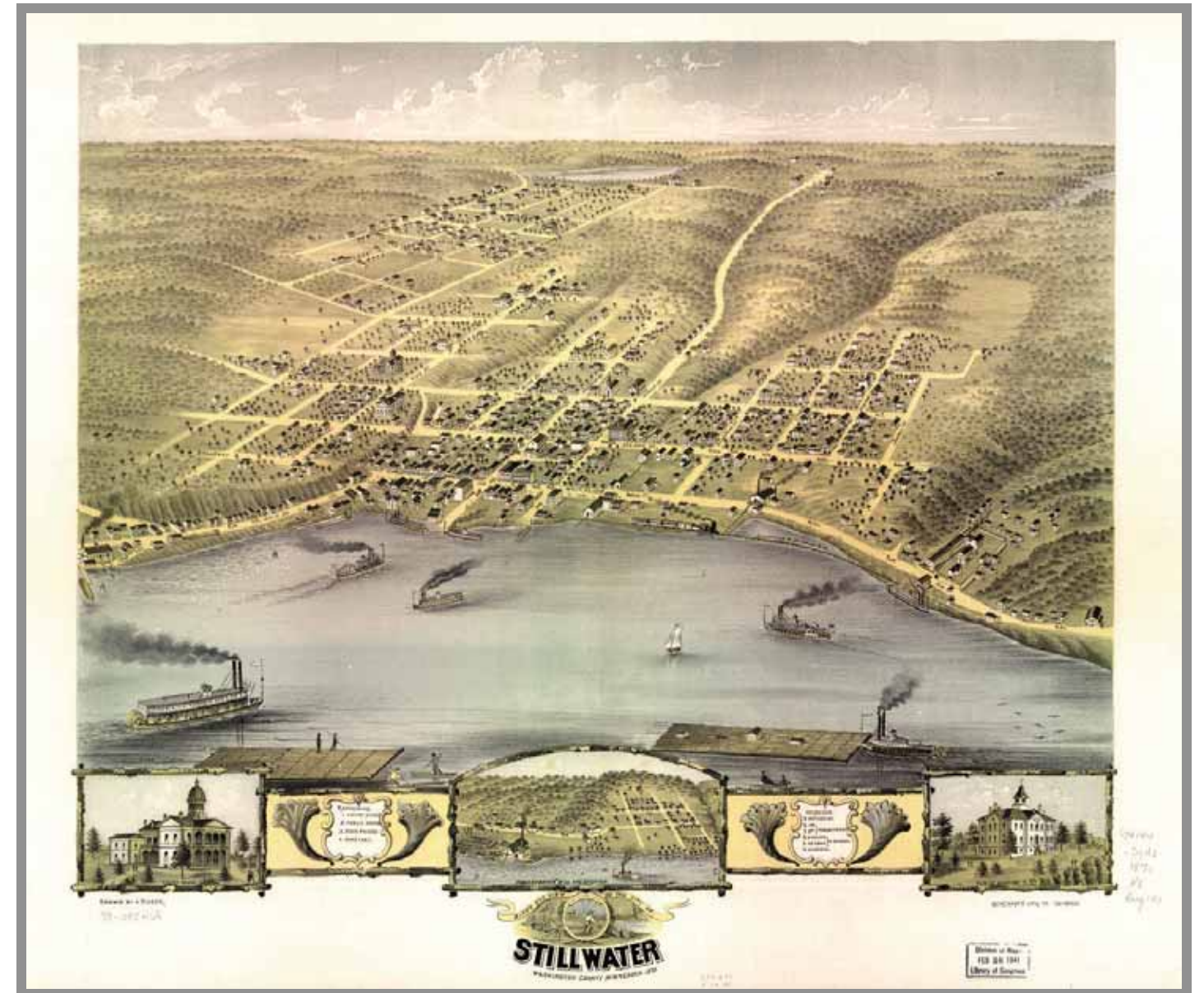
Rough surface roads and seasonal steamboats were Stillwater's only conduits for trade prior to 1871. In 1867, area business leaders organized the Stillwater & St. Paul Railroad. The two railroads that followed immediately brought economic and population growth and secured the city's position as a lumber center. In 1871 the Stillwater, White Bear and St. Paul Railroad connected Stillwater with Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth. In 1872, the St. Paul, Stillwater, and Taylor's Falls Railroad reached the city.

By 1878 the Stillwater and St. Paul became part of the Northern Pacific transcontinental system. Two other lines followed, and rails and spurs were laid across the riverfront to sawmills and factories. They also connected to depots supplying freight and passenger service as well as river steamers. In 1876 a pontoon-supported, wood drawbridge spanned the river to Houlton, Wisconsin. This structure was rebuilt in 1911 and occupied the site of the present Lift Bridge (1931; NRHP).

In 1870, with about 4,000 inhabitants, Stillwater was the largest settlement in Washington County. From its "commanding position" at the head of Lake St. Croix, one observer described it as "the commercial and manufacturing center of the entire St. Croix lumbering district."²⁴

The 1870 bird's eye view of Stillwater shows the townsite creased with lightly wooded ravines, and the beginning of significant residential development is evident: between 1870 and 1871, more than 200 houses were erected. By 1879, and the publication of the next bird's eye view, the ravines are edged by residential development, and the commercial district is a dense backdrop for the riverfront mills, rail yards, and landings. By 1900, eleven sawmills would locate on the levee.²⁵

Rail connections allowed local manufacturers to produce lumber, lath, shingles, doors, sashes and furniture, instead of continuing to raft sawn lumber downriver to other markets for processing. A population surge reflected the success of the lumber companies and new manufacturing: Stillwater grew to 9,055 in 1880; 11,260 in 1890; 12,318 in 1900 and 12,435 in 1905. The peak year for lumber traffic on the St. Croix was 1890, when one half-billion board feet passed through the St. Croix Boom.²⁶ The boom closed in 1914, marking the end of Stillwater's lumber era.



Bird's Eye View of the City of Stillwater, Minnesota, 1870. Albert Ruger (1829-1899), lithographer; reproduction from Library of Congress.



S. Main Street, looking north toward North Hill, 1873



Stillwater Bridge, 1878

Lumber businesses dominated the city’s economy through the nineteenth century, but Stillwater’s location in a productive agricultural region also made the grain business lucrative. Grain dealers built mills and warehouses served by rail spurs laid along the levee next to sawmills and factories.

Boat builders including the St. Croix Boat Shops, ice houses, and foundries of various types also located along the levee. Foundry products were needed for mill and railroad development, and there was strong demand for many types of agricultural implements.²⁷ In 1882, Seymour, Sabin & Co., a manufacturer of furniture and wood products, launched the Northwestern Manufacturing and Car Company. The firm promised employment to one thousand workers including Stillwater State Prison inmates.²⁸ The company planned to manufacture threshers and farm machinery and freight and passenger cars as well as sashes and doors, flour barrels and other millwork. In 1888 it became the Minnesota Thresher Company. It was next the Northwest Thresher Company and survived until 1916; a successor firm that utilized the machine shop, Twin City Forge and Foundry, made munitions and steel castings. After a brief period of operation by Minneapolis Moline Power Implement Company, the machine shop building was razed in 1946.²⁹



Northwest Thresher Company, 1908



New steel-wheeled tractors, 1911



Riverfront Landscape: 1876



1885



1910



The *Panoramic View of the City of Stillwater, Minnesota, 1879* shows the city's industrial riverfront and residential development arranged along its bluffs and deep ravines. Albert Ruger, lithographer; reproduction from Empson Archives.



Lincoln School, North Hill (1873; razed), ca. 1892

Prosperity and the Landscape

Stillwater’s late nineteenth-century prosperity mirrored that of many other Minnesota manufacturing cities. A steadily growing economy and wealth of local wood and stone products underwrote the lavish bluff-top Italianate and Queen Anne style houses constructed by the city’s “lumber barons.” Stillwater’s builders also chose dramatic sites for public buildings: Lincoln School (1873) graced North Hill, just above the sawmills. On South Hill, the Washington County Courthouse (1869), Central School (1869) and High School (1887) were prominent landmarks. As described in 1909, the placement of public school buildings on prominent parcels was a point of local pride:

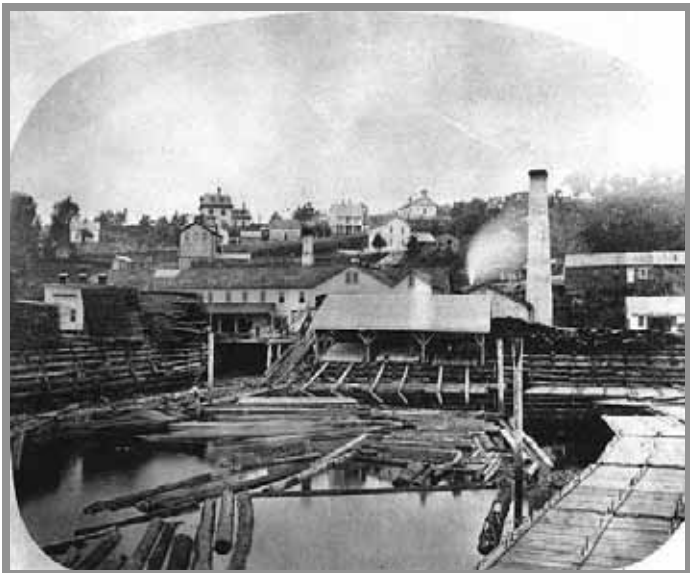
Each of the buildings is beautifully situated. The Central, Lincoln and High are located on eminences overlooking the business part of the city, and the enchanting river prospect; each has grassy lawns embellished with many a spreading elm and vigorous oak, marking each spot as one of beauty.

Situated as these buildings are, away from the noise and smoke and dust of the city, and at high elevations, the air is pure and wholesome, and this, added to a well-nigh perfect sanitary equipment and the purest of spring water in each building, render the school life of the Stillwater child almost ideal.³⁰

The cupolas and steeples of blufftop landmarks remain key features of the city’s riverfront skyline.



Washington County Courthouse (1869), in 1870



St. Croix Mills with North Hill at rear, in 1914



Isaac Staples House, Laurel Street (ca. 1873; razed)



L. E. Torinius House, 812 Harriet St. (1902)

Stillwater's large community of laborers included Germans, Scandinavians, Italians and other European immigrants. Eastern European Jews and African-American families were also among the early population. Many laborers were typically housed in simple frame buildings, some built in the shadow of employers' mansions. Hilltop sites were sought for a collection of churches that represented a variety of denominations and cultural backgrounds. The soaring spires of those on South Hill including St. Michael's (1873) and St. Mary's Catholic churches (1884) are exemplary.

A new crop of commercial-district business blocks reflected the economic success of the city as well as its cultural life. During the late 1870s and 1880s, one- and two-story, wood-frame commercial buildings were gradually replaced with a substantial collection of masonry business blocks. The Grand Opera House (1881; 301 S. Main St.; burned 1902) was reportedly the largest of its kind west of Chicago. At the time of its opening it was described as a "combination of the Queen Anne, Victoria and Gothic Style," and symbolized the city's financial and social stability as well as its cultural aspirations.

The Shingle-style Union Depot (1887) presided over its riverfront location near the bridge. The Hersey and Staples Block (1890; Main and Myrtle streets; razed), was built of locally quarried stone, with Lake Superior brownstone trim. The Lumber (Lumbermen's) Exchange Building (1890; 101 E. Water Street) was the "first modern business block" in the city, and featured heating, plumbing, and electrical service, as well as an elevator.³¹ The craftsmanship and size of these buildings reflected a high level of investment for a city of only about 11,000 residents.



Looking northeast from South Hill, ca. 1908. Stillwater High School at left (1887; razed); Central School at right (1869; razed)



St. Michael's Catholic Church (1873)



St. Mary's Catholic Church (1884)



Hersey and Staples Block (1890; razed)



Grand Opera House (1881; razed)



Union Depot (1887; razed)

**The Changing Landscape after Lumber:
The City Beautiful Transforms the Riverfront**

The northern pineries along the St. Croix River were depleted by the turn of the century, and Stillwater's lumber industry declined sharply. The closing of the St. Croix Boom Company in 1914 was a critical event in the city's economic history. Riverfront mill and factory buildings were put to other uses, but the new businesses were often short-lived. Investment in diversified manufacturing, including agricultural implements, allowed the city to retain its workforce and position as a trade center. The city's population stood at 10,978 in 1910, but declined to 7,735 in 1920 and 7,013 in 1940.

Northwest Thresher, Twin City Forge and Foundry, the Connolly and Foote-Schultze shoe companies, Smithson Paper Box Company, Stillwater Market Creamery, Minnesota Mercantile Company, and Stillwater Garment Company were among the city's important early twentieth-century employers on or near the riverfront. The Stillwater Prison—located in Battle Hollow since 1853—closed in 1914. During the next decades the riverfront area was slowly transformed by removal of industrial buildings, railroad tracks, and boathouses.



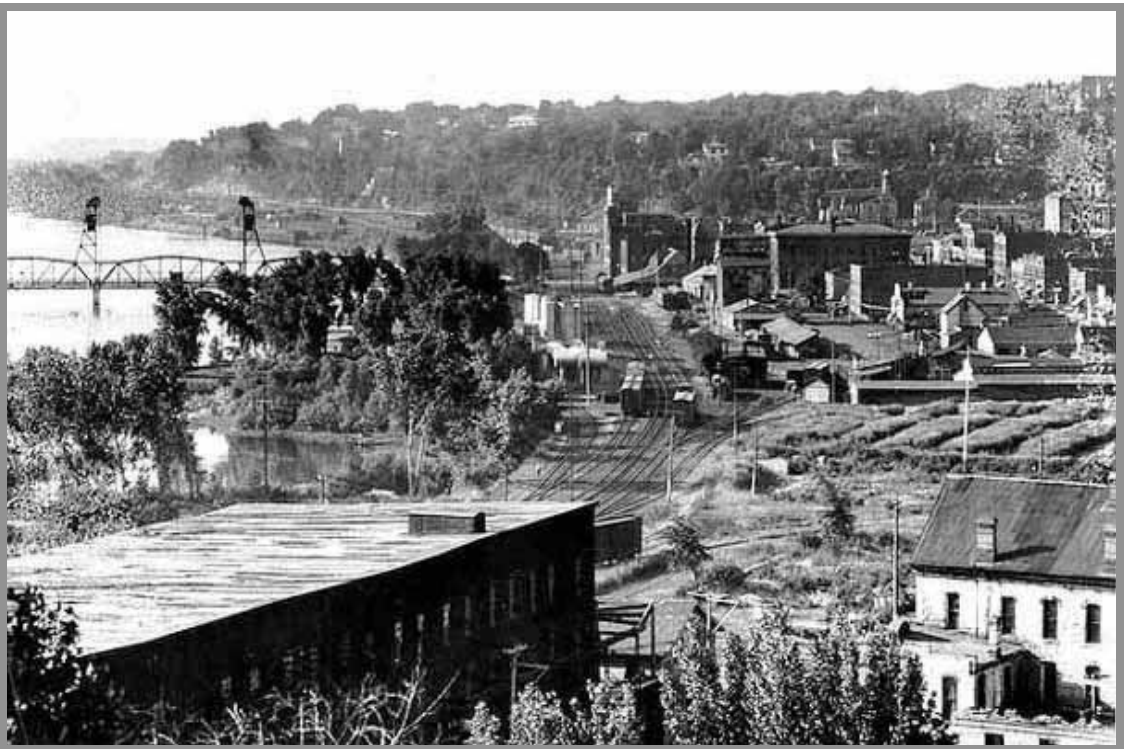
Minnesota Mercantile Company employees, 1925



Lowell Park north of E. Chestnut Street, 1917



Lowell Park north of E. Chestnut Street, 1922



Looking south over the Lift Bridge, 1934



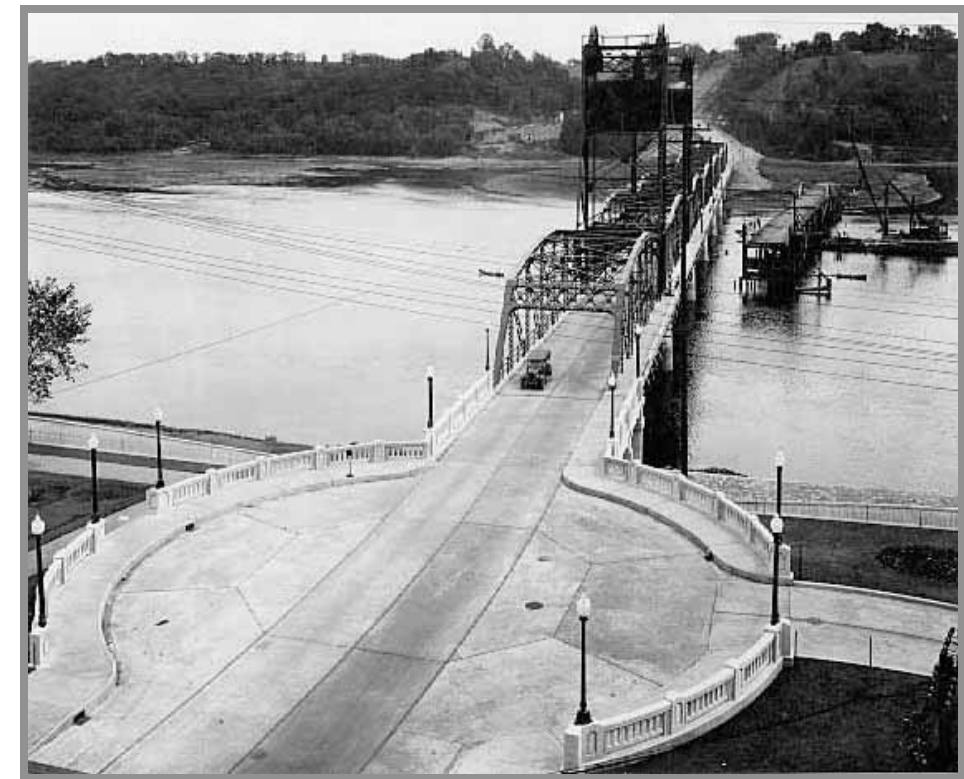
Looking north over the Lift Bridge, 1934

The nationally-important City Beautiful Movement, which emphasized good urban planning around a foundation of improved streets and public parks, was underway just as Stillwater was beginning to see the possible need for new uses for the riverfront. Evidence of the city's progressivism included streetcar service inaugurated in 1889, opening of the Minneapolis and St. Paul Suburban Railway (which after 1899 offered half-hour service to St. Paul), and completion of the Carnegie Library in 1903.

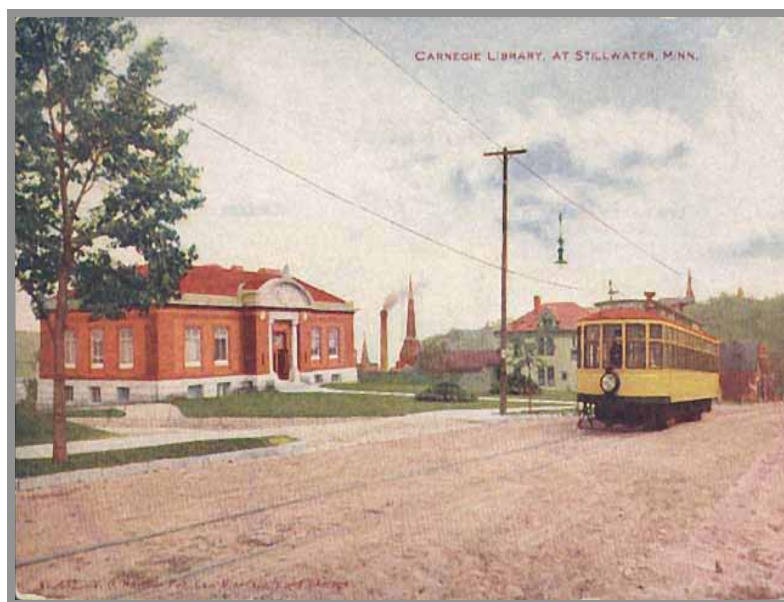
Although the riverfront would continue to be dominated by industry for several more decades, the initial construction of Lowell Park (1911) represented the first step in reworking the city's gateway and accommodating new automobile traffic. Initially designed by William A. Finklenburg of Winona, the park extended two blocks south of Chestnut Street and featured a river wall with a lawn, plantings, and concrete benches. A north extension was completed in 1917 with plans by Minneapolis landscape architects Morell & Nichols, and a riverfront pavilion was completed in 1923. The firm also prepared the *Plan of Stillwater* (1918). It was a blueprint for the modern city, proposing new ideas for parks, boulevards, housing, and riverfront land use. It called for a system of scenic drives linking views of the river valley, and the reclamation of ravines for park purposes.³²

The landscape architects also revisited and promoted the once-popular idea of making the St. Croix River navigable between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River, and envisioned an industrial riverfront coexisting with recreational use. The river's role in industrial transportation continued to decline, however. In 1921, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported that the St. Croix was "principally used by excursion steamboats and pleasure launches." The number of river passengers declined steadily: in 1917, 11,337 were carried; in 1921, only 1,092.³³ In 1917 the East Side Lumber Company on the Wisconsin side of Lake St. Croix donated their property to the City of Stillwater for park use. In 1923 the land was developed as a Tourist Camp and in 1931 American Legion Post 48 constructed Legion Beach. The site was later named Kolliner Park. It has been closed since 1979.³⁴

When the new Stillwater Lift Bridge opened in 1931 it became the centerpiece of a redesigned riverfront. The two-lane, 1,050-foot bridge was completed just as the city was facing the Great Depression, but at a time when city leaders planned to build on future tourism and recreation markets. The Lowell Inn (1927), built on the site of the Sawyer House,



Lift Bridge Approach, 1931



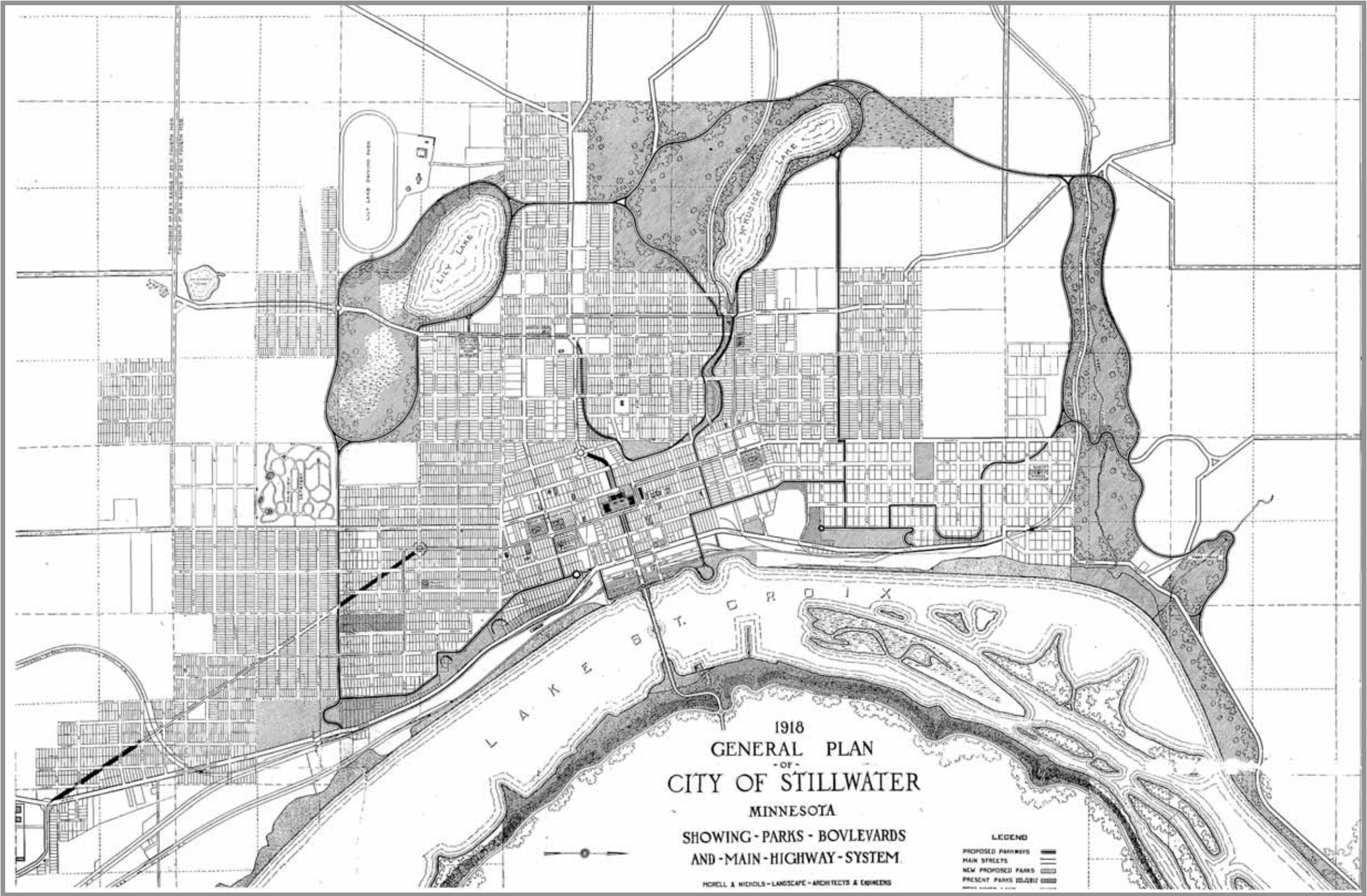
Carnegie Library, 1903



Looking south from Pioneer Park, 1935



Lift Bridge Approach, detail, 2011



Morell & Nichols, *General Plan of City of Stillwater* (1918), envisioned a system of parks and drives along the city's ravines and a riverfront reclaimed for recreation.

symbolized the city's potential as an automobile traveler's destination. During the Depression years of the 1930s, Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other public funds assisted with some area improvements geared at tourism, including the placement of commemorative markers at Battle Hollow and near the Tamarack House, the site of the county's first courthouse. Design and construction of the Lake St. Croix Overlook (NRHP), south of Stillwater, and the St. Croix Boomsite (NHL), north of the city, was completed by the Minnesota Department of Highways and utilized National Youth Administration (NYA) funds. Increasingly, visitors saw less and less of the city's industrial past, although railyards still defined much of the riverfront. Lumberman Isaac Staples' North Hill residence, built ca. 1873 and overlooking his St. Croix Lumber Mill, was razed in 1918. During the 1930s, Pioneer Park was placed on the site and offered a dramatic view of the Lift Bridge and river and valley vistas.

Following World War II, surface parking lots, fuel storage tanks, rail spurs, and a marina occupied portions of the riverfront. In 1958 Northern States Power (now Excel Energy) completed the Allen S. King Generating Plant in Bayport. The nearly 800-foot tower is visible from the riverfront and from many points within the city. In 1960, a new one-story Hooley's Supermarket (razed) replaced the Shingle-style Union Depot (1887). During the 1960s and early 1970s, the replacement of other key downtown buildings—such as the Staples Block at Main and Myrtle with the Cosmopolitan State Bank (1968)—altered the traditional streetscape.

Residents' pride in the city's historic houses was always evident, but interest in historic preservation grew during the early 1970s. The Stillwater Motors Building at 365 S. Main Street was converted into retail shops as the Grand Garage. This project was regarded as starting a "commercial renaissance."³⁵ Revitalization of historic buildings for use as restaurants and as antique, book, and specialty stores created re-purposed spaces for new businesses along Main Street and added to the city's tourism potential.

The Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission was established in the mid-1970s and reflected increased interest in revitalizing the city's historic and cultural resources. The vacant Stillwater Prison on N. Main Street was proposed for adaptive reuse as housing. In 2002, before development began, the buildings were destroyed by fire. By 2005, however, more than 300 rental and condominium units in three new riverfront housing projects were under construction on this and adjacent sites.³⁶ The Territorial Prison Warden's House (1853; NRHP), now the home of the Washington County Historical Society, is an important historic property at the north entrance to the city.

The Stillwater Lift Bridge and Lowell Park remain anchored at the heart of the city's gateway, sheltered by the city's hills and bluffs. Stillwater's commercial district and blufftop neighborhoods are framed by the hillside steeples and rooflines that line the city's steep streets: this remains a unique cultural landscape etched and built by water and shaped by lumber.



Lowell Park and the Stillwater Lift Bridge, April 2010



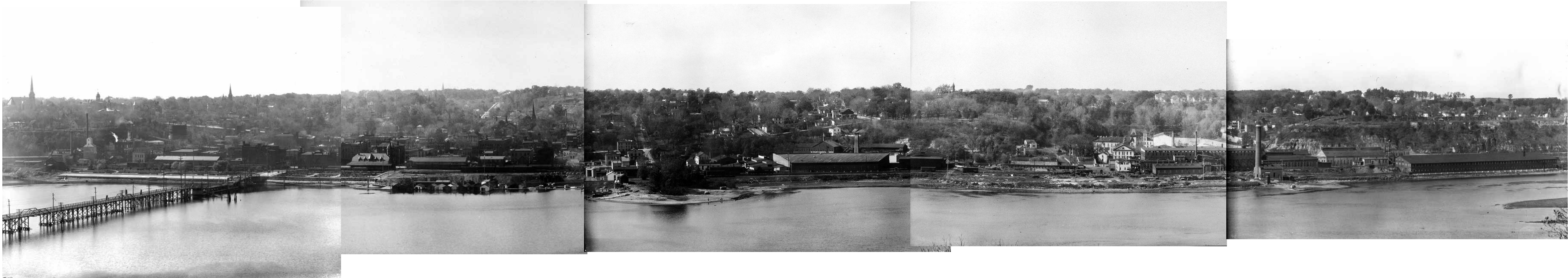
Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



Commercial Historic District from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010

Opposite:
180° view from Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010





1910



2010

Cultural Landscape Components: Scale

At many levels of scale, Stillwater's cultural landscape setting remains an expression of its past as a pre-eminent early Minnesota lumber town. By 1860, it was the state's leading lumber producer; throughout the late nineteenth century the St. Croix was "awash with floating wood."³⁷ Stillwater's population rose steadily during this period and growth was accompanied by an impressive build-out of sawmills, factories, railroad facilities and commercial blocks, as well as dwellings, churches, and civic buildings. When the last log passed through the St. Croix Boom in 1914, Stillwater had enjoyed a long period of prosperity through the "golden age" of the lumber industry. Much of that landscape is preserved today.

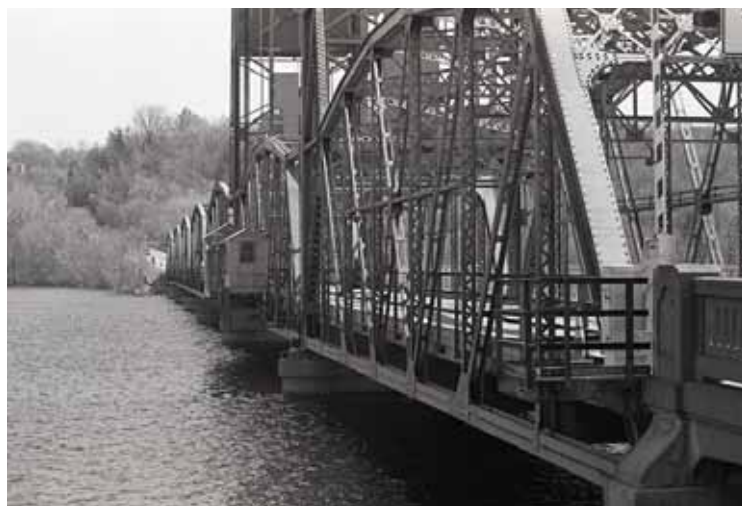
At the broadest scale, Stillwater's cultural landscape is anchored by the deeply-cut bluffs and the St. Croix River Valley. The valley shelters Lake St. Croix and the city. Stillwater's riverfront, commercial district and neighborhoods rest in a basin defined by a series of old creek beds, ravines, and terraces. At the next level of scale are the features that enliven and define the city's viewshed and skyline. These features include buildings, structures, and objects, as well as bluffs and other prominent landscape elements that frame important views.

Exemplary cultural landscape features include the Stillwater Lift Bridge spanning Lake St. Croix, the Washington County Courthouse atop Mt. Zion, and hilltop houses and churches. Public stairways link commercial and residential districts. The city's original townsite plan continues to define elements such as lot size, building footprint and orientation, and street width. Public sidewalks and mature trees are also important components of this landscape.

The retention of scale is critical to the historic integrity of the Cultural Landscape District and to our continuing understanding of the evolution of the area.



Looking north across Lake St. Croix from the S. Main Street stairs, 2011



Stillwater Lift Bridge (1931; NRHP), 2011



Washington Co. Courthouse (1869; NRHP), 2011



W. Mulberry St. stairs, 2011



W. Mulberry St. landscape, 2011



**James and Elizabeth Roney House (ca. 1867),
510 N. Third Street, in ca. 1867**



Roney House, 2011

Among the finest-grained elements of the cultural landscape are landscape and architectural details. These small-scale and often ephemeral elements—some drawn from underlying bedrock and clay deposits—can include stone retaining walls, granite curbs or metal fences, and textural features such as building surfaces and details.

A 1999 study of the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District found that of 434 inventoried historic properties within the boundaries of the original townsite plat, more than 57 percent contributed to the district’s historic character.³⁸ These properties encompass all components of the cultural landscape including lumber dealer’s Queen Anne-style hilltop houses, and include features such as the stone walls that frame hillside blocks, and views to the surrounding river valley.



Looking southeast to South Hill and Lake St. Croix, 2011



S. Fifth Street wall, 2011



S. Fifth Street wall, 2011



St. Michael’s Catholic Church (1873), 2011



Stone wall behind Hersey, Bean & Co. mill site, 2011

Spatial Organization and Circulation: The Weave of Streets and Stairs

During its initial development, surveyors draped Stillwater's grid-plan streets over hills and bluffs with little recognition of the steep topography. Extensive grading of the highest bluffs was accomplished during the first decades of settlement. In 1870, the steep Third Street ravine was filled and streets were graded; "opening Third Street" became the subject of a local election campaign.³⁹ By 1880 one writer observed that Stillwater's deepest ravines had

*... nearly disappeared, and some are found who cannot see in the artificial changes the beauty that once existed in the abrupt bluffs and irregular ravines in a state of nature. However this may be, a full equivalent for beauty lost is paid for utility gained. Enough is left to mark this still as a point of rare beauty."*⁴⁰

During the past century, many streets have been regraded during sewer and sidewalk construction projects to improve drainage and safety, but the general pattern of street grid, sidewalks and building setback remains intact.

Early builders erected limestone retaining walls to shore up the edges of steep streets and ravines. Much of the stone came from local quarries. The walls ranged from a few courses of stone to the massive buttresses placed along the bluff below Pioneer Park and behind the State Prison. The same writer described the buttress along North Hill below the park around 1880:

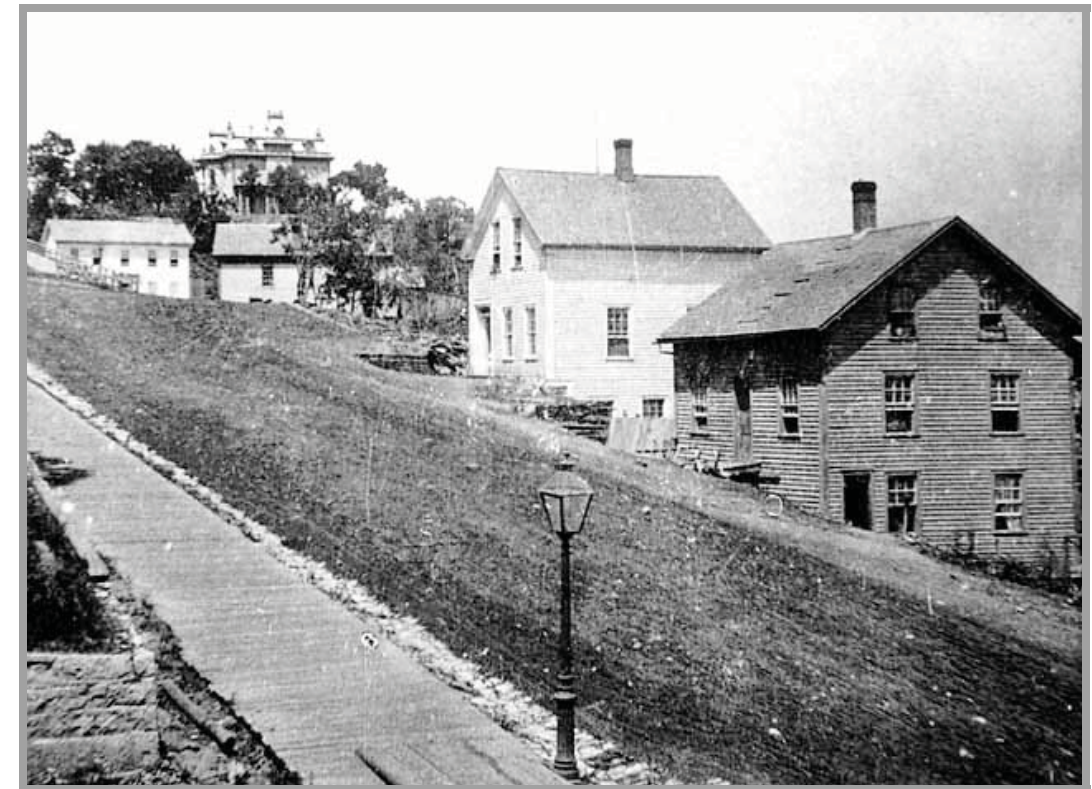
*The bluffs here have been cut down on Third Street about forty feet, varying somewhat to suit the grade to the topography. A little to the west of the [Lincoln] school building is Isaac Staples' residence, prominent on a point of the bluff in block 8, corner of Cherry and Second streets, looking down on the lake, affording a magnificent view of the entire lake. Here the once rugged and steep face of the bluff has been transformed into a succession of giant steps, built of solid masonry, rising one above the other until the summit is reached, on which the [Isaac Staples] residence is located.*⁴¹



N. Second Street, looking south, 2011



N. Third Street, looking north, 1873



N. Second Street, looking north to the Isaac Staples House, 1873

When landscape architects Morell & Nichols studied the city in the early twentieth century, they were inspired by the system of bluffs and ravines, but were critical of the way that some of the best public vistas might have been missed:

On account of its bluffs, ravines, etc., the location of Stillwater offers unusual opportunities for an attractive and practical layout of the city but unfortunately those opportunities were not made use of by the first city planners of Stillwater.

Morell & Nichols, Plan of Stillwater (1918)

A network of informal paths first spanned or short-circuited some of the city's ravines and other topographical inconveniences. By the early 1870s, public stairs provided crossings of deep ravines and bluffs at four locations. The first systems of wood steps were later improved with stone and concrete. A steep and very prominent set of stairs extended from S. Main Street to S. Broadway. Another set ascended the bluff to S. Broadway via E. Locust Street. Early stairs were also built between S. Third and Fourth Streets at Chestnut Street, and were placed on the west side of S. Second Street between Pine and Olive streets.

Stillwater's system of stairs and crossings remains a unique part of its early circulation pattern and highlights the distinctive landforms that link water and forest belts across the city.



S. Main Street, looking south at stairs, ca. 1885



S. Main Street stairs, 1914



Chestnut Street Stairs, looking up, 1916



Chestnut Street Stairs, looking down, 2011



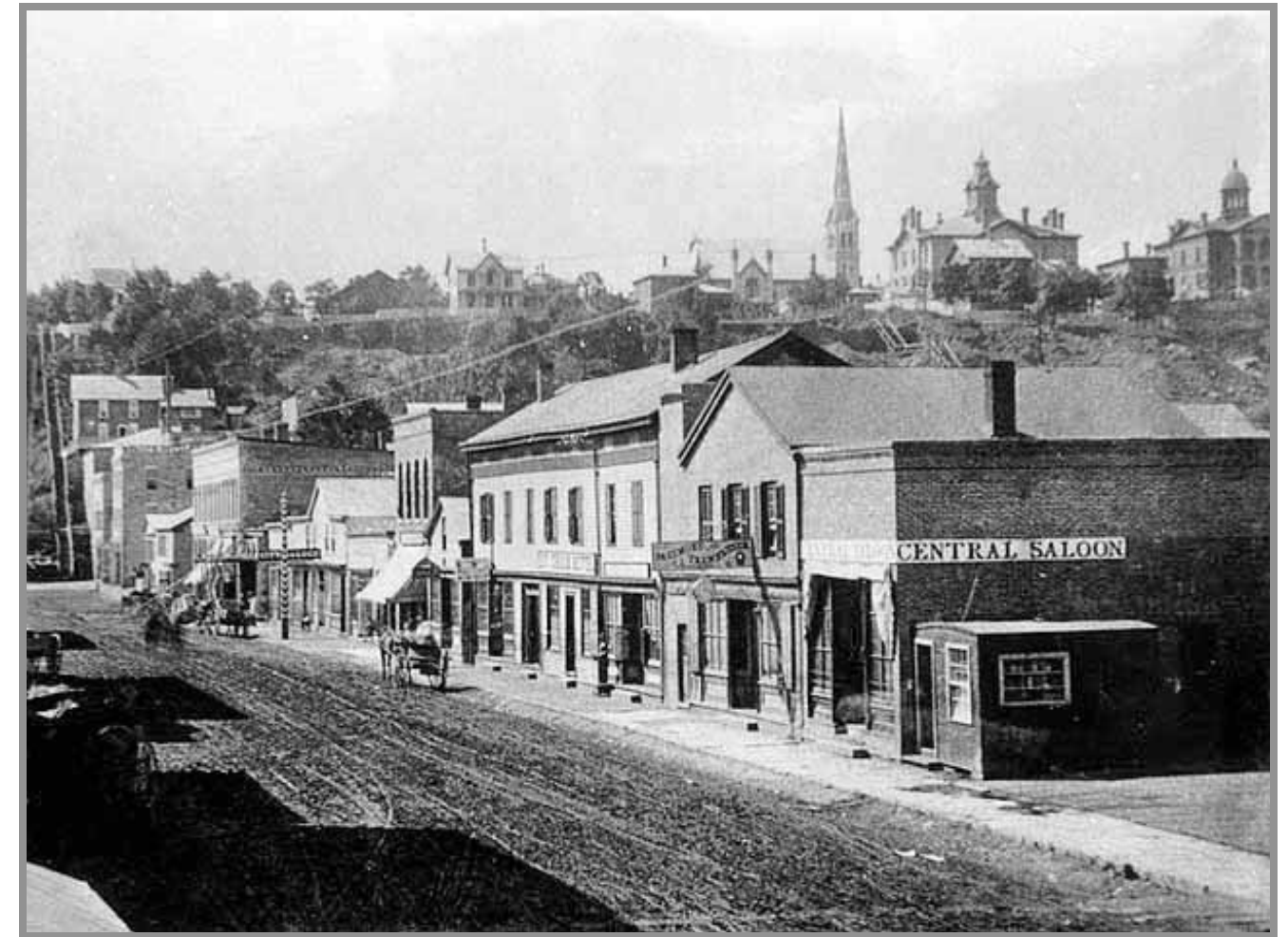
Laurel Street Stairs, looking up, 2011



Willard Street Stairs, looking up, 2011

The Commercial Historic District and North and South Hill Neighborhoods

The boundaries of the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District encompass the Stillwater Commercial Historic District and several blufftop historic neighborhoods. The North and South Hill neighborhoods anchor each end of the cultural landscape district and offer many vistas of the city and St. Croix River valley.



S. Main and Chestnut streets, looking southwest, 1878

Stillwater Commercial Historic District

The Stillwater Commercial Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is at the heart of the city's Cultural Landscape District. It includes the area that parallels the river along Water and S. and N. Main streets, and the cross streets of Mulberry, Commercial, Myrtle, Chestnut, Olive, and Nelson. The area's primarily brick commercial buildings represent a variety of architectural styles from the 1860s through the 1930s; there are also examples of nineteenth-century Greek Revival and Italianate-style dwellings at the edges of the district.

Beginning in 1848 and with a flurry of building following the creation of Minnesota Territory and Stillwater's designation as the seat of Washington County, the shape of the early town emerged above the muddy levee, assisted by a calamitous 1852 flood and landslide that changed the shape of the levee and Main Street.⁴²

Most mid-nineteenth-century commercial buildings served the rapidly growing lumber industry; by 1857, there were 38 stores and shops that served a population of 2,500 housed in about 348 dwellings, and blacksmiths, foundries, and hardware stores were also part of the mix.⁴³ Although most commercial and industrial buildings were initially of clapboard-covered frame construction, by the late 1850s brick and stone were also in use. These materials were used exclusively after fire limits were established in 1867. The oldest remaining downtown core along N. and S. Main Street is composed of structures built between 1864 and 1875; some feature stone party walls with brick-faced facades.⁴⁴



S. Main and Nelson streets, looking north, 2011

During the 1880s and 1890s Stillwater continued to enjoy “the golden years of lumbering.” Its position as a railroad, manufacturing and agricultural trade center was evident in a new generation of buildings woven throughout the commercial district. Today these buildings remain united by scale, proportion, and materials. Their Italianate and Queen Anne Style brick facades and cast iron, pressed metal, and stone trim suggests that their design was likely based on standard plans executed by skilled masons.

By 1900, Stillwater’s downtown was largely complete and included handsome civic buildings at the edge of downtown around Fourth and Myrtle streets. Architects documented in the design of turn-of-the-century Classical Revival Style civic buildings include Patton and Miller of Chicago (Carnegie Library, 224 Third Street N., 1903) and James Knox Taylor (U. S. Post Office, 220 E. Myrtle Street, 1903).

The largest, rail-served mill and factory complexes are gone, but the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Freight House (CM&StP; 1883) at 239-305 S. Water Street, and the Lumber Exchange (1890) at 101 S. Water Street, built by the Union Depot & Transfer Company, remain testament to the important period of rail development. Following the early twentieth-century decline of the lumber industry, riverfront businesses diversified to include new types of manufacturing. By 1911, however, planning for Lowell Park was underway. The park and levee would provide a new generation of public access and recreation.



Main Street looking south, 1928



Byron Mosier Cigar Store (1888),
Main at Chestnut streets, 1915



Byron Mosier Cigar Store, 2010



Chestnut Street at Main, looking west, 1915



Construction work at Lowell Park levee, ca. 1927



Raising a telephone pole on Main Street, 1928

The North and South Hill neighborhoods as well as adjacent portions of the Carli and Schulenburg and Hersey Staples additions have distinctive character embedded in their blufftop setting, pattern of streets and stairs, and late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century residential architecture.

North Hill Neighborhood

Perched above the city's business district, the North Hill neighborhood is east of N. Fifth Street roughly between School and E. Myrtle streets. Part of the Original Plat of the Town of Stillwater (1848), this prominent blufftop area was first known as "Government Hill."

Crossed by a military road, North Hill was also the site of an early, now-removed cemetery. The first houses were built in the 1850s, and included the large homes of the city's lumbermen and business leaders. Many dwellings were designed to impress, and to be visible from distant points along the river. The centerpiece of the area was the mansard-roofed Isaac Staples House (ca. 1873), designed by architect A. M. Radcliffe.⁴⁵ The property offered a view of Staples' mills and other investments, and was landscaped with vineyards. This house was torn down in 1918 and replaced with Pioneer Park. One of North Hill's other prominent landmarks was the cupola-topped, mansard-roofed Lincoln School (1873) at N. Fourth and Laurel streets.

Many wealthy businessmen and their families populated the North Hill neighborhood, but the owners of small shops and stores as well as craftsmen also resided here. Natives of New England made up much of the city's early population, but by the 1880s Stillwater was also settled by many Swedes, Germans, and members of other immigrant groups. The presence of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Lutheran Church at 314 Fourth Street N. (1904) suggests that some of the Swedish community was probably concentrated on North Hill.



Looking south along N. Second Street, 1886



Lumberman William Sauntry's house, 626 N. Fourth Street (1891) with its Moorish-inspired recreation hall at left (1902; NRHP)



An example of the architectural variety of North Hill: the Ivory E. McKusick House, 504 N. Second Street (1866), in 2011



Lincoln School (1873; razed), 1909



Lincoln school primary class, 1905

South Hill Neighborhood

South Hill, like its neighbor to the north, was part of the original Stillwater townsite plat. The hill is centered near N. Fourth and Pine streets. The surrounding area is creased by ravines and steep topography that required several sets of early stairs, including those from S. Main Street to Broadway and those along the south side of Chestnut from S. Third to S. Fourth streets. The area’s pattern of large blocks and number of unopened or vacated streets contrasts with the tighter grid of North Hill. Some of the limestone retaining walls on South Hill appear to date to the earliest efforts to make the steep sites habitable.

The Washington County Courthouse (1867-70) was placed on a prominent knob known as Zion’s Hill, as was the Central School (1869) and the Stillwater High School (1887). Many builders of nearby South Hill houses were lumber dealers, mercantile business owners, and professionals. The rooflines of these houses, many of them on large lots offering splendid views, added to Stillwater’s skyline. Great architectural variety is evident, from small Greek and Gothic Revival cottages to large Queen Anne houses complete with carriage houses. The visual richness of the area is testament to the nationally-distributed pattern books that detailed elaborate houses for execution by local carpenters and masons.

Stillwater’s nineteenth-century congregations built a number of churches on South Hill, including St. Michael’s (611 S. Third Street, 1873-75) and St. Mary’s Catholic (407 S. Fifth Street, 1883), which served the city’s Irish Catholic and French Catholics, respectively. Their prominent spires added to the collection of cupolas offered by the courthouse, schools, and residences.

From south hill a fine view of the city is obtained. If a stroller along these bluffs could, at the same time that he takes in the present prospect carry a picture of Stillwater as it was a little more than thirty years ago the contrast would be almost incredible.
History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley (1881) ⁴⁶



View from Washington County Courthouse looking northeast, 1880



Looking at South Hill from North Hill, 2011



A. Jenks House (1871; NRHP), 504 S. Fifth Street, 2011



205 E. Walnut Street (ca. 1870), 2011



205 E. Walnut Street, gable detail

Queen City of the St. Croix

Countless points across Stillwater and the Wisconsin side of Lake St. Croix offer vistas of the city and the St. Croix River valley. For many generations, people have sought the best spots to visit, contemplate, and photograph. Although building construction has blocked or limited views, some buildings—including the Washington County Courthouse (1867-70) and the terrace of the Stillwater Public Library (2006)—have opened up new public vistas.

Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth, descended the St. Croix River in 1680 and recorded early praise for its beauty. A succession of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European explorers and traders followed, most seeking furs and other riches. U. S. Government explorers, including Major Stephen H. Long (1817), Henry R. Schoolcraft (1832), and Joseph N. Nicollet (1837) navigated the St. Croix on the eve of Indian land cession. Schoolcraft's journal referred to the high banks, picturesque views, transparent waters and "lofty eminences" of the river. His traveling partner, Lieutenant James Allen, wrote of the "green gentle slopes of Lake St. Croix." Although none of these explorers specifically described the future Stillwater townsite, all agreed on the picturesque quality of the surrounding Lake St. Croix landscape. Geologist David Dale Owen explored the river in 1846 and reported on a section that included Stillwater. By the time of Owen's trip, however, the first sawmills were operating, and industry had begun to change the natural shoreline and setting.⁴⁷

Prior to the Civil War, writers working for eastern newspapers traveled the St. Croix by steamer and published their observations in eastern newspapers. The steep gorges on the river around Taylor's Falls and the Dalles and the Painted Rock above Stillwater received much of this national attention. Stillwater would not receive much published praise until it became an established city that showed off its qualities of both industry and natural beauty.



Looking northeast from the Washington County Courthouse lawn, ca. 1885



Cultural Landscape District entries from the north along Highway 95 and N. Broadway



Cultural Landscape District entries from the south along Highway 95 and S. Main Street



Early Stillwater visitors consistently described the bowl-like, sheltered setting: one writer described the city as placed on “the segment of a circle, the bluffs forming the circumference and the bank of the lake the secant line.”⁴⁸ Lacking a singular craggy rock outcrop, an enormous bluff, a waterfall, or another striking feature that could be given a name and made the subject of legend, Stillwater missed out on the nineteenth-century stereopticon and postcard treatment given the upriver St. Croix Dalles, Winona’s Sugar Loaf, Red Wing’s Barn Bluff, and Minneapolis’ St. Anthony and Minnehaha Falls. The St. Croix River, however, was always singled out as one of the region’s natural wonders, and early twentieth-century promotional guides calling Stillwater the “Queen City of the St. Croix” or the “Bluff City” also exclaimed about the “romantic surroundings” and presentation of a “fascinating and delightful picture.”

With improved roads coupled with early twentieth-century efforts to revitalize the riverfront, Stillwater became a destination for automobile travelers seeking weekend scenery. As the city’s manufacturing strength waned, local promoters gradually turned their focus to the river as a recreational destination. Streetcar service to Stillwater, which took only about a half hour from the Twin Cities, provided a convenient link to a departure point for riverboat excursionists. It was also a destination for automobile tourists along the St. Croix. Urgency to redevelop the riverfront was spurred by the City Beautiful Movement, and unleashed a new generation of critical but optimistic landscape writing. In 1911, on the eve of construction of Lowell Park, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* observed:

*Nature has given to Stillwater many beauty spots that could never artificially be acquired. Thoughtlessness of man in the rush for wealth has left neglected many of the most beautiful places and rendered unsightly others by using them as dumping grounds. But in this great civic revival which is sweeping the country, Stillwater is having its awakening, and at present the interest of its citizens, both men and women, is centered in improving the levee, along the banks of the historic and beautiful Lake S. Croix, converting it into a park. Without doubt this will be completed in the early summer, restoring not only to Stillwater, but to the state, one of its early bits of beauty . . .*⁴⁹



Steamer Ben Hur at Lowell Park, 1911



A gondolier at Lowell Park, 2011

The Stillwater Cultural Landscape District includes the historic city in its distinctive river and bluff setting. Diverse elements of scale and detail include prominent skyline landmark buildings and historic circulation patterns embedded in streets and stairs. The North and South Hill neighborhoods, the downtown commercial district, and the riverfront all shape the district and our continuing understanding and appreciation of its significance.

Key views of the Stillwater Cultural Landscape District include:

- From the Lift Bridge and from many locations within Stillwater and across and along Lake St. Croix.
- From the S. Main Street stairs over Stillwater and Lake St. Croix.
- Upriver vistas with the St. Croix (Staples) Lumber Mill, Pioneer Park, and North Hill in the background.
- Upriver and downriver views from the Washington County Courthouse and surrounding South Hill.
- Downriver vistas from North Hill and Pioneer Park across the city to the Lift Bridge and Lake St. Croix.
- Entrances to the city from the north and south along Highway 96.

The following landscape panoramas highlight these and other views and viewsheds that define the district.

Views and Viewsheds

Upriver Viewsheds



Looking upriver from near N. Broadway, May 2010



Looking upriver and northwest from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, January 2010



Looking upriver and northwest from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



Looking upriver and northwest from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



1880



Looking upriver from below the Stillwater Lift Bridge, April 2010

Downriver Viewsheds



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, April 2010



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, April 2010



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, January 2010



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



Looking downriver from the Stillwater Lift Bridge, May 2010



Looking downriver from the Lake St. Croix Overlook (NRHP), TH 95/36, Oak Park Heights, just south of Stillwater

Riverfront



Looking west at Stillwater from Houlton, Wisconsin, January 2010



Looking west at Stillwater from Houlton, Wisconsin, April 2010



Looking west at Stillwater from Houlton, Wisconsin, April 2010



Riverfront looking upriver at high water, April 2010



Riverfront and Lowell Park looking upriver at high water, April 2010



Lowell Park, 2010



Lowell Park, 1918

S. Main Street Stairs



Looking upriver from the S. Main Street Stairs, January 2010



Looking upriver from the S. Main Street Stairs, April 2010

S. Main Street Stairs



Looking upriver from the S. Main Street Stairs, April 2010



View from S. Main Street Stairs, 1873

Pioneer Park



Looking downriver from Pioneer Park, January 2010

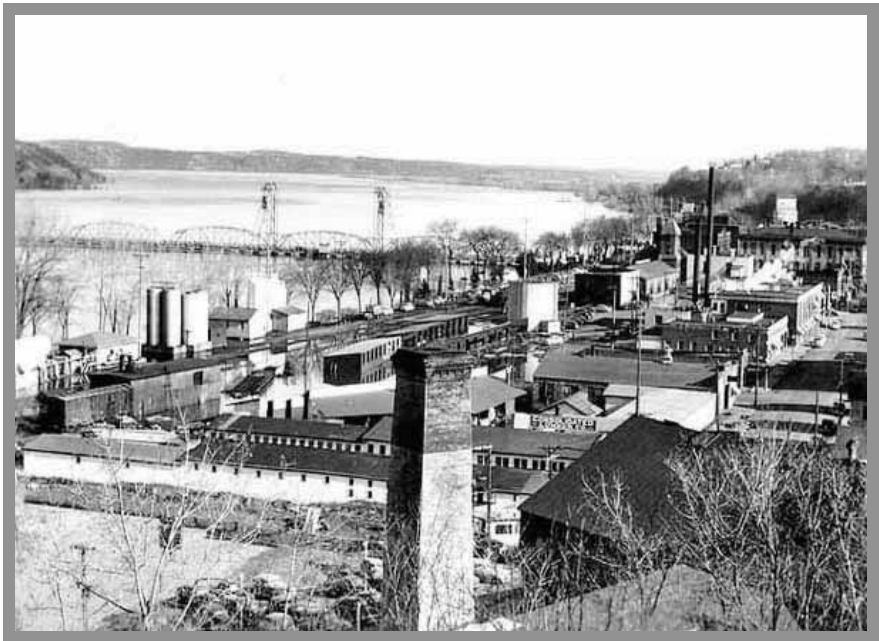


Looking downriver from Pioneer Park, April 2010

Pioneer Park



Looking downriver from Pioneer Park, April 2010



1960

Endnotes

¹ Barbara J. Henning, *Cultural Resource Investigation St. Croix River Bridge*. Prepared for the Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul, Minn. Final Report August 1999, 1-2.

² Ibid., Map 1.

³ See nps.gov; <http://nrhp.mnhs.org>; http://www.stillwatermn.org/hpc/Sample_interface/Categories/home06.asp.

⁴ Carrie J. Patterson, “Bedrock Topography and Depth to Bedrock,” *Geologic Atlas of Washington County* (C-5, plate 4), 1990.

⁵ Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, St. Croix River Basin, accessed as <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/basins/stcroix/index.html>.

⁶ “Stillwater Ideal for Homes and Businesses,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, 26 Sept. 1909, 38.

⁷ Federal Writers’ Project, *Minnesota, a State Guide* (New York: Viking, 1938), 458.

⁸ J. Wesley Bond, *Minnesota and its Resources* (Philadelphia: Keen and Lee, 1857), 158.

⁹ Anthony V. Morell and Arthur Nichols [Morell & Nichols], *Plan of Stillwater* (Stillwater, Minn: The Park Board), 1918.

¹⁰ Norene Roberts, *Final Survey Report for the South Hill Stillwater Residential Area*. National Register Identification and Evaluation Study. Prepared for the Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission, 1996, 41.

¹¹ Thomas Waters, *The Streams and Rivers of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977), 144; Roberts and Fried, *Historical Reconstruction*, 30.

¹² W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1888), 52.

¹³ James Taylor Dunn, *The St. Croix: Midwest Border River* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1965), 100; Warner and Foote, comps. *History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing, 1881), 513; Roberts and Fried, *Historical Reconstruction*, 32.

¹⁴ Emma Glaser, "How Stillwater Came to Be," *Minnesota History* 24 (Sept. 1943), 199.

¹⁵ Warner and Foote, op. cit., 502.

¹⁶ Robert Vogel, “Stillwater Historic Contexts: A Comprehensive Planning Approach.” Prepared for the Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission, 1993, 37.

¹⁷ Bond, op. cit., 158.

¹⁸ Glaser, op. cit. 203.

¹⁹ Roberts, *Final Survey Report for the South Hill Stillwater Residential Area*, op cit., 22.

²⁰ Vogel, op. cit., 28.

²¹ Waters, op cit., 145.

²² Ibid.

²³ Henning, op. cit., 25.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Roberts and Fried, *Historical Reconstruction*, 32-39.

²⁶ Waters, op. cit., 146; Henning, op. cit., 23.

²⁷ Roberts and Fried, *Historical Reconstruction*, op cit., 106.

²⁸ Augustus B. Easton, ed., *History of the St. Croix Valley*, vol. I (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, 1909), 116; 206.

²⁹ Roberts and Fried, *Historical Reconstruction*, 55-56.

³⁰ Easton, ed., op. cit., 228.

³¹ Roberts, *Historical Reconstruction*, op cit., 110.

³² Morell & Nichols, op. cit., 15-21.

³³ United States Army. *Report of the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army*, Part II, 826, 1922.

³⁴ Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Croix River Crossing Project, Draft 4(f) Evaluation, E-122. On file, Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul.

³⁵ Norene Roberts, *Intensive National Register Survey of Downtown Stillwater, Minnesota*. Final Report Prepared for the Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission, 1989, 43.

³⁶ *Stillwater Gazette*, 11 October 2006.

³⁷ Henning, op. cit, 19.

³⁸ Henning, op. cit., 41.

³⁹ Ibid; Easton op. cit., 103.

⁴⁰ Warner and Foote, op. cit., 555.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Roberts, *Intensive National Register Survey of Downtown Stillwater*, op cit., 22-23.

⁴³ Roberts, *Intensive National Register Survey of Downtown Stillwater*, op cit., 23.

⁴⁴ Roberts, *Intensive National Register Survey of Downtown Stillwater*, op cit., 25.

⁴⁵ Norene Roberts, *North Hill (Original Town) Stillwater Residential Area*. National Register Identification and Evaluation Study. Prepared for the Stillwater Heritage Preservation Commission, 1995, 16.

⁴⁶ Warner and Foote, op. cit, 555.

⁴⁷ Henning, op cit., 26-29.

⁴⁸ Warner and Foote, op. cit., 554.

⁴⁹ “Pretty Park on Levee to Beautify Stillwater,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, 29 Jan 1911, 24.

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Panoramic View of the City of Stillwater (1879), page 15, courtesy Washington County Historical Society.

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