

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER:

Red River ox carts lined up on Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) in front of Cheritree and Farwell's Hardware store in 1859. Charles William Wulff Borup, as agent for the American Fur Company, arranged for carts to haul furs for traders.

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Case of the Vanishing Historic Site

EDITOR'S NOTE: This year marks the bicentennial of the discovery of Carver's Cave, an historic landmark of the Ramsey County area. The cave was discovered in 1767 by the British explorer, Jonathan Carver, and subsequently mentioned by most of the early explorers and settlers of the area. In the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, the mouth of the cave disappeared.

The following story was written in 1913 and is published as a contemporary account of a group of men engaged in an early attempt at restoration of an historic site. Documentation and footnotes have been added as explanatory material and to trace what became of their efforts.

Or What Happened to Carver's Cave?

BY CHARLES T. BURNLEY

CARVER'S CAVE, the "Wakan-tebee" of the Indians,¹ lost for almost three decades, has been rediscovered. Its smoke-blackened walls saw the light of day for the first time in twenty-eight years, November 5, 1913. It will be made a part of the city system of parks and exploited as a relic of primeval days.

The cavern opens at the base of the southwest exposure of the great sandstone cliffs at Dayton's Bluff, St. Paul. Above and a little to the south of the point of the high bluff looking down the Mississippi River are the Indian mounds. Indian tradition connects the mounds and cave. The mounds are the home of the departed, the cave, "Wakan-tebee," the home of the "Great Spirit."

TWO CHAMBERS of the cave have been found. The cavern has a depth of at

least 200 feet into the cliff. It has been reported by early explorers to extend as much as two miles beneath the great bluff.

The outer cavern is all that white men really have known as Carver's Cave. It is 100 feet long and 40 feet wide at the present time [1913]. It has a height of 12 feet. Two-thirds of the cave is covered with a subterranean lake. This has been draining at the rate of a million gallons a day for over a month and still covers the larger part of the cave floor. The inner cavern is entirely filled with a subterranean lake. It is 150 by 75 feet, as nearly as can be judged. The water is crystalline and doubtless comes from springs.

Chief Medicine Owl² and a party of Blackfeet Indians from the Glacier National Park region who were passing through St. Paul have explored the cavern. They sailed about the underground lake in a skiff searching for "medicine" writing placed on the walls by the ancestors³ of the Indians who once lived in the area. These mostly have been destroyed by the vandalism of white men.

In the far corner of the cavern, water was found bubbling from beneath the wall. An opening was cut and a second cavern was found, larger than the first.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Charles T. Burnley was a young reporter for the St. Paul Dispatch when he wrote this story about Carver's Cave in 1913. A graduate of Macalester College, St. Paul, he was a student correspondent for the Dispatch during his college years, then joined the staff in 1911. From 1919 to 1941, he was city editor of the South St. Paul Daily Reporter. In 1942, he returned to the St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press as a reporter, copy editor and makeup editor. He retired in 1963. He has been a long-time member of the Ramsey County Historical Society.



This was completely filled with water.

LONG IRON PIPES have been forced beneath the north wall of the main cave. The explorers think another chamber lies in that direction.⁴

The property at the mouth of the cave belongs to the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. It was purchased by that company from the Milwaukee Road. The need of the railroads to increase their track-age obliterated the mouth of the great cave almost thirty years ago.

The sandstone cliffs were cut back 75 feet and the original mouth of Carver's Cave was destroyed. Then a land slide covered what was left and Carver's Cave became only a memory.⁵

A year ago, John H. Colwell, at that time president of the Mounds Park Improvement Association, agitated for the re-opening of the cave. He was instrumental in getting the Dayton's Bluff Commercial Club to join him.⁶

IN THE FALL of 1913, John W. Armstrong, Ramsey County surveyor, ran his lines out following old survey notes, found his old pins and placed a blaze on the face of the cliff. He said, "Dig here."

It was not until the middle of November that the debris was removed. A gang of men, three teams of horses and 50 pounds of dynamite—were used to open the famous old cave. Plans are being made to exploit it as a beauty spot and a lure to tourists. A large electric sign is to be placed high on the face of the cliff above the cave. It will be in plain view from the new Union Depot, from steamers on the Mississippi River and from a great part of the business section of St. Paul.⁷

The intersection of Short and Cherry Streets is directly above the mouth of the cave. Short Street will be condemned, converted into a park, and cement steps will be built down the face of the cliff to the

The interior of Carver's Cave looked like this on May 1, 1867 when the Minnesota Historical Society celebrated the centennial of Carver's council with the Indians by exploring the cave with boats and candles. Except for this sketch, from the Minnesota Historical Society, pictures and map used with this story were given to the Ramsey County Historical Society by the author.

mouth of the cave. Carver's Cave will be made a part of the city park system. A block from the crest of the bluff is the proposed Stickney Boulevard. The Short Street Park and Carver's will connect with this.⁸ The Dayton's Bluff Commercial Club has appointed John H. Colwell, W. E. Witherspoon, and Frank J. Waterous to superintendent the conversion of this bit of scenery into a city park.

CARVER'S CAVE has been known to Indians for thousands of years. It perhaps has a history dating back to the last ice epoch, when the last glacier pushing southward broke over the edge of the bluff into the deep valley of the Mississippi River. The glacier broke into jagged fragments the thick overlying Trenton Limestone strata that now outcrops above the St. Peter Sandstone base in which the cave is found.

On November 5, 1913, workmen cleared the mouth of the cave, a mere slit at the base of the rock. By lying flat, they could see the top of the arched roof. Within, lighted by the rays of the setting sun which shown directly into the narrow opening, was what appeared to be a vast underground lake of pure ice-cold water. Darkness veiled the farther walls.

Dynasties of Sioux and their ancestors knew of the cave and doubtless held their counsels there. The place was held in great awe by the Indians.

Captain Jonathan Carver, pushing his way up the Mississippi River in a canoe, reached the cave on May 1, 1767. He is the first white man known to have visited



Teams of horses were used in 1913 to scoop rock and debris from mouth of cave, in background.

the cavern.

Captain Carver, in his notes, tells of finding this cave: "About 30 miles below the Falls of St. Anthony, in the sandstone cliffs overlooking the Mississippi River there is a cave of amazing depth. The bottom of the cave is of fine sand. Twenty feet from the mouth begins a lake which extends an unsearchable distance, for the darkness of the cave prevents all attempts to acquire a knowledge of it. I threw a pebble toward the interior with my utmost strength. I could hear it fell in water. It caused an astonishing and horrible noise that reverberated through all those gloomy regions."

OTHER EARLY adventurers found mystery and cause for wonder in the cave. In 1817, Major Stephen H. Long of the United States Army, managed to creep through a narrow crevice into the cavern.

In 1823, the heirs of Captain Carver laid claim to the site of the City of St. Paul, basing their rights on the discovery of the territory by Captain Carver and the following deed which has been declared fictitious:

"To Jonathan Carver, a chief under the most mighty and potent George III, King of English and other nations . . . We, chiefs of the Naudowissies . . . in return for his aid and other good services done by the said Jonathan to ourselves and allies, give, grant and convey to him, the said Jonathan and his heirs and assigns forever, the whole of a certain tract of territory of land

bounded as follows: From the Falls of St. Anthony running on the East bank of the Mississippi River nearly Southeast as far as Lake Pepin where the Chippewa joins the Mississippi, and from thence Eastward five days travel, accounting twenty English miles a day, from thence again to the Falls of St. Anthony on a straight line. We do for ourselves, heirs and assigns forever give unto the said Jonathan, his heirs and assigns forever, all the said land, with all the trees, rocks and rivers therein, reserving the sole liberty of hunting and fishing on land not platted or improved by said Jonathan, his heirs and assigns. To which we have affixed our respective seals.

"At the Great Cave, May the First, 1767."

THE CLAIM of the Carvers was referred to a committee of Congress and was reported adversely.

On May 1, 1867, the Minnesota Historical Society celebrated the centennial of Carver's council with the Indians by a trip to the cave in the afternoon. Boats and candles were used to view the cave.⁹

About 1885, a railroad cutting took a slice off the overhanging Dayton's bluff and the falling debris so covered the entrance that the cave was lost from sight until its rediscovery this year [1913].¹⁰

The occasion of the visit of Chief Fish Wolf Robe of the Blackfeet Indians and his Medicine-Man, Chief Medicine Owl,

and their band on November 16, 1913, is the most notable occurrence since the opening of the mouth of the cavern. The Blackfeet insisted on going first to the Indian mounds where they observed a ceremony for the dead buried there,¹¹ before they would go to the re-opened cave of "Wakan-tebee."

For centuries before the Indian village of Kaposia was founded on the river flats below the mounds,¹² the prehistoric Indians brought their dead chiefs to the burial place on the high bluffs. They were brought from as far north as the Great Lakes and from as far west as the Dakotas. The dead were transported in canoes down the Mississippi River. Their bodies are said to have been wrapped in buffalo robes. These ancient funerals made the ground hallowed in the minds of the Indians.

Chief Fish Wolf Robe and his band stood decked in their feathers and war paint, their faces reverently lifted toward the sun, while Chief Medicine Owl made his appeal to the "Great Manitou" of the Indians.

AT THE MOUTH of the cave again, Medicine Owl advanced alone to the cavern, turned, faced his followers and made "good medicine" before they dared venture into the sacred dwelling of the "Great Spirit."

The Indians embarked in a skiff and, paddling with a shovel, made a circuit of the walls of the cave as far as the lake could carry them. They searched for the signs of the great medicine men, the inscriptions of serpents, buffalo heads and birds. The interior of the cave is covered

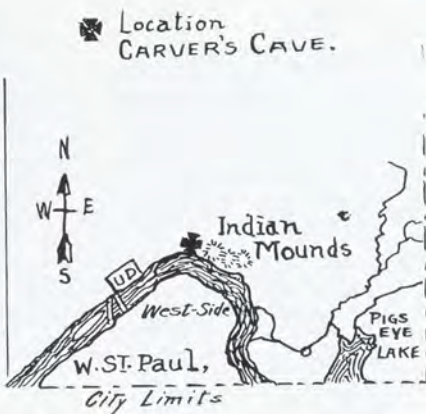
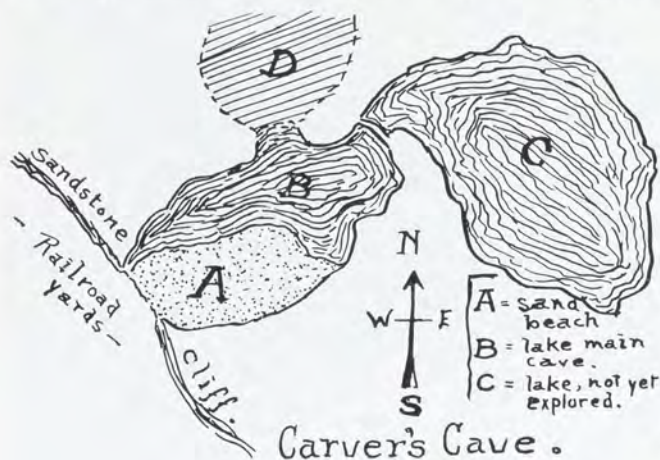


Chief Fish Wolf Robe, left, and his band of Blackfeet Indians pose in front of the cave. Chief Medicine Owl is fourth from left. Drawing of the cavern, below, indicates portions explored and unexplored but thought to exist. Map at right locates cave in relation to St. Paul area. Letters "UD" mark location of Union Depot in St. Paul.

with a fine sediment, a dark thick slime, and the inscriptions in many places had been cut nearly away by white men who had placed their initials on the sandstone surfaces of the cave.¹³

Further explorations continued until December of 1913. The cave entrance then was closed and an iron gate placed in front of it to prevent further vandalism or destruction of the records of the Indians, cut into the cave walls.

POSTSCRIPT: As the following explanatory notes indicate, plans for creating a park at Carver's Cave never materialized.



The cave still was open as recently as 1958, according to the records of J. A. Beebe of the Burlington Railroad, which owns the property. A new flurry of interest in Carver's Cave sprang up in 1958 in connection with Minnesota's Statehood Centennial celebration. However, a 1959 news story states that the original entrance to the cave was buried under 20 feet of fallen dirt and rock. Since then, no continuing, concerted efforts have been made to reopen the cave.

Notes

1. "Wakan-tebee" is a Dakota word meaning "Dwelling of the Great Spirit." W. C. Fuller, "Wakan-Tebee, the Dwelling of the Great Spirit," *Historic Sites* (F. C.) 623, Minnesota Historical Society, March 5, 1936, page 9.
2. Medicine Owl was the chief medicine man for the 2,000 Piegan Blackfeet Indians at the Blackfeet Agency in Montana. They were brought to St. Paul by railroad officials interested at that time in promoting Glacier National Park.
3. Lazy Boy was a member of the Algonkin Blackfeet party which came to St. Paul. He said that the Chippewa fought the Sioux in St. Paul and some of the Chippewa hid in the cave. Big Sun, the Chippewa chief, buried some belongings in the cave while there. Lazy Boy translated the hieroglyphics on the weapons found in the cave. Carver, however, in 1767 had made notes of the writings on the walls. These probably were pictographs made by prehistoric Indians.
4. On November 17, 1913, a second cavern entrance was discovered about nine feet below the water level. On November 19, 1913,

after a rock was removed, J. H. Armstrong and Frank Koalaska found a third chamber. After more digging the third cavern was discovered to be seventy-five feet long and twenty-five feet wide with a ceiling ten feet high. Fuller, pages 8-9.

5. In 1869 and 1885, several hundred feet of the Indian mounds bluffs were cut away to make room for a railroad right-of-way, and the opening to the cave disappeared. *St. Paul Dispatch*, May, 2, 1941. Today the railroad tracks and right-of-way of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad pass right beside it.
6. William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, Saint Paul: 1922, Vol. 1, page 57.
7. This project never was carried out.
8. This also was not done because of the closing of Carver's Cave in 1913.
9. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May, 7, 1967.
10. Folwell, Vol. I, page 57, and *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 2, 1941.
11. The mounds were built by pre-historic Woodland Indians on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River now called Mounds Park.
12. The village of Kaposia was established after 1750 by the Mdewakanton Dakota Indians whose chiefs were named Little Crow.
13. Beginning in 1860 with the inscription of T. W. Wilson's name and date, white men began to carve or write their names on the walls of the cave. Fuller, page 8.

John H. Colwell, prime mover in reopening the "lost" Carver's Cave is shown at left. At right, wearing overcoat, is John Nankeville, a laundry owner who helped finance the effort. Filaments held by men are roots of nearby trees that found the water in the cave.





THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.