

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

In the Beginning:
The Geological Forces
That Shaped Ramsey County

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Spring, 1999

Volume 34, Number 1

Special 150th Anniversary Issue
Ramsey County And Its Territorial Years

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"St. Paul in Minnesota," watercolor, 1851, by Johann Baptist Wengler. Oberösterreichisches Landes Museum, Linz, Austria. Photo: F. Gangl. Reproduced by permission of the museum. Two years after the establishment of Minnesota Territory, St. Paul as its capital was a boom town, "... its situation is as remarkable for beauty as healthiness as it is advantageous for trade," Fredrika Bremer wrote in 1853, and the rush to settlement was on. See "A Short History of Ramsey County" and its Territorial Years, beginning on page 8.

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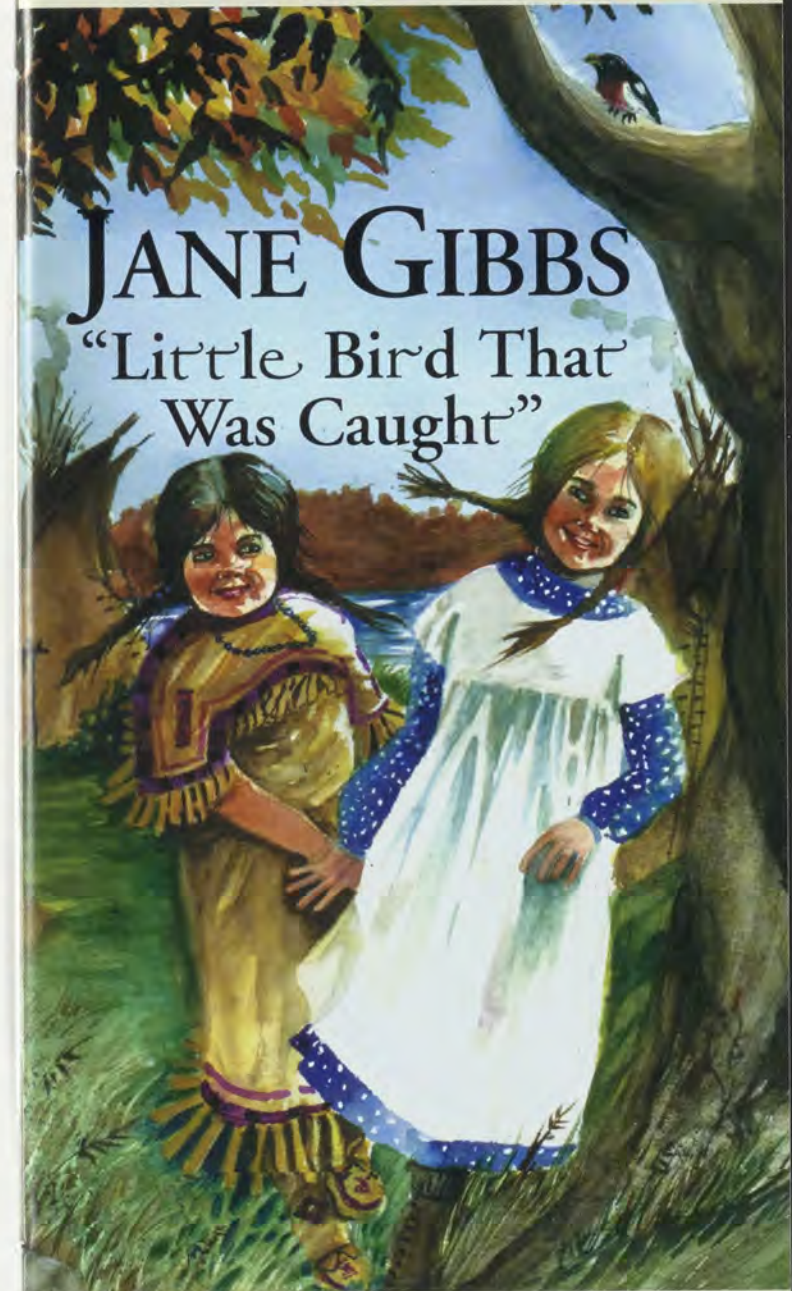
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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In the Beginning

The Geological Forces that Shaped Ramsey County

Scott F. Anfinson

Editor's Note: The following article is adapted from "The Nature of the River," which was written by Scott F. Anfinson for The Final Report on the Mississippi and St. Paul, a study prepared by Carole Zelle for the Ramsey County Historical Society and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It has been edited with Anfinson's permission by Thomas J. Kelley for this special edition of Ramsey History.

The great bend in the Mississippi River in St. Paul was a focus of human activity long before Euro-Americans began to settle there in the mid-nineteenth century; for at least 10,000 years, people have lived in the vicinity. A spearhead found south of Mounds Park on the Mississippi in Ramsey County, has been dated at around 10,000 years before the present era. During this period, the environment and the cultures have changed considerably. The radical changes of the last 150 years have displaced the aboriginal culture and greatly altered the physical setting. Reconstructing the images of St. Paul's and Ramsey County's pre-urban past allows us to look back in time and to appreciate a history of the city and county that does not depend on the written record.

Interpreting the pre-settlement past of Ramsey County's riverfront, where the county's more recent history begins, is an interdisciplinary task. An environmental history must look at the geology, paleoecology and early written accounts of a setting largely unaltered by humans. A cultural history must investigate the prehistoric archeology, ethnographic accounts, and anthropological interpretations of the aboriginal cultures that once occupied the area. These investigations are complicated by the dramatic landscape alterations associated with a large urban center that have destroyed or effectively hidden most of the aboriginal archeological sites.

Drawings and written accounts by early explorers and settlers regarding the

area's Indian people give us a fairly accurate picture of what the last aboriginal inhabitants looked like and how they lived. Some sites occupied by prehistoric cultures no doubt survived the urban onslaught and are buried deeply beneath railroad grades or riverbank filling. But until some of these sites can be investigated our interpretation of the prehistoric culture of St. Paul must be based on the few available artifacts, descriptions of early archeological work, environmental reconstructions, and interpretations of prehistoric complexes in adjacent regions with similar environments.

Complex Geology

Ramsey County lies in a setting that is geologically complex, both in its bedrock and its glacially produced features. The geological story of the Ramsey County area encompasses ancient oceans teeming with primitive life, glacial bulldozers from Canada, and powerful rivers with enormous waterfalls. The legacy of these environments can be seen in the fossils eroding out of the bedrock, high hills built of multi-colored gravels, and deeply cut valleys.

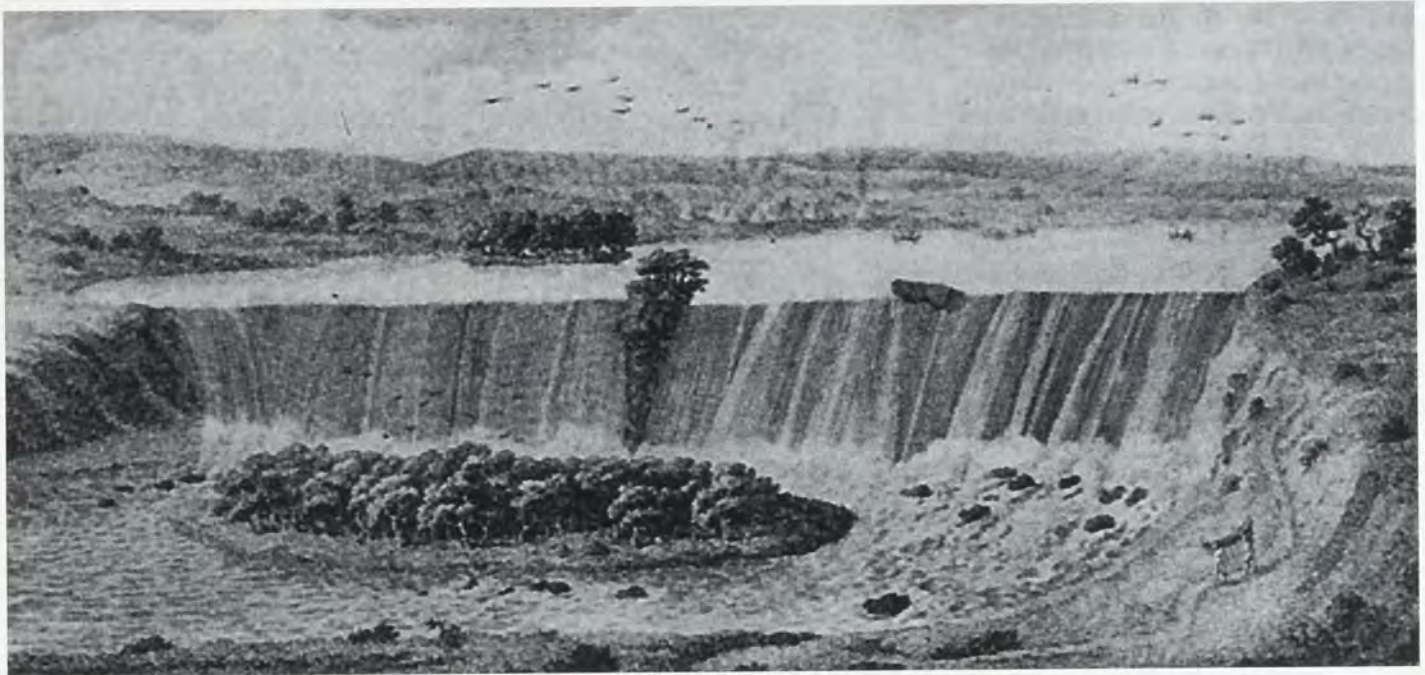
Six hundred to sixty-five million years ago Minnesota was very close to the equator so the climate was much warmer than today. The region was covered with a shallow sea inhabited with recently evolved shellfish and older, simpler animals such as corals and sponges. Their fossils and the plant life of that ocean have been chipped out of the rock along the St. Paul riverfront by generations of

collectors. Eastern Minnesota was alternately above and below water during the Late Paleozoic and Mesozoic eras (600 to sixty-five million years ago). When it was above water, former marine sediments were eroded and new sediment deposition was limited. Missing rock layers in St. Paul include those from the Age of Fishes, the Age of Dinosaurs, and the beginning of the Age of Mammals. Evidence of millions of years of geological history, St. Peter sandstone, Glenwood shale, and Platteville limestone, are visible along the central St. Paul riverfront. The bedrock exposures are dominated by St. Peter sandstone, a soft white rock deposited along the beach of an ancient ocean. The exposure of St. Peter sandstone at Dayton's Bluff was the basis for the Dakota name for St. Paul, *Imizha ska* or "white rock."

Lying immediately on top of the St. Peter sandstone is a narrow band of soft, gray Glenwood shale deposited when the Ramsey County area was covered by seawater. Above this shale is the hard, light-colored Platteville limestone deposited in the warm mid-Ordovician ocean. This limestone was used in many of the early buildings in St. Paul and Minneapolis. Southwest of downtown St. Paul there are a few exposures of Decorah shale, a gray-green rock with the most dense fossil concentrations of any of the Twin Cities bedrock outcrops. Springs have carved numerous natural caves, some of which were known to be sites of aboriginal activity, through this sandstone. This bedrock arrangement of hard limestone over soft sandstone promoted the formation and migration of St. Anthony Falls, which began in St. Paul more than 12,000 years ago.

Cut into the bedrock and filled with glacial drift are numerous valleys excavated by the pre-glacial and interglacial

and the People Who Followed



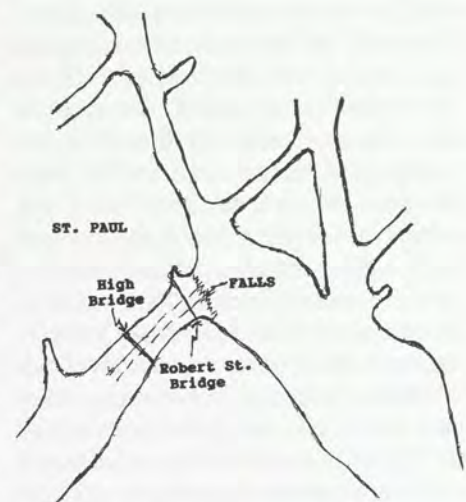
Earliest known view of St. Anthony Falls, reproduced from Jonathan Carver's Travels, published in 1778. All photos used with this article, with the exception of the drawing on this page, are from Billions of Years in Minnesota by the late Edmund C. Bray and published in 1977 by the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Mississippi and St. Croix rivers. An early St. Croix River valley now contains a chain of lakes which were formed by melting blocks of ice buried in the glacial drift (Phalen, Keller, Gervais, Vadnais, Pleasant). One of the early Mississippi River valleys forms the path of the Trout Brook valley east of downtown St. Paul. St. Anthony Falls began its retreat at the end of the Pleistocene ice age at the spot where this valley enters the present Mississippi River valley. This is approximately where the Lafayette Bridge is today.

The glaciers retreated from the Ramsey County area about 13,000 years ago, although large blocks of drift-buried ice may have survived for more than a thousand years. By 12,000 years ago, the Des Moines lobe of the glacier had retreated

into the Red River Valley and Glacial Lake Agassiz was beginning to form at this valley. The retreating glaciers left drift averaging twenty feet deep at Dayton's Bluff to 260 feet along the Phalen Creek and Trout Brook valleys where it fills the ancient valleys.

The only outlet of Lake Agassiz during its early history was Glacial River Warren, which began at Brown's Valley and flowed through the Minnesota River lowlands. At its peak, Lake Agassiz covered all of northwestern Minnesota, eastern North Dakota, and central Canada. The swiftly moving water from this vast lake quickly cut through the deep glacial drift that filled the old Mississippi River below Trout Brook. Above Trout Brook, the river encountered the hard Platteville limestone, which was not easily eroded,



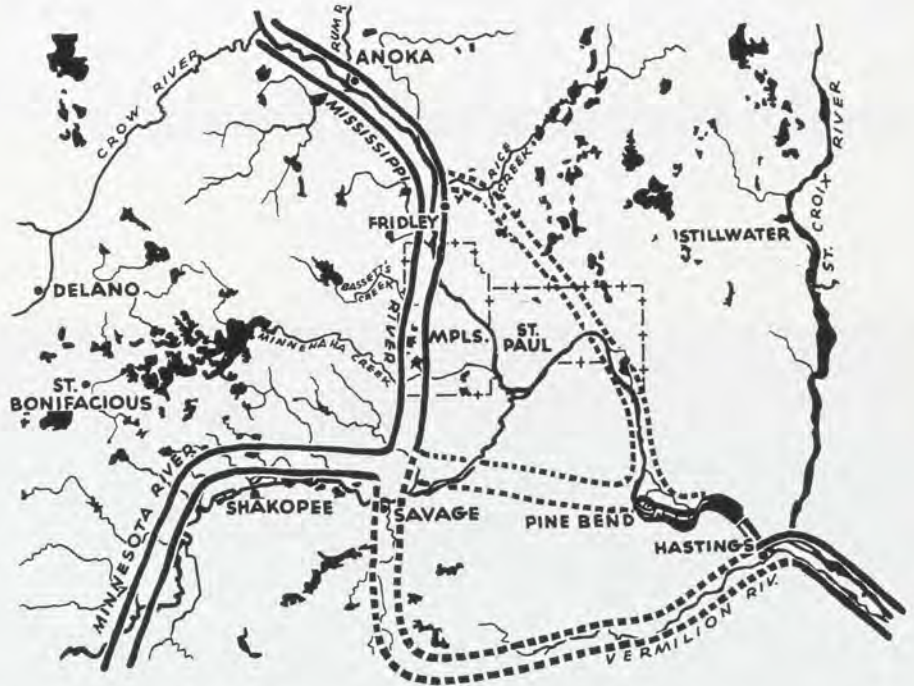
Drawing by Edmund Bray indicating the location of the great waterfall created by Glacial River Warren below the present-day Robert Street bridge.

thus a waterfall formed. As the water dropped off the limestone ledge, it eroded the soft sandstone below the lip and the limestone collapsed in great tabular blocks. Some of these blocks can be seen along the river valley in St. Paul, especially in the vicinity of Fountain Cave.

From the river bend in downtown St. Paul, the River Warren Falls rapidly worked its way up the river to Fort Snelling, where it split in two. The smaller St. Anthony Falls began its ascent along the Mississippi through Minneapolis and the River Warren Falls continued up the Minnesota River valley until it reached a buried channel at Nine Mile Creek. Over the next 10,000 years, St. Anthony Falls traveled eight miles up the Mississippi to what is now downtown Minneapolis. It was seen by Father Hennepin in 1680 about 1,500 feet south of its current position. As impressive as St. Anthony Falls was to its early visitors, it pales when compared to the River Warren waterfall that was thundering in downtown St. Paul 12,000 years ago. In the 1850s St. Anthony Falls was about 1,500 feet across and fell about thirty feet. The River Warren Falls at the High Bridge was 2,700 feet across and fell 175 feet.

Steep Bluffs, Plains

Much of the topography of Ramsey County at the time of white settlement was relatively rough due to prominent hills, deep ravines cut through the glacial drift, and the broad Mississippi trench. Large hills still are present south and east of St. Paul. North and west, in what was once rural Ramsey County, outwash deposits form a relatively flat plain, but post-glacial streams cut into the plain. The deep Phalen Creek and Trout Brook valleys bisect the core of the city and were significant transportation barriers for early settlers. Steep bluffs, often rock-faced, line the Mississippi River valley in St. Paul. These bluffs line the river east of Phalen Creek for almost a mile. They then recede after the river turns south of the Pig's Eye flats area. Dayton's Bluff at the river's bend ascends almost 200 feet to Mounds Boulevard. West of Phalen Creek, the bluffs are not as high nor as steep in the eastern part of the downtown area and the rock facing is intermittent,



Interglacial valleys of the Mississippi River near the Twin Cities.

although the prominent cliff separating the upper and lower landings is still visible between Wabasha and Robert streets. Relatively flat alluvial terraces formed by glacial River Warren are present along the upper elevations in the Mississippi at St. Paul, while floodplain terraces and islands built of post-settlement alluvium are present at lower elevations. Most of the islands that once dotted the river have disappeared as modern filling has narrowed its channel. Prior to intensive urban development, the Mississippi River floodplain contained large marshes and lakes. The river was relatively shallow in the downtown area, averaging less than ten feet before dredging in the late nineteenth century.

Bison and a Giant Beaver

The study of the post-glacial, pre-settlement ecology of the area is largely based on the interpretation of sediment cores from lake bottoms. The strata usually can be radio carbon dated, with maximum errors of only a few hundred years. Once the vegetation is known for particular periods, the animal populations can be interpolated. Occasional finds of buried bones also can be used to determine what animals were present during the prehis-

toric eras. In 1955, skeletal remains of a now extinct form of bison were found in excavations for the Trout Brook sewer extension at Mississippi Street and Maryland Avenue in St. Paul in a peat deposit more than eighty-five feet deep. Other animal remains also were found in this deposit, including those of the giant beaver. There was no evidence of human activity.

The remains of these extinct animals are evidence of an environment much different from today. Following the retreat of the glaciers 13,000 years ago, the area soon was covered with a boreal forest dominated by spruce. Continued warming of the climate gradually caused the replacement of the spruce by deciduous species, such as elm and oak; a deciduous forest covered the area by 10,000 years ago. By 7,000 years ago, prairie took over much of the area as the post-glacial warming, drying trend neared its peak. This trend had reversed by 5,000 years ago, and the pre-settlement vegetation pattern developed. A deciduous forest dominated the area with large prairie openings to the west and east. The original government land survey notes indicate oak dominated the uplands with maple, elm, ash, willow, and cottonwood on the higher land in the Mississippi Valley. Extensive wet mead-

ows and marsh vegetation were found in the lowlands. Some wild rice was present along the river.

Mastodon, musk ox, giant beaver, moose, and other species preferring a relatively cool climate probably inhabited the early boreal forest. As the weather grew warmer and drier and the forest became more open, bison, elk, and deer became more dominant. Cold water fish, such as northern pike, probably entered the area soon after the glaciers retreated. With the establishment of the prairie at the peak of post-glacial warming, large herds of bison probably roamed the area. Waterfowl were seasonally abundant in the riverbottom wetlands, and there were many kinds of fish in the river and back-water sloughs.

Prehistoric Peoples

Human occupation of North America began at least 12,000 years ago. At that time, southern Minnesota had just been uncovered by the retreat of glacial ice and the environment was very different from that encountered by white settlers. The earliest cultural period is referred to as Paleo-Indian and is generally identified by the presence of large, finely made points that tipped spears and darts. Paleo-Indian peoples are known as "Big Game Hunters" since their excavated sites often yield now-extinct megafauna such as mammoth and giant bison, but these people no doubt also used small animals and plants for subsistence.

The Archaic Period followed Paleo-Indian in the Midwest, perhaps 8,000 years ago, and lasted until about 2,500 years ago. It is characterized by changes in technology, in settlement patterns, and probably sociological and ideological orientations. Subsistence settlement patterns include the use of more permanent base camps, more diversified hunting, and more gathering of plant foods. Technological changes include the appearance of ground stone tools and of stemmed projectile points that are flaked in more irregular patterns than Paleo-Indian points.

Increased mortuary rituals centering on the construction of burial mounds and the widespread use of ceramics are the hallmarks of the Woodland Period (200 B.C. -500 A.D.). The earliest Woodland

ceramics in Minnesota are thick-walled vessels with exterior cord marking and decorations limited to fingernail impressions on the rim. None of these early ceramics are found in St. Paul, but they are known from Grey Cloud Island in the Mississippi ten miles south of St. Paul. In Middle Woodland times, the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, centered in Illinois and Ohio, promoted widespread cultural contacts, and the trading of such exotic materials as obsidian and copper. Mortuary rituals feature large conical mounds containing log or stone crypts with elaborate grave goods accompanying burials. Preferential mortuary treatments infer class-structured societies. Stone crypts and clay death masks found by nineteenth century excavations at Indian Mounds Park are evidence of the most northwestern extension of Hopewell.

The collapse of the Hopewell Interaction Sphere in about 400 A.D. led to the development of numerous regional traditions collectively called the Late Woodland. Ceramics became more globular, thinner, and featured complex cord impressions. Horticulture played an increasingly important role in subsistence, and settlements became more permanent. The introduction of the bow and arrow is revealed by the appearance of smaller projectile points. Some burial mounds are built in the shape of animals, as in the namesake of the Effigy Mound Complex on the Mississippi River in southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, and northeastern Iowa. No animal-shaped mounds are recorded in Ramsey County, but Late Woodland peoples associated with the effigy Mound Complex may have built many of the small mounds in St. Paul.

The Late Woodland Period ended about 1,000 A.D. in southeastern Minnesota with the appearance of people practicing intensive maize horticulture associated with the Middle Mississippian and Oneota Traditions. The hallmark of these complexes is shell-tempered pottery with thin-walled, smooth-surfaced, globular jars decorated with trailed lines. Projectile points usually are small, unnotched triangular forms. These people lived in good-sized, permanent houses in relatively large villages often protected

with wooden palisades. Most sites are on river terraces above fertile floodplains where corn and other crops could be grown. Some shell-tempered pottery has been recovered from Indian Mounds Park and the village site below it.

Historic Native Americans

At the time of European contact in the seventeenth century, the Dakota or Sioux Indians controlled most of Minnesota, with the Ojibwa (Chippewa) apparently restricted to the northern Lake Superior area. Before French intrusions into the Great Lakes region in the mid-seventeenth century, some cultural interaction had taken place between the French and the Dakota prior to the actual French entry into Minnesota. The first record of Europeans visiting the Ramsey County area is that of Father Louis Hennepin in 1680. Hennepin and two companions had been captured by a Dakota war party in the Illinois country and were brought through St. Paul on their way back to the Dakotas' home village at Lake Mille Lacs. They apparently left their canoes in the Phalen Creek valley and then went overland to Mille Lacs.

The early historic aboriginal inhabitants of the Ramsey County area were bands of Eastern Dakota who are known as the Santee. St. Paul may have been near the southeastern limit of Dakota territory at this time due to inter-tribal conflicts with tribes of the Illinois Confederacy. Le Sueur in 1700 recorded a Dakota village near the mouth of the Minnesota River; perhaps the earliest reference to Kaposia, the Mdewakanton Dakota village of successive chiefs named Little Crow. When Carver visited the area in 1766, the Dakota were in firm command of the region and he noted a Dakota cemetery on the top of Dayton's Bluff near the cave that bears his name.

The Dakota continued to occupy the Ramsey County area until the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, the village of Kaposia dominated the riverfront downstream from Phalen Creek. The Dakota ceded their lands east of the Mississippi River in 1837 and their lands west of the Mississippi in 1851. Intensive white settlement of St. Paul began in the early 1840s.



Map of Minnesota Territory showing the original counties as they existed from 1849 to 1851. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See "A Short History of Ramsey County," beginning on page 8

R.C.H.S.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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