

Context 1 – Native American, Early Archeological, Early Settlement Time Span –1700 to 1858

Although early settlement of the Minnesota River Valley likely began about 1200 BC, Chaska begins its recorded history in 1769.

Geography and Location

Due to its advantageous geography, the Chaska location has long been a prime settlement area. Here, the natural resources of the Big Woods met the transportation possibilities of the Minnesota River (originally called “St. Peter’s River” by Anglo-American settlers). The river itself also provided abundant bounty, including the deep clay deposits that were later to lead to the city’s brickmaking success.

The “Big Woods” were an enormous area of mainly deciduous forest that covered much of southeastern Minnesota, with Chaska located right at the core. These dense woods were composed of a wide variety of trees, including mostly basswood and sugar maple, but also ash, box elder, butternut, cottonwood, dogwood, elm, hackberry, and willow. Diverse in both flora and fauna, the forest areas provided an abundance of small game animals, allowing for excellent hunting and trapping.

Though the Big Woods was known as one of Minnesota’s most prominent features, earlier topography may have been more diverse. Studies of the early geologic resources refer to the importance of early prairie lands. Rolling uplands of low hills were dotted with smaller lakes and peat bogs. These lakes and pockets of prairie and oak savannah continued to some extent within the forest, adding to its vitality.

The Minnesota River was an important tributary to the Mississippi that formed the backbone of the valley’s transportation network. The river was considered especially important to the Dakota tribes, who believed the mouth of the river was located between the center of the earth and the center of the heavens.

The river itself forms an L-shape that flows southeast from Big Stone Lake on the South Dakota border. It then turns upward to join the Mississippi just north of Chaska, near Fort Snelling. Its name (and eventually that of the state) comes from the Dakota words *mini* meaning “water” and *sota*, “like the cloudy sky.” It was formed from glacial melt. The rolling hillsides provide some bluffs, though these are not as dramatic as those off of the Mississippi. The relative lowness of the terrain often led to flooding of the basin area, especially during spring snow melt.

Very little of these original geologic features (along the river), natural landmarks (such as the Big Woods), or viewsheds exist today.

Native American Settlement and Sites

Archeological studies have demonstrated evidence that the area was settled as early as ca. 10,000 to 3,000 BC, and that the site has been continually occupied since the early Archaic period. However, the preponderance of archeological evidence is associated with the middle to late Woodland period and the later M'dewakanton Dakota, who are the primary band associated with the area.

Archeological investigations in the area, particularly on farmsteads and as part of the environmental impact studies of new housing developments, demonstrate a fair amount of archeological remnants of these tribes, and perhaps of some even earlier settlements. Much of the evidence discovered are lithic scatters throughout previous cultivated farmland, and range from flakes and flake fragments to bone fragments and sherds. In general, however, artifacts in the area are not well inventoried, and suffer from both natural disruption from flooding, sedimentation, etc. and man-made development. For example, most of the early mounds the area was noted for have been destroyed by construction.

Although there are "lithic scatters" and evidence of settlement in the area as early as 3000 BC, the first consistently chronicled Native American settlement of the area appears to have been the Mound Builders of the Woodland period, beginning around 1200 BC. "Mound Builders" is a term applied to a diverse group of people who lived over a great portion of North America. Current archeological studies indicate that this culture may actually have been several different bands, some of whom were hunter-gatherers and the majority of others that farmed a specific area.

Mounds are evident from Minnesota all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, and as far east as the Appalachian Mountains. The purpose of the mounds can be mysterious — although some were apparently used for burial purposes, others appear to have no artifacts and perhaps served simply as raised areas for religious ceremonies ("temple mounds") or as fortifications. Still others may be collapsed lodges. Many of these mounds were located along river valleys. In any case, they were fairly prevalent throughout Minnesota, though fairly rare today. The three remaining mounds in City Square park are thus all the more valuable.

However, the primary band of Native Americans associated with the area are the M'dewakanton band of the Dakota (Sioux) tribe. These "People of the Lakes" had settled the area having been driven south due



Illustration of a Dakota Indian from Jonathan Carver's 1778 publication

to conflict with the Chippewa (Ojibway) associated with the area just north of the Minnesota River Valley. Several of these battles actually occurred in the Chaska area.

The M'dewakanton were established in at least seven villages along the Mississippi, and their territory ranged as far south as the Illinois River. When the first Anglo-American settlement began in the 1700s, this would have been the tribe that they encountered, and even the name "Chaska" stems from a Dakota word meaning "first-born son."

The Treaty of Traverse de Sioux was signed between the Dakota and the US Government on July 23, 1851. That treaty officially opened the area for Anglo-American settlement, ceding almost twenty-four million acres of land for about three million dollars, paid over time. Though it established reservation areas for the Dakota, many members of the tribe remained living in the Chaska area through the end of the 19th century, and enjoyed good relationships with the town's residents, which may have protected Chaska settlers during the later "Indian Uprising" of 1862.

Archeologically, there are likely few remaining Native American resources in the area. Erosion and other natural causes, farming, and development have compromised the integrity and placement of artifacts. The most likely remaining resources occur in mounds and in existing remnants of the Big Woods.

Early Anglo-European Settlement

"There is no doubt that at some future period, mighty kingdoms will emerge from these wildernesses, and stately and solemn temples, with gilded spires reaching the skies, supplant the Indian huts..."

- Jonathan Carver

The same geographic features that made the Chaska area so attractive to Native American settlement made it an ideal Anglo-European destination as well. The area was originally explored by Pierre-Charles le Sueur under the auspices of the French government in 1700. He came up the Minnesota River from Louisiana with three boats and twenty-two men, passing through Chaska en route to the Blue Earth River, where he established Fort L'Huiller at what is now Mankato. The fort was abandoned in 1702.

Many years later, in 1766, British explorer Jonathan Carver began to map out the area, while searching for a way to the Pacific Ocean. His book, *Travels Though the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, '67, and '68* became the first English account of the region, though historians cast doubt as to whether or not he actually explored all of the areas chronicled, or relied upon information passed on from Native Americans for many of the descriptions.

The river basin area around Chaska was dubbed Little Prairie, and included a trading post at Little Rapids. It became an accessory area for fur trading, though most of that business was centered at Mendota. As part of that trade, the area was occupied mainly by French and French-Canadian voyageurs. Jean-Baptiste Faribault ran a trading post in the area from 1826-1842 (just north of the present-day City of Chaska), and others trading in the area included Louis Provencalle, James "Bully" Welles, and Joseph Renville Jr. Exploration continued, particularly by the Feathersonaugh and Nicollet parties. Missionaries were also active, including Father Augustin Ravoux's log chapel which opened in 1842 — holding services for three years until the still un-converted Dakota threatened to burn it down (it was sold to the Catholics of Wabasha and floated down the river to its new location).

Though nearby areas, such as Carver, were settled early by "sooners" who moved in before ("sooner than") the area was officially open for homesteading, Chaska was generally not settled until after the Treaty of Traverse de Sioux in 1851.

The earliest name associated with the town is that of the land speculator Thomas Andrew Holmes, arriving in the Minnesota River valley about one month after the treaty was signed. Holmes had been licensed for two sites by the Indian agent, one at Shakopee and a secondary one at Chaska. However, he focused his efforts on the first site, selling the "Shaska" townsite to David L. Fuller in 1852. Fuller's main agent, Samuel Allen, was one of the first Anglo-American settlers in the area, which soon proved to be popular with Western-moving settlers due to its accessibility and plentiful natural resources.

The City of Chaska

The city itself was rather slow to develop. It was first platted by John T. Halsted in June of 1854. The Shaska Company was incorporated in 1857 by Frederic de Freudenreich, Amasa Mason, Freeman James, T.D. Smith, and George Fuller. The city, which had been chosen in 1856 as the county seat for the newly-established Carver County, was re-surveyed and platted to facilitate roadways and government buildings. It is at that time that the City Square was recorded "for the purpose of a common park." Bonds were issued and plats sold, but due to financial issues and litigation, the development of the city proper was slow.

Meanwhile, just outside of the town, efforts were made to establish the community of "Yorkville" at the river dock. These were soon abandoned, and that area is part of present-day Chaska in the area around Stoughton Avenue.

At the same time, the area farmsteads were being rapidly settled. Most of the early homesteaders relocated from the east coast, drawn by the fertile farmlands, river access, and woodlands. The Chaska area was also one of the first areas west of Minneapolis and St. Paul to be opened for homesteading, and so was very

accessible. The farmsteads soon had a predominance of German — and some Scandinavian — immigrants and recent immigrants, coloring the cultural heritage of the area.

One of the first buildings in the city was the Chaska House Hotel, built by Jacob Byhoffer for Paul Faber. The hotel burned down, sadly, in 1876. Other early buildings included Wagner’s saloon, the Linenfelser and Faber stores (still standing at Walnut and East Second), the Warner General Store, the Nobel-Sell House (301 East 3rd Street), and Lucius Howe’s brickyard, established in 1857. Due to fire, flooding, and development, few early buildings remain in Chaska, with the majority of the historic resources in the city dating from the 1880s-1920s.

Related State Contexts

Chaska’s historic contexts are incorporated within three of the larger, statewide contexts as determined by the State Historic Preservation office:

- “Indian Communities and Reservations, 1837-1934”
- “Early Agriculture and River Settlement, 1840-1870”
- “Railroads and Agricultural Development, 1870-1940”

Property Types

Note: In general, these property types listed in these contexts will identify specific Chaska examples as available. Unfortunately, relatively few of these examples are available for the Early History context. The following list represents cultural resources that are likely present in the area.

Pre-European sites

Mounds — particularly the three remaining in City Square

Gravesites

Caves

Habitation Sites

Ceremonial Sites

Other Archeological Sites

Prominent Natural Features

Low Bluffs

Viewsheds

Remnants of the Big Woods

Pre settlement

Fort Sites

Trading Sites

Chapel Sites

Boat Landings and River Access

Camp Sites

Early Settlement

House Sites
Civic Sites
Commercial Sites
 Howe Brickyard
 Linenhauser and Faber Store
Farm Sites

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. Chaska should pay special attention to archeological investigations of pre-European sites. In particular, this investigation should be required of any new development, in an effort to discover and inventory an early archeological resources.
2. Chaska should pay particular attention to remaining mounds, particularly those in City Square park. Although these mounds were far from rare (historians estimate there may have been tens of thousands in Minnesota at the time of Anglo-American settlement), very few remain intact. Most have been destroyed by natural forces and/or development. Preservation and interpretation of the mounds and remaining resources should be given the highest priority.
3. Chaska should pay special attention to any early settlement resources, such as forts, chapels, trading posts, and housing and commercial sites. Ideally, a full archeological survey should be completed.
4. Because of the importance to the area of these early sites, and their relative rarity, the HPC should pay special attention to making Chaska's residents aware of this early history. Through this outreach, other sites and resources may come to the HPC's attention. The preservation of any sites and related resources should be given the highest priority.
5. Due to necessary flood prevention efforts, such as the levee, most of the original vistas and viewsheds have been compromised. A sense of these views and the location, as portrayed in early maps, plans, paintings, drawings, and even photographs, would give modern-day visitors a much better sense of early resources and why Chaska was such an attractive settlement site. Such an interpretive display could be featured at the History Center, or perhaps on a walking trail along the levee. Similar efforts should be made with remaining old-growth forestry from the Big Woods.
6. The Chaska HPC should consider ways to interpret lost resources, including early homes, businesses, and Lucius Howe's first brickyard, that may have been destroyed by fire, flood, or development. Ideas for this include a walking tour of "sites that were," or a physical/ website exhibit.
7. Efforts should be concentrated on remaining early settlement resources, such as the Linenfelser and Faber stores and the Nobel-Sell House.