

Cedar Lake – Lake of the Isles Master Plan Historic Context

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Pre-European and Early European Settlement

It is important to acknowledge and understand the depth of the history of indigenous people in Minnesota and at the lakes now known as Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake. Archeological evidence shows that American Indians occupied this region for thousands of years. The land that is now Minnesota was originally home to the Dakota, Ojibwe, and Ho Chunk, and the area now known as Minneapolis has several lakes that were, and continue to be, important cultural and natural resources for these tribes.

Bodies of water are particularly important spiritual sites for the Dakota people. As explained in *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota*, “In the beginning, the water—Mni—was pure, part of the land, and therefore part of the people. It was the first medicine given to our people because water keeps everything alive. Water that comes from within the earth is pure and as such is considered wakan or sacred.”¹

In an 1805 treaty, 100,000 acres of land around the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers—known as Bdote—was acquired by the United States. Only two of the seven Dakota leaders present at the signing agreed to sell the land. No amount of money was specified for the sale, and the Dakota people were never paid for the value of the land. The treaty was never proclaimed (the final step in the ratification process), but the United States considered the land to be sold and began developing and altering the landscape. Minneapolis is on land that was ceded as part of this treaty.²

Bands of Native American tribes lived and moved throughout this region for centuries. One notable village was established in 1830 on the east bank of Bde Maka Sake. Major Lawrence Taliaferro, who was stationed at Fort Snelling, and a Dakota leader, Mahipiya Wicasta (Cloud Man), established a farming community that utilized Euro-American agricultural practices after many Dakota starved during the harsh winter of 1828-1829. The lakes to the north, including Wita Tomna (now Lake of the Isles) and Cedar Lake, were also valuable sites for the area’s tribes.³

Treaties signed by the Dakota and the United States in 1851 opened a vast area west of the Mississippi River to Euro-American settlement and intensified tensions that would lead to the

¹ Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 19.

² “Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park: Calhoun/Bde Maka Ska – Harriet Master Plan,” 2017, from the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board.

³ David A. Lanegran and Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Lake District of Minneapolis: A History of the Calhoun-Isles Community* (Saint Paul: Living Historical Museum, 1979), 5; Westerman and White, *Mni Sota Makoce*, 104-107.

U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. During the war, federal and state militia rounded up, imprisoned, and exiled Dakota people across Minnesota. Approximately 1,700 people, including Mahipiya Wicasta, were detained in a concentration camp at Fort Snelling. With the influx of Euro-Americans in the following decades, industrial, residential, and recreational development around the Chain of Lakes increased.⁴

Lake of the Isles, Cedar Lake, and the Grand Rounds

Parks shaped Minneapolis's history and made its reputation as the City of Lakes. The Chain of Lakes in west Minneapolis, which includes Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake, has long been a centerpiece of the city's park system.

The development of parks around Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake did not begin until the late 1800s. Earlier in the city's history, the area was better known as a railroad corridor. In 1865, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (StP&P) graded a mainline southwest from downtown Minneapolis that ran along the east and south shores of Cedar Lake, then known as Lake Leavenworth. This route proved to be busy and the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railway built a set of parallel tracks in 1871, and then constructed a railyard at the northeast corner of Cedar Lake. The St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway—successor to the StP&P—rerouted its mainline in 1882-1883 to follow the north shore of Cedar Lake, giving the railroad a more direct route west from Minneapolis.⁵

As Minneapolis grew, citizens became concerned about the city council's limited investment in public parks. The Board of Trade, hoping to improve community's image and economy, began advocating for a park board separate from the local government. The state legislature authorized a public referendum, and city residents voted to establish an independent Minneapolis Board of Park Commissioners (MBPC) in 1883. Among its responsibilities, the new board was authorized to acquire land for city parks. Later that year, noted landscape architect Horace Cleveland presented a plan for a system of parks and parkways to the MBPC. That plan was expanded in 1891 into a series of connected parks and parkways that became known as the Grand Rounds. Cleveland hoped that this park system would promote civic health and spur economic development in the city. In keeping with landscape architecture trends of the time, the Grand Rounds had a highly groomed, picturesque aesthetic.⁶

Cedar Lake and Lake of the Isles were not initially included in the park system. Both lakes were marshy wetlands and not immediately attractive as potential parks. The board soon realized, though, that Lake of the Isles could be a valuable asset and began acquiring shoreline through donations and purchases in the late 1880s. In 1887, MBPC purchased the two remaining islands in the lake. The other two islands had been incorporated into the southern shoreline in 1884 when the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway built a right-of-way for its tracks.⁷

⁴ "Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park: Calhoun/Bde Maka Ska – Harriet Master Plan."

⁵ Greg Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context, History, and Physical Description for the Proposed Southwest LRT Project, Hennepin County, Minnesota," 2014, prepared by The 106 Group for the Metropolitan Council.

⁶ Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context."

⁷ Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context."

An integral part of the Grand Rounds was a series of connected parkways that ran along rivers, creeks, and lakes to create a large circuit. The tree-lined parkways separated vehicle traffic (horse carriages and, later, automobiles) from pedestrian traffic and provided the infrastructure for popular recreational activities of the time, including scenic drives, walking, horseback riding, and bicycling. It took many decades for the system to be constructed, and work on a parkway around Lake of the Isles began in 1888. The road followed the original grade of the shoreline and was frequently submerged and impassable. To address this issue and improve the quality of the lake, MBPC dredged the lake to increase its depth and used the dredged material to raise and stabilize the shoreline. Dredging and filling projects would occur through the early 1900s and successfully turned the marshy Lake of the Isles into an attractive water feature. Affluent residents were drawn to the redeveloped lake and built elegant homes along its shores.⁸

The parkways provided a transportation route over land, and MBPC began constructing channels between lakes to provide a transportation route on the water. Construction of a canal between Lake of Isles and Cedar Lake began in 1911. The canal opened in 1913 and was officially named the Kenilworth Lagoon in 1914. It originally had unlined shores, likely with sod planted down to the waterline, but these banks quickly began to erode, and wood sheet-piling was installed to make a more robust edge. Rose bushes were planted above the sheet-piling to screen it from view and maintain the picturesque aesthetic of the Grand Rounds.⁹

Park development at Cedar Lake lagged behind Lake of the Isles and other parks in the Grand Rounds. The first parcels of land around the lake were acquired by the MBPC in 1908, and dredging efforts did not begin until 1911. One of the most impactful improvements was the construction of a channel to the northwest to Brownie Lake. When the canal opened in 1917, it was possible to travel by water from Brownie Lake through Cedar Lake and Lake of the Isles to Bde Maka Ska.¹⁰

During the Great Depression, federal relief programs completed several projects at Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake, including extensive work to the Kenilworth Lagoon. Stone riprap was placed around the bridges at either end of the lagoon, and limestone masonry retaining walls were installed at the corners of the bridge at the West Lake of the Isles Boulevard. Wood retaining walls were also constructed at the west end of the lagoon.¹¹

The next major round of improvements came in the 1970s. Recreation needs were changing during this period, placing different pressures on the Grand Rounds as more people used the parkways as commuter routes. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) hired San Francisco landscape architects Eckbo, Dean, Austin and Williams to study the Grand Rounds. After community input, a series of improvements were carried out including rose-toned pavement on parkways, cube-shaped streetlights, and new signage.¹²

⁸ Muriel Nord, "Lake of the Isles Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1984), 2.

⁹ Theodore Wirth, *Minneapolis Park System, 1883-1944* (Minneapolis: Board of Park Commissioners, 1945), 140; Minneapolis Park Board Annual Report for 1915, 52-3.

¹⁰ Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context"; Charlene Roise, "The Cedar Lake Parkway Bridge in the Context of the Grand Rounds, Minneapolis," 2000, prepared by Hess, Roise and Company.

¹¹ Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context."

¹² Mathis, "Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context."

In the 1990s, MPRB struggled to keep water out of the previously swampy areas at the north end of Lake of the Isles. The board elected to let the land return to a more natural state in 1994. In the 2000s, MPRB undertook a multi-year project to repair shorelines, address flooding, improve water quality, and replace or restore vegetation. Over 100 shrubs were planted along the Kenilworth Lagoon as part of this project. Water plants were planted near the shoreline at the northeastern and southwestern corners of the lagoon.¹³

As part of the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park, Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake see millions of visitors each year. MPRB began a master planning process in 2020 to guide long-term improvements to these two parks while maintaining their historic character.

¹³ Sharon Parker, “The dredging of Lake of the Isles: There is a method to this madness,” *Southwest Journal*, October 1994, B-15; Mathis, “Kenilworth Lagoon/Channel Context.”