As one strolls along the busy shores of Lake Calhoun—known to the Dakota as Bde Maka Ska (“white banks lake”) in reference to the sandy white beaches that enveloped the waters—the true history of this place feels absent. A small monument on the east side of the lake marks a spot that largely goes unseen. This location is now more closely associated with inline skating, dog walking, jogging, and summer fun, but it was not always simply a place of leisure. The history of the land and the waters that have protected this space for centuries is a long and contentious one upon which only a small fraction of perspectives have been properly documented.

From 1830 to 1839 a small agricultural community of Dakota known as Heyate Otuwe, “the village at the side,” was located at Lake Calhoun, then a marshy area that had previously served as a place to harvest wild rice, located roughly six miles from Bdote, a site of creation for the Dakota people. The community, which in 1839 had a total population of 207, including 72 men, 54 women, and 81 children, was under the supervision of Indian agent Lawrence Taliaferro. The village of Heyate Otuwe came into being in 1829 when Chief Cloud Man, or Mahpiya Wiwaśta, a member of the Black Dog band of Dakota, decided to try the “white man’s way” of farming. He was influenced to do so after surviving a treacherous incident in a snowstorm. Missionary Samuel Pond stated that the chief—who like many Dakota in Minnesota sometimes hunted a great distance from their summer villages—was hunting on the plains near the Missouri River when he and the other members of his party were overtaken by a sudden blizzard.

According to Samuel Pond, the storm was so violent that the hunters lay down, each wrapped in his furs. Mahpiya Wiwaśta could not communicate with his companions and did not know whether they were dead or alive. The men lay there for three days and nights under the snow. During this time Mahpiya Wiwaśta remembered that Indian agent Taliaferro had urged them to plant crops at Lake Calhoun. When the storm was over, the members of the party found that they were near a “large camp of Indians who came to their assistance.” On returning home to Black Dog village, Mahpiya Wiwaśta persuaded a group of families to accept government assistance to start a new village in which agriculture would be emphasized for subsistence. They were given seed and farm tools, and the colony began in August 1829.

Dakota people, historically seen in western anthropological terms as hunters and gatherers, were traditionally not viewed as farmers, though they had always cultivated gardens at village sites. Their way of life did not fit under the term agriculture because they traveled at different times of year and harvested their food from wild and native plants rather than subsisting off of plants that were not indigenous to the area. Another difference from European agriculture was that in Dakota culture it was the women who cultivated crops, not the men.

From Samuel Pond’s point of view, Mahpiya Wiwaśta’s decision was “to turn their attention to agriculture and adopt the customs of civilized people.” Thus, the Dakota—particularly Dakota men—would spend less time hunting and more time farming: Pond defined the change as “abandoning the chase and cultivating the arts of civilized life.” He viewed Mahpiya Wiwaśta as a “man of superior discernment, and of great prudence and foresight.” Pond noted that the chief was “opposed by many of the other chiefs, and none of them entered heartily into his views.”

Mahpiya Wiwaśta’s decision to take up agriculture could be viewed as assimilation to western values and culture. This was Indian agent Taliaferro’s understanding: he named the village Eatonville in honor of John Eaton, secretary of war in the administration of President Andrew Jackson, calling the village “my little Colony of Sioux agriculturists.” Eatonville was viewed as an experiment to see if the Dakota’s lives would be improved by emphasizing agriculture as a way of life. This perspective sees
Mahpiya Wičašta’s and his fellow band members as pawns of civilization, on a “progressive” path to assimilation into European ways. From the chief’s perspective, however, he had a decision to make, one supported economically by the local Indian agent and missionaries, which may have had a strong influence. It was a time of transformation for the Dakota. Mahpiya Wičašta’s decision was not merely economic or cultural but also political, a move toward self-sufficiency and independence.

Mahpiya Wičašta had a choice to make, and he opted to try another way of life. The traditional ways of the Dakota were becoming less and less viable, especially with the decline of buffalo and its disappearance from the eastern regions of the Dakota homelands.**

Mahpiya Wičašta was not seeking to become something other than a Dakota person. He did not
As the corn in their fields ripened, Dakota women and children sat in scaffolds to prevent birds from damaging the crop, as shown in an engraving based on a painting by Seth Eastman.

>> intend to forsake his identity as a Dakota man; he was simply making an honest attempt to adapt to his surroundings, changing with the times as any human being, as well as any community, must in order to live. The change in subsistence patterns did not make the people of this village any less Dakota. Its members not only tried to feed themselves more efficiently but shared their wealth, in a typically Dakota way, with neighboring bands, thus ensuring the survival of even more Dakota people. In September 1835, Taliaferro felt the need to lecture the people of Mahpiya Wičaštā’s village “to explain fully to the Indians—not to give their corn away to others of their relations—other matter of importance to their interests.” Despite the fact that the people in this village embraced agriculture, Taliaferro was never able to convince them to stop being Dakota.xxv

While the people of the village begun by Mahpiya Wičaštā spent more time growing crops than did other villages, he was not the only Dakota leader to turn to farming. Ecological decline had led other nearby Dakota communities to take up agriculture since the 1770s. At the same time, though the members of the village farmed during the summer, they continued to hunt, fish, and gather crops as usual over the course of the year. It was people
from Ḥeyate Otuŋwe that Samuel Pond accompanied on a winter hunting trip to the Rum River, hoping to make progress in learning the Dakota language. Ḥeyate Otuŋwe was the place where the Dakota language was first written down in a comprehensive way by the missionaries and the Dakota they taught.\textsuperscript{xxii}

Missionaries like Samuel and Gideon Pond, who arrived at Fort Snelling in 1834 and spent twenty years preaching Christianity and documenting the Dakota language, were certain they were working with a dying race of people. They felt it was their duty to record these peoples and to save as many of them as they could. The idea that the Dakota would survive the colonial impact of invasion, or that they had their own spirituality and/or religions that were distinct to them, handed down to them by their own god (Tunkašida), did not seem to pass through their minds. These brothers were, however, among the few whites who came into contact with Dakota people and made any attempt to learn their language. But there was an agenda to their learning the language: in order to convert as many Dakota people as possible, they would need to translate the Bible into Dakota first. Thus language acquisition was a necessary step in order to speed up the conversion process.

In the end, Ḥeyate Otuŋwe was abandoned by Mahpiya Wiçašta’s band due to fear of retaliation from the Ojibwe following a war between the two nations in 1839. As a result, many have viewed the village at Lake Calhoun as a “failed experiment,” ignoring the fact that the villagers continued to emphasize agriculture in the years following, when they were located on the Minnesota River near Bloomington. After the treaties of 1851, Mahpiya Wiçašta and his band moved up the river with other Dakota to the area near Yellow Medicine, joining the Hazelwood Republic, a self-governing body of farmer Indians that chose their own officers, advised by the missionary Stephen R. Riggs. According to Pond, Mahpiya Wiçašta was among those placed in the concentration camp at Fort Snelling over the winter of 1862–63. He died there and was buried “within sight of the valley he loved so well and not far from where he was born.”\textsuperscript{xxiii}

From a Dakota point of view, Mahpiya Wiçašta’s village was not a failure because it insured the survival of his people and his descendants. He could not read the future, but he saw his people hungry and did what he needed to do—and for a period of time it worked. Many Dakota villages were nourished by the crops Ḥeyate Otuŋwe harvested during a time when food was not so readily available to them. The legacy of Mahpiya Wiçašta lived on after his death and has served as a source of inspiration to his descendants. He is remembered as a man not afraid to take on a challenge, and he has continued to serve as a source of inspiration for many of his descendants who reside in the Twin Cities area as well as for those who are still living in exile from their home territory of Mni Sota Makoce.\textsuperscript{xxiv}