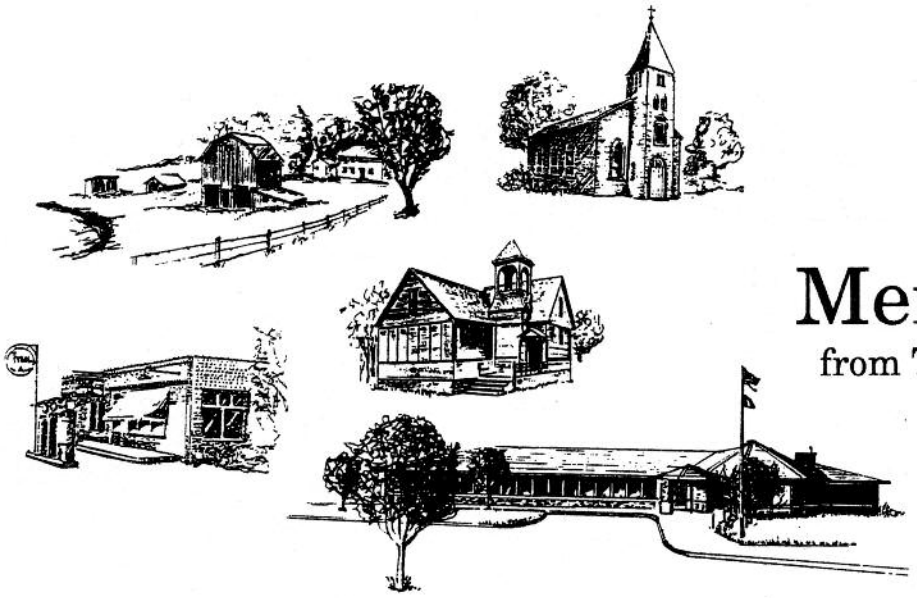


The Heritage of
Mendota Heights
from Township to Village and City

While young, as a city, Mendota Heights enjoys a long and rich heritage. In 1805 Lt. Zebulon Pike acquired a military reserve from the Dakota Indians to build Fort Snelling. Virtually half of Mendota Heights was included in the reserve. When Col. Henry Leavenworth built Camp New Hope in 1819 to assemble materials for the fort, his camp was in Mendota Heights. Later, the original draft of the Congressional bill creating the Territory of Minnesota located the capitol on Mendota Heights land.

Mendota Heights owes much of its early heritage to Fort Snelling and its neighbor, the city of Mendota. Today, Mendota Heights practically surrounds Mendota and hosts many of its historic locations. Mendota pioneers were also the pioneers of Mendota Heights. Their farms, buildings, and roads predate the creation of Dakota County and its opening to settlement. While the county formed in 1849 the land remained Indian territory until 1853.

Mendota Township

Mendota Township was the first of twenty Dakota County townships organized in 1858. The township organized on May 4 and included all of today's Mendota Heights, Eagan, Lilydale, and the portion of St. Paul bounded by Delaware Ave., Annapolis St., and the Mississippi River; Mendota was an independent city. Two years later the county board separated the southern half of the Township to create Eagan Township on April 3, 1860.

Between 1860 and 1956 Mendota Township's borders remained intact with three exceptions.

- In 1874 the northern tip, north of Annapolis Street, was annexed by St. Paul.
- During the 1860s the Village of Mendota rejoined the Township but reincorporated as a city again in 1887.
- In 1901 Lilly Dale became a village; returning to the Township in 1907. In 1951 Lillydale incorporated as the Village of Lilydale. Its spelling changed often.

For ninety years Mendota Township was primarily truck farm and dairy country. Gradually individual homes were built along the St. Paul border in the north and in the hills above Mendota in the west. Between them were farms, country schools, some estates, a few stores, and, later, three golf courses.

The Dodd Road provided a north-south travel artery and the Old Mendota Road handled east-west trafic. At the northeast corner of where they intersected stood the town hall. Just south on Dodd Road, in the 1930s, a community hub evolved in the form of Frank Fischer's country store. Fischerville even appeared on some maps. Next to the store was the home of the volunteer fire department. The Township's 1860 population of 454 grew slowly to 1,360 at the start of World War II.

The Village and City of Mendota Heights

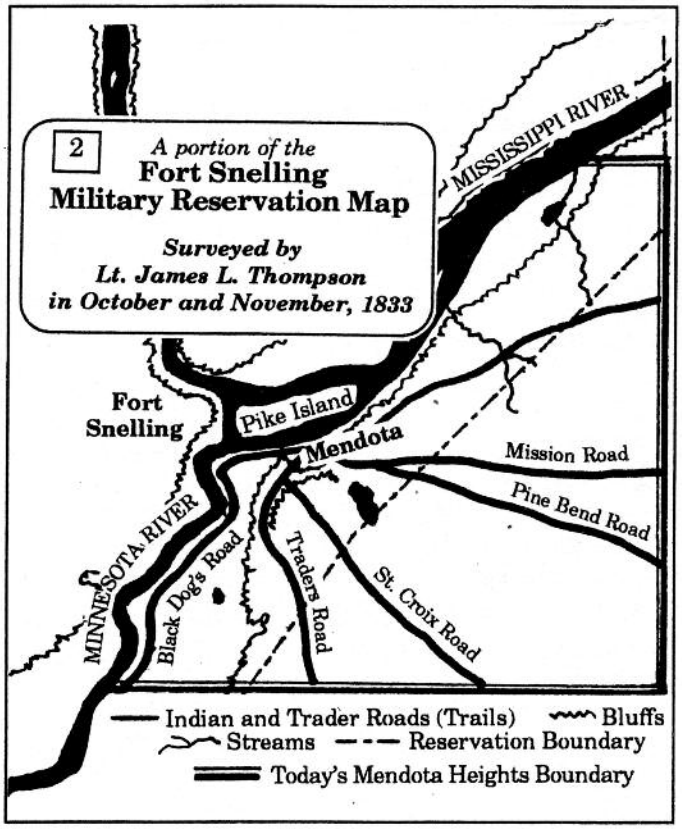
Following World War II "suburban boom" was underway. Home construction increased rapidly, particularly in the northern section. By 1950 the population totaled 2,107. Farmers were selling lots for individual homes and acreage for subdivisions. The immediate need for community planning and anticipated demands for services prompted a change in government form. The concerns were borne out for during the next ten years the population more than doubled to 5,028.

By vote of its citizens the Township incorporated as the Village of Mendota Heights on February 21, 1956. Robert Edman was elected the first mayor, serving in 1956 and 1957. Louis Wachtler, long time Township dairyman, became the second mayor from 1958 to 1960. In 1961 Donald Huber was elected mayor and continued in that capacity to 1977. In 1973 the state legislature changed the designations of incorporated communities and the Village became a City on January 1, 1974. Robert Lockwood became mayor in 1977 serving until 1987. In 1987 Charles Mertensotto became Mendota Heights' fifth mayor a position he holds today (1993).

A Mendota Heights historic site map and descriptions follow.....

Mendota Heights

Heritage Maps



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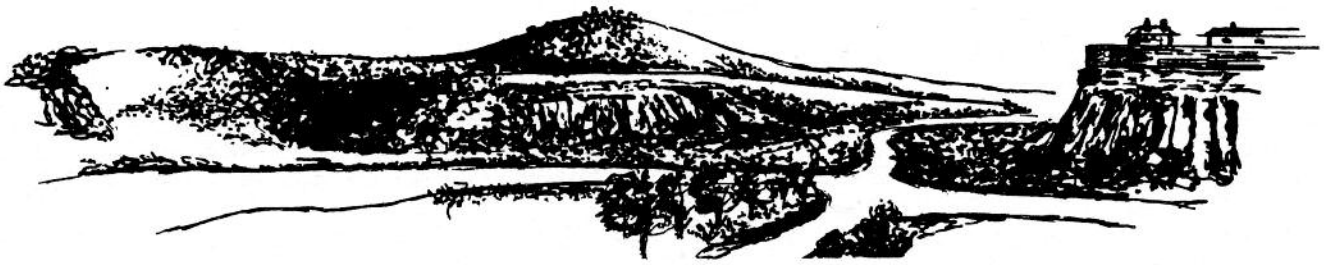


1

Pilot Knob, overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, has a special place in Mendota Heights history. The Dakota Indians called it O-be-ya-wa-be, "Hill that is much visited," and considered it sacred. The state's first U.S. military encampment was below it and it overlooks the first American fort, Fort Snelling. It is now Acacia Cemetery.

Riverboat pilots named it as a land mark. The first steamboat to stop below it was the Virginia in 1823.

The Dakota Indians selected the site for the signing of the Treaty of Mendota in 1851. The treaty opened southeastern Minnesota to settlement.

When U.S. Senator Steven Douglas authored the bill creating the Territory of Minnesota he picked the site for the territory's capitol. Henry Sibley prompted the change to St. Paul.

The largest funeral held at the cemetery was for Charles "Speed" Holman holder of national speed and endurance records in the 1920s. His seat belt broke while flying upside down before the grandstand at the Iowa State Fair.

2

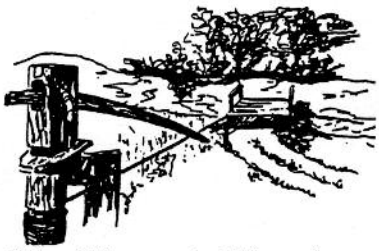
Lt. Thompson's 1833 map shows early trails crossing Mendota Heights. The Mission Trail goes to the Dakota Village at Kaposia. The Traders Road probably became the end of the original Dodd Road.

3

Boundary line of military reserve acquired by Lt. Zebulon Pike in 1805.

4

Site of Camp New Hope established by Col. Leavenworth in 1819.



5

Site of the Minnesota River ferry operated as early as 1839 to Fort Snelling; closed in 1926.

6

Site of Constant Le May's 1849 farm believed to be the first land claim in Mendota Heights.

7

Dodd Road completed by Major Dodd from St. Peter in 1849. The original road probably ended in Mendota but now bisects the city. It also became known as the Jefferson Highway for the Jefferson bus route.

8

Site of claim by A. Perron in 1851 on west side of Le May Lake.

9

Site of 1851 Clement Vondell farm. Streets in area bear his name, spelled Vandall, and the only numbered streets in the city; First, Second, and Third.

10

St. Peter's Church, built in 1853 with native limestone. The oldest Minnesota church in continuous use.

11

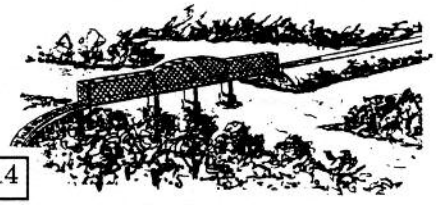
St. Peter's Cemetery and arrowhead marker; resting place of many pioneers.

12

S.C. Staples farm location in 1854, between Dodd and Delaware. A street bears the family name.

13

E.G. Rogers 1856 farm on the southeast shore of today's Rogers Lake.

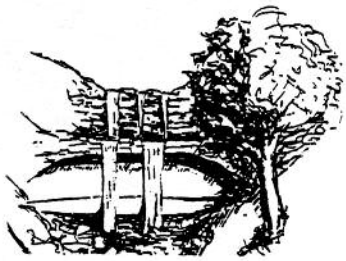


14

Site of 1865 railroad trestle and swing bridge to Fort Snelling. The bridge, 520 ft. long with a 250 ft. swing span, carried the first Dakota County railroad, the Minnesota Central.

15

Lake Augusta named for Henry Sibley's daughter. A Dakota camping area until the 1862 Indian uprising.



16

Ivy Falls, known to old timers as Happy Hollow Falls. The falls has a double drop of thirty feet carrying a small stream to Pickerel Lake. It was once proposed as a state park.

17

Site of Louis Wachtler dairy farm which served St. Paul's West Side for years. A portion of the farm, now occupied by Ecolab, was used for community gatherings. Louie was elected the city's second mayor in 1957 and county commissioner in 1960.

18

Somerset School known for years as District 5. First located at Emerson and Delaware in 1859 it was moved in 1862 to Dodd Road on land donated by Henry Sibley. Named for the Somerset Farms located across Dodd Road.

19

The Burows farm on Victoria Avenue. The nine remaining acres of the original farm offers passers-by and surrounding homeowners a living picture of pastoral life. The white farmhouse was built in 1877. The pond is a favorite stopping place for Canada geese.

20

Site of the Mendota Township Town Hall. The hall appears on a 1896 county map surrounded by farmland owned by S.C. Staples.

21

The Staples/Mears home built by C.F. Staples a four term state legislator, member of the Railway and Warehouse Commission, and son of pioneer S.C. Staples. N.T. Mears, a principal in Buckbee Mears purchased the home. His son, N.B. Mears, led the firm to international prominence in the development of graphic arts and color TV components. N.B. built the large white house adjacent to the family home.

22

The Mendota Bridge became the longest poured concrete bridge in the world when built in 1926. Most bridges have one central span, the Mendota has thirteen. In the 1970s a second channel dredged under the east end straightened the Minnesota River.

23

The original barn club house of the Riverview Golf Club, today's Mendakota Country Club. Louis Fischer liked golfing and with the help of friends, built five holes on his farm complete with sand greens in the early 1920s. By 1929 it had 18 holes and was open to the public. It was sold to the members in 1956.

24

Site of Work Camp No. 1 constructed during the depths of the depression to provide employment and housing. The camp quarried limestone from the bluff. Several barracks housed 20 to 40 men. The stone can be seen throughout the metro area in park and playground buildings.

25

Minnesota River Lookout, about a mile south of Camp No. 1 on Highway 13. The site, constructed with Camp No. 1 limestone, offers a tremendous view of the Minnesota River bottoms.

26

Frank Fischer's Store and volunteer fire department. The store became an early village stopping place for everything from groceries, to harnesses, to boarding the Jefferson bus, or a checker game.

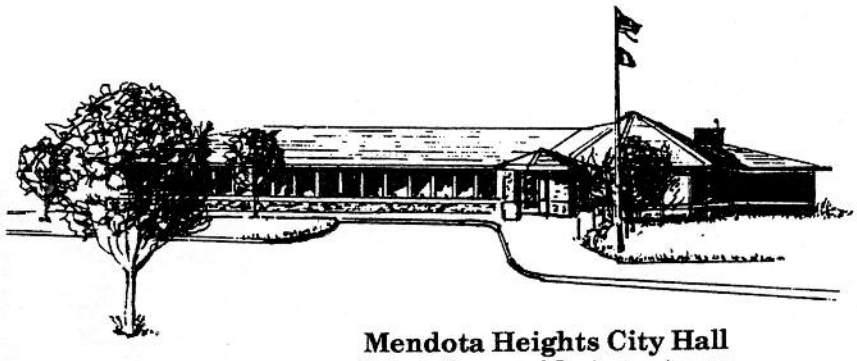
An adjacent building was home to the volunteer fire fighters who still serve the city and adjacent communities. Frank Fischer was the first chief serving from 1947 to 1961. The basement of the fire hall was used for village meetings. A modern fire hall is now across the street.

27

St. Thomas Academy and Visitation Schools. The schools were relocated from St. Paul in 1965.

28

Sibley High School constructed in 1970 replacing the old Sibley located in West St. Paul. The School is the headquarters for Independent School District 197 for K through 12 and adult education.



Mendota Heights City Hall
Victoria Curve and Lexington Avenue

29

Today's Mendota Heights City Hall was constructed in 1988 on a 20 acre site acquired in the 1970s. The building's interior and exterior were specifically designed to complement the neighboring residential community.

On the main floor are administrative, engineering, and code enforcement offices as well as City Council Chambers and community meeting rooms. A lower walk-out level houses the police department and expansion space.

Prepared by the Mendota/West St. Paul Chapter of the Dakota County Historical Society

and produced with much appreciated support from the

The City of Mendota Heights

3-0693