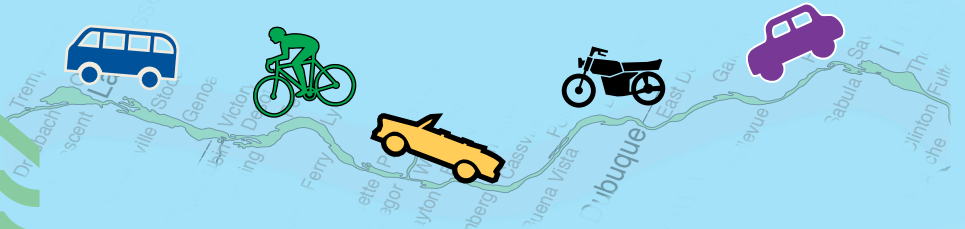


River Loop



Downtown St. Paul to Downtown Minneapolis — The Many Faces of the Urban River

By Reggie McLeod



Pedestrians use the walkway under the Hennepin Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis. (© Explore Minnesota Tourism Photo)



The Stone Arch Bridge is a popular vantage point for river watching. (© Explore Minnesota Tourism Photo)

The Mississippi River in the Twin Cities has undergone enormous change during the last couple of decades. Bald eagles have become almost commonplace. Developers have wrestled with environmentalists and community activists for years over some scenic stretches of river. Former industrial sites have been converted to parks and natural areas. In some cases, residents of condos with a river view have fought plans for new condos across the river, complaining that they would ruin the river view.

Fort Snelling State Park is a good place to begin this tour, because it has long been a very important point on the river. Dakota tradition holds that it is the center of the earth. Zebulon Pike picked the site for the first U.S. fort in the area, because it controls the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. **Pike Island**, at the confluence, is named for him. This is also the point that the Mississippi leaves the gorge to become a floodplain river as it picks up a lot of sediment and pollution from the Minnesota River.

Going to and from Fort Snelling State Park is a bit nerve-wracking, with the highways, ramps and twists and turns, but it's worth the effort. A museum and the restored fort offer interesting historical exhibits. The fort has a great view of the rivers. Pike Island is a good place to hike. The island and most of the shoreline on both rivers in this area are heavily wooded and crisscrossed by public trails.



Minnehaha Creek tumbles over a cliff at Minnehaha Regional Park. (2008 National Park Service)

The **Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge** stretches upriver from here. Tows travel up and down the Minnesota River as far as Savage, nearly 15 miles, where the nine-foot channel ends.

On the Mississippi, a couple of miles upriver from the fort, which is on the Minneapolis side, **Minnehaha Creek** joins the Mississippi on a broad beach just downriver of Lock and Dam 1. The famous and picturesque **Minnehaha Falls** is just a short hike up from the river.

Lock and Dam 1, also known as the **Ford Dam**, blocks the river at the narrowest point of the gorge. A visitor

In each River Loop column we'll explore a stretch of the Upper Mississippi where you can make a circle trip in one day. Follow along with us as we prow for interesting places and things to do.



Below: The Weisman Art Museum is on the U. of M. campus near the river. (© Explore Minnesota Tourism Photo)



The 10th Avenue Bridge (formerly the Cedar Avenue Bridge) near the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis, was a favorite spot to watch the construction of the new I-35W bridge. (Wikipedia Commons)

center on the Minneapolis side provides a good view of the lock, which raises and lowers boats 38 feet. This lock and the **Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock**, 49 feet, are among the deepest on the river. (A friend once likened the experience of locking downriver to

Never mind that when the river flows from west to east — as it does in several stretches — the “west bank” is actually south of the “east bank.”

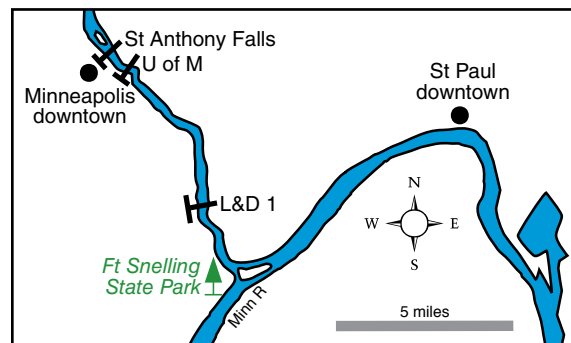
what it would feel like being in a giant toilet tank during a slow flush.)

The dam, one of only a few on the river generating electricity, was built to provide power to the Ford Motor plant on the opposite bluff, in St. Paul. Ford recently sold the dam and may close the plant in the near future. Without the dam, much of the river upstream to St. Anthony Falls would be a boulder-strewn rapids. No wonder it was once the upper limit of river shipping.

Many place names in the Twin Cities area are rather confusing and show the influence of river pilots, who think in terms of upstream, downstream, west bank and east bank. Never mind that when the river flows from west to east — as it does in several stretches — the “west bank” is actually south of



Wilderness Inquiry takes a group of paddlers on the river. (2008 National Park Service)



the “east bank.”

About five miles upriver from the Ford Dam, the **University of Minnesota** claims to be the only university that spans the river. The main campus is north across the river from the

neighborhood known as the West Bank, where another part of the campus is.

This is a good point to note that most of the bridges in the Twin Cities accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists. In fact, several carry only pedestrians and bicyclists across the river. This is a marked contrast with bridges down-

river from the Twin Cities, where there are long stretches where you cannot safely walk or bike across the river.

Just upstream from the campus,

the new **I-35W bridge** stretches across the river where the old bridge collapsed during the afternoon rush hour on August 1, 2007, killing 13 people. Just upstream from there, at downtown Minneapolis, the river is dense with sites and features. St. Anthony Falls, the Stone Arch Bridge and the Upper and Lower St. Anthony Falls locks have long dominated the river here. The new Guthrie Theater, a huge blue presence hulking over the river,

almost upstages the other sites. As with any bold new architectural structure, some hate it and some love it, but there is broad agreement that theater-goers enjoy stunning river views. Condos are sprouting like weeds in the Guthrie neighborhood.

The **Mill City Museum** and **Mill Ruins Park** inform visitors about the era when underground mill races powered busy flour mills that helped feed the growing nation. The museum

is built into the ruins of a mill and the park displays unearthed features from that era.

The **Stone Arch Bridge** gracefully swoops over the Upper St. Anthony Falls lock, the park and then across the river, just below the falls. This beautiful former railroad bridge has become more than a pedestrian and bike bridge. It had become an icon of late 19th century development and a platform for viewing the falls, down-



Across the river from downtown St. Paul, boat slips line the shore of a protected cove. To the right of the slips, Harriet Island Regional Park invites picnickers, cyclists, anglers and walkers to the river. (Robert J. Hurt)

town skyline, lock, river, Nicollet Island and a parade of joggers, walkers, skaters, bicyclists and other people watchers. You might even see a parade of tourists on Segways taking the “Magical History Tour.” In 2007 people witnessed the I-35W Bridge collapse and the rescue work from here.

If the weather is nice, it’s easy to while away the time on the bridge and in the parks on both sides of the

river. You’re only a block or two from restaurants, coffeehouses and shops.

The excursion boats *Minneapolis Queen* and *Paradise Lady* can get you out on the water from **Boom Island Park** for a short or long excursion.

If you cross the river on the **Hennepin Avenue Bridge** you’ll also pass over **Nicollet Island**, where a casual community of older homes has been steadily evolving in an upscale direction. The east bank of the river (across

from downtown) has witnessed a steady procession of development. Here, too, parks line most of the riverfront, at least to the Stone Arch Bridge. A facility here generates electricity from the falls near an area on this side of the river that has been the subject of several schemes to create a stretch of whitewater for adventurous kayakers.

The University of Minnesota’s **St. Anthony Falls Laboratory** conducts research on fluid dynamics here. The





Visitors and theater-goers can take in the view from the Guthrie's decks, overlooking St. Anthony Falls and the Stone Arch Bridge. (2008 National Park Service)

university's main campus, about a mile downriver, sits perched on a bluff overlooking the river and **Bohemian Flats**, on the opposite bank. A former railroad bridge now carries bicyclists and pedestrians across the river here and offers another platform for watching a quiet river in the midst of the busy city.

The river begins a big curve here that eventually bends it back to a southerly direction again, which many consider the proper orientation. Right before the last twist to the south

the shoreline enters St. Paul and you can spot the remains of the **Meeker Island Lock and Dam**, the first lock and dam built on the Upper Mississippi, in 1907. The dam was removed five years later after it was replaced by the Ford Dam, but the lock walls are visible during low water. A path leads down the bluff to the site.

If you travel on the river from the university to downtown St. Paul, you could easily be fooled into thinking you were out in the countryside, not floating through the center of a large

urban area. Parkways and paths grace the bluff edge until you get to two large parks on the east bank below the Ford Dam. **Hidden Falls Regional Park** is the more manicured of the two, although the falls is not a big attraction. Neither is the steady procession of jets going to and from the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport across the river.

The **Watergate Marina** marks the border between Hidden Falls and **Crosby Farm Regional Park**, downriver. Crosby is a bit wilder and most of it is just a floodplain forest with paths.

Industry and railroad tracks gradu-

The river begins a big curve here that eventually bends it back to a southerly direction again, which many consider the proper orientation.

ally take over the riverbank from here to downtown St. Paul. Older neighborhoods reach toward the river at the **Smith Street High Bridge**. Below that a large new housing development has replaced a deteriorating industrial area along the river.

The **Xcel Center** and the **Minnesota Science Museum** both overlook the river and cast their economic light



The Stone Arch Bridge was originally a railroad bridge. (Meet Minneapolis)



At dusk, exterior walls of the Guthrie Theater flicker with images from plays past. The cantilevered promenade extends out over the riverfront, offering views from both sides and a deck at the end. (Meet Minneapolis)



St Paul's busy riverfront is part of the panoramic view from Mounds Park. (Robert J. Hurt)

on the neighborhood. The park along Kellogg Avenue is a great place to stroll, hang out and watch the river. The working river begins just downstream from downtown. Here tows are taken apart, emptied, filled and reassembled into new tows to send downriver.

The National Park Service has organized the 72 miles of river from Dayton, Minn., above the Twin Cities, to Hastings, below it, into the **Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA)**. The Park Service presents a number of programs on the river; works to protect the cultural and natural resources; and operates the Mississippi River Visitor's Center in the lobby of the Minnesota Science Museum.

The Mississippi River Trail (MRT), a bicycle route along the entire length of the Mississippi River, follows both sides of the river through the MNRRA. This summer MRT signs were installed along the length of the trail through the MNRRA, with the exception of the Minneapolis stretch.

Across the river from downtown, in **Harriet Island Park**, the **Padelford Packet Boat Company** is celebrating its 40th year of operating excursions

on the river on its fleet of boats.

The shoreline upriver from here lies below **Cherokee Heights**, a steep bluff. A trail follows the river through largely undeveloped parkland, past Pickerel Lake to **Lilydale**, where the **Sibley House** provides a look back to the early settlement of the area. Henry Sibley, a fur trader, became Minnesota's first governor.

Above the river, Cherokee Heights is an older St. Paul neighborhood with scenic parkland along the bluff's edge. A spot as modest as the park bench just west of Smith Avenue where the High Bridge reaches the bluff, provides a fine post for watching the river and the pedestrian traffic on the bridge, with the **St. Paul Cathedral**, **Minnesota History Center** and downtown skyline for a stunning backdrop.

The bluff ends at the Minnesota River Valley, where Highway 55

crosses the valley over the **Mendota Bridge** to the opposite bluff, where Fort Snelling keeps watch. 🏰 🌊

Reggie McLeod is editor of Big River.



A whole towboat is on display on the balcony of the Science Museum of Minnesota. (Science Museum of Minnesota)