

The Many Worlds of District 1, Part VI: There for the taking

[First plat map of District 1 area]

Early white settlers in and near District 1 witnessed a world of raw, natural beauty they could not have imagined, and they were astonished. 500-foot bluffs gave a birds-eye view of ten miles' distance and more—and these were majestic bluffs “rounded with taste and skill such as could be imitated by no man,” and “set out with trees gracefully arranged like orchards,” and “sewn with grain to the summit,” and “clothed [in] beautiful green.” A newcomer could stand on the tallest point and let his gaze trace the course of a sky-lit river divided “into numerous channels, forming thousands of beautiful islands, covered with long grass, ready for the scythe of the mower.” At night, the steel-blue sky was studded “with diamonds and sparkling with brilliants of purest ray.” The air was “dry and bracing,” and the “stillness of [the] small hours...sublime.” Best of all, this vast virgin landscape seemed almost bereft of people, and there was no sign of human hand interfering with the word of the Creator. The settler looked out “with wonder, love and admiration,” ready to assert dominion of all he surveyed. *

Pointe LeClaire

French Canadians had the first toehold. They were trappers who created an enclave, sometime during the spring or summer of 1837 or 1838, on District 1 lowland dubbed “Grand Marais,” (Big Swamp) by French explorers more than a century before. Their wives and children tended plots on the fertile bottom soil surrounding the alluvial wetlands. They got on well with native people. Many of the women were themselves mixed-blood or Dakota mothers of mixed-blood children. Eventually, about forty families lived in a line of cabins that stretched two miles south to the mission at Red Rock. They named their settlement “Pointe LeClaire” after the leader, trapper and carpenter Michel LeClaire, who held his men in perpetual readiness to defend their employer, The American Fur Company.

The American Fur Company forbade the sale of alcohol in the area, fearing its effects on native warriors who cooperated in the production of furs as well as on the well-being of the families in the voyageur network. One scofflaw, who built various boot-leg hovels along the river from about 1832, was an “intruder who had been prohibited from living in the country, and who felt the chief end of man was to drink and sell whiskey.” For a time he ran a whiskey and grocery shop at the foot of Dayton's Bluff. His name was Peter (Pierre) Parrant, and among his customers were soldiers from the fort, traders, voyageurs, and Dakota warriors.

L'Oeil de cochon

Parrant and another man, Abraham Perry, (whose wife was the local “accoucheuse” or midwife) settled on Dakota tribal land along the river and were much complained about by Chief Little Crow whenever he visited the fort. Often banished and sometimes burnt out by soldiers, Parrant was instantly recognizable, “distinguished by all who had ever viewed him, as notable for having one eye unequally matched with its distant yoke mate and precisely the shape of a pig's eye.” The nickname “Pig's Eye,” —oeil de cochon to the French Canadians —was coined by Roswell Russell, a sutler's clerk at Fort Snelling who frequently visited the Grand Marais village near one of Parrant's ramshackle dwellings. Russell was fascinated by the eye: “Blind, marble-hued, crooked, with a sinister white ring glaring around the pupil, giving a kind of piggish expression to his sodden, low features.”

The name caught on. One day, a French Canadian named Edmund Brissett, who often did carpentry work for settlers, wrote a letter from Parrant's grocery store at what is now the lower landing of St. Paul, and "as a joke to some of the boys," designated its address of origin as "Pig's Eye, such a month." The emerging town rejected the nomenclature, preferring the name of its Catholic Church, but the sobriquet "Pig's Eye," stuck to Parrant and attached to his hovel at Grand Marais. It eventually came to designate the entire marshland area. Parrant "was very mad [about the name]," wrote Brissett, "and threatened to lick me, but never tried to execute it."

In 1844, Michel LeClaire contested a claim by Parrant that encroached upon his home. The area in question was Grand Marais wetland that could not be tilled and was considered virtually worthless. Nevertheless, LeClaire felt a greater principle was at stake and brought the case before Justice of the Peace Joseph Brown, who presided from his trading post on Gray Cloud Island. After hearing arguments, Justice Brown decided that, since neither man had put stakes in the ground before witnesses, the claim of the first man to properly do so would be honored. The two men raced eight miles to the site in dispute, with the curious trailing behind. LeClaire, much younger than the 67-year old Parrant, arrived first but by only a few minutes. Parrant may have been a drunk, but he was tough from a life in the wild. According to one report, he died later in 1844 while enroute to his native Sault Ste-Marie. Another report has him chased out in 1845, arriving in Winnipeg, then South Dakota, marrying twice and fathering children before dying sometime after 1872.

Such multitudes

On July 15, 1838, the steamboat Palmyra had arrived at Fort Snelling with official notification of the signing of the treaty by which Dakota lands east of the Mississippi were open to American settlers. Promoters were jubilant. "Hitherto," write early St. Paul historian John Fletcher Williams, "every foot...had been the property, after a fashion, of a few barbarians, but this obstacle was no longer to exist." He predicted that "[o]nce the white man had gained a foothold on the soil...he would soon enlarge his grant, until he had swept out of his way its original tenants."

The treaty concession included the entire east side of the Mississippi and all the rivers' islands. But the Dakota were still on the western side and crossed into former lands at will to hunt or fight the Ojibway. Tales of the battle at Pig's Eye in 1842 were widely publicized and exacerbated fears of the "wild west." The settlement at St. Paul was not much better, described as little more than a squalid encampment for squatters, discharged soldiers, speculators, and gamblers. Soldiers' wives and children preferred St. Paul to the greater danger of the fort, but white Americans were not yet ready to move in great numbers to an area with so many louche characters about. According to a St. Paul newspaper, Easterners considered all of "the country west of the Alleghenys [to be] ...a vast, dreary waste sacred to bear and redskin."

Even though the land east of the Mississippi had been purchased in 1837, it was not officially available for sale by the U.S. Government until the fall of 1848. In 1849, there were about 150 white or part-white people in St. Paul and just a scattering in District 1. But a flood of newcomers was expected after Minnesota gained territorial status on March 3rd, 1849. In April, the optimistic editor of *The Pioneer* wrote, "We advise settlers who are swarming into St. Paul in such multitudes to bring along tents and bedding to provide for their comfort until they can build houses; as it is utterly impossible to hire a building in any part of the village..." By 1850, the St. Paul area population had risen to 1,274. By 1855, it reached 4,716.

A region of uncertainty

Of course, District 1 was not part of “the village.” It had the Pointe LeClaire settlement and various hunting paths, including the pre-territorial trail that would become Point Douglas Road. But most of District 1 was wilderness. “The connecting link between St. Paul and [the mission at] Red Rock,” warned *The Pioneer*, “is Pig’s Eye. This locality of which much has been said, but which few of our denizens have seen, is bounded on the north by Weld’s Bluff, which is seen from St. Paul, on the south by Red Rock, on the west by the timbered bottoms of the Mississippi, and on the east, by a region of uncertainty.” **

Part of McLean

President Zachary Taylor appointed Alexander Ramsey Territorial Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in May, 1849. Two years later, Governor Ramsey persuaded Chief Little Crow of the Dakota to agree to a new treaty ceding all Minnesota lands west of the Mississippi River, except for a pair of distant strips 150 miles long, to the U.S. Government. The signing took place at Mendota, and the Dakota people never trusted Little Crow again. For white settlers, a psychological door opened. The treaty signed in 1837 had made District 1 technically available for white habitation. The 1851 treaty made it seem safe—or relatively so. It also brought money in the form of Indian Payments.

In 1853, the area just south of the present day junction of U.S. 61 and Warner Road was platted. In 1858, it became part of the Township of McLean, established by settler Nathaniel McLean just four years after St. Paul was incorporated. McLean, a tall, slightly lame, fast-talking man was a one-time printer, 3-term Ohio legislator, veteran of the War of 1812, former U.S. Army major, Sioux Indian agent, and Ramsey County Commissioner. The Township of McLean also included the eastern Dayton’s Bluff area. A series of annexations in 1872, 1885, and 1887 gradually enfolded all of McLean, including the future District 1, into the city of St. Paul.

Ox-cart culture

Between the achievement of territorial status in 1849 and the road-building program passed through Congress and signed on January 7, 1853, the future of settlement on the St. Paul frontier was hampered by the difficulty of transporting anything that could not be moved by water. From April to November, steamboats brought visitors in ever-increasing numbers. But the only means of conveyance once people and plowshares reached land was the ox or horse-drawn cart, an awkward contraption with two wheels so huge, it could pass over soft ground or mucky marsh where vehicles with smaller wheels would have mired. Ox-carts, sometimes several hundred in a train, could be heard for miles as wooden hubs screeched against wooden axles, all of it held together by strips of rawhide, since iron was rare on the frontier. Carrying 400 to 800 pounds of fur or other goods, the carts worked for trappers and merchants. But they were slow, broke down often, and were inadequate for settlers’ needs.

Real roads were a practical necessity and could be built on the paths of native trails already carved out. But good roads are expensive. The U.S. government was almost giving away the land, went the argument of fiscally conservative lawmakers in Washington. Why should it give settlers free roads too? Henry Sibley, American Fur Company partner, territorial delegate to Congress, and future governor of the state of Minnesota, argued that territorial lands could not be sold “if the immigrant cannot reach them.” Without roads, no matter how enticing the area’s natural beauty, pioneers yearning for virgin soil, speculators eager to buy and resell land, traders stocking up for increased commerce were all stymied.

Fraud and cheating

The treaties signed at Mendota in 1851 had two obvious benefits for whites. The first benefit was the land itself, cleared of “savages.” The second was the multiplier effect of the payments specified in the treaties. Annuities paid under the treaty provisions quickly ended up in the hands of traders and the economy of St. Paul. As James McMullen, a settler who arrived in 1849, commented, “If you had half a pint of whiskey and were willing to trade with the Indians, you could get almost anything they had.”

A few years ago the Indian Payments were the great event of the year in Minnesota. Everything in financial matters dated from and was referred to the Indian Payments; almost our whole specie currency was derived from this source. Notes fell due and grocers' bills matured at the Indian Payment. The persistent dun, the wife's new dress, the ball, the workman, and the new hat, were put off until “after payment.”

~ St Paul Advertiser, 1856

In 1853, a new territorial governor, Willis A. Gorman, replaced Alexander Ramsey. Gorman contended that under Ramsey's aegis, there had been “more fraud and cheating in the Indian trade in the [Minnesota] territory than it has been my lot to see or know of any where else on earth.” Gorman bitterly opposed men like Ramsey, Henry Mower Rice, and Henry Hastings Sibley, who, he felt, had “fattened for 25 years upon the Indians and the U.S. Treasury.”

It took years for the U.S. government to push all the Dakota to western Minnesota, although they had been formally moved to Redwood Falls in 1853. Few left easily. And some came back to live on the river during the summer. They did not yet fully understand the terms of their banishment. They thought of the annuities granted “in perpetuity” as a guarantee that the whites, who had taken their hunting grounds, would now take care of them, providing food and clothing and other necessities forever. A thousand-year ethos of self-sufficiency had become pointless, replaced by a mixture of hope, resignation, anger, confusion, and increasingly desperation. Many braves spent all the allotments on “minne-wakan” (supernatural water) from the traders and roamed the countryside harassing and begging at settlers' homes. Their reception varied, but according to Edward Letterman, in the 1965 Ramsey County Historical Society quarterly, [visiting warriors] “threatened the fearful and begged from the soft-hearted.” Letterman added that “Settlers who treated the Indians fairly and firmly usually received fair treatment in return. In any case, homesteads were far enough removed from each other and drunken warriors sufficiently frightening to make generosity with food the wisest policy, even as settlers petitioned to have the “removal” completed and their nuisance guests gone.

Old Betts

[photo of old Betts]

One frequent visitor to District 1 was an elderly Dakota woman called “Indian Bess,” who was greeted affectionately by whites at the kitchen door. Also called the “berry woman” or “Old Betts,” Bess came back to Pig's Eye every year to tend the graves of her warrior relatives, according to the recollections of John Kochendorfer, an 1856 arrival who bought the site of Kaposia. Sister of the warrior “Rattler,” whose wife had been murdered in the 1842 Battle of Kaposia, Bess was part of a doomed landscape. She scrounged for food among occasional buffalo still grazing in the meadows that would soon be

transformed by the tracks and roundhouses of the railroad at Pig's Eye. She made her way through the rich bottomland as thousands of ducks darkened the skies with their annual descent in the sloughs of the marsh. Bess stood among old trees that would disappear one day when the white man's dam and locks flooded the plain, sinking the fertile fields and forest into muck.

During the Sioux war of the 1860s, Bess interceded on behalf of white prisoners, earning such gratitude that the Chamber of Commerce allotted money for her care during her last illness. The older settlers made sure she had a proper Christian burial.

* Quoted pioneer remarks from: "The History of Minnesota," by the Rev. Edward Duffield Neill; "The History of St. Paul," by the Rev. Alvan Coe; and "Horns of Thunder," by Mary Wheelhouse Berthel.

** Weld's Bluff was Dayton's Bluff land purchased by Even Weld in 1848 from French Canadian voyageur Charles Mousseau, who had staked his claim in 1838. In 1850, Weld and others from Dayton's Bluff resold their land and headed for California.