LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

By Rachel Hines

"Living with the Mississippi" is a blog series that examines the history of the river flats communities and what it means to almost literally live on the Mississippi River.

Follow along to learn more about life on the Mississippi prior to luxury condos and clean river water, before the riverfront was considered a desirable place to live.

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Researching the East Side Flats communities in Minneapolis proved to be difficult; unlike their neighbor across the river, the Bohemian Flats, these two settlements went relatively unnoticed by the surrounding community and have largely faded from public memory. One of these, which I will refer to as "East River Flats" for clarity's sake, was located below the area where East River Parkway runs along the

University of Minnesota Campus. Today, it is known as East River Flats Park and is the location of the boathouse for the school's rowing team. The other, which I will call the East Side Flats, was located below the 10th Ave and 35-W Bridges between the Southeast Steam Plant and a heating plant used by the University of Minnesota.



"Residential area on the east bank of the Mississippi River, Minneapolis." Photographer Unknown, Taken on March 9, 1895. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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It is unclear when settlers first arrived at the East River Flats, but the community appeared in the 1880 census. [i] The residents at the East River Flats lived a pretty quiet existence, until around 1891 when the Minneapolis Parks Board became interested in the property.[ii] Hoping to create a counterpart to Riverside Park, located on the west side of the river, the Parks Board made their first moves to acquire the land the following year. The residents were slowly evicted from their homes, until 1903, when Carrie Baker, the last remaining "squatter," moved in with her granddaughter.[iii] Though the story of the East River Flats is not a prominent one in public memory, the name remains to commemorate the former community and the story has survived in historic newspaper articles and Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board publications (see below).

Even less has survived about the East Side Flats, however. Though the residents appeared in each year's city directory until 1952, I have yet to locate their names in the census data. The East Side Flats pops up in a few newspaper articles, sometimes noted as the "East Bohemian Flats" for its proximity to the Bohemian Flats,[iv] not for the ethnic composition of the community, makes appearances in the Minneapolis City Council Proceedings, occasionally as requests for utilities or public services, and survives in a few photographs, mainly of the University of Minnesota's East Bank campus. Yet no publications are dedicated to its memory and no festivals or theater productions commemorate its history. It is unclear why so much attention was given to the Bohemian Flats and so little to the East Side, but I would suppose it was because the community was much smaller and less visible. The population was also less exotic, as most of the residents had Scandinavian surnames. Though we know little about this community, its quaint appearance mirrors that of the Bohemian Flats, and it is easy to imagine a settlement of a similar character.

Further Reading:

To learn more about the history of the East River Flats Park, or the Minneapolis Parks in general, check out David Smith's 2008 history of the properties owned by the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board. The story of the East River Flats Park begins on page 51. http://www.minneapolisparks.org/documents/parks/Parks_Lakes_Trails_Much_More.pdf

Footnotes:

[i] 1880 United State Census, Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota; p. 765; June 5, 1880; National Archives Microfilm, Reel 622.

[ii] Smith, David C. "Parks, Lakes, Trails, and so much more: An Overview of the Histories of MPRB Properties." Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, 2008.

[iii] "The Last Squatter." Minneapolis Journal 4 August 1903.

[iv] "Hikes Wid Me Rags: Little Willard Parton Explains His Presence in the River." St. Paul Globe 14 July 1903.