

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.

First published online for River Life at <http://riverlife.umn.edu/rivertalk> in December, 2014 with comments by Pat Nunnally, River Life.

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

Our featured series “Living with the Mississippi” has gathered more readers than any other part of our work. Largely this is due to the stellar research and writing of the author, Rachel Hines. But it’s also a testament to the enduring hold that riverfront communities have on our imagination. There’s something about these places, whether Bohemian Flats or St. Paul’s West Side, that simply continues to interest people.

I think there are a couple of longer-term issues as well that the series and the places it describes bring to light. For one thing, the contrast between “then and now” in the physical environment is largely unstated, though ever-present. Living with the Mississippi a century ago meant living alongside what was often an open sewer and what was always an industrial waste dump. The river itself was different also. The construction of what we know now as the Ford Lock and Dam downstream of Bohemian Flats meant the water level is steadier now, with less of the seasonal rise and fall



Upper Landing

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

that marks a more natural river pattern. All of these factors meant that living in a space now reserved as a park was a completely different experience of land, of water, and of the sensory environment at the water's edge. The corridor smelled different, looked different, sounded different, even felt different underfoot with a marshy uneven river bank in place of today's mown grass field.

Our head note for the series alludes to another broad change when it refers to the time "before luxury condos and clean river water." Although the clean river water is

more important, it is now largely taken for granted, and Minneapolis and St. Paul have joined cities across the developed world in converting their riverfronts to something that is increasingly focused on luxury condos.

Simply put, we are in danger of privatizing our riverfronts to the point where the descendants of former residents won't be able, or feel comfortable, walking where their grandfathers and grandmothers once lived. On St. Paul's Upper Landing this has already happened; the narrow strip of public land and pathway outside residents' front balconies



Upper Landing and Residents

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

feels more private than public. There's room for debate on this of course; the debate would be a healthy next step in our riverfront planning and design.

The stories of places like Bohemian Flats and the Upper Landing are vitally important connections between past and present. They help us organize our thoughts about who we have been and who we are now. But we critically need new stories, stories of our relationship with the Mississippi in the 21st century. I would argue that the stories that drive our sense of the river's meaning forward should focus more than we have on sustainability and inclusion. We have spent a lot of time working on access; we must pivot to a focus on equity, where the gift of access is felt by all.

I don't think I'm the only one who feels this way. Last week, an article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune explored in some detail the efforts of the National Park Service to reach younger and more diverse audiences. One way to do this, and a way that our program can actively participate in, is to work to ensure that park visitors hear more diverse stories than we have been telling. Visitors to St. Anthony Falls

should know who Eliza Winston was and what happened to Spirit Island. Upper Landing visitors (and residents) should know who lived in that spot a century ago, and what happened to that community. As the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary planning gathers steam, people will need to know who Bruce Vento was, but also the importance of this place to Dakota people.

We have done a lot to bring people back to the riverfront. But there is much yet to do if we are to make the riverfront a welcoming place to all of the people who live here.

If our riverfronts reflect who we are and aspire to be, then what do they say about us? Do they say what we want them to?