

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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The Mississippi's role in shaping the industrial history of Minneapolis is well known. However, the banks of the Mississippi provided more than a workplace for the early residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul- they also served as a home. Between 1860 and 1960, the Mississippi River floodplain hosted a half-dozen ethnic enclaves in St. Paul and Minneapolis. These communities were often seen

as their own separate settlements, distant from the city located above. The residents of these areas bore a number of labels, ranging from penniless criminals to hard-working new Americans. Today, the communities are often remembered as cultural havens, places where recent immigrant families could practice their traditional customs and beliefs, separated from the city both physically and culturally.



Spring Flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897.
Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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Three of these communities were located near downtown St. Paul. The West Side Flats occupied the large flat area located adjacent to Harriet Island and across the river from downtown St. Paul, the Upper Levee, or Upper Landing, was an Italian community located just across from the West Side Flats below Irvine Park, and Swede Hollow ran along Phalen Creek, the southern end of which was known as the

Connemara Patch. Minneapolis was home to three settlements of its own as well. Two of these were known as the East Side Flats; one at the site of the East River Flats Park below the University of Minnesota campus and the other beneath the 35-W and 10th Ave Bridges. The other was the Bohemian Flats, located just across the river underneath the Washington Avenue Bridge.



“Swede Hollow, St. Paul.” Taken by Albert Charles Munson in approximately 1910.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

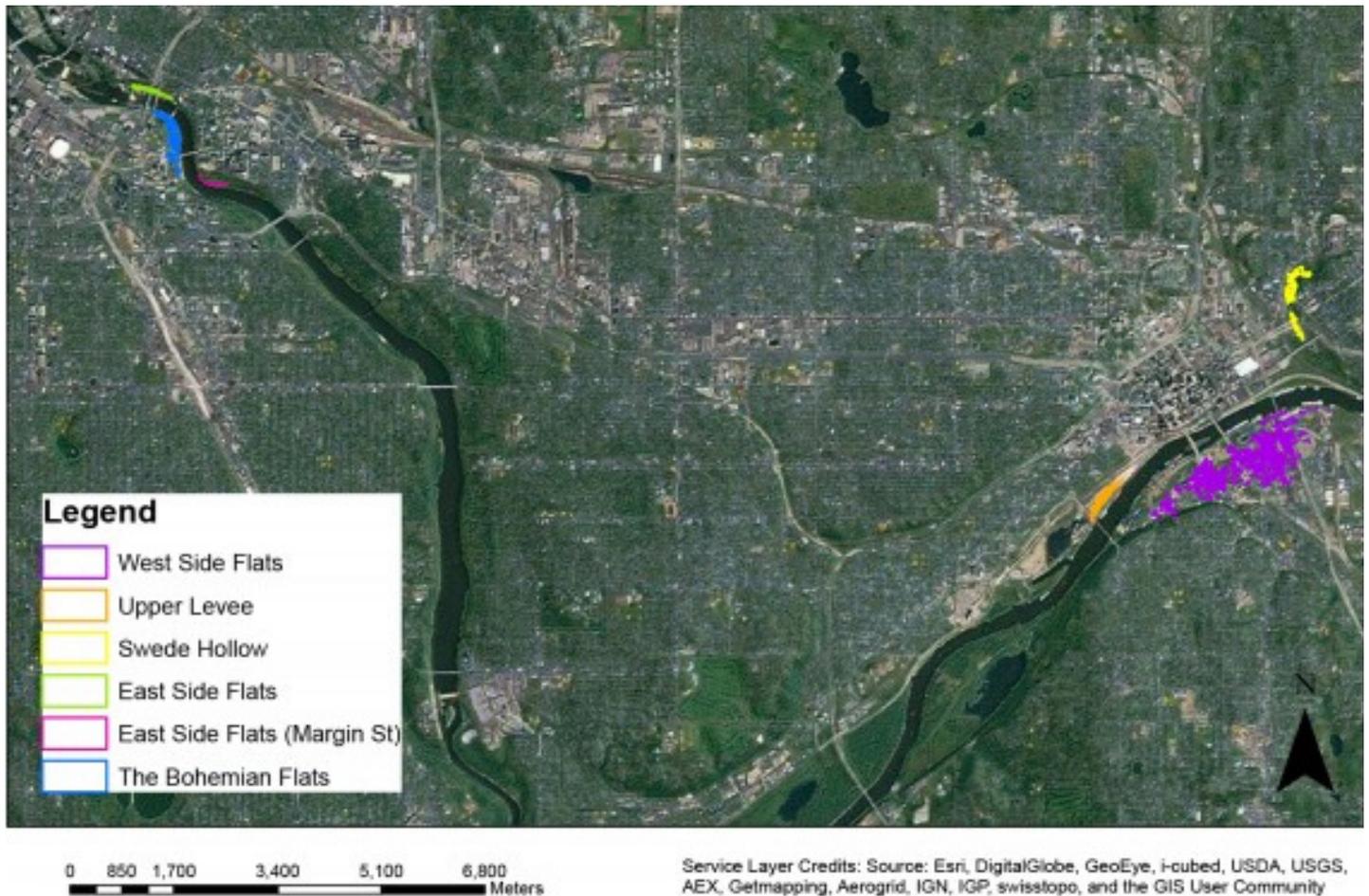
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Home to various immigrant groups upon their immediate arrival in the Twin Cities, the river flats communities were in undesirable locations; the homes, even into the mid-20th century, lacked modern conveniences like running water and sewer systems, and the residents, victim to the flooding of the river each spring, were often forced to take shelter elsewhere when their homes became inundated. Despite these unfavorable conditions, however, thousands of immigrants called these communities home, whether for only a year or most of their lives, and many recall fond memories of life alongside the river. After decades of immigrant settlement, the residents of each community

were removed from the land for various reasons, whether it due to the health risks associated with living near a polluted river or the attractive quality of the real estate.

For the next few months, this series will examine the history of the river flats communities and what it means to almost literally live on the Mississippi River. Continue to 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.



River Flats Communities Map, Created by Rachel Hines using Historic Plat Maps and Bing Maps, June 2014.