

# 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.

# LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI LIFE ON A FLOODPLAIN

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In 1931, after the Bohemian Flats community was removed from the river bank to make room for a barge terminal, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged the river to allow large barges to pass through. The dredged material was placed atop the flats, raising the grade, and a sea wall was erected to ensure the new terminal would not experience flooding.[i] The city had learned to take these precautions after observing the traumatic experiences of the residents at the Bohemian Flats, as well as those at the flats communities in St. Paul, brought by the river each spring.

These floods occur due to the unique position of the Twin Cities: the Mississippi River Gorge. The gorge was created by the retreat of the St. Anthony Falls; as the river eroded the soft St. Peter Sandstone, it caused the top layers of limestone and shale to break off, moving the waterfall from St. Paul to its current location. This process left behind the gorge's steep bluffs and a limited floodplain, the river flats. When snow and ice melt upstream during the spring, or when the Mississippi River Basin receives large amounts of



“Flooded upper levee area of St. Paul.” Photographer Unknown, taken in 1952. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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rain, the river becomes too large for its banks and empties onto the floodplain.

This process remains a concern today, its effects felt when the river flooded this past June (2014). For those at the Bohemian Flats, spring floods often meant packing up your belongings and temporarily living with friends or family; there were even reports of the residents camping out in the Noerenberg Brewery until the water subsided.[ii] One Minneapolis Tribune article noted that some families had to remain in their inundated homes: “Though one house is floating and the kitchen is flooded, the family is still cooking and living there. No one would take them in, said Susie [Sustiak], because the are seven children and they would make the house so dirty.”[iii]

Floods not only brought water into the homes, but debris, logs, and ice as well, which could cause irreparable damage.[iv] The river would also carry belongings away, including sheds and wood piles, and chickens would be found drowned after the water receded.[v] Though a flood wall was erected at the Bohemian Flats in the early 20th century, it did not do much to prevent flooding. Rather, it often trapped much of the water and silt behind it once the flooding subsided. One of the most devastating floods in the Twin Cities area took place in April 1952, leading to the evacuation of the entire Upper Levee community and portions of the West Side Flats.[vi] The rise in water level led to extreme property loss for both communities and prompted the city of St. Paul to consider new plans for the flats. This eventually led to the demolition of the homes on the flats and the repurposing of the land for industrial uses.



“View of flooding on West side of Wabasha Street Bridge, St. Paul.” Photographer unknown, taken in 1952. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

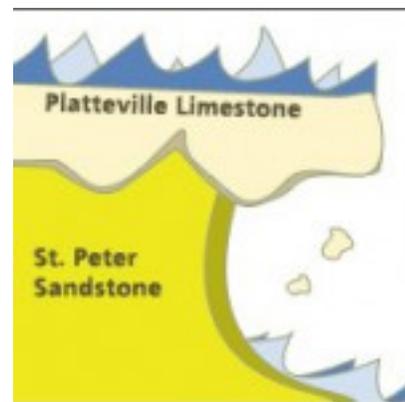


Image created by the National Park Service for website “Twin Cities Geology,” updated in 2014.  
<http://www.nps.gov/miss/naturescience/twingeol.htm>

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## Further Reading:

- “River of History,” the historic resources study for the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=192461>
- The National Park Service’s timeline for the Flood of 1952: <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/1952timeline.htm>

## Footnotes:

[i] Minneapolis City Engineer’s Records about the Municipal Barge Terminal. Minneapolis City Archives, 1926-1932.

[ii] “Critical!” Minneapolis Tribune 2 April 1897.

[iii] “Venice Again Appears on Flats Under Washington Avenue Bridge.” Minneapolis Tribune 12 April 1922.

[iv] “Anxiety! Dwellers on the Bohemian Flats Filled With Alarm.” Minneapolis Tribune 3 April 1897

[v] “Venice Again Appears on Flats Under Washington Avenue Bridge.” Minneapolis Tribune 12 April 1922

[vi] “The Flood of 1952.” National Park Service. <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/1952timeline.htm>