

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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LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI DR. KILVINGTON'S DUMPING GROUND

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In 1890, the St. Anthony Falls Water Power Company ordered that the City of Minneapolis stop dumping their garbage directly into the Mississippi River, giving them only a few days to find a new place to dispose of waste. [i] Barred access to the river, Dr. Kilvington, head of the Minneapolis Board of Health, and his sanitation committee found a loophole by depositing trash on the banks of the Mississippi instead. It was determined that the flats beneath the Washington Avenue bridge would provide a satisfactory location for the dump, "away from the settled city." [ii] This facility, described in an appropriately titled Minneapolis Tribune article about the flats called "Life at the Dump," was extremely hazardous to the health of the residents at the Bohemian Flats.

The reporter describes the odor of the dump in great detail: "The smell though was extremely picturesque. It had frills and fancy trimmings all over it. The outer zone was gently suggestive of eggs which had become passé. Then there was wafted in an odor reminding one of a Bridge square restaurant; this was soon reinforced by foul exhalations from decaying fruit and vegetables, and the center of the atmospheric pollution was a combination of all these smells and every other that could offend the olfactory sense." [iii] The author goes on to condemn the dumping of garbage into the river as an illegal offense, and discusses the implications of these practices on the nearby community.

The residents of the Bohemian Flats were not the only people affected by the dumping ground. Not surprisingly, this new riverside location did not remedy the Mississippi's water quality issues. An 1894 report found that the water, which approximately 100,000 Minneapolis residents drank, was extremely contaminated. Report author and chemist Charles W. Drew attributed the major disease outbreaks to this problem, noting that the water's quality was one of the city's most important issues. [iv] The garbage at the Bohemian Flats was routinely washed into the river by spring floods, which not only contaminated the water, but also temporarily left the city without a place to put their waste. [v]

In 1899, the State Board of Health ordered Kilvington's replacement, C.T. Frane, to find a new location for the city dump, after closing the location at the flats. This article not-

ed that city residents had been dumping their "cess-pools" (toilet waste) beneath the bridge in addition to trash. [vi] Around the same time, a similar dumping ground at the East Side Flats beneath the 10th Avenue Bridge was closed; however, it seems that these decisions were concerned solely with the water quality of the Mississippi River. The residents of these communities were rarely mentioned in the articles. Though one story discusses a petition from the Bohemian Flats residents asking to remove the dump from their community, the government, "recognizing nothing could be done at once," filed the petition and seemed to promptly forget the complaint. [vii]



"S.S. Kilvington." Taken by W.H. Jacoby and Son in approximately 1885. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Though the residents at the flats predated the garbage dump by over two decades, it reflected negatively on the community, rather than the people who put their garbage next to a residential area. It leads one to wonder about the role of the government in creating an unfavorable place. What responsibility did the city and the city's residents

take for this trash heap? Why did it become synonymous with the flats residents when the majority of the garbage did not belong to them? The Bohemian Flats was already a place where disease and poverty ran rampant, but the presence of this city dump would have made life much more unbearable.

Footnotes:

[i] "In the City: The City to Be Without a Place to Dump Its Garbage After Tuesday of this Week." Minneapolis Tribune 30 April 1890.

[ii] "That Garbage Dump: The Health Officers Think the New Site Will Answer." Minneapolis Tribune 26 August 1890.

[iii] "Life at the Dump." Minneapolis Tribune 26 April 1892.

[iv] "River Water Report." Minneapolis Tribune 10 June 1894.

[v] "It's Quite Serious: The City Has No Place to Dump Garbage." Minneapolis Tribune 22 May 1892.

[vi] "The Court Says, Stop!" Minneapolis Tribune 1 September 1899.

[vii] "At the Top Again." Minneapolis Tribune 10 May 1892.