

Minnehaha Creek

A Wild and Urban Stream

By Bill McAuliffe

It begins at Gray's Bay. For a while it was known as Brown's Creek. But Indian traders, soldiers, settlers, loggers, millers, developers, stream straighteners, flood managers, bridge builders, park visionaries and, as ever, canoeists have all contributed much more color than that to Minnehaha Creek.

Today it's a centerpiece in the Twin Cities metro area, defining urban and

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suburban neighborhoods, nourishing real estate values, providing inspiration and retreat to residents from Minnetonka to south Minneapolis, before it tumbles over a cliff and flows into the Mississippi.

Each year it thrills about 800,000 visitors to Minnehaha Falls, the 53-foot cataract watched over by bronze versions of the tragic young lovers, Hiawatha and Minnehaha, from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, "The Song of Hiawatha." Nearby, a bust of the Dakota Chief Little Crow also stands by. (The Longfellow poem actually takes place along Lake Superior more than 400 miles away — a small bit of poetic, geographic and cultural license.) The creek itself is where kids shout and splash as they drop off rope swings dangling from trees along



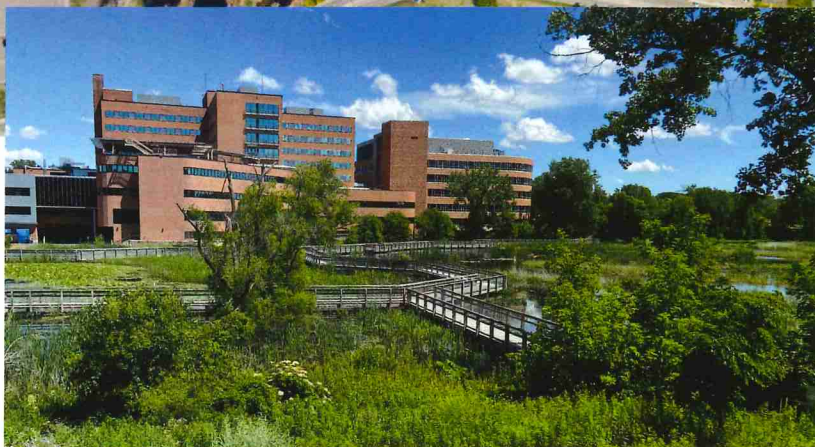
Minnehaha Falls in Minnehaha Regional Park is a popular spot for photographers in south Minneapolis on the Mississippi. (Bill McAuliffe)

its shady and sometimes steep banks. It's where landscape painters and joggers find challenges and rewards. It's where dogwalkers and their dogs find joy and relief.

Yet it's still just a creek ... usually easy to walk across without getting swept away. In winter, it often freezes solid. That's one reason there are few fish in it, though that also gives walkers, snowshoers, skaters and sometimes bicyclists an ephemeral path through

the city. Late architect and artist Victor C. Gilbertson, who published a delightful book of watercolors of all 101 bridges across the creek in 2002, described it as a "meandering magnet."

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The creek was “re-meandered” through 109 acres of newly accessible green space in Hopkins and St. Louis Park. Methodist Hospital is on the right. Excelsior Boulevard is below and Louisiana Avenue South crosses the creek near the restored wetland. (Courtesy MCWD)

Left: Patients at Methodist Hospital benefit from the restored wetlands’ fresh air, peace and quiet. (Bill McAuliffe)

Thirty-four percent of the land in the quarter-mile-wide corridor along its banks is public, explained Samantha Hoppe, engagement coordinator for the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD), an agency managing creek issues. For about half its length (and along nearly all of its Minneapolis shoreline) it is hugged by popular walking or biking trails. Much of the rest is detached public parks, private residential property, wetlands and commercial property.

The Dakota people called it “Wakpa Cistinna,” meaning “little river.” They had it about right, but their term “Mini Haha” is the one that caught on. It meant “curling water” and described the falls about two-thirds of a mile upstream from the creek’s mouth. Author Mary Eastman, in an 1849 book, took the obvious next step, arguing that the term meant “laughing water.” She got the last laugh, so far.

Euro-Americans Paddle Upstream

In 1822, two teens from the new Fort Snelling — William Snelling, the son of the fort’s colonel, and his pal, drummer Joseph Brown — paddled for two days up the creek and became the first whites known to lay eyes on the sprawling Lake Minnetonka. Brown, in 1826, built the first cabin on the lake, and the creek became known among the wilderness neighborhood’s newcomers as “Brown’s River.” But it didn’t become a regular feature on maps until the 1850s, when settlement by Euro-Americans was taking hold.

In those early decades, the creek’s power was harnessed by flour mills and saw mills. There were six mills along the creek from 1855 to 1874, including one that employed a carpenter named Amos Gray. He and his wife Susan are regarded as the first white settlers in the area — hence, Gray’s Bay. A lit-

tle more than two miles downstream, the settlement of Minnetonka Mills became an economic engine in the 1850s, with a furniture factory that produced more than 2,000 pieces of furniture a week. But the creek and its industries were surpassed by the mills that sprang up around St. Anthony Falls nearby on the Mississippi River, and the creek was dammed and tamed in 1897, effectively ending the milling industries.

Balanced Urban Ecology

Man-made flood control projects soon collided with one of the driest periods in recorded history. By the mid-1930s flooding was a dim threat, and cities happily expanded by draining and reclaiming more wetlands and straightening waterways to accelerate drainage. In fact, in the spring of 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson visited Minneapolis, the creek was dry. No landmark falls! City leaders stepped up to

give nature a hand, arranging to have the fire department run fire hoses to pour water into the creek above the dam — a creek restoration of sorts, ahead of its time.

One year later, a deep snowfall and sudden spring warmup unleashed massive flooding, forcing city leaders to reconsider their thoughts about water on the urban landscape. But with so many cities, agencies and interest groups now in the mix, a solution was elusive. The first step was a petition by residents to form the MCWD to begin addressing the issues. More than 10 years and many studies and negotiations later, an adjustable dam was built

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at Gray’s Bay in 1979 to manage both the level of Lake Minnetonka and the outflow into Minnehaha Creek. Ideally, it’s closed to keep the lake level high enough for recreation and to reduce the chances of flooding downstream. The lake level is lowered in late summer and fall to make room in the lake for spring meltwater. It works most of the time, though in 2014 the dam was overtopped for 83 days by rain and snowmelt, submerging Hiawatha Golf Course, parks and residential lots, causing millions of dollars in damages and leading to a no-wake declaration for Lake Minnetonka.

Balancing Act

The dam’s operations are now guided by a partnership among the MCWD, National Weather Service, US Geological Survey and Hennepin County. It’s one of many partnerships that now exist along the creek, with multiple purposes. Some are educational, trying to reduce pollutants that flow off streets and yards and out of sewers into the creek. Some aim to blend flood control with aesthetic enhancements to urban life, adding water features while



Sculptor Jacob Fjelde depicted Hiawatha carrying Minnehaha over Longfellow’s “wide and rushing rivers.” (Bill McAuliffe)



President Lyndon Baines Johnson (middle) along with Minnesota Governor Karl Rolvaag (left) and Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited the falls in the spring of 1964. The fire department came to the rescue and ran fire hoses to the dry creek to provide water for the temporarily restored picturesque falls. (Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board)

acknowledging a low margin for error in densely populated areas. Creek scholars have dubbed this strategy “balanced urban ecology.”

“The idea is that we can create the happiest, thriving, sustainable communities when we see harmony between the built environment and the natural environment,” Hoppe explained.

The best examples are concentrated along a 1.5-mile stretch of the creek, mostly through St. Louis Park and Hopkins, where happiness and environmental harmony weren’t much discussed decades ago, when the creek was being straightened, industrialized and pretty much trashed.

A key feature of the changing perspectives is a \$1.1-million wetland restoration that grew out of a partnership between the MCWD and Methodist Hospital more than a decade ago. The effort restored flow-slowing curves to the creek and added a sturdy boardwalk that became an amenity prized by hospital workers, patients and the public. Hospital officials say the “re-meander” is a valuable element in the hospital’s mission to help patients find nontraditional tools to regain health — like fresh air, and peace and quiet. It is part of the larger Minnehaha Creek Preserve, a \$2.6 million floodplain makeover led by MCWD and St. Louis Park.

“What we once considered a nuisance is now our greatest asset,” Duane Spiegle, vice president of real estate and support services for Park Nicollet Health Service, has said. “Having a healthy stream and wetland incorporated into our hospital campus differentiates us from other healthcare facilities. This place of healing now promotes well-being inside and outside its walls.”

The re-meander’s walkways and wetlands connect to the Minnehaha Creek Greenway, a 109-acre linear park that is shoehorned — at times barely noticeable — between and in many cases below small warehouses, manufacturing operations and other light industrial enterprises. Winding through tamarack bogs, wetlands, lush grasslands and masses of wildflowers, the Greenway is a shimmering park — restful, diverse, home to egrets and other waterfowl — a feature that attracts people of all ages. It’s lined with interpretive signs and benches, and crossed by many new bridges. On a recent walk, it seemed the most obvious demographic group was young parents with kids in strollers.



The creek flows through Arden Park, in Edina, a western suburb. (Courtesy MCWD)

MINNEHAHA CREEK

The map shows the Minnehaha Creek route from Lake Minnetonka through various parks and urban areas. Key locations include Gray's Bay, Minnetonka Civic Center, Jidana Park, Burwell Park, Minnetonka Mill, St. Albans Mill, Big Willow Park, and Minnetonka Boulevard Bridge. Distances between points are marked along the route.

WATER SAFETY

Let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return.

Check the forecast, and prepare for rain even if there is only a small chance.

Wear a life jacket. The law requires one life jacket per person on board.

Bring:

- › First aid kit
- › Cell phone
- › Drinking water
- › Sunscreen
- › Waterproof containers for storing valuables
- › Quick-dry clothing

Scan ahead for hazards like overhanging trees, rocks, low bridges or rapids.

Portage around challenging sections.

Do not swim within 72 hours of a rain event due to polluted runoff from streets.

Avoid riffles and follow the smooth water shaped like a “V” pointing downstream.

(Courtesy of the Minnesota DNR. Learn more at bit.ly/Y1WV2az.)

TIME ESTIMATES

You may want to tackle the creek in sections, especially if it is your first time. These are rough estimates and can vary widely based on conditions and paddling style.

Section	Time Estimate
Entire Creek	~6-9 h
Upper: Gray’s Bay to Target-Knollwood (Primarily undeveloped wetlands and natural areas – most likely to have enough water during low conditions)	~2-3 h
Middle: Target-Knollwood to Pamela Park (More urbanized as you float through Hopkins and St. Louis Park, but includes the newly-restored Minnehaha Creek Preserve, part of the Minnehaha Creek Greenway)	~2-3 h
Lower: Pamela Park to Longfellow Lagoon (Flanked by trails and parkways through Minneapolis)	~2-3 h

Housing and community enhancements are burgeoning along the formerly fouled creek. In Hopkins, the site of a former cold-storage warehouse purchased by MCWD is part of an area that will include 800 units of housing, retail and commercial businesses, park improvements and stormwater retention makeovers. One long-term goal, Hoppe said, is to get the creek and Lake Hiawatha removed from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's list of impaired waters. The Metropolitan Council and the Three Rivers Park District are also involved, building on light rail transit and other redevelopments in the area.

At the falls, a multimillion dol-

lar and multiyear effort is underway to redesign and rebuild landscape and tourist features, many of which were built during the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and are now crumbling. The stairway along the south bank has been closed, but the barricades and steep piles of rubble have not stopped climbers and adventure seekers (yes, even families with small children) from trying to get a closer look. Many ideas are under consideration, such as building a viewing area at the bottom of the falls — you want to pose in the mist, don't you? — and making the pathway down to it more gentle and stable than the challenging routes currently in place. It

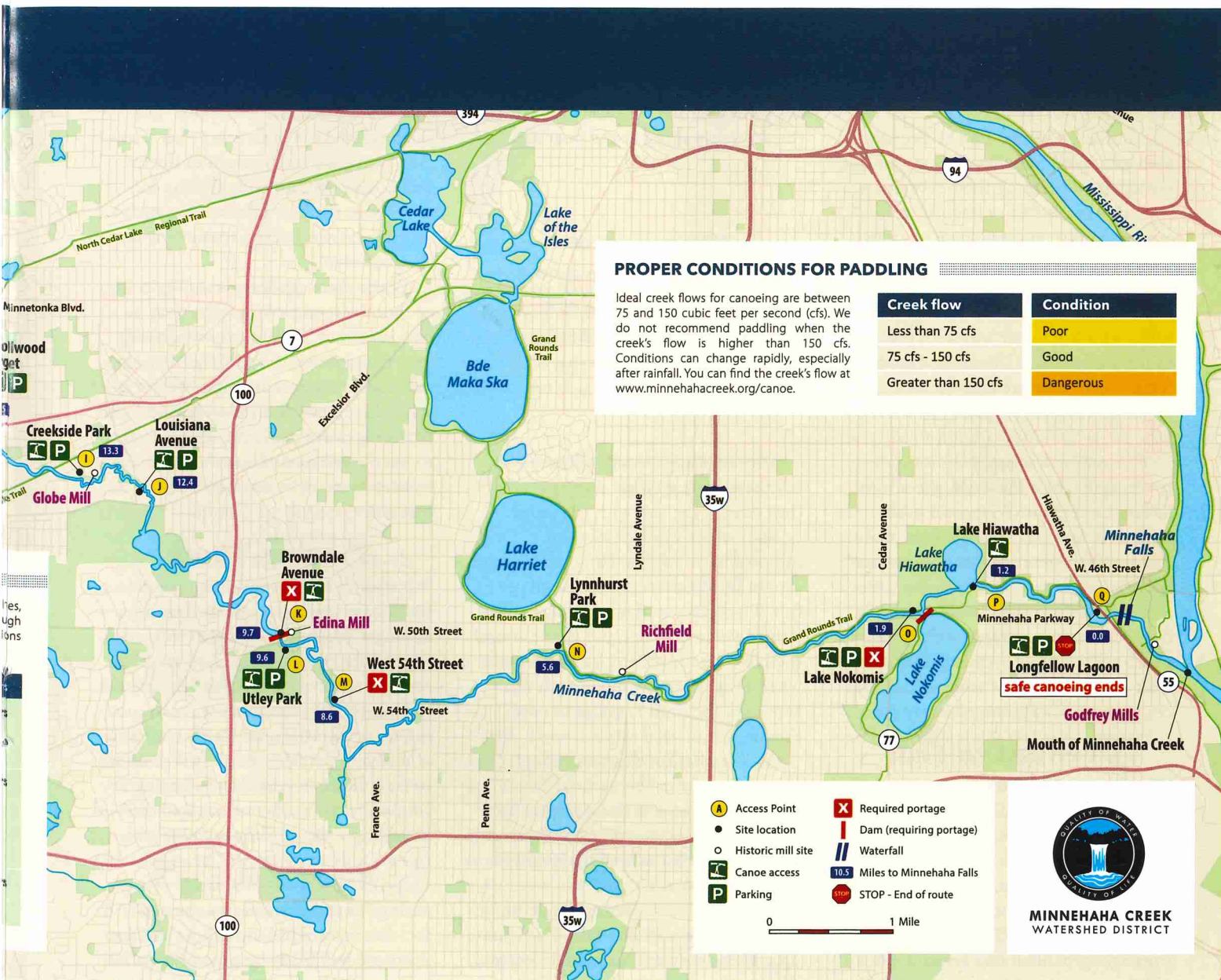
won't be easy. A boardwalk built along the south bank near the falls in 2009 was closed by damage from water seepage.

Players in that project include the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, National Park Service, Army Corps of Engineers, tribal councils and even the Minnesota Veterans Home, a former source of flooding nearby.

Paddle It

Meanwhile, people continue to step into canoes at Gray's Bay or downstream to float or paddle from the west-

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Minnehaha Creek (Minnehaha Creek Watershed District)

(Minnehaha Creek continued from page 27)

ern suburbs and through south Minneapolis. It took young Snelling and Brown and their companions two days to go upstream to Lake Minnetonka. Urban paddlers these days need about nine hours to go downstream to the Mississippi, but it's not always easy. Yes, its flow is controlled, but the MCWD warns against padding during times of high water. Low water brings its own challenges, as dragging a canoe over gravel for 22 miles isn't much fun. Even when water levels are good, the creek's relative narrowness makes for many sharp turns, quick detours under brushy overhangs and head-bumping

But the creek is still "the creek," as the locals call it — urban but a little wild.

encounters with trees along its banks. A canoe jammed against a tree in fast water can easily overturn, so paddlers should expect to get wet and possibly cold.

Kayaks might offer easier navigation, and coffee shops along the way can make for rewarding stops. But the creek is still "the creek," as the locals call it — urban but a little wild. And the stories every paddler brings home are as colorful as ever.

For further information, including streamflow and paddling conditions as well as updates on related redevelopment projects, go to the website minnehahacreek.org.

Bill McAuliffe wrote for the Minneapolis Star Tribune for 33 years and is now retired. For 25 years he owned a home five doors from the creek. He now lives in Minnetonka, Minn., where one of his favorite bicycle rides crosses Gray's Bay dam.



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