

Aitkin County Great River Road Interpretive Site Narrative

Introduction:

Aitkin County has a proud and long history of being a Mississippi River County. Thousands of years ago, the melting of a glacial ice sheet resulted in a lake about 20 miles long and 5 miles wide. This lake was later called Glacial Lake Aitkin. The gradual melting of this glacier was the beginning of the Mississippi River drainage system.

Before the area was colonized, the Mississippi and connected waterways shaped the life of indigenous tribes in the area. The Native American history is vast, fascinating, and an integral part of Aitkin County's story. The fur trade was very prosperous, and the Savanna Portage is an early Voyageur Route from the St. Louis River system to the Mississippi River. The pioneers and their utilization of the Mississippi River paved the path to industrialization. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the logging and riverboat industries defined the area. Riverboats navigated the Mississippi River from Aitkin to Grand Rapids across four decades, as this was the only source of transportation to Grand Rapids at that time. Logging was king for decades, with the Mississippi River as the main log highway, sending miles-worth of White Pine and other logs to mills located along the Mississippi. The economic boom, made possible by access to the Mississippi, built our community.

From the banks of the Mississippi River grew a legacy that we still celebrate today. Every prominent building in the city is studded with a plaque that heralds Aitkin as a "Mississippi Riverboat Town." Even now, the Mississippi River is a defining geographical and cultural characteristic.

Aitkin County has more miles of the mighty river than any other in Minnesota. Our river communities include Jacobson, Libby, Savanna Portage, Palisade, and Aitkin. Since the Riverboat era, the Aitkin County portion of the Mississippi River has remained wild and undeveloped. This 100 mile portion of the Mississippi is one of the few truly pristine waterways remaining in the United States. With excellent canoeing, kayaking, boating, and fishing, this precious unsullied resource should be protected and unchanged, yet appreciated and used with respect.

Establishing an Interpretive Center at the Aitkin Area Chamber of Commerce, located in the heart of Aitkin and a stone's throw from the Mississippi, creates an opportunity to tell

a story that spans both time and distance, and that is intrinsically linked to the Mississippi River.

At the Aitkin Chamber Interpretive Center, we would tell the overarching narrative of the Mississippi River in the area and the themes and values that connect us to the Great River Road – but our relationship to the river is unique, and we would do a disservice to travelers and to our history if we did not direct visitors to prominent areas along the Mississippi in Aitkin County. In addition to the Aitkin Chamber Interpretive Center, we would like to place interpretive panels at the Palisade Community Center, the Jacobson Wayside Rest Area, the Sandy Lake Dam and Recreation Area – also known locally as “Libby Dam,” and the Savanna Portage State Park. Each location is significant in its own way, and we could not tell the complete story without them.

Locations:*

*** A photo story for each location included as an additional appendix**

Aitkin Area Chamber of Commerce - (Main Interpretive Center)

Values: Scenic, Historic, Cultural, Recreational

Themes: Theme 8 and Theme 9

The main Interpretive Center will be at the Aitkin Area Chamber of Commerce office, located in the Historic Butler Building. The Chamber carries a historical display of our river heritage and would expand that display with the help of the Aitkin County Historical Society. Currently, the Chamber office has historical photographs of Mississippi riverboats and logging operations. We would work with the Historical Society to expand our photographic display. We also have artifacts from Mississippi riverboats and display models of two riverboats that once traveled the area. Our artifacts and displays in the Aitkin Chamber Interpretive Center will focus on the economic impact of the Mississippi's proximity, while also highlighting outdoor recreation on and near the Mississippi. Additionally, to emphasize the connection between the satellite locations, we are prepared to work with a local graphic design and production company to create a large illustrated and informational map of the locations to add to our display. We would also provide informational materials for each satellite location that includes a historical overview, photographs, directions, and suggested activities. All promotional materials would be branded with the Great River Road logo and a link/QR code to the Great River Road App. Our estimated timeline to expand our display for the interpretive center would be about one month. Most of the materials already exist, it would be a matter of adding the Great River Road branding and sending everything to production.

The Chamber has extended weekday hours but is not open weekends. However, there is access to the building, and the Aitkin Chamber stocks visitor information racks available even when the office is closed.

In addition to the Aitkin Area Chamber of Commerce office and Mississippi public access, visitors can view the Showboat of the Mississippi (formerly the Mississippi Melodie of Grand Rapids), a restored riverboat with a built-on stage where community events are hosted, as well as the Aitkin County Historical Society's Depot Museum. Aitkin is home to the annual community celebration, Riverboat Heritage Days, and the Ripplesippi River Run, a 2.5 river mile paddle starting at the Aitkin City Park on the Ripple River and ending at the Aitkin County Campgrounds on the bank of the Mississippi River.

Palisade Community Center

Values: Historic, Recreational

Themes: Theme 1, Theme 3, Theme 4

Named by an official of the Soo Line Railroad for the high embankment on either side of the Mississippi River, Palisade is a town of less than 200 people with a long history with the river. Palisade's small numbers swell every season during events like Riverfest (a celebration of the area's connection to the Mississippi), the Firemen's Competition (a friendly competition between firefighters that includes activities on the Mississippi), and the Mid-Winter Festival (which includes reenactments of when the "Mountain Men" traveled up and down the Mississippi trading their furs for goods. At the Palisade Community Center, which is connected to the Palisade Fire Department and is open to the public, there are historical displays detailing the town's connection to the Mississippi and logging heritage. In addition to the display, Berglund Park is located on the banks of the Mississippi River. Berglund Park offers a public water access, fishing pier, and campground. Also nearby is Palisade's Long Lake Conservation Center, with its beautiful campus and commitment to environmental education and stewardship.

Jacobson Wayside Rest Area

Values: Natural, Historic

Themes: Theme 9

Formerly a logging town known as "Mississippi Landing", the Jacobson township is rich in history with the Mississippi River. It was once the Swan River Logging Company's main headquarters and last stop for unloading logs to be floated down the Mississippi River. Rabey, now a ghost town with only a few depressions left in the ground, once had a train station on the Western rail line. It connected Jacobson to Hill City and was called the Mississippi Junction at the time. The Jacobson Community Center, itself a historical landmark in Aitkin County, has displays and information on the early river traffic and logging. Due to limited hours at the Jacobson Community Center, an interpretive panel with the history of the Mississippi River and Jacobson area would be placed at the nearby Jacobson Wayside Rest Area.

Sandy Lake Dam & Recreation Area

Values: Natural, Historic, Recreational

Themes: Theme 2, Theme 3, Theme 5

The Sandy Lake Dam & Recreation Area is located at the outlet of the Sandy River on Big Sandy Lake, though only a couple of miles from the Mississippi. The Dam is operated by the US Army Corps of Engineers for flood control, recreation, and environmental stewardship along the Mississippi River, as is a series of 5 other dams (known as the Mississippi Headwaters Project) in Northern Minnesota. The old lock house has been converted into a small interpretive center and is an excellent source for Mississippi River and Native American History. The area is also part of the historic canoe route that connected the Mississippi River to Lake Superior for major fur trading companies. In addition to the dam and interpretive center, the area features the only public water access onto the Sandy River/Mississippi River and Big Sandy Lake, as well as developed camping, a public beach, playgrounds, fishing and other day use opportunities. The site is staffed year round and the interpretive center is open May 1 through October 15th, where educational programs are offered and are open to the public.

Savanna Portage State Park

Values: Scenic, Historic, Natural, Recreational

Themes: Theme 1, Theme 2, Theme 5

Savanna means “open grassland” and refers to the expanse of marsh grass in the park. Savanna State Park is home to the historic six-mile Savanna Portage Trail that the Dakota and Ojibwe Indians, explorers, and voyageurs traveled over 200 years ago. The trail linked the St. Louis and Mississippi rivers along the canoe route from Lake Superior to the upper Mississippi. It was a quite difficult five day portage across marsh, swamp, and forest. It was made up of 13 poses (or pauses); voyageurs would slog along the trail with their 90 pound packs, leave them at a pause, and then trek back for more goods. Excerpts from journals have described: “The first 3 pauses are shockingly bad. It is not only a bed of mire, where men are often waist deep, but the mosquitoes came in hordes and threatened to carry away a man alive or devour him...” Visitors can hike a large portion of the Savanna Portage Trail; as well as the Continental Divide Trail, where the water to the west flows in the Mississippi River and the water to the east runs into Lake Superior.

Savanna State Park also offers stunning natural vistas: visitors can enjoy nearly 16,000 miles of acres of lakes, bogs, forested hills, and rivers. Fishers often catch panfish, trout, and bass. Among the oaks, visitors can glimpse deer, bears, wolves, and moose. By day, campers can bike and swim, and at night, listen to loons call across the lake.