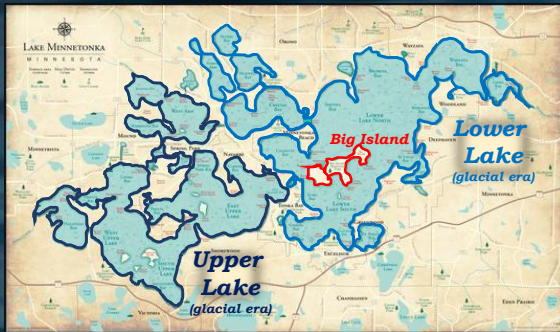


Lake Formation and Early Inhabitants

2.4 M BC - 1200

Big Island's history begins many thousands of years ago during the Ice Age, when great glaciers carved out the Lake Minnetonka Basin.



Lake Minnetonka was created by two different glaciers over 10,000 years. One created the **Lower Lake**, another the **Upper Lake**. The minerals and other elements these glaciers left behind made the aquatic life, vegetation and chemistry of the two lakes different. The **Lower Lake**, which contains Big Island, resembles northern Minnesota lakes, while the **Upper Lake** more closely resembles those in the south.

The story of people on Lake Minnetonka begins about 10,000 years ago, after the melting **Laurentide Ice Sheet** formed the sprawling body of water that today covers over 14,500 acres. The early inhabitants are often described by time periods such as **Archaic** (habitation by crossing from Asia), or **Woodland** (increasing use of agriculture), each of which have been further divided into Early, Middle, and Late stages. The region's first people were large-animal hunters of the early **Archaic Period**. Later inhabitants of the **Woodland Period** constructed massive mounds used for ceremonial, burial, and even residential purposes. This ancient civilization encompassed much of today's Midwest America and reached its peak during the late **Woodland Period** around 1150. More than 12,000 burial mounds were built in Minnesota; 400-600 of these on the shores of Lake Minnetonka and as many as 15 on Big Island itself. Sadly, most of these were later looted or desecrated.

There were many different groups in the Lake Minnetonka area during the **Woodland Period**, as evidenced by the many **artifacts** they left behind. A **dugout canoe** made from white oak and radiocarbon dated to 1050-1165 (right) may have been used for seasonal **wild rice harvesting** on the Lower Lake.



Mounds on Big Island had an average height of 2-3 feet and diameter of 20 feet, much like those of Woodland era mounds in Iowa's Effigy Mounds National Monument (photo).



Indian Mound in Hennepin County. Edwin Whitefield Watercolor ca 1857



In August 1934 the Gunnarson family discovered a dugout canoe as they were extending their dock into North Arm. (photo courtesy of the Western Hennepin County Pioneer Association, Long Lake MN)

About 1200 years ago the Woodland Period peoples of Minnesota experienced a revolution – the discovery of how to parch wild rice. It meant that food could be stored, reducing the chance of starvation and the need for migration. Centuries later this stable food supply would also be a staple for the Dakota, believed to be descendants of the Woodland people, and the next to inhabit Lake Minnetonka and Big Island.

The Dakota Presence

The Lake Minnetonka area is part of the Dakota people's homelands. Living with nature, they hunted, fished, made maple syrup and gathered various plants for medicine and food in this area.



Ballplay of the Dakota on the St. Peter's River in Winter, 1848. Seth Eastman

The Dakota had villages on the shores and islands of Lake Minnetonka. It was also known as a camp where one could stop and rest, between villages to the north and south along the Minnesota River. **One of the nearest villages was home to Dakota leader/Chief Šákpe, and is called Tíŋta Otunŋwe, or Prairie Village.** The Dakota people call the Big Island Wíta Tánka (Wíta: "island"; Tánka: "great, large or big"). It was the main sugar camp in this area where giant sugar maples were tapped, and the sap boiled for maple syrup and sugar.

Lake Minnetonka is the largest body of water near what would become the City of Minneapolis. After Minnesota became a territory in 1849, the US government put increasing pressure on the Dakota to sign over their land. They did this via misinterpretation, lack of game through the fur trade and increased European population. **The brother of Šákpe requested Lake Minnetonka become the perpetual homeland of his band, but that request was ignored.**

Several treaties were signed between the Dakota, the US Government and the State of Minnesota between 1805 and 1858. **The provisions of these treaties were not met, which caused starvation and led to the U.S.- Dakota War of 1862.** In the aftermath of the war, 303 Dakota men were sentenced in trials that lasted only minutes. President Lincoln reduced the number who were sentenced to death to 38. **On December 26th, 1862, those 38 Dakota men were hanged in the largest mass execution in U.S. History.**



Seth Eastman painting of Dakota village



'Indian Sugar Camp,' by Seth Eastman

As a result of the war, Governor Alexander Ramsey exiled the Dakota from Minnesota in April of 1863. They were forcibly removed to many locations including Crow Creek (SD), Santee (NE) and Flandreau (SD). However, some never left and are still here today. After removal, European settlers immigrated onto Dakota lands including the Lake Minnetonka area, replacing the indigenous population.

Early Settlement

1822 – 1905

In 1822, Joe Brown and Will Snelling, two boys from Fort Saint Anthony, paddled a canoe up Minnehaha Creek and became the first recorded Euro-Americans to explore Lake Minnetonka. Although they camped overnight on Big Island, it would be 30 years before the first settlers arrived.



Judge Bradley B. Meeker
1813 – 1873

1852 Judge Bradley Meeker first claimed the island after exploring it with territorial governor Alexander Ramsey. Meeker abandoned his claim in 1854 but the name *Meeker's Island* remained.

1856 William and John Morse used military bounty land warrants to buy Meeker's Island. William built a settlement cabin and bought John's land in 1861. Meeker's Island became *Morse's Island*.

1872 Morse created a 175 acre tract on the west side of the island. Investors tried to sell it for \$10 an acre, without success. They started to call it 'Big Island' but for many it remained *Morse's Island*.

1878 With activity around the Lake increasing, a group led by Stanley Kitchel bought and platted the southwest half of Morse's tract. Several smaller subdivisions were established in the 1880s.

1887 William Morse platted his own *Morse Island Park*, which offered 78 small cottage lots.

1892 Olaf Searle, a poor Norwegian immigrant turned millionaire, acquired 111 acres in the center of the island and built a 3-story 21 room Colonial mansion. He dredged a canal around his property that was later widened to create the channel dividing the island today. But Searle came upon hard times, died penniless in 1926, and his deserted mansion burned a few years later.

1893 Samuel Morse (no relation) acquired the northeast section of the island a year after William Morse had lost it to bank foreclosure. Morse, a wealthy flour mill executive, already had a summer home on Recreation Point and left the tract he purchased undeveloped.



Stanley Rice Kitchel
1855 – 1900



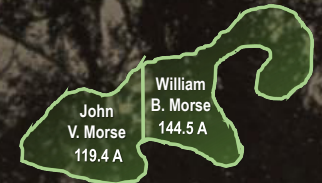
Samuel Morse
1853 – 1922



John Vinnicum Morse
1833-1912



William Bradford Morse
1829 – 1921



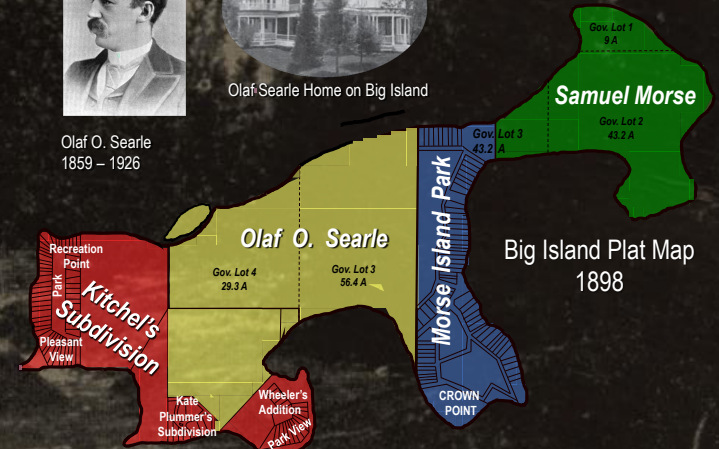
Morse 1856 land purchases
(taken from an 1855 territorial survey)



Olaf O. Searle
1859 – 1926



Olaf Searle Home on Big Island



In 1905 the Twin City Rapid Transit Company (TCRT) wanted to increase streetcar traffic to Excelsior by building an amusement park, the first by a transit company on an island. Samuel Morse sold them his land. Big change was about to come to Big Island.

Big Island Park

1906 - 1911



In August 1906 the Twin City Rapid Transit Company opened “Big Island Park” with a series of free concerts. Word spread that there was an exciting adventure just an hour from Minneapolis and thousands came to enjoy a day on the Lake.



Visitors from the center of Minneapolis could reach Excelsior by streetcar in forty minutes and then board one of **three large ferry boats** for a twenty-minute ride to the island. The round-trip fare was fifty cents and service was frequent and punctual. **Weekend use reached 15,000 people per day.** Those living on the Lake could take one of **six express boats** for a round-trip fare, including park admission, of just twenty cents.



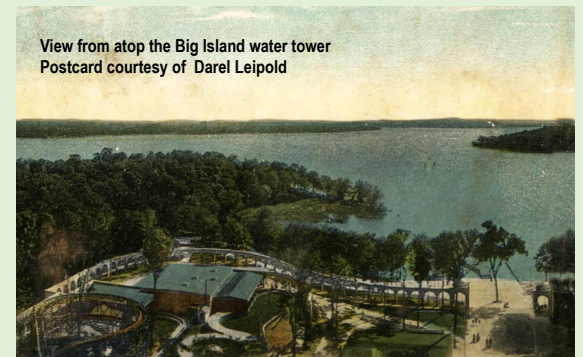
The Park was built as a family ‘*spend-the-day*’ picnic resort set on an island of majestic trees, rolling lawns, knolls and vistas of water and sky. There were innovative structures with a **Spanish Mission motif** and in the center of it all was a nearly **two-hundred-foot water tower** modelled after the Tower of Seville, embedded with hundreds of lights and a beacon visible from all points on the lake.



Amusement features included a figure eight roller coaster, a carousel, a baseball diamond, an Enchanted River ride, and a postal photo gallery. **The Park’s main attraction, however, was the \$50,000 music casino,** built of steel, concrete and glass, with seating for 1500.



Roller coaster with water tower in background c. 1906



After several years park attendance started to decline. High operating costs and lack of off-season revenue compounded TCRT’s problems and the park closed permanently at the end of the 1911 season. On August 12, 1912 the 142-foot ferry Minneapolis was burned on the lake by the TCRT before a crowd estimated at 25,000. Built in 1905 to transport thousands to Big Island, its useful life, like that of the Park, had ended. By 1917 most of the buildings had been dismantled and the rebar melted down for the World War I effort.

Big Island Game Farm

1915 - 1920

In 1915 Minnesota game bird populations were declining due to severe weather and habitat changes. Pheasants released in 1905 had failed to thrive. Despite success in other states, 'artificial' game propagation had not yet been attempted in Minnesota. It was time to try.



Frank Blair, a highly-regarded conservationist recruited in 1914 by the *Minnesota Game Protective League*, convinced the League to start the **first state game bird farm**. The **Twin City Rapid Transit Co. (TCRT)** donated use of its 'Big Island Park' as well as buildings and lumber for coops and rearing pens.

Blair felt that **ring-necked pheasants** could adapt to changes threatening native birds. In late 1915 the farm opened with forty hens and ten cocks. In 1916 native birds were added, including quail, prairie chickens, and pairs of teal, mallard, and pintail ducks. Domestic poultry were used to hatch eggs and rear chicks.

Pheasant and quail multiplied and the *State Game and Fish Commission* took ownership of the farm, allowing the first releases in 1917. While the island offered vermin control advantages, it lacked sufficient space. In 1920, with the state pheasant population over 400,000, the farm moved to a new 200 acre site near Mound.

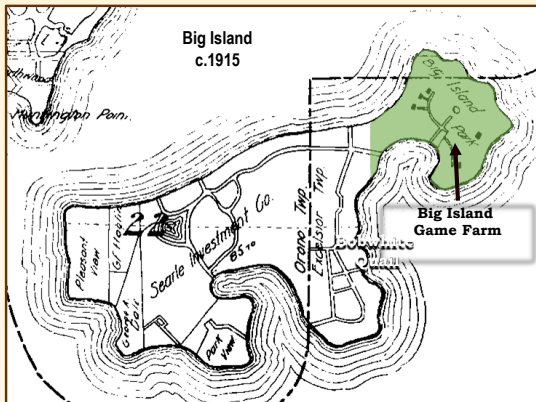
By 1924 enough birds had been released to have a **first ever pheasant season** in Carver and Hennepin counties, where hunters bagged 250 roosters. The Mound farm closed in 1928, replaced by larger more efficient farms. By 1931 the pheasant population had reached four million and hunters brought in **one million birds in Minnesota's first state-wide pheasant hunting season**.



Brooding Coops (1916)



Rearing Pens for Quail and Ring-necked Pheasants (1916)



Game Farm Pheasants c.1920

Game farms closed in the 1950s as established bird populations depended more on habitat and weather conditions than on the number of birds released. But thanks to Blair's work the ring-necked pheasant had become Minnesota's iconic game bird and most birds in Minnesota and the Dakotas today can be traced to the original Big Island Game Farm.



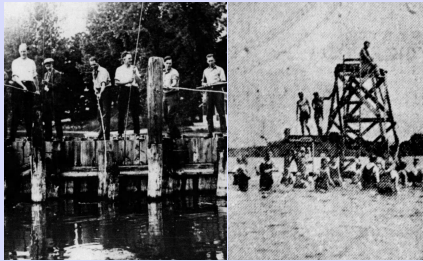
Big Island Veterans Camp

1921 - 2003

In 1921 the Federal Board for Vocational Education decided to create a summer retreat for disabled veterans on Big Island. The Twin City Rapid Transit Company made the land available and the Minneapolis War Chest Fund helped build a Main Hall and restore existing dormitories.



The Main Hall overlooked Excelsior while across the island a semi-circle of tents were set up for single vets. (c. 1921)

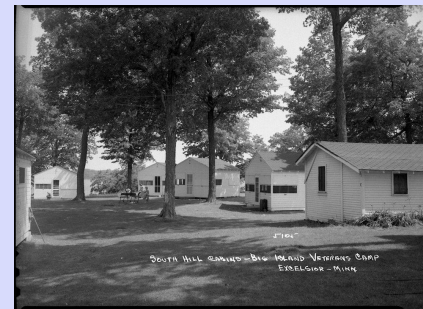


Vets enjoyed organized sports, swimming, fishing, boating and a variety of social events. (c. 1921)

The Minnesota state legislature allocated operating funds for the camp in 1922 and in 1925 approved a **Board of Governors** represented by four different veterans groups. Ads in 1930 offered “sleeping cottages along the lakeshore, a fireproof dormitory, large main building with dining room and recreation area.” Railroads from Minneapolis gave vets discounted fares.

By 1931 over 3500 vets used the camp annually. In 1947 a new **Board of Governors**, authorized by the state, purchased the land from the TCRT for \$25,000. The camp continued to provide inexpensive summer vacations for veterans and their families well into the 1970s.

In 1978 the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs took over the camp. By the early 1980s winter vandalism had become a problem and aging buildings had fallen out of code compliance. As a result the camp closed in 1984. However in 1985 a new Board of Governors decided to clean up and repair the camp, reopening it in 1989.



South Hill Cabins



Dormitory



Veterans Camp photos taken in 1955. Provided courtesy of Darel Leibold



The camp remained open through the 1990s but closed in 2003 for the last time after the Board of Governors voted to sell the land and use the proceeds for other veterans' needs in the state. After over 80 years serving as a retreat for veterans this popular and fabled property was ready to serve its next use.

Creation of a New Park

2003-2019

Once the veterans' camp site became available, the City of Orono put substantial effort into discussions with existing and potential stakeholders and concluded that permanent public ownership of the property was of paramount importance. The City Council appointed former mayor Gabriel Jabbour to represent the City in discussions with Three Rivers Parks, Hennepin County and the Department of Veterans Affairs to reach an acceptable outcome for use of the property.



"Gabe" Jabbour at a council meeting

A financial package was put together to meet the **\$5.70 million** price of the Camp, including \$1.3 million from the Lurton and Carlson families, \$1.55 million from Orono HRA Public Project Revenue Bonds, and a \$2 million grant from the State of Minnesota. In early 2005 the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD) agreed to partner with the City by contributing the remaining \$850,000 in exchange for a **Conservation Easement** that would preserve the open space and natural character of the entire **56-acre property**.



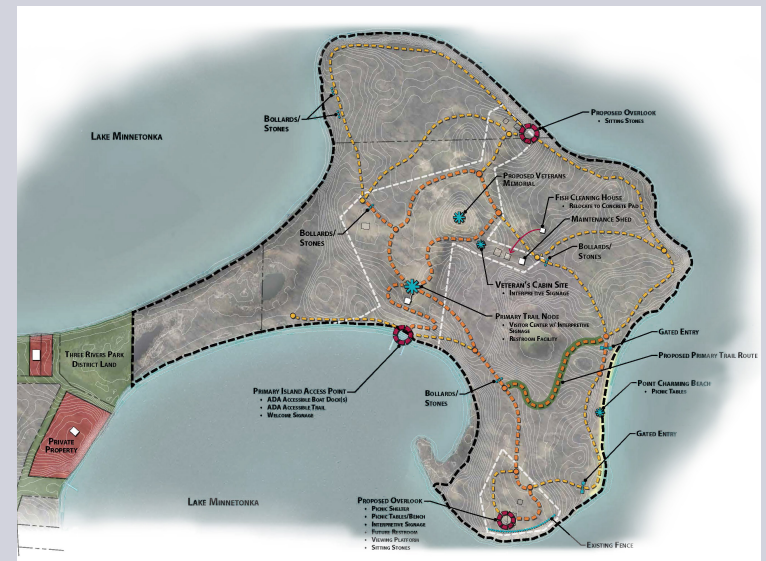
Eagle's nest

As a part of this agreement, **45 acres were to remain undeveloped**, allowing the remaining 11 acres to be developed in a limited manner for generally passive recreational and educational uses. Purchase of the property was completed in January 2006. In order to operate Big Island Park successfully, the City and the MCWD created a **Big Island Nature Park Management Plan** in November 2011. The management plan contained a vision and a series of goals for the park.



Orono Park Commission, 2019

The renewal of Big Island as a park preserve **would not have happened without "Gabe" Jabbour**, who put his heart and soul into the project, even doing back-breaking work to clean up the property, demolishing dilapidated buildings that were unsafe and repairing the picnic pavilions. Additional help came from local business volunteers. **The park officially re-opened on June 25, 2008.**



Big Island Concept Plan by Bolton & Menk

In 2018, a master plan was created to guide the park's limited development while creating an enjoyable and educational experience for its visitors. Implementation of the plan is being accomplished by a group of dedicated volunteers, grants and private donors (see bigislandlegacy.org).