A Secret Place

This place gets its name from the Mdewakanton Dakotah words for “great water,” which translates to Minne–tonka. The lake was a secret to all but Native Americans early in the 19th century. Not only was it secret, it was sacred—a place to worship the spirit and build mounds for last resting places. Though interaction occurred with traders and the US army not far away, the Dakotah never revealed the lake.

A Secret No More

In the year 1822 everything changed. Two young men from Fort Snelling made their way into Dakotah country by canoe. Working their way up Minnehaha Creek, they passed through the Headwaters and finally found a Dakotah camp on Big Island. After that, it was only a matter of time until settlement occurred. Eventually the Dakotah sold the area to the United States with the Treaty of Mendota in 1851. The lake remained an occasional campsite for Native Americans, but visitations dwindled and finally came to end in the early 20th century.

Have Your Wetland and Eat It Too

Native Americans were nomadic residents around Minnetonka. They came to the area seasonally to hunt and fish and to gather wild rice, roots and berries.

You might still find plants in the Headwaters wetland that were harvested by the Dakotah. For example: Broadleaf Arrowhead. These so-called duck potatoes were gathered in fall and then strung overhead in the wigwam to dry. Later the tubers of the plant were boiled for eating.