No photograph or drawing of the Richfield flourmill has been found. This unidentified painting shows what it might have looked like.

Hennepin history hiding in plain sight at Lyndale Avenue on Minnehaha Creek

by Tom Balcom
Minnehaha Creek played a key role in the early settlement of Hennepin County. Water from the creek powered flourmills that became the centers of business and political life for Richfield Township, Edina, St. Louis Park, and Minnetonka. The former Richfield flourmill site at Lyndale Avenue has some especially important historic features dating from the 1800s. Through the years, some of these features have become mysteries, while others are still "hiding in plain sight."1

The historic bridge, crossing over Minnehaha Creek on today's Lyndale Avenue, is well hidden. The cement railings of the bridge that line the sidewalks and road are low, nondescript, and barricaded by two layers of chain link fence. The vegetative landscape includes invasive shrubs and some dead and down trees.

Under the bridge, the Minneapolis Board of Parks and Recreation trail is recently closed because of the potential for falling debris. The wooden walkways, railings, and steps are in disrepair. Tagging signs and graffiti cover the lower cement walls of the bridge in obvious conflict with Minnehaha Creek's natural surroundings. The bridge is scheduled for replacement in 2011.

Despite this bleak picture, the Lyndale Avenue crossing is one of the most historic places in all of Hennepin County, with great scenic and education potential. Let's start with the site's historic significance.

Hennepin County land was opened for settlement and farming in the early 1850s. To meet the rising demand for processing grain, flourmills sprang up at strategic locations on the county's rivers and streams. Six mills were built along the 22 miles of Minnehaha Creek from Lake Minnetonka to the Mississippi River. The mills could operate with adequate waterpower from early spring until late fall because creek levels were higher and flows were more constant in the 1800s.2

A dam and a flourmill were built in the Minnehaha Creek valley at Lyndale Avenue (then called Bloomington Road) in 1854. This first mill on the creek had a turbine wheel with four runs of stone powered by a dam with a seven-foot head. Originally known as the Richland Mill (and often called the Old Red Mill), it produced 20 barrels of flour in 10 hours. Because the mill was a gathering site for farmers from the surrounding countryside, a post office named Harmony was also established in 1854 across the creek from the mill at what is now 53rd and Lyndale.3

The day Minnesota became a state, May 11, 1858, the first town meeting took place at 53rd and Lyndale to organize the township and select a name. Participants suggested Richland and Harmony—names already in use in the area—for the township. Thirteen citizens at the meeting rejected both names and finally chose "Richfield."

The government center for Richfield Township, at 53rd and Lyndale, was at its geographic center. Richfield originally encompassed a 63-square-mile area, almost twice the size of a typical township. It was bounded on the north by Lake Street, on
the east by the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, on the south by 78th Street, and on the west by what is today’s Highway 169.1

The Richfield flourmill and post office also made the area of 53rd and Lyndale the township’s original business and social center. Several wood-frame buildings on the east side of Lyndale housed a general store, a meat market, a smithy, and a grocery and dry-goods store. A school and two churches located there too. Because this settlement preceded the advent of railroads, the Richfield flourmill was dependent on wheat arriving in farmers’ wagons from the surrounding countryside, sometimes from as far away as 60 miles.2

Wheat was Minnesota’s leading farm crop in those early years, and money came from the East to buy it. At harvest time, wagons loaded with wheat waiting for conversion to flour for local and Eastern markets lined the road near the mill. Farmers wanted to sell their wheat, get it processed as soon as possible, and buy a few necessities at the stores. The job of hauling wheat had to go quickly because the farmers and their horse teams were needed for plowing for more crops and other chores.

The dialects of other languages as well as of American English were evident in the views expressed at early Richfield Township meetings. In 1858, tax assessors collected 25 cents for every $100 of real estate to use for the improvement of roads. The sum of $400 was enough to fund administration of the township for the first year. The next year the figure was cut to $100, but the $400 level was restored in 1860. That year the township voted to restrain hogs and bulls from running free and established a pound and pound master to enforce the regulation.3

The first reduction in the size of Richfield Township occurred in 1867. The state legislature transferred the two-mile-wide strip of land between Lake Street and 46th Street to Minneapolis Township.4

By this time, the Richfield flourmill was starting to decline in importance because of waterpower and railroad advantages.
along the downtown Minneapolis riverfront and in other nearby communities. Another sign of flourmill and business-center decline occurred in 1879 when a new town hall for Richfield Township was built at 62nd Street and Lyndale Avenue.

A few mysteries obscure our view of the Richfield flourmill and dam. There are no known photographs or drawings of the Richfield mill and dam site, and historical maps show varying locations for the mill on the creek at Lyndale Avenue. Finally, no one knows when the flourmill ceased operation or was torn down.

William D. Washburn bought the mill property in June 1886 for $5,000. His plan was to build a memorial orphanage in honor of his brother at 50th and Nicollet and surround it with a residential development called Washburn Park. By the end of 1886, the orphanage was completed and the Washburn Park residential plat, designed by well-known landscape architect William D. Washburn was a prominent entrepreneur in sawmilling, flourmilling, and railroads in the Upper Midwest, as well as Minnesota's U.S. senator in the 1890s.
Washburn Memorial Orphan Asylum, looking southwest from 49th and Nicollet, ca. 1890. The orphanage was built in 1886 and torn down in 1929.

Lyndale Avenue Bridge over Minnehaha Creek, 1894, two years after it was constructed.

H. W. S. Cleveland, was filed with Hennepin County. No flourmill or dam shows up at Lyndale Avenue and Minnehaha Creek on the plat map. W. D. Washburn, the orphanage, and 22 other landowners in the area were listed as proprietors of a real estate development of wooded, hilly land, platted into large and small residential lots. This early neighborhood surrounded the grounds of the Washburn Memorial Orphan Asylum.

The 1886 map narrative advertised Washburn Park as a place, "where men of business can get away from the noise of the city and the inconvenience of small lots and crowded neighborhoods." Oddly, Washburn Park was promoted as a suburban retreat in 1886, but it was incorporated...
into Minneapolis less than a year later when the southern city limits were extended from 38th Street to 54th. Soon after the annexation, the streetcar line on Nicollet Avenue was also extended from 37th Street to 50th. This public transit linked the orphanage and the new Minnehaha Creek neighborhood with the rest of the city. The Washburn Park narrative continues:

This poetic stream [Minnehaha Creek] runs through the entire park and along its shores a wide boulevard is being laid out, connecting Lake Harriet with the Falls of Minnehaha. The picturesque ness of the stream and its sloping banks is only equaled by the clearness and purity of its waters. With Minnetonka, Calhoun and Harriet as a source of supply, Minnehaha Creek as the aqueduct and the reservoir that is to be built on the high hill near the center of the park for a local head, Washburn Park will have a complete system of waterworks. 9

Construction of the waterworks system for Washburn Park was delayed because of the old milldam at Lyndale Avenue. Supplying water to the Washburn Orphanage and neighborhood from Minnehaha Creek was a constant problem. A change in creek flow presented an opportunity to remedy the situation: "The mill dam (associated with the former Richfield flourmill) was breached in 1892 when the City of Minneapolis built the Lyndale Avenue Bridge over Minnehaha Creek. However, the earth embankments of the old milldam remain and serve as the bridge approaches. Lyndale Avenue passes over the top of the old milldam as it crosses Minnehaha Creek in south Minneapolis."10

In 1893, the year following creek-flow restoration, W. D. Washburn proposed a plan for his own private waterworks system for the orphanage and the neighbor-

hood. The Minneapolis City Council and the Minneapolis Park Board approved the plan through passage of this resolution:

That William D. Washburn, his heirs and assigns are hereby granted the right to lay a six-inch water main from Minnehaha Creek, for the conducting of water, to or upon lots or tracts of land within the boundaries of Washburn Park, an addition to the city of Minneapolis, to be used for fire protection, lawn purposes, domestic consumption or any other purpose, said water to be supplied by means of a pumping station, stand pipe, and water tower to be located on the property belonging to said William D. Washburn.

Washburn plat map, 1886 —detail showing the waterworks system built for the orphanage and neighborhood in 1893

Minneapolis Central Library
A 260-foot well, sunk near the creek pumping station just downstream of the new Lyndale Bridge, provided water during dry periods and winter months, when water from the creek was not available.11

The Minneapolis Park Board was just starting to implement a concept in the 1890s called the Grand Rounds Parkway System. The Grand Rounds is an outer belt of encircling parkways, connecting and passing through several large proposed park areas. Most of Minnehaha Creek’s lands and parkways were acquired and developed at this time, ahead of the residential growth that occurred later. Park Board President Charles Loring made the following statement to the Board of Park Commissioners in 1893:

In securing land to complete the Minnehaha Parkway, and in building the drive from Lyndale Avenue to Minnehaha Park, you have opened for public use one of the most beautiful and useful parks in this or any other city. Its area of nearly 200 acres, stretching from the lakes to the beautiful falls of Minnehaha, contains the most picturesque and varied scenery of wooded
hills, green meadows and running brook. It is a New England picture set in a prairie frame. This beautiful valley you have saved from destruction, for had it not been for your action and the generous co-operation of the own-
ers of the land, it would surely have become the receptacle of the rubbish of the neighborhood, a menace to the health of the people. You have saved it to be a promoter of health, a source of pleasure and recreation, and an educa-

Aerial photo, 1925, showing Washburn High School under construction to the left, Washburn Orphanage to the right, and the neighborhood filling up with houses.
Stone arch of 1892 Lyndale Avenue Bridge, before (above) and after 1973 concrete work (above right). Note that the Minneapolis Park Board’s walkway under the bridge has not been built yet.

The Washburn Park neighborhood, orphanage, and water tower were hooked up to city water in 1915, resolving the water-supply and water-quality problems that had plagued the area in the past. City sewer connection came soon afterwards, and over the next 15 years the neighborhood filled in with houses, the city built a new water tower, the orphanage closed and was torn down, and Ramsey Junior High and Washburn Senior High Schools arose on the former institution’s property.13

The 1892 Lyndale Bridge over Minnehaha Creek (see p. 10) replaced an 18-foot-wide, wood truss bridge, probably built in the 1850s. The city had to raise the Lyndale roadbed 11 feet, requiring substantial fill to accommodate the new 37-foot high bridge of blue and Mankato limestone. Original plans to accommodate Minnehaha Creek flows included an arch 25 feet in diameter with a 48-foot long barrel, stone headwalls, and wing walls. This bridge substructure supported a 36-foot-wide roadway plus six-foot sidewalks on each side with metal pipe railings.14

Another mystery appears in county transportation department records:

Designs for the Lyndale Avenue Bridge, which began in 1891, may have occurred after [landscape architect] Cleveland was retained by the Park Board to develop Minnehaha Parkway plans and take his concepts or designs into consideration for the new bridge. However, there is no written evidence directly linking the design and construction of the bridge with the design and construction of the Parkway. At the time of construction, the stone arch bridge was more substantial than the simple wood truss bridges that were located along the parkway into the early twentieth century.15

Numerous modifications to the Lyndale Bridge over Minnehaha Creek have obscured the original stonework and substantially changed its appearance. The most significant change was made in 1956, when new concrete wing walls were constructed around the original stone bridge. The bridge deck was widened at that time with concrete-and-steel-beam sections to
accommodate the addition of eight-foot sidewalks. Additional substructure repairs were required in 1973 as a part of Lyndale Avenue repaving activities. Concrete placed over the limestone façade above the arches conceals the remaining stone headwalls of the 1892 bridge.\footnote{16}

The Minneapolis Park Board planned substantial changes to the city’s parkway system in the early 1970s. The study report that guided these changes included the following statement about the Minnehaha Parkway from Lake Harriet to Lake Nokomis: “This parkway section is truly
beautiful. The smooth flowing landscape and creek has constantly changing tree groupings, which create open meadows, dense woods, and sun-filtered tree canopies. The linear configuration is ideal for pathways, bicycle trails and a canoe route to connect small passive recreation areas . . . In the future, all bridges should be designed to allow the passage of canoes and possibly a path under the bridge" (emphasis added).17

The Park Board followed the report’s path recommendation and constructed a wood walkway with railings, through the arch of the Lyndale Bridge in the 1970s. Because the original 1892 limestone is still visible in the arch barrel, this pathway under the bridge has provided parkway walkers and runners with intimate sensory and historic connections to Minnehaha Creek for 37 years.

These connections should be maintained and enhanced in the design of the new Lyndale Bridge to be built by Hennepin County in 2011.

Additional historical and archeological investigation during bridge removal and new construction might reveal answers to some of the mysteries concerning the flourmill, dam, and bridge. The structures are significant to the history of Hennepin County and Minnehaha Creek. The Hennepin County Transportation Department and the Minneapolis Park Board should collaborate with other supporting organizations to provide maximum recreational, scenic, and educational benefits at the bridge site.18

With these benefits, the new bridge will stand the test of time and should last as long as the one now “hiding in plain sight.”

References

1. The phrase “hiding in plain sight” comes from a local history about the original town of St. Anthony and a larger area called East Minneapolis in the 1800s but known as Southeast Minneapolis today. See Penny Petersen, Hiding in Plain Sight: Minneapolis’ First Neighborhood (Minneapolis: Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Association/NRP, 1999).

2. Foster Dunwiddie, “The Six Flouring Mills on Minnehaha Creek,” Minnesota History (Spring 1975): 162-74. Two factors have dramatically changed the watershed’s storm-water runoff and consequently the flows in Minnehaha Creek: installation of Gray’s Bay Dam at the outlet into the creek in 1897 to raise and stabilize Lake Minnetonka levels, and 20th-century urbanization, increasing impervious surface and eliminating wetland storage capacity in the watershed. The creek-flow change was quite evident in the 1920s: “To those who are accustomed to think of Minnehaha Creek as a series of isolated, stagnant pools that for a few weeks in spring are joined to form a weed-choked channel in which evidence of a sluggish current is to be discerned only by careful watching, it may seem incredible that this so-called ‘creek’ was once a not inconsiderable river and went, as a matter of fact, by the name of Brown’s River in Territorial times. During the seventies of the last century it furnished power for no less than five flourmills, some of them of large size and all of real importance to the farming population of Hennepin County in pioneer days.” See Otto Schossler, Riverside Reveries (Minneapolis: n.p., 1928), p. 105. Irving Dunmooor recalled “huge quantities of pickerel and large suckers” in the creek in 1853: “His family salted them and packed them in barrels.” See Jane Hallberg, Minnehaha Creek: Living Waters (Minneapolis: Cityscapes, 1995), 87.

3. Dunwiddie, 166.

4. Frederick Johnson, Richfield: Minnesota’s Oldest Suburb (Richfield: Richfield Historical History, 2008), 14, 5.


7. Johnson, 54.
9. Ibid.
15. Mead and Hunt, 1.
16. Ibid., 7.
18. Likely supporters of the design, funding, and establishment of an interpretative program for historical and natural resources at the site include the Washburn Public Library (located just south of the Lyndale bridge), Richfield Historical Society, Hennepin History Museum, Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, Minnesota Historical Society, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Citizens for Minnehaha Creek Corridor.