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Advancing the Reach: The Heritage Board and the Centrality of Water

Abstract

Nearly three decades after its inception, the Heritage Board is now facing a crossroads in its continued approach to the interpretation of the St. Anthony Falls reach of the Mississippi River. Both past and current projects have not explored the historic and spiritual significance of the river enough, taking its presence for granted instead. A realignment of the Heritage Board's structure and operation is necessary in order to ensure that the group fulfills its decision-making responsibility to include the river and water in the narrative of the Heritage Zone around the Falls. The group can reach this goal through the incorporation of two new members, one expert on the ecological profile of the river and another on the interpretive perspectives of indigenous populations. Through the introduction of Water Impact Statements, the Board has the ability to highlight the centrality of water in its overarching interpretations. Drawing from the theories of reverence, a working river, and relationality, these changes are supported by scholars and researchers who focus on river maintenance and health. Moreover, this proposal aligns neatly with existing Heritage Board plans and other groups, such as the Friends of the Mississippi and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Convincing Board members of the ecological and spiritual significance of water to the story of the St. Anthony Falls will help strengthen the organization's work and allow group members to become stewards of the river through their interpretive visions.



St Anthony Falls

Why Water is a Challenge

As the Heritage Board approaches 30 years of existence, now marks an important time to revisit the organization's core mission. Established by Minnesota state statute in 1988, the Board was commissioned to develop a "comprehensive interpretive plan for interpretation of...significant historic and natural features" of the St. Anthony Falls reach of the Mississippi River.¹ The Board has since taken on countless initiatives to help tell the story of St. Anthony Falls, but has yet to fulfill a few central components of its charter. Specifically, the Heritage Board has had a relatively static relationship with the river itself, despite it being the proximate source for all that is in the Board's purview. One of the ways this disconnect has manifested is through the difficulty of incorporating Native American perspectives and teachings into the overall interpretation. The banks of the Mississippi have attracted the bulk of the Heritage Board's attention over the past decades, but it is now necessary to embrace the challenge of thinking critically about water. Transitioning the Board to an approach that recognizes and celebrates the role of the river as the primary contributor to the past, present, and future of the St. Anthony Falls river story is the right step in advancing the Board's goals.

The Heritage Board's shortcomings on the topic of water should not be equated with any type of ill intent. Rather, the issue has likely been the fact that folding in meaningful perspectives, information, and concerns about water into the greater story is a difficult task. The Mississippi cannot be easily contextualized due to its size, longevity, and reach beyond the local area. Because of this, the river has assumed a place as a constant in the interpretive planning process. Without frequent revisits to water health, management, and interpretation, the Heritage Board misses out on a chance to capitalize on the strength of the river in the St. Anthony Falls stretch. As a result, water is treated as a secondary concern, often surfacing in the interpretive

planning as part of a supplemental focus. The disconnect formed through this process separates the Board's work from gaining deeper footholds via a relationship with the water. Most would agree that the river is a defining feature of this region and is an essential part of the Twin Cities' history, but integrating this sentiment within the comprehensive plans is an unfamiliar task.

Recent reports illustrate the problem with making water occupy a more prominent space in St. Anthony Falls interpretation. The "River Ecosystems" section of the Heritage Board's 2013 East Bank Plan highlights ideas such as increasing bird watching capacity and providing places to play in the water.² Surely there is a place in the Board's work for these amenities, but there is no present discussion about water flow, river organisms, or threats from pollution. The historic arc of the river's health is a fundamental part of the Heritage Zone's story. Burying this water-based approach to interpretation is disingenuous to the purpose of the Board and insufficient to the public's understanding of the area.

A similar issue arises from the planning around Native American influences in the Heritage Board's work. It is encouraging to see the commitment and openness of the Board to alternative perspectives, especially from indigenous peoples. However, the actual inclusion of such voices is hindered by the Board's current capacity to support non-traditional interventions. Each of the three recent Heritage Board reports (2009, 2013, and 2014) has included sections about the role of Native American histories in the modern interpretation of the St. Anthony Falls. Plans have ranged from the broad aim of "infusing perspective"³ to specific cultural installations,⁴ but often focus on indigenous as a tangential part of the regions past. Moving from considering Dakota and others as a source for interesting stories to a place where the spiritual roots of the water become part of the *collective* story is a vital component of connecting the Heritage Board to the significance of the water.

Again, the Board's difficulty to feature water as a historically significant framework in its own right does not stem from unawareness or poor effort. In some cases, the Board simply is not adequately equipped to tackle water issues. Considering the membership of the organization, there is an understandable majority of political and administrative leaders and their appointees. The composition of the group is codified in the statute that created the Board, which sets the chair as the director of the Minnesota Historical Society.⁵ Despite being made up of 22 members, the Heritage Board does not have a permanent place for either an expert in river ecology or a dedicated representative of indigenous peoples. Lacking these critical voices leaves the Board at a disadvantage when addressing water directly, from both a scientific water management view and from a perspective of cultural significance and identity. Because of this current reality, the Board excels in its interpretive planning on the banks surrounding the river, yet struggles to put forth equally substantial proposals for a river story that leads with water. Although the problems outlined here are largely rooted in the legal framework of the Heritage Board, a targeted effort toward organizational reform can realign the group's work by making enormity of meaning in the river the central part of the overall story.

Celebrating the Centrality of Water

Proposing a number of added responsibilities to the already busy lives of Heritage Board members would be a myopic method of overcoming the organizational problem of how water is addressed and communicated through the interpretive planning process. Instead of a new checklist of what facts and figures should go into Board reports, there is far more value in cultivating a decision making structure in which the Board can incorporate water concerns and river stories into existing initiatives. Through a restructuring of the organization's membership

and a concerted effort to push water to the forefront, the Heritage Board has an opportunity to broaden its work and fully engage with the Mississippi. In order to do so, Board members must be ready to take their positions seriously and strive to go beyond the traditional projects sponsored by the group.

Since this proposal affects the operation of the Heritage Board rather than specific projects, there is no one place in the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone on which to center this recommendation. Rather, the direct impact of the proposed shift in prioritization will be realized in the meetings and reports of the Board. Thinking toward when this idea could begin to gain traction among the group members, a target date for introducing the emphasis on the centrality of water is July 20th, 2015, when the Heritage Board has one of its three yearly meetings at the Mill City Museum on the West Bank of the river. This meeting marks a space for the Board to reconsider its original mission and begin to implement the following proposal.

A picture of the Mill City Museum as seen from the Stone Arch Bridge and a map of the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone are included below in this section. Consider the confluence of populations, histories, traditions, nature, and industry that is housed in such a short stretch of the Mississippi River as a whole and the surrounding region.

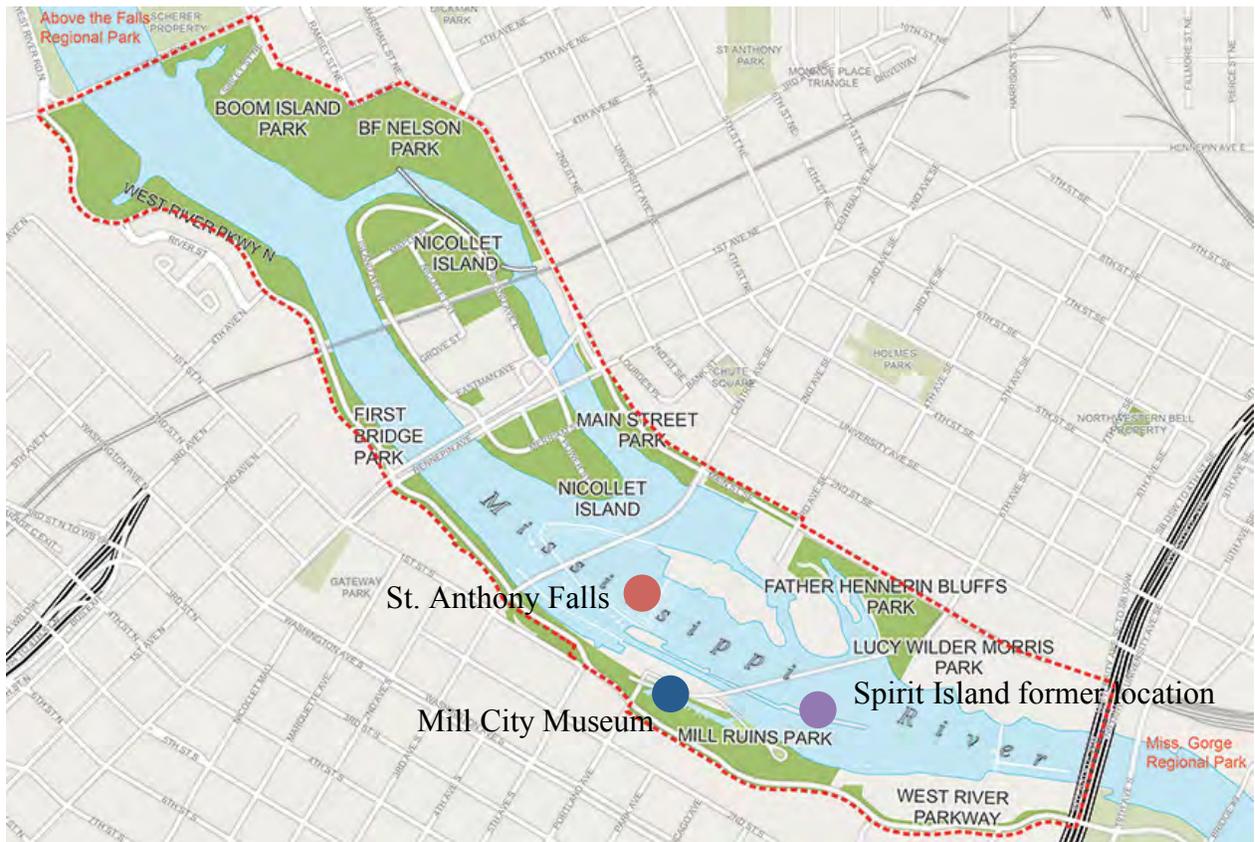


Mill City Museum, West Bank

As alluded to above, the plan begins with membership. In order to take on a new set of responsibilities toward interpreting the significance water, the Board must be able to consider multiple ideas and perspectives at once. Especially with the vastness of this undertaking, the Board would benefit from adding two water experts. One of these new members would be a researcher who specializes in river ecology and would therefore be able to assess the river as a dynamic part of interpretation. This member would be able to speak to how Heritage Board plans affected the health of the river in the context of its continually changing ecological profile, a task that may be too complex and technical for many of the current members. The search for this addition to the organization should target Friends of the Mississippi River, a group that works

with the National Park Service and has produced a recent report on the “State of the River.”⁶

This work monitors vital signs about the river, with information about flow, nutrients, invasive species, and sediment. Another possibility for Heritage Board outreach is the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). The MPCA is equipped to provide a detailed assessment on the success of restoration plans. As the Heritage Board moves toward considering the centrality of water, this type of information will be key.



Map of St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone

Of course, tracking changes in the Mississippi through river monitoring is not the only source the Heritage Board should draw on when factoring water into interpretation. The rich history of interaction between indigenous populations and the Mississippi provide the basis for a cultural, spiritual, and historical perspective on the water. Moreover, there is an added significance in the Heritage Board’s charge to tell the story of the St. Anthony Falls, a place that

is considered to be a spiritual meeting place for Dakota people.⁷ Relating the nature of the river's intangible meanings to a broader audience is as central to the Board's water focus as the ecological understanding gained by the first additional position. One challenging part about carving out this new place on the Board is the selection criteria for a representative. It is essential that the group does not take one Native American voice as speaking for all indigenous peoples, as doing so risks isolating the very people that must be included in this new direction of discussion. To make the best decision, the Heritage Board should jump at an opportunity to partner with the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council (MIAC).⁸ This government entity, which serves as a liaison between tribes and the state government, is uniquely poised to select a representative that can speak to the historical and spiritual underpinnings of indigenous peoples and the river, as well as inform planning and interpretation for the Heritage Board.

A final change promoted by this proposal would be a shift in the structure of meetings and reports that the Heritage Board produces. In essence, the conversation of the group would be guided by an ongoing set of Water Impact Statements. Similar to the required Environmental Impact Statements needed for many projects nationwide, a Water Impact Statement centered on the Heritage Zone would immediately communicate what aspects of the discussion or interpretation concern either the ecological health of the river or the connection to cultural beliefs. Therefore, the two new group members will be in the perfect position to take the lead on this part of the Heritage Board's work, mitigating any added pressure on the current board members. As highlighted throughout this proposal, the Heritage Board's work originates from the existence of the Mississippi, and must continue to prioritize its role in the "story of the zone."⁹ Even more important than containing key information that will inform Board decisions and illuminate water issues in the St. Anthony Reach, the Water Impact Statements will set the

tone for all of the Heritage Board's proceedings. As a result, the group will be empowered to speak cohesively about water management and river interpretation rather than sprinkle bits about the river throughout the reports. Leading with water allows the Board to frame all of its interpretations within a broader narrative about the evolving river.

The Importance of Promoting the River

As evidenced by the balance of the Heritage Board's interpretive planning reports, the group has a far more advanced conceptualization of the land around the Mississippi than the river itself. The proposal sketched out above introduces a framework that would allow the Board to strike a more equitable balance in its projects, leading with a better understanding of water. Of course, this new organizational culture and focus represents a shift from the Board's status quo operation. The members of the Heritage Board should jump at this change, however, as it will propel the group into the future of the Mississippi and its river story. Acknowledging the multifaceted strength of the river in fulfilling the Heritage Board's mission is the first step in ultimately communicating about the river's prominence with a wider audience.

Much of the Heritage Board's work with the river is compartmentalized in the sense that most interpretations exist with only one or two primary motives. For instance, the plan to display water-level markers is a good first step to sharing the history of the river's profile in the region, but fails to describe how variation in depth shaped the shoreline and affected the flow over the St. Anthony Falls.¹⁰ Moreover, there is even less planning around the responses of native populations to changes in the river's ecological makeup. Building upon this type of tentative Heritage Board foray into incorporating the dynamic river into the overall story of the zone is a key part of keeping the Board's work relevant and enduring.

The addition of expert board members with exceptional knowledge about river systems and river relationships, as well as the development of an organizational focus on water with Water Impact Statements, will help usher in a new era of Heritage Board interpretation. This proposal is characterized by a “yes, and…” approach that encourages expanding the water aspect of the narrative instead of a “just enough” mentality that would continue to take the water for granted. Perhaps most succinctly, the proposed alterations to the Board allow for greater exploration into an area where there is a high need for developing and communicating stories, but currently a dearth of tools at the Board’s disposal. Connecting the members to the necessary tools, i.e. expert members, will anchor the group’s work at the focal point of the entire zone – the water. Aided by the efficiency provided through the Water Impact Statements, the Board will be able to stay up-to-date on the ever-changing Mississippi.

One of the benefits of this plan actually arises from its method of implementation. Rather than immediately thrusting the Board into this new mode of operation, the integration of the new members and new procedures would be gradually implemented over one year. This period of transition would reinforce the idea of a water-centric interpretation by adding aspects of river health and river connection into ongoing plans that may have no explicit connection to the water. Challenging the Board to find the underlying links between its regular projects and the river to form a more encompassing interpretation will help with the shift in mentality necessary to make a broader change toward interpretations directly based in the water of the St. Anthony Falls reach. In sum, these structural and operational changes to the Heritage Board pave the way for the group to move beyond identifying historic significance in the Heritage Zone and become the foremost stewards of the river by conserving and celebrating its continuing central place in the story of the zone.

Finding Life in the Water

In order to expand on the reasons why this plan addresses a problem in the St. Anthony Falls stretch, the Heritage Board should strive to internalize some of the broader themes that guide water management and river interpretation. A number of scholars and technocrats have tackled the river from a number of angles: health, navigation, ecology, spirituality, economic utility, and more. For the Board, these perspectives lend legitimacy to the organization's work, as well as a framework in which detailed plans can be connected to overarching ideals and interpretations. Dealing with the academic and expert discourse on water can become overly philosophical or too amorphous, however. Luckily, there are a few core principles that the Heritage Board can draw from to help guide specific plans along the larger ideas governing the relationship between people and rivers. The three broader themes that serve as diverse introductions to the proposal of water centrality are: reverence, a river that works, and relationality. Recognizing the role of water across these multiple dimensions requires a commitment from the Board to remaining open to nontraditional voices.

The notion of holding a “reverence for rivers” applies more broadly than just to the St. Anthony Falls reach or even the Mississippi River.¹¹ Coined by Luna Leopold in California in 1977, this term has remained an integral part of the current understanding of how water, especially rivers, permeates through the collective consciousness. Leopold argues that rivers must be considered from the view that they have a life of their own; there are many factors that must be a part of judging the “health of the river organism.”¹² In short, Leopold exposes the pervasive nature of water as a factor in river decisions, even those that do not directly address it. Returning to the Heritage Board, this teaching becomes a crucial part of the transition to making

water a central aspect of all of the group's actions. Including a Water Impact Statement along with any planning is an excellent way to fulfill this necessary part of interacting with the river. Moreover, maintaining this privileged position for the river within the Heritage Zone allows reverence to take on historic and spiritual meanings. In many ways, the Board already does a good job in the historic reverence of the water. For instance, the preservation of the A Mill demonstrates the ability of the Board to tell a story about the functionality of the water, allowing the river to take on a dynamic role in the history of the Falls. Expanding the idea of reverence to the spiritual relationship with the river as told through the perspectives from indigenous peoples would be a perfect project for the new Board representatives to spearhead. Finally, reverence carries an air of permanence, regardless of what changes the river undergoes. With this in mind, this view of the river keeps the Board flexible when faced with any future instability in the St. Anthony Falls reach, such as climate change or other geological events.

The comparison of a river that works to a working river was forwarded by the Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee (UMRCC). The report considers the floodplain of the Mississippi River from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Cairo, Illinois, focusing on the contentious balance between the conservation of the river ecosystem and the economic production to be gained from it.¹³ Both of these provide important interpretive narratives for the Heritage Board to include in its planning. The Board has a strong record of projects around a "working river," such as recognizing past industry, navigation, and regional advancement. Appreciation of the significance of "a river that works" is the next challenge for the Board. Weaving together the importance of a healthy, well-functioning river and the allure promoted by this vitality is a way to add complexity to the river's existence. Modifying the framework of the UMRCC report from

how river interventions have caused ecological impacts to how interpretive storytelling can be drawn from ecological significance is a good starting perspective for the Heritage Board's work.

A final guiding principle that the Heritage Board would be wise to explore in depth aligns seamlessly with the infusion of indigenous voices about the centrality of water. The Dakota ethic of *Mitakuye Owas'in*, or "everything is my relative," illustrates a sense of "relationality" between humans and any part of the Earth, including rivers.¹⁴ This concept is explored through the work of Darlene St. Clair, and is readily adaptable to the opportunities in front of the Heritage Board. The notion of relationality in this Dakota tradition bestows agency to parts of nature, even those that are inanimate. The interconnectedness of all of these "relatives" forms a shared identity that has aspects of all earthly objects. In this interpretation, waterways are non-metaphorically thought to be "arteries" and the "lifeblood" of all.¹⁵ Through this ethic, water assumes an elevated position within all of the other parts of the Heritage Zone and beyond. The long established spiritual relationship of indigenous peoples to this idea may be foreign to Heritage Board members and the general public at first, but ultimately forms the basis for a much more compelling story. Instead of displaying Native American language interpretations or recounting the manner in which the Dakota interacted with the river, the Board can cut directly to the significance of the water to the very essence of a people and of the region. Perhaps a stronger understanding of this broader framework would promote a newfound approach in interpreting the water of the St. Anthony Falls. It surely would improve upon the Heritage Board's decision-making perspective, especially when intertwined with a reverence for rivers and an impetus on a river that works.

Building On Existing Plans

Since the success of this proposal involves the reconfiguration of the Heritage Board in both structure and operation, it helps that there are already plans in place that can be readily advanced along this new path. As mentioned above, the Heritage Board released a comprehensive plan in for the zone in 2009 and has since released detailed plans for both the East and West Banks of the river. While this proposal may soon indicate the need for a third plan focused on water management and health of the river, the existing Board plans, along with outside reports, serve as a good initial framework for the proposed shift.

One of the “interpretive gateways” of the East Bank Plan is a “Confluence Walking Map” of the Mississippi River.¹⁶ In essence, the Heritage Board is proposing large, interactive map of the river that illustrates the geology and watershed leading to and from St. Anthony Falls. This type of water-centric plan fits in well with the proposal here, but would benefit from the insights of an ecological expert on the Board. Carving out a space within the map for stories about water health and changes in river structure over time would add water significance beyond the traditional topics the Board has already identified: people and commerce.¹⁷

In the 2009 Plan, the Heritage Board included the idea of the St. Anthony Falls as a “spiritual place” among its interpretive themes and messages.¹⁸ However, this section is far too short to inform any meaningful advancement on indigenous perspectives in the stretch. The 2014 West Bank Plan builds on this introduction by proposing a few places where visitors can experience Dakota art and language firsthand.¹⁹ These initiatives are excellent beginnings, but would benefit from the perspective raised by St. Clair and other indigenous teachings. Digging deeper than the unfamiliarity of Native American culture and history and into the governing ethic that explains the role of the river in supporting life would be a much more powerful addition to

the emerging story at these sites. It is certainly apparent that the Heritage Board is committed to incorporating interpretations of the river health and the indigenous connection to the water, but still needs the final push toward aligning these goals with an overarching water story. The inclusion of additional members and the start of normalizing Water Impact Statements directly target these aspects of the Board and its work.

Of course, the Heritage Board is not the only group concerned about the river and working to address its needs. The Friends of the Mississippi 2013 Report assesses river health based on water flow, bacteria, sediment, nitrate, and contaminants.²⁰ Bridging this scientific take on the river health with the Heritage Board's interpretive perspective will thrust water to the forefront of future planning. Fostering this ongoing partnership, which would be facilitated by the new Board member, is an essential part of constantly understanding the Mississippi as a dynamic body of water. Ecological changes at the microscopic level observed by the scientific partners could inform a discussion about the historical significance of climate change, for example. Another stakeholder in the health of the river is the MPCA, which published an assessment of the Twin Cities Watershed in 2013.²¹ The report includes a wealth of technical information collected through careful monitoring of the region, which can be employed to track the health of the river over time and place. One final entity that works directly with the water in the St. Anthony Falls reach is the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. This organization's 2014 master plan for the Falls highlights the current concerns about water quality and water flow in the stretch.²² Combining these ancillary reports with existing Heritage Board interpretive plans will ease the transition toward a water-first approach and encourage collaboration within the river zone.

Success Criteria of a Shift to Water

While the idea of increasing the emphasis on water as the preeminent site of interpretation for the Heritage Board may face some initial resistance, the more difficult aspect of its implementation may be evaluating when the goal has been met. Judging the change in operation is not easily quantifiable, and must be assessed through ongoing review of the Board's work and disposition toward water-based planning. The two main tenets of this proposal that must be realized for it to be a success are leading with water and promoting Heritage Board stewardship of the river. Under these broad goals, the specific provisions of this plan become better directed to make a positive impact.

To begin, the Board must implement the core structural and operational changes proposed here over the course of a year, beginning in July 2015. Without the inclusion of an ecological water expert and a representative of the indigenous population in the region, the Board will undoubtedly struggle to include a multi-layered, meaningful water focus in its interpretations. Additionally, including a Water Impact Statement along with each Board meeting and decision process will be impossible without these key experts and the buy-in of the group as a whole. However, these visible changes are primarily important in that they broaden the Heritage Board's capacity for and emphasis on making water stories the central priority in planning. In this sense, this proposal will be a success when water issues cease being difficult to conceptualize or act upon for the group as a whole. Perhaps it will be the quality of discussion or the citation of Leopold in interpretive plans, but a cultural shift in water discourse is the defining trait of this plan.

To illustrate this idea, take the example of the upcoming St. Anthony Lock closure. If the Board were to proceed with the centrality of water in mind, the Board would consider the

ecological ramifications of the closure and how the changes in sediment, organisms, and water flow relate to the period before and during the Lock's existence. Moreover, the Board would explore how the presence of a lock affects the perception of the river as part of an inherited identity. Does a closing lock close (or open) a key artery of the Earth? Most importantly, the Board's proposal for how to recommission the Lock structure and surrounding area would be informed by the narrative constructed from the river itself, not from the outside in. This proactive, water-focused process is just one of the many projects that would be reimaged within this new framework.

An area where success would be readily apparent is in the governing statute of the Heritage Board itself. Currently, the Board's membership is codified by state statute.²³ Lobbying for an amendment allowing the formalization of the addition of both expert positions would reflect the significance of including these voices. Granting this legitimacy to these water-first perspectives would send a signal to other members that the Board is serious about its responsibility to maintaining the changing health of the river in the St. Anthony Falls story. With this prompting, members would ideally begin to see themselves as stewards of the river in addition to interpreters of the surrounding zone. Embracing an active role in communicating the condition of the river as a historical and natural resource is the end goal, with the caveat that the specific actions and messages continue to evolve along with the river.

Welcoming indigenous populations as an instrumental part of the river story carries a few success criteria on its own. Because Native Americans can trace their relationship to the St. Anthony Falls back the farthest, it makes sense that their perspective would prominently lead the discussion surrounding cultural minorities in the region. This will be realized by a return of indigenous peoples to the Falls in a capacity sponsored by the Heritage Board's interpretation

and dedication to delving deeper into indigenous stories. An accompanying goal to this part of the proposal is that an increased Native American presence in the Heritage Board’s planning will pave the way for other minorities to invest in their own river stories. Perhaps the next area to gain permanent representation on the Heritage Board could be the black community at the head of this reach in North Minneapolis.

One last indicator of success in the stewardship dimension of this plan is the frequency with which the Heritage Board cites the MPCA, Friends of the Mississippi, the MPRB, and other ecological groups as sources aiding in the framing of the Board’s interpretive vision. The resources and expertise of these coexisting groups should be used to add a previously unheard dimension to the Heritage Zone planning. In a similar vein, Board members should reach a place of dexterity in their grasp of indigenous relationships with the water. Ideas such as “relationality” and deriving identity from the river will need to join the language used by the Board when considering interpretations relying on Native American perspectives. Recognizing the river as the fundamental part of the heritage story of St. Anthony Falls is a central goal in the future of the Heritage Board, and achieving this aim begins with the organizational shift outlined here.



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- ¹ Minnesota Stat. 138.763 Subd. 3
- ² "Changing Relationships to the Power of the Falls: An Interpretive Vision for the East Bank of St. Anthony Falls." 2013
- ³ "Power of the Falls: Renewing the Vision for the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone." 2009
- ⁴ East Bank and West Bank Plans
- ⁵ Minnesota Stat. 138.763 Subd. 1
- ⁶ Russell and Weller, "State of the River Report." 2013
- ⁷ *Bdote Memory Map*.
- ⁸ Indian Affairs, State of Minnesota
- ⁹ Minnesota Stat. 138.763 Subd. 3
- ¹⁰ East Bank Plan, pg. 29
- ¹¹ Leopold, Luna B. "A Reverence for Rivers." 1977
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ "A River That Works and a Working River." 2000
- ¹⁴ St. Clair, Darlene. "Mitakuye Owas'in K'a Haha Wakpa." 2015
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ East Bank Plan, pg. 16
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ "Power of the Falls." 2009
- ¹⁹ West Bank Plan, pg. 22
- ²⁰ Russell and Weller, "State of the River Report." 2013
- ²¹ "Mississippi River - Twin Cities Monitoring and Assessment Report." 2013
- ²² "St. Anthony Falls Regional Park Master Plan." 2014
- ²³ Minnesota Stat. 138.763 Subd. 1

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