

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

DK-MHC-012
CS 1901
Mendota Overlook

Historic Name Other Name	Mendota Overlook	CS # SHPO Inv #	1901 DK-MHC-012
Location	W side of TH 13 at jct of TH 13 and Mendota Heights Rd	Hwy District Reference	TH 13 Met E 106.3
City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM	Mendota Heights, City of Dakota 28N 23W Sec 33 St. Paul SW Z15 E486290 N4968020	Acres Rest Area Class	20 4
Designer	Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch	SP #	13-117-21-1 1901-01
Builder	Works Progress Administration (WPA) National Youth Administration (NYA)	SHPO Review #	94-0681
Historic Use Present Use	Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area	MHS Photo #	013548.04-17
Yr of Landscape Design	1938-39	MnDOT Historic Photo Album	Nic 5.10 Nic 5.19 Ols 1.68
Overall Site Integrity	Moderately Altered		
Review Required	Yes		
National Register Status	Eligible, see Statement of Significance		
Historic Context	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960 Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1943		
List of Standing Structures			
Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	Fieldwork Date
01	Overlook Wall	1938	11-02-97
			Prep by
			Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 46
			Prep for
			Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table			
Final Report	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)		

■ BRIEF

The Mendota Overlook is a 20-acre site located on the western side of former T.H. 13 (Sibley Memorial Highway) near the intersection of former T.H. 13 and Mendota Heights Road within the City of Mendota Heights.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Stone Overlook Wall. Built 1938 by the WPA. The principal structure on the site is an overlook wall constructed on the top of a hill overlooking the Minnesota River Valley to the west. The wall and its footings are built of gray, random ashlar, rockfaced, striated limestone that was quarried on the site. Many of the gray limestone blocks also show traces of tan limestone. The wall is 18" thick and anchored at intervals by 26"-square piers that project about 6" above the wall. The walls and piers originally had limestone caps that were replaced by gray-tinted concrete caps circa 1997.

The structure is very large, measuring about 270' from north to south. It is basically rectangular in shape. The western side features a wide, curving, lookout bay. The southern side of the wall consists of a 25'-wide rectangular lookout bay near the southeastern corner, and a staircase with 5'-wide stone steps near the southwestern corner. (The steps have been covered with a veneer of concrete but the landing at the bottom of the steps is limestone.) The eastern side of the overlook originally consisted of a long, straight wall. An opening (with four concrete bollards to block vehicles) was created in the eastern side circa 1997. The northern side originally had a stairway near the northwestern corner and a 24'-wide vehicle opening near the northeastern corner that was flanked by curved end walls. This opening was closed circa 1997, probably using stone taken from the eastern side of the wall. At the same time, the staircase near the northwestern corner was removed and its opening filled.

The inner side of the overlook wall on the northern, western, and southern sides was originally lined with a 4'-wide flagstone walkway. The plans specify that five benches (with masonry pedestals and 7'10"-long poured concrete seats) were to be placed on the flagstone -- three within the rectangular lookout bay on the southern side and one adjacent to each of the two staircases. (The 1938 *Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development* indicates that only three benches were placed there in 1938 (*Annual Report 1938:44*). Perhaps two of the benches were eliminated from the plan.) The flagstone walkway and stone benches have been removed.

The overlook wall originally enclosed a parking area that was surfaced with gravel. The gravel parking area has been replaced by a grassy lawn.

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The overlook is located on a flat table of land, with the bluff dropping off sharply below the western wall.

The wall was originally approached by a curving entrance drive that led from the southbound lane of former T.H. 13 (Sibley Memorial Highway). The entrance drive curved toward the

wall and entered the northern side of the parking area within the overlook wall. Cars now enter the site from southbound former T.H. 13 (Sibley Memorial Highway) near the site's southeastern corner. The road enters a large, rectangular, asphalt-paved parking area that was added east of the wall circa 1997. A wide, asphalt-paved sidewalk (also circa 1997) leads from the parking area to the new opening in the eastern side of the wall. An asphalt-paved bicycle path now leads north from the midpoint of the wall into the adjacent forest. A wooden information board is located near the eastern edge of the parking area.

The wall is surrounded by grass and a clover ground cover on the northern, eastern, and southern sides. Forests begin several feet north and south of the wall. Brush is growing beneath the western side of the wall and down the bluff. There are clumps of mature evergreens at the northeastern and southeastern corners of the wall. There is a grassy ditch between the new parking area and former T.H. 13. (This ditch is the location of the quarry from which the stone was cut for the overlook wall.)

■ SETTING

The site is located along the line of large bluffs that forms the Minnesota River Valley. It has a relatively secluded setting. The site is surrounded on the north by a forested state park, on the east by former T.H. 13, on the south by the bluff line and woods, and on the west by the Minnesota River Valley. The tracks of the former Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha railroad run north and south below the bluff west of the overlook. The site is within Fort Snelling State Park. The bike trail is part of the Big River Regional Trail.

■ INTEGRITY

Alterations

In circa 1997, the following alterations occurred: The stonework was cleaned and repaired. The vehicle entrance in the northern wall was filled. The northwestern staircase was removed and its opening filled. A new opening was created in the eastern wall. The flagstone walkway was removed. The stone and concrete benches were removed (these may have been removed at an earlier date). A concrete cap was added to the top of the wall replacing the original cap. The parking area within the wall was replaced with a grassy lawn. A new parking lot, paved sidewalk, and paved bike trail were added to the site.

In general, the site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, although its design has been altered somewhat.

Notes on Condition

The overlook wall is in good condition. The limestone landing beneath the southern steps is in poor condition. The wall's mortar has been recently patched.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Mendota Overlook was constructed by the Minnesota Department of Highways in cooperation with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration

(NYA). Construction of the overlook and concurrent grading and landscape work on the Mendota Cut-Off (S.P. 55-116-23) occurred in 1938. The NYA landscaped the Mendota Overlook site in 1939.

The overlook was designed by Arthur R. Nichols, Consulting Landscape Architect for the Minnesota Department of Highways. The plans for the overlook indicate that they were drawn in December of 1937 and signed by Nichols, Harold E. Olson (Engineer of Roadside Development), and O. L. Kipp (Construction Engineer). The overlook was apparently constructed in association with a realignment and widening of former T.H. 13. In addition to the stonemasonry wall, a 1,835 sq. ft. flagstone walkway, 684' feet of stone curbing, and three stone seats were constructed. (*Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development 1938:44*). The stone was quarried east of the wall at the current location of the ditch between the existing parking area and former T.H. 13.

The overlook site was landscaped by the National Youth Administration in 1939. The NYA installed 17 evergreen trees, 40 evergreen shrubs, 176 deciduous shrubs, and 24 vines at the site that year (*Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development 1939:21*).

The overlook was constructed by the enrollees of Mendota Work Camp No. 1, a WPA work camp for unemployed "transient" men. The camp was established in May of 1935. It was located about one-quarter mile north of the overlook site. Camp officials were Superintendent Henry Steinhagen, and shop foremen Burton B. Benecke and Robert Rasmussen. The camp had 13 buildings: six bunk houses, a lavatory/washroom, a recreation hall, a kitchen and dining hall, and an office building, two garages, and a blacksmith shop. The remains of the recreation hall's stone chimney still exist at the former camp site (SHPO inv. #DK-MHC-013). Besides this chimney, the only other extant structure known to have been built by Mendota Work Camp No. 1 is the Mendota Overlook (*Little Historian*, April 1984).

Most WPA enrollees were unemployed men who lived within the area of a WPA project. They lived at home and reported to the job site each day. In June of 1935, however, the WPA had established 25 camps in Minnesota (sometimes called work camps, transient camps, or treatment centers) that provided work, lodging, food, and clothing specifically for transients or homeless men.

In June of 1935, for example, 25 transient WPA camps were operating in the state. Many were located in northern Minnesota. Six of the 25 transient camps, however, were located in the Mendota area, presumably because of its proximity to the Twin Cities. In June of 1935 the six transient work camps located in the Mendota area (i.e., having Mendota, Savage, or Shakopee addresses) included: Mendota Work Camp No. 1 with 171 residents, Culver Camp with 295 residents, Dan Patch Camp with 385 residents, Boiling Spring Camp No. 7 with 140 residents, Shakopee Camp No. 4 with 155 residents, Savage Camp No. 3 with 180 residents, and Shakopee Camp No. 5 with 155 residents ("Transient Survey" 1935).

In 1935, Mendota Work Camp No. 1 had the distinction of being the only WPA transient camp for African Americans in the state. However, the African-American enrollees had apparently been transferred to another camp by the time the Mendota Overlook was constructed in 1938. The overlook wall was apparently built by white "transients" who resided at Mendota Work Camp No. 1. (A series of historic photos in the MHS collection, most dated April 1937, show only white workers.) (See information on African Americans at Mendota Work Camp No. 1 at the end of this document.)

Mendota Work Camp No. 1 apparently closed in 1941. The WPA ended in 1943.

Site Development Unit files indicate that in 1961 the Mendota Overlook had three picnic tables, three fireplaces, two toilets, and drinking water.

■ PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS

A Section 106 review was conducted in circa 1992-1995 as part of the Metropolitan Airport Commission's (MAC) environmental documentation for their Long-term Comprehensive Plan regarding possible relocation of the airport (SHPO rev. 94-0681). The Mendota Overlook was included within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) under review. The review eventually concluded that the overlook was eligible for the National Register. A lengthy file in the SHPO chronicles the Airport Commission's Section 106 review. The file contains several survey reports and items of correspondence. Items relevant to the Mendota Overlook have been photocopied for inclusion in this inventory file.

A separate Section 106 review was apparently conducted in association with the recent rehabilitation of the overlook wall.

■ STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Mendota Overlook, built in 1938, is one of 37 stone overlook walls recorded in this inventory. It is one of 23 properties in the inventory that were built by (or suspected to have been built by) the WPA. It is the only site in the inventory that is known to have been built by a federal relief program that was designed for a specific population of workers -- in this case, so-called "transients." It is the only known surviving example of the work of Mendota Work Camp No. 1, one of at least 25 transient camps operating in the state in the mid-1930s. The overlook is one of more than 60 sites in the inventory that were designed by, or whose design is attributed to, Arthur R. Nichols. The site was landscaped by the NYA, and is one of 19 sites in the inventory on which the NYA worked.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." It is recommended that the Mendota Overlook is ELIGIBLE for the National Register under this historic context because it meets the following registration requirements:

Important Federal Relief Project. The Mendota Overlook is the only known surviving example of the work of the enrollees of Mendota Work Camp No. 1, a WPA camp for homeless men which operated in Mendota from 1935 through circa 1941. (National Register Criterion A.)

Significant to the History of Roadside Development. The Mendota Overlook is among the 68 Depression-era properties in the inventory that represent the MHD's first large-scale effort to construct roadside development facilities in the state. The site is important as a well-preserved example of the work of the WPA and NYA in cooperation with the MHD. The property is an example of the distinctive and well-constructed public facilities, built by the MHD in partnership with federal relief agencies, that met the objectives of roadside development while providing essential work and job training to the nation's unemployed during the Depression. (National Register Criterion A.)

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Design Significance. The Mendota Overlook is one of the most elaborate stone overlook walls built by the Roadside Development Division. In spite of recent alterations it is still an excellent example of the application of the "National Park Service Rustic Style" to a roadside development structure of this type. It has stonework of excellent quality, and displays the special labor-intensive construction techniques and distinctive use of indigenous materials that characterize both the Rustic style and federal relief construction in Minnesota. Furthermore, the Mendota Overlook is an important example of the roadside development work of prominent landscape architect A. R. Nichols. (National Register Criterion C.)

As part of a 1992-1995 Section 106 review (see above), the SHPO also determined that the Mendota Overlook is ELIGIBLE for the National Register under the context "Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1943."

This property may also be associated with the "Tourism and Recreation in the Lake Regions, 1870-1945" historic context.

■ **OTHER COMMENTS**

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

Former T.H. 13 (Sibley Memorial Highway) is fairly quiet past this site.

The "footprint" of the Mendota Overlook is almost identical to that of the Stillwater Overlook - South, also in this inventory.

This portion of T.H. 13 was recently turned back to Dakota County. The overlook property is apparently now being transferred from Mn/DOT ownership to the MnDNR.

■ **REFERENCES**

An Appraisal Inventory of Work Done with WPA and Other Federal Relief Funds Through the Functioning of the Department of Highways, State of Minnesota. Highway Department Records, Subject Files Box 7, Relief Labor (Minnesota Historical Society). May 9, 1938.

Anderson, Rolf T. "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941." National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form. Oct. 9, 1990; amended Aug. 30, 1993.

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Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development Along the Trunk Highways in Minnesota. Minnesota Department of Highways. 1938 and 1939.

Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Highways of Minnesota for 1937-1938. Mar. 1, 1939.

Final Report National Youth Administration for the State of Minnesota: Sept. 1935 to July 1943. U.S. National Youth Administration, Minnesota. 1943.

Hess, Roise, and Co. "Mendota Heights Scenic Overlook." Minnesota Architecture History Inventory Form. June 22, 1994.

"Mendota Work Camp No. 1." *Little Historian*, Jan. 1984. [Dakota Co. Historical Society newsletter.]

"Mendota Work Camp No. 1 (Part 2)." *Little Historian*, Apr. 1984. [Dakota Co. Historical Society newsletter.]

"Mendota Work Camp No. 1: A WPA Camp for Transients." Typed manuscript, author and date unknown. Dakota Co. Historical Society.

Meyer, Roy W. *Everyone's Country Estate. A History of Minnesota's State Parks*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991.

"Negroes at Mendota Camp Are Sent Away." *West St. Paul Booster*, March 23, 1936.

Photographs of Mendota Work Camp No. 1. 1937. Minnesota Historical Society.

Reiman, Richard A. *The New Deal and American Youth*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992.

Rose, Nancy E. *Put to Work. Relief Programs in the Great Depression*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994.

Site Plans. Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul.

Thiel, George A. and Carl E. Dutton. *The Architectural, Structural, and Monumental Stones of Minnesota*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1935.

"Transient Camp Negro Bound to Grand Jury." *West St. Paul Booster*, May 17, 1935.

"Transient Survey, Transient Camps, WPA, June 16, 1935." WPA, Camp Division File, Reports on Shelters and Camps, 1935, National Archives. [Copy at Dakota County Historical Society.]

■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

African Americans at Mendota Work Camp No. 1

In June of 1935, there were 171 African-American men (with an average age of 40 years old) enrolled in Mendota Camp No. 1. This camp was the only WPA camp in Minnesota in 1935 that enrolled African Americans. (The Mendota Work Camp No. 1 and a WPA camp near Culver were also the only WPA camps that were segregated in June of 1935 -- Mendota No. 1 for African Americans and the Culver Camp for men with venereal diseases.) The men of Mendota Work Camp No. were involved in "road construction, quarrying of rock for building purposes, camp maintenance and clean-up, [and] construction" ("Transient Survey, Transient Camps, WPA, June 16, 1935").

Racial segregation within the federal relief programs was a standard practice. The CCC and the WPA programs were both segregated, with very few African-American camps established in Minnesota. The National Youth Administration (NYA), on the other hand, was not segregated. African-American youth worked along with white youth in a number of activities within the NYA program. However, the percentage enrolled in the program in Minnesota was low (for example, only 55 African Americans were enrolled in the NYA during the 1939 project year).

In general, although the African-American population in the 1930s was disproportionately affected by the Depression and poverty, only a small percentage of African Americans were given work through federal relief programs.

The African-American residents of Mendota Camp No. 1 were apparently subject to considerable local racial discrimination. This discrimination was apparently a major factor in the transfer of the camp's population out of Mendota in March of 1936. A local newspaper article reports in March of 1936 that 93 African Americans (presumably the entire camp population at that time) were transferred to the Paul Bunyan Camp in Becker County in northern Minnesota (*West St. Paul Booster*, Mar. 27, 1936). The text of the article follows:

Ninety-three Negroes stationed at the Mendota transient camp were ordered transferred last Saturday morning to camp Paul Bunyan, near Brainerd [sic], by Superintendent Henry Steinhagen, in charge of the Mendota camp.

Residents of Mendota township had signed petitions for their evacuation, and demanded their transfer to some other locality. Deputy Sheriff Wallace stated that the Negroes were continually in trouble, and the county jail in Hastings housed one or more of them all during the year (*West St. Paul Booster*, Mar. 27, 1936).