

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT  
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

HU-LCC-009  
CS 2805  
La Crescent Overlook

<b>Historic Name Other Name</b>	La Crescent Overlook	<b>CS # SHPO Inv #</b>	2805 HU-LCC-009
<b>Location</b>	W side of TH 61/14 at jct w/ Main Street	<b>Hwy District Reference</b>	TH 61/14 6A 1.8
<b>City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM</b>	La Crescent, City of Houston 104N 4W Sec 10 La Crescent Z15 E636500 N4854100	<b>Acres Rest Area Class</b>	1 4
<b>Designer</b>	Minn Dept of Highways (MHD)	<b>SP #</b>	2805-02 2805-43
<b>Builder</b>	Minn Dept of Highways (MHD)	<b>SHPO Review #</b>	
<b>Historic Use Present Use</b>	Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area	<b>MHS Photo #</b>	014742.01-18 014742.24-25
<b>Yr of Landscape Design</b>	1941	<b>MnDOT Historic Photo Album</b>	
<b>Overall Site Integrity</b>	Intact/Slightly Altered		
<b>Review Required</b>	Yes		
<b>National Register Status</b>	Eligible, see Statement of Significance		
<b>Historic Context</b>	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960		

**List of Standing Structures**

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	
01	Overlook Wall	1941	
02	Bench(es), Other	1941	
03	Flagpole(s), Other	Ca. 1992	
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table			

<b>Fieldwork Date</b>	01-11-03
<b>Prep by</b>	Gemini Research May. 04 G1. 106
<b>Prep for</b>	Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit

<b>Final Report</b>	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minn Trunk Hwys (1998) <b>Addendum</b>
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■ **BRIEF**

The La Crescent Overlook is located on the western side of T.H. 61/14, between the T.H. 61/14 roadway and the eastern edge of downtown La Crescent. The eastern terminus of Main Street, an east-west street, is at the overlook. The north-south street that runs along the western side of the property is identified on original plans as "Service Drive B," and is also called Chestnut Street.

■ **STANDING STRUCTURES**

**Stone Overlook Wall.** Built 1941 by the Minnesota Department of Highways. The overlook wall is an 80'-long structure that is aligned north and south. It is built of rockfaced, coursed ashlar, gray limestone. The wall has a balanced, symmetrical, tripartite design with a central curved lookout bay. Within the bay is a small bituminous-paved plaza area with two benches and three flagpoles.

Prominent within the design are sections of open balustrade. The balustrade consists of lengths of 4"-diameter iron pipe railing, painted green, that are supported between stone piers.

**Concrete Benches.** Built 1941 by the Minnesota Department of Highways. Incorporated into the western side of the overlook wall are two benches that have poured concrete slab seats. The seats rest on concrete bases whose "feet" have a slight flare.

**Flagpoles.** Date unknown, possibly circa 1992. There are three flagpoles within the circular lookout bay on the western side of the overlook wall. The poles have very low, square, poured concrete bases. The bases are partly obscured by layers of bituminous paving. At the time of fieldwork in January of 2003, the flagpoles were flying a U.S. flag, a State of Minnesota flag, and a La Crescent flag.

A small, low, rectangular granite monument at the base of the central flagpole is inscribed with the following: "In recognition of the Minnesota Department of Transportation and citizens of La Crescent in fostering pride in our community, July 4, 1992." This monument is associated with a 1992 community project to repair the site.

■ **OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS**

The overlook was designed to provide a broad view of the Mississippi River Valley to the east. The site may also serve to control erosion and retain the hillside. The site was developed in an area of dramatic grade change, with the land descending significantly between downtown La Crescent (on the west) and the Mississippi River (on the east).

The site includes a long triangular grassy island on which the overlook wall stands. The island is bounded by the T.H. 61/14 roadway on the east. The western side of the island was originally bounded by "Service Drive B", also known as Chestnut Street. (See next paragraph.)

The overlook was designed to be reached by cars traveling on city streets and on T.H. 61/14. Cars could approach the overlook from the west by following Main Street, and from the north by following Chestnut Street, which essentially became the northern leg of Service Drive B at the site. Cars traveling on both northbound and southbound T.H. 61/14 could enter the site by turning into the southern leg of Service Drive B near the southern end of the site. Circulation at the site was altered circa 1990 when an exit lane was built from southbound T.H. 61/14, through the northern portion of the site, to

Main Street. The exit lane essentially replaced the northern leg of Service Drive B. After the change, cars could no longer travel from Chestnut Street southward into the site.

There is no special provision for parking at the site -- cars parallel park along Service Drive B (Chestnut Street) and Main Street.

There are no pedestrian sidewalks on the long, triangular island. There are concrete sidewalks along the western side of Service Drive B (Chestnut Street).

There is no curb and gutter on the long, triangular island, but there is curb and gutter along the western side of Service Drive B (Chestnut Street).

The original planting plan, dated 1954, specifies that seven savin juniper be planted close to the eastern side of the overlook wall. Six Norway maple were to be scattered throughout the island. The four-lane highway's median was to be planted with American elm. American elm and Colorado spruce were to be planted on the eastern side of T.H. 61. Plantings elsewhere along the four-lane highway were to include large numbers of Colorado spruce, Norway pine, silver maple, Norway maple, green ash, Wisconsin weeping willow, American elm, Lombardy poplar, dolgo crab, savin juniper, and Siberian pea tree ("Planting Plan," S.P. 2805-43 and 2801-25, Sheet 4 of 13, approved March 8, 1954 by O.L. Kipp.)

Current plantings at the site include grass turf and about nine trees on the long, triangular island. Three of the nine trees are mature and six are young. The mature trees include two spruce east of the wall and one crab apple at the northern end of the island. The young trees include five spruce and one cedar east of the wall. (The young trees were probably planted in 1992, see Historical Background below.) The hillside on the western side of Service Drive B south of Main Street is densely planted with deciduous shrubs.

#### ■ **SETTING**

West of the site is La Crescent's central business district. The post office is across the street to the northwest, and the telephone company is across the street to the southwest.

East of the site are several features: the T.H. 61/14 roadway, the tracks of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad, an industrial area near the tracks, and the Mississippi River. The industrial area includes auto repair shops, warehouses, and similar structures. The banks of the Mississippi are wooded. The bluffs of the Wisconsin side of the river are visible in the distance. La Crosse, Wisconsin, is located across the river to the east.

#### ■ **INTEGRITY**

##### **Alterations**

The top of the overlook wall has been poorly patched with mortar. The bituminous paving along the western side of the overlook wall is too deep and obscures the base of the flagpoles and the base of the stone wall. Low rectangular flower boxes, edged with railroad ties, have been added at the base of the wall's eastern face.

### Notes on Condition

The property is in fair condition.

### ■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The La Crescent Overlook was constructed by the Minnesota Department of Highways (MHD) in 1941.

The overlook was built in conjunction with a large project to reconstruct bridges, dikes, and highways in the vicinity. The highway work included reconstructing T.H. 16 (an east-west segment) westward from the Wisconsin state line into La Crescent, and realigning T.H. 61 (a north-south segment) through La Crescent. In addition to being realigned, T.H. 61 was expanded from a two-lane to a four-lane highway. According to local newspapers, this large project occurred over approximately three years (1939-1941), with several different construction contracts let by the MHD. The larger project was also marked by labor troubles including a strike, intervention by the county sheriff to keep the work going, and an incident in which a 10-ton crane was blown up as part of the labor unrest (see References below).

The overlook is clearly indicated on plans that were approved April 15, 1940 (S.P. 2805-02, see Sheets 1 of 28, 7 of 28, and 8 of 28, for example). The final Construction Progress Profile for S.P. 2805-02 shows the completed overlook. Available plans are quite general; original detail plans and drawings of the overlook have apparently been lost.

The name of the designer of the La Crescent Overlook has not been identified. The overlook may have been designed by A. R. Nichols, who was consulting Landscape Architect for the Roadside Development Division from 1932-ca. 1940, or by Roadside Development Division staff, which included landscape architect Fred Vogt, engineer Harold E. Olson, and others. The staff apparently based much of their work of the 1940s on preliminary designs by Nichols. The overlook wall's symmetry and formalism suggest Nichols' hand. The wall is an interesting and late example of the National Park Service Rustic Style in which the railings are built of iron pipe (inspired by modern machinery), rather than the peeled logs that would have been more typical of earlier Rustic Style designs. The plantings, installed in 1954, were probably designed by the staff.

The name of the builder is also not known. Many MHD roadside development facilities built during the Depression were constructed by workers from New Deal federal relief programs. However, research in local newspapers and highway department records has found no reference to federal relief workers building the La Crescent Overlook.

Plantings were not installed at the overlook until after World War II. A planting plan for a segment of the four-lane highway, including this overlook, was approved during the spring of 1954. The plantings were apparently designed by the Roadside Development Division, and Harold E. Olson, head of the Division, signed the plans. (See Planting Plan, S.P. 2805-43 and 2801-25, Sheet 4 of 13, approved March 8, 1954 by O.L. Kipp.) The plantings were probably installed during the 1954 construction season.

Houston County historian Angela Murphy indicates that the La Crescent Overlook was referred to by some local residents as the "heave-ho" or the "heaving rail." Murphy learned from long-time residents that "transient" or homeless men would ride railroad box cars on the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad east of the site. They would allegedly get off the train at La Crescent, buy a bottle of liquor, and sit on the cement benches at the overlook while they drank the alcohol. Murphy indicates

that the nickname may have originated from two possibilities -- that the empty liquor bottles were tossed eastward over the overlook wall, or that the transients would become drunk and then be sick over the wall (Murphy 2003).

In 1992 the overlook was repaired as part of a community effort. The stonework was tuckpointed, the railings painted, and new plantings were installed. The work was completed by volunteers working in cooperation with Mn/DOT. Stone mason Jeff Geiwitz was among the workers. In a report on the project, the *Houston County News* noted: "La Crescent has a beautifully landscaped entrance to the downtown area on the east end of Main Street by the post office." The article indicated that trees and bushes were planted, railings painted, and stonework repaired. The area was also repaved, and new flower baskets and flags were installed. Local groups that participated include the Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, Eagles Club, Northern States Power, Pine Creek Livewires, La Crescent Apple Blossoms 4-H Group, the La Crescent Post Office, the building class at the La Crescent High School, Bauer's Market, Heth Hardware, and Jeff Geiwitz ("Cooperation" 1992). A granite monument near the center of the site commemorates the project.

#### **Example of an Early MHD Roadside Development Facility**

The La Crescent Overlook is a well-preserved example of the facilities built by the MHD Roadside Development Division in the 1930s and early 1940s in its efforts to serve an increasing number of motorists using the state highways. The MHD created scenic overlooks like this one to give motorists a safe and organized place to pull off the road and enjoy a spectacular view, and to improve the function and aesthetics of the highway. In La Crescent, the overlook provides a view of the expansive Mississippi River Valley to the east. The site may also serve to control erosion and to retain a portion of the hillside above T.H. 61/14.

The La Crescent Overlook illustrates the range of situations to which MHD scenic overlooks were adapted. In this case, an abrupt change in topography within an urban setting created the opportunity for an overlook. In a similar urban setting in Redwood Falls, the MHD also created a retaining wall and overlook that provided a roadside enhancement as well as channeling traffic through a steep area. (See Redwood Falls Retaining Wall, SHPO inventory number RW-RFC-032.)

The La Crescent Overlook was not designed with its own parking area. Instead, visitors could parallel park along the street, or could walk to the overlook from nearby city blocks. Having no parking area was atypical but not unique. Other early MHD roadside development sites that did not have their own parking area include the Redwood Falls Retaining Wall, the Granite Falls Overlook, and the Silver Lake Roadside Parking Area.

#### **Highway 61 and the Great River Road**

The La Crescent Overlook was developed along a stretch of state highway that has been a popular tourist route since auto tourism began in the 1910s. The route's popularity may have led to the creation of the site. From the mid-1910s through at least the 1930s, this stretch of highway was part of at least two well-known routes: the "Mississippi Valley Highway" and the "Mississippi River Scenic Highway." Tourist highways such as these were named, marked, and promoted by private groups interested in auto tourism. The naming, marking, and mapping of these routes was especially important in the years before highways were numbered and marked by the State in a standardized system. Tourist highways were usually welcomed by local communities because they helped draw motorists who then spent money on gas, food, and lodging.

In 1921 this portion of the highway became part of the state's original trunk highway system, which was implemented that year. This highway was first called Minnesota Highway 1, which stretched along the eastern edge of the state from Iowa to Canada. In 1925, Highway 1 was also named a U.S. Highway called U.S. Highway 61. In 1933, the highway was renumbered from "Minnesota Highway 1" to "Minnesota Highway 61" during a statewide effort to make state and U.S. highway numbers correspond.

In 1938, three years before the La Crescent Overlook was built, the Mississippi River Parkway Planning Commission was formed to develop plans for a newly-designated scenic highway that would include this portion of Highway 61. Called the "Great River Road" (also known as the "Mississippi River Parkway"), it would follow the banks of the Mississippi River through the United States. Harold E. Olson, MHD Roadside Development Engineer, was a leader in the multi-state effort, and the commission's inaugural meeting was held in 1938 in St. Paul. (Olson was still involved in 1963 when he became the Executive Secretary of the Minnesota Parkway Commission, the state's version of the national commission.) The national or multi-state Mississippi River Parkway Commission is still in existence. Its headquarters is in Minneapolis.

Although the Great River Road was established in 1938, Congress did not approve funding for the first feasibility study until after World War II. In 1959 the Minnesota legislature officially designated the Minnesota segment of the road.

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

There have apparently been no previous cultural resource reviews of the property.

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The La Crescent Overlook was built in 1941 by the Minnesota Department of Highways. This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." It is recommended that the property is eligible for the National Register under this historic context because it meets the following Registration Requirements:

Significant to the History of Roadside Development. The La Crescent Overlook is among a group of sites statewide, most dating from the Depression, that represent the MHD's first large-scale effort to construct roadside development facilities in Minnesota. These properties date from the formative years of the Roadside Development Division, and represent the state highway department's efforts to serve the steadily increasing number of motorists using the state's new trunk highways. (National Register Criterion A.)

Design Significance. Built in 1941, the La Crescent Overlook is a well-preserved example of the MHD Roadside Development Division's scenic overlooks created in urban settings. It is a late example of the NPS Rustic Style with stonework that displays the special labor-intensive construction techniques and indigenous materials that characterize the NPS Rustic Style in Minnesota. (National Register Criterion C.)

The 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.

T.H. 61/14 is relatively busy past the site.

■ REFERENCES

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Murphy, Angela [Houston County Historical Society staff]. Correspondence with Kay Grossman. Jan.-Mar. 2003.

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*The WPA Guide to Minnesota*. Minnesota Work Projects Administration Federal Writers' Program. 1938. Rpt. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1985.

■ **ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**La Crescent**

La Crescent (population 4,500) is the largest town in Houston County and is located across the Mississippi River from La Crosse, Wisconsin. Platted in 1856, La Crescent developed from an earlier settlement called Manton. Its name apparently originates from a rivalry between Manton and La Crosse. Mistakenly assuming that La Crosse was named for the cross emblem of the Christian Crusaders of the Middle Ages, early settlers chose to name the town after the crescent, which was the emblem of the Crusaders' rivals, the Saracens and the Turks. In fact, La Crosse was the French name for a Native American game (Upham 1969:239).

La Crescent is famous for its apple orchards. Apple growing began as early as 1856 when John Harris established the first orchard, located on the western edge of the town. Harris developed and grew 20 varieties of apples. His activities led to the creation of the Minnesota Horticultural Society.

**Local Stone**

It is possible that the limestone used to build the La Crescent Overlook came from a nearby quarry. Extensive quarrying of limestone along the Mississippi River Valley began in the 1850s, although limited quarrying had been occurring near St. Paul since Fort Snelling was established in 1819-1820. Much of the Mississippi River limestone -- or Oneota dolomite -- was a gray or buff color. One of the early quarries in the La Crescent region was a limestone quarry near Hokah, about five miles southwest of this site. The quarry near Hokah closed about 1935 (Thiel 1935:152).