

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

OT-OTC-004
CS 5621
Otter Tail City Historical Marker

Historic Name Other Name	Otter Tail City Historical Marker	CS # SHPO Inv #	5621 OT-OTC-004
Location	W side of TH 78 at TH 108	Hwy District Reference	TH 78 4A 36.4
City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM	Otter Tail, City of Otter Tail 134N 39W Sec 10 134N 39W Sec 15 Ottertail Z15 E301810 N5144450	Acres Rest Area Class	.2 4
Designer	Nichols, A R, Attributed	SP #	5621-02
Builder	Minn Dept of Highways (MHD)	SHPO Review #	
Historic Use Present Use	Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area	MHS Photo #	013524.08-17
Yr of Landscape Design	1948	MnDOT Historic Photo Album	Ols 2.97 Ols 2.98
Overall Site Integrity	Intact/Slightly Altered		
Review Required	Yes		
National Register Status	Eligible, see Statement of Significance		
Historic Context	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960		

List of Standing Structures

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built
01	Marker	1948
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table		

Fieldwork Date
06-29-97

Prep by
Gemini Research
Dec. 98 G1. 55

Prep for
Site Development Unit
Cultural Resources Unit
Environmental Studies Unit

Final Report Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)

■ BRIEF

The Otter Tail City Historical Marker is a small, .2-acre site located on the western side of T.H. 78 at its junction with T.H. 108 (also called Main Street). The site is about 600' east of the eastern shore of Otter Tail Lake within the city limits of Otter Tail.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Stone Marker. Built 1948 by MHD. The site's principal feature is a stone marker that is roughly rectangular in shape and measures approximately 16' long by 6' wide. It is built of pink and gray granite. The lower portion is built of randomly-laid split boulders and the upper portion is built of coursed ashlar, roughly-cut granite. A few pieces of contrasting tan-colored limestone were also randomly used. The stones were well-selected and the masonry carefully executed.

The marker has a rectangular shaft that holds a bronze plaque set into a rectangular niche. The sides of the shaft are buttressed and there are projecting stone blocks above and below the niche. Three curving poured concrete steps at the front edge of the marker approach the plaque. (The lowest step is about 10' wide.) In front of the marker is a 12' by 16' plaza comprised of 4' by 4' concrete squares.

The text of the marker addresses the history of Otter Tail City. Seals of the Minnesota Department of Highways and the Minnesota Historical Society are cast near the bottom of the plaque. (See text at the end of this document.)

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The site has a curving gravel pull-off drive that forms a grassy island between the pull-off drive and T.H. 78. There is a 6"-thick poured concrete curb around the grassy island and a straight section of curb in front of the marker. Behind the site stands a natural oak forest. Most of the site is planted with grass and there are a few mature evergreens flanking the marker. The original planting plan specifies that 21 American Elm be scattered throughout the highway intersection, seven Black Hills Spruce frame the marker, and six Savin Juniper flank the front of the marker. The topography of the site is relatively flat.

Across the local street south of the marker is a second marker that predates the MHD marker by 15 years. It is located a few feet off of Mn/DOT right-of-way. Erected in 1933 by the Otter Tail County Historical Society, this second marker consists of a huge granite boulder that is about 7' tall and is mounted on a poured concrete base that is about 4' in diameter. Affixed to the eastern side of the boulder (facing T.H. 78) is a small bronze plaque that reads: "This tablet commemorates Otter Tail City, the first county seat of Otter Tail County, 1858 to 1872. This site was chosen for the erection of a court house and jail. Otter Tail County Historical Society, June 25, 1933." The boulder stands within a grassy area that is shaded by a natural oak forest. There are no roads or paths leading to the boulder -- the visitor just walks through the trees. There was once a flagpole near the boulder that has been removed.

■ SETTING

The wayside rest is located at a busy highway intersection at the edge of a stand of natural oak about 600' east of the eastern shore of Otter Tail Lake. T.H. 108 (also called Main Street) leads east from this point into the center of the town of Otter Tail. The site is surrounded by residences and resort-type structures on the north, west, and south and T.H. 78 and widely scattered residences and businesses on the east. A large house, which was built in the 1860s and served as a stagecoach inn, stands next door to the north. Along the southern edge of the site is a local street (asphalt-paved) that leads westward to the shore of the lake.

■ INTEGRITY

Alterations

It appears that the site was built fairly close to plan.

The site is intact with the exception of the elm trees and juniper bushes which, if planted, have been removed. The site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Notes on Condition

The marker is beginning to suffer wear and tear. The mortar needs repair but no stones appear to be missing. The site is somewhat unkempt with weeds growing over the curbs.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to the development of this wayside rest, the first joint trunk highway marking program of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Department of Highways (established in 1929) erected a 3' by 5' rectangular steel marker here as early as 1930. It had black letters on a white background, and the seals of the Minnesota Department of Highways and Minnesota Historical Society. The steel marker bore a slightly longer text than the current metal marker.

The current site was established in 1948 as a 650'-long roadside development project. The plans were signed in 1948 by Harold E. Olson (Engineer of Roadside Development), G. G. Gladman (Engineer of Survey and Plans), Walter Schultz (Assistant Engineer of Survey and Plans), O. L. Kipp (Chief Engineer), and R. J. Wolfangle (Engineer of Plans). The marker was formally dedicated on July 23, 1950.

Although it was not built until 1948, the site was probably designed by, or its design strongly influenced by, Arthur R. Nichols who served as Consulting Landscape Architect for the Roadside Development Division of the Department of Highways during the 1930s. Nichols designed most of the roadside development structures built during the 1930s and 1940s. The original plans do not list Nichols' name as designer, yet the Otter Tail design strongly resembles sites designed by Nichols. It may be that Nichols prepared preliminary sketches of the Otter Tail marker that were not transformed into final drawings until 1948. It is also possible that the Otter Tail site was designed by Fred Vogt, staff Landscape Architect for

the Roadside Development Division, who worked closely with Nichols during the 1930s and early 1940s.

The boulder marker located across the street south of the wayside rest (and off of Mn/DOT right-of-way) was erected in June of 1933 by the Otter Tail County Historical Society. Its plaque was replaced circa 1984-1985.

■ PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS

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

■ STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Otter Tail City Historical Marker was built in 1948 by the MHD. It is one of 18 stone, free-standing, shrine-type historic markers recorded in this inventory. It is one of more than 60 sites in the inventory that were designed by, or attributed to, Arthur R. Nichols.

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 registration requirements listed below:

Non-Federal Relief Property That Closely Resembles a Federal Relief Property. The Otter Tail City Historical Marker is important as an excellent example of a Non-Federal relief property, built during the decade immediately following the end of the federal relief programs (1943-1953), which strongly represents a continuation of the design principles and philosophy of the federal relief-built roadside development sites. The Roadside Development Division's stonemasons continued the federal relief era's tradition of excellent craftsmanship when they constructed the marker. (National Register Criterion A.)

Design Significance. Built in 1948, the Otter Tail City Historical Marker has stonework of excellent quality and is a good example of the MHD Roadside Development Division's small pull-off style roadside parking areas -- this one with a shrine-type historic marker. The marker, built by the Division's own stonemasons, is an intact example of the application of the "National Park Service Rustic Style" to an interpretive marker. It 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. (National Register Criterion C.)

The site 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.

This marker is very similar in design to the Vineland Historical Marker, also in this study.

The site is located at a busy highway intersection with somewhat disruptive traffic movement and noise. It is difficult to safely turn into the site.

■ **REFERENCES**

"Markers and Monuments in Otter Tail County." Typescript. Otter Tail County Historical Society, Jan. 1980.

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

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

Upham, Warren. *Minnesota Geographic Names: Their Origin and Historic Significance*. 1920; Second Rev. Ed. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1969.

■ **ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND MARKER TEXT**

Local Stone

The stone used to construct this marker may have been quarried in the St. Cloud area, the state's largest granite producing region. Granite quarrying began in Stearns and nearby counties in the 1860s. The St. Cloud granite region produces a fine-grained granite that ranges in color from black to varying shades of red and pink, to a clear white.

Otter Tail City

From 1848 through 1860, Otter Tail City was a station on the route of fur traders traveling the Red River oxcart trails from St. Paul and Crow Wing (both on the Mississippi River) to the Red River Valley. (Crow Wing was a settlement located north of Little Falls.) In 1858 the village was named the seat of Otter Tail County. By 1860 it had a population of 200 Euro-American settlers and was the site of a regional U.S. Land Office where pioneers came to file land claims. The town was abandoned during the U.S. Government-Dakota Conflict of 1862, but the settlers eventually returned. By 1870 the village had a number of retail businesses, five hotels, a sawmill, a flour mill, a brewery, and a local newspaper. The county seat was moved from Otter Tail City to Fergus Falls in 1872, crippling Otter Tail's prospects for growth. The Northern Pacific Railroad was built through the area in 1872 but bypassed Otter Tail City, dealing the village another serious blow. By 1888 Otter Tail City had been abandoned.

Text of Stone Marker

"Otter Tail City. Otter Tail City in the 1850s was an important post on the fur trade route from St. Paul and Crow Wing to the Red River Valley. It was once the county seat and had the U.S. Land Office for the district. When the county seat was established at Fergus Falls in 1872, the city was abandoned." [Seals of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Department of Highways]