

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT  
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

WA-SWC-1205  
CS 8214  
Stillwater Retaining Wall

<b>Historic Name Other Name</b>	Stillwater Retaining Wall	<b>CS # SHPO Inv #</b>	8214 WA-SWC-1205
<b>Location</b>	W side of TH 95 450' N of the intersection TH95 and Lookout Tr	<b>Hwy District Reference</b>	TH 95 MET E 104
<b>City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM</b>	Stillwater, City of Washington 30N 20W Sec 34 Stillwater Z15 E516020 N4987740	<b>Acres Rest Area Class</b>	NA
<b>Designer</b>	Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch	<b>SP #</b>	
<b>Builder</b>	National Youth Administration (NYA)	<b>SHPO Review #</b>	
<b>Historic Use Present Use</b>	Hwy Retaining Wall/ Sea Wall Hwy Retaining Wall/ Sea Wall	<b>MHS Photo #</b>	014744.02-10
<b>Yr of Landscape Design</b>	Ca. 1937	<b>MnDOT Historic Photo Album</b>	
<b>Overall Site Integrity</b>	Moderately Altered		
<b>Review Required</b>	Yes		
<b>National Register Status</b>	Not 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	Retaining Wall	Ca. 1937
NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table		

**Fieldwork Date**  
11-02-02

**Prep by**  
Gemini Research  
May. 04 G1. 110

**Prep for**  
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 Stillwater Retaining Wall is a large limestone wall located on the western side of T.H. 95 about 450' north of the intersection of T.H. 95 and Lookout Trail.

■ **STANDING STRUCTURES**

**Stone Retaining Wall.** Built circa 1937 by the NYA. The site's principal element is a substantial limestone retaining wall that retains the base of a tall steep bluff along the western edge of T.H. 95. The wall was designed to protect the highway from washout and falling rock while at the same time contributing to the aesthetics of this important scenic tourist route.

The wall is built of tan, random ashlar, rockfaced limestone that was probably salvaged from one of the buildings of Minnesota's first Territorial Prison (see below). The mortar joints are gray and the overall quality of the stonework is good.

The wall is about 9' tall. Its upper edge has an original limestone cap that is about 6" thick. The wall is battered and about 4' thick near the base.

The wall was originally longer than its current 175' length. At some unknown date (possibly in the last three decades?), the southern portion collapsed, apparently during a flood or washout. The southern end of the remaining 175' is still jagged and broken.

■ **OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS**

Between the base of the wall and T.H. 95's concrete curb is a strip of weedy, gravelly grass that is about 6' wide.

The shoulders are narrow in this vicinity and the highway is very busy. There are no provisions for parking; pausing on the shoulder is not safe or recommended. Along the eastern side of the highway across from the wall is a post-and-cable highway guardrail. South of the wall, T.H. 95 is divided with a narrow median.

Deciduous vines are growing on the face of the wall. (A.R. Nichols may have specified that deciduous vines be planted on top of the wall, as he did for retaining walls at other roadside development projects of the period.) Rising above the wall is a very steep, wooded bluff that is thick with trees and shrubs, mostly deciduous.

■ **SETTING**

The setting is wooded with few buildings in view. West of the wall is a residential neighborhood located on top of the bluff. East of the wall is the T.H. 95 roadway, a railroad trackbed (formerly shared trackbed of Chicago, St. Paul, Mpls and Omaha and Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific), an electrical transmission line, and a business that stands on the bank of the St. Croix River. The business is fairly screened by volunteer trees. Surrounding the site on the north and south is the T.H. 95 roadway.

This portion of the St. Croix has been designated the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.

■ **INTEGRITY**

**Alterations**

The southern portion of the wall has been removed.

**Notes on Condition**

The wall is in fair condition. After the southern portion collapsed, loose stones were removed but the broken end of the remaining wall was left jagged. This end needs mortar repair and stones should be replaced so that a smooth edge is created.

■ **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Stillwater Retaining Wall was built circa 1937 as part of an extensive MHD roadside development project in the Stillwater area. Work on the Stillwater-area projects apparently occurred in 1935-1939, first using federal relief labor hired with National Recovery Work Relief (NRWR) funds in 1935-1936, and then using labor from the National Youth Administration (NYA) in 1936-1939. A. R. Nichols, the MHD Roadside Development Division's Consulting Landscape Architect, designed the Stillwater-area projects.

No original plans for the wall have been located. A plan exists for a similar wall that stood nearby to the south and has been demolished (S.P. 8214 (212-45) Sheets 1-2 of 14).

The MHD Construction Project Log for Control Section 8214 at this location indicates "Retaining Walls and Diversion Ditches" in "1938" (projects 1937A.F.E.8 and 1938A.F.E.8), which could include this wall, and unspecified "Roadside Development" nearby in 1936 and 1939, which could also pertain.

The series of 1935-1939 roadside development work in the Stillwater area is represented by five properties in the Mn/DOT Historic Roadside Development Inventory. Listed from south to north, they are the following:

- Stillwater Overlook - South
- Stillwater Retaining Wall
- Indian Battleground Historical Marker
- Stillwater Overlook - North
- St. Croix Boomsite Roadside Parking Area

See the separate inventory file on each property for more information. The series of Stillwater projects also included at least one additional site, known as Stillwater Spring Development (S.P. 212-45-22), that was built in 1938 by the NYA and has been razed. (See photo in Olson photo album.)

The stone used to build most of the sites in the series -- most likely including this Stillwater Retaining Wall -- was salvaged from a three-story stone building of the Minnesota Territorial Prison in Stillwater that the NYA demolished in 1936-1938 (*Annual Report* 1939:27). The prison had operated for 61 years, closing in 1914. Its buildings stood vacant until most were demolished in 1936-1938 by the

National Youth Administration. The salvaged stone was used by the NYA and the MHD for various roadside development projects in the Stillwater area. (See also Additional Background Information below.)

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

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

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Stillwater Retaining Wall was built circa 1937 as part of a series of MHD roadside development projects along T.H. 95 -- an important tourist route -- in and near Stillwater. The projects were designed by noted landscape architect A. R. Nichols and built with labor provided by the National Youth Administration, an important Depression-relief program. Unfortunately, a major portion of the retaining wall has been removed.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960."

Had the series of 1930s-era MHD roadside development facilities along T.H. 95 been close enough to one another to form an historic district, this retaining wall would probably have been considered a "Contributing" element. Evaluating the wall as an individual site, however, Gemini Research recommends that the wall is not eligible for the National Register. Although the wall was undoubtedly designed by A. R. Nichols and built with federal relief labor, it is not -- by itself -- a substantial accomplishment of the Roadside Development or New Deal programs and is, by itself, a somewhat minor utilitarian structure. It does not possess outstanding design qualities or other outstanding historical associations that would make it eligible.

It is not clear how much of the wall is missing. For this reason, the specifics of its loss of integrity are not yet understood.

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

■ **OTHER COMMENTS**

T.H. 95 is very busy past this site with cars traveling about 50-60 mph.

■ **REFERENCES**

Anderson, Rolf T. "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941." National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form. Oct. 9, 1990; amended by Anderson Aug. 30, 1993; amended by Gemini Research 2002.

Construction Project Log. Minnesota Department of Highways. St. Paul.

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

Granger, Susan, Scott Kelly, and Kay Grossman. *Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways.* Prepared for Mn/DOT. Dec. 1998.

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

Tweton, Jerome D. *The New Deal at the Grass Roots. Programs for the People in Otter Tail County, Minnesota.* St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988.

## ■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### **Territorial Prison**

The stone used to build this wall was likely obtained from the razed buildings of Minnesota's first Territorial Prison. In 1849, the Minnesota Territorial Legislature designated Stillwater as the site for the Territory's first prison, which was located on what was then the northern limits of Stillwater (now the site of the Indian Battleground Historical Marker in Stillwater -- see that inventory form). Stillwater resident Jacob Fisher designed the first prison buildings. Construction began in 1851, and by 1853, a three-story cell block, a warden's home, and a workshop had been constructed of native St. Croix Valley limestone. Stone for the prison was apparently quarried near the site. The prison operated for 61 years, closing in 1914. Its buildings stood vacant until most were demolished in 1936-1938 by the National Youth Administration. The stone was used for various MHD Roadside Development projects in the Stillwater area including the Stillwater Overlook - South and the Indian Battleground Historical Marker.

### **Local Stone**

It is probable that the limestone used for the retaining wall is St. Lawrence limestone, or dolomite, a type of stone that was quarried throughout the Stillwater area beginning as early as 1847. Layers of St. Lawrence limestone, one of the region's oldest limestone deposits, are exposed in the steep bluffs of the St. Croix Valley, including at Stillwater.

### **Stillwater**

Stillwater was allegedly named for the still waters in Lake St. Croix. It may also have derived its name from Stillwater, Maine, where a number of the first Euro-American settlers originated. The town was founded in 1843 by John McKusick and was incorporated in 1854. The first sawmill was built in 1844 and Stillwater came to be known as the "cradle" of the white pine lumbering industry. It is also referred to as the "Birthplace of Minnesota" because it was the site of the 1848 convention that led to the formation of the Minnesota Territory.