

Indian Mounds Cemetery - Gone but Not Forgotten

The history of the Dakota burial mounds in St. Paul

By Rianna Knoll

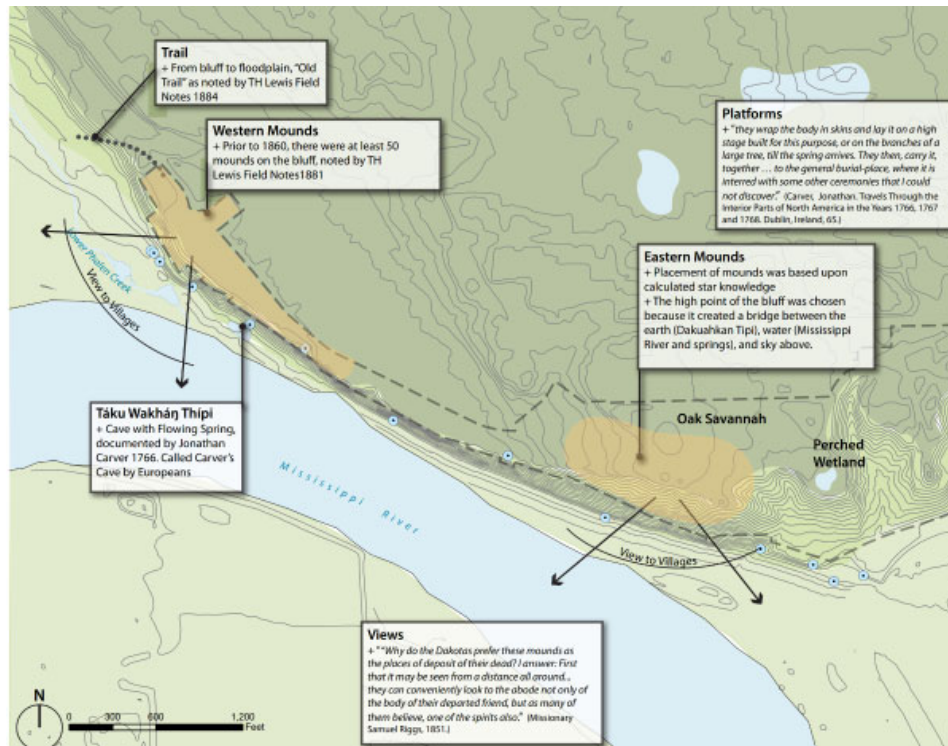
December 12, 2022

Introduction

Indian Mounds Regional Park located in St. Paul is known for its 6 Native American burial mounds, but what lies underneath is a rich history where two groups of at least 50 mounds once existed along the bluff. ⁵ What is now a park once was, and is still, a sacred place of burial of the ancestors of living people. The remaining graves are a popular landmark for they are the “tallest and most prominent burial mounds on the northern 600 miles of the Mississippi River,” however, few people know of their significance to Dakota culture or the presence of the original mounds. ³ It is my purpose to introduce a walking tour that will educate the community on this forgotten history while conveying the sacredness of death practices.

Due to the European settler’s excavation of the original mounds, little is documented about the true origin of the cemetery. Furthermore, the forceful removal of Dakota from their land and the years of time have caused many Indigenous people to lose valuable knowledge of the history of the mounds. It is important that we do not continue to degrade the mounds in search of answers and let

the dead rest in peace. This story will provide as much detail as possible while remaining within the barriers of the truth.



Map representing the location of the mounds and historical accounts

How the Mounds Came to Be

Origination

Indian Mounds Park is a burial ground and sacred site and has been so for over a thousand years. The mounds were initially constructed from 200 BCE to 1000 AD when Indigenous communities were coming together to live in a "less mobile" fashion.⁵ This is an era in time known as the Middle Woodland period. The Dakota are tied to the later-built mounds, which are the smaller ones, but it is unknown as to if they are the original creators of all of the mounds.³ Nonetheless, the mounds, including those defiled by white European settlers, hold significance to their culture. This may be hard to understand due to the time passed and differences in practices, however, a few comparisons can be made to eliminate the idea of "barbaric rituals" that historians like Samuel Pond have unfortunately created in Western society.



Indian Mounds Park is a place where deceased Dakota ancestors are buried. It may be a park, but it is truly a cemetery. Think of the way that we may visit our deceased relatives at a cemetery to honor their memory; we too would feel tremendous grief if their graves were removed, or if we lost the ability to find peace through visiting them. However, it is important to note a distinction; this site was not a cemetery as we view them. There were only around 50 mounds; this is not enough to have been the resting place for everyone in a community, so there were some criteria for who was buried. ⁶ Differences aside, Indian Mounds Park has always been a “place of reverence, remembrance, respect, and prayer,” just as we view our cemeteries. ¹



The location of the original mounds was separate from the living space of the Indigenous people; Dayton's Bluff was purely a ceremonial space.³ Think of this, loosely, like a funeral home or church; we do not build parks there, throw parties, or tear these down when in full use. The mounds were meant for ceremonial functions related to "group identity, solidarity, and religion" and the excavation of the mounds stripped away the spirituality and connection that the original mounds harbored.³



Lastly, the resting plots of the deceased gave the Dakota opportunities to gather out of honor and work together in building the mounds, which reinforced a group identity.³ According to Dakota oral traditions, the location was “an important gathering place for a confederation of historic Dakota.”⁵ When we attend funeral services, it serves a social function in bringing together family and communities, which was a purpose the mounds fulfilled as well.

Burial traditions as a whole may be better understood by comparing the mounds to our own selves and feelings, however, the mounds also help us better understand Indigenous people during the time period. The deceased were buried in either log or thin limestone tombs with valuable artifacts such as copper axes, pottery, and stone knives. Offerings, like perforated bear teeth and shells, were laid on the graves.⁶ These show that the mound builders lived in a community where structured implications of religious symbolism and artistic value in the buried items existed. Moreover, some of the objects in the mounds included “volcanic glass from Wyoming” and

“marine shell from saltwater” which means that the community had an established trade system and valued connections and travel. ⁶ Lastly, the diversity of the mounds in their construction and burial methods from one another show a variety of people using the land as a cemetery, which represents unique differences united in death. The usage of a system, tradition, and trade represents a civilization contrary to Samuel Pond’s belief that the Indigenous tribes needed to “adopt the customs of civilized people.” ⁴ Historians twisted

Dakota practices, like displaying bodies on platforms, from an honorable, sacred ritual to a menacing, disrespectful act. But to prove these historians’ biases incorrect, the mounds reveal that early Native people, like the Dakota, were not an unknown group to be feared, but that they valued respect and a system that should have been recognized by settlers rather than stripped away.

As centuries were spent building the mounds one by one, with decades of time separating their thoughtful creation, settlers have torn them down at a faster, careless rate. The remaining 6, which were the largest and oldest mounds, are protected by the Field Archeology Act and Private Cemetery Act. ⁵ The mounds at Indian Mounds Cemetery were not just a sacred site for Dakota during the Middle Woodland period, but just as our cemeteries, the value of a connection with the deceased remains to this day. We can not turn back time and stop the mounds’ excavation, but we can keep the memory of Indigenous ancestors alive by recognizing their final place of rest.

Relevance to the Mississippi

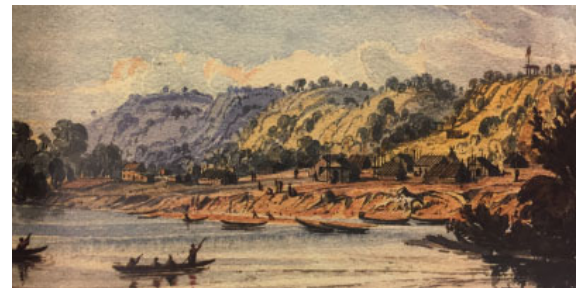
Most burial mounds are built on “elevated bluffs near major bodies of water” while the villages were located down below. ⁵ This holds



A pot found buried in one of the mounds

true for the burial site of Indian Mounds Park; however, the location holds deeper significance for the Dakota people as the Mississippi River holds high value in their culture. According to Dakota oral traditions, Minnesota is their homeland and Bdóte is the place of their people's creation.⁷ The mounds are part of the larger area of Bdóte, making the land itself sacred.⁵ Therefore, a sacred gravesite on sacred land was optimal for their culture as it connected both the living and deceased with their origin at the river. It is symbolic that the departed were laid to rest on a bluff near the river, as it represents a state between water, or life, and the heavens, or death.³ All in all, the Mississippi's proximity to the mounds was an important spiritual factor in their creation.

While the Bdóte confluence connects both the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, it also connected people for ceremonies to "reinforce communal ties and forge alliances."⁵ The bluffs stand with grandiosity over the river, making it a clear landmark for Indigenous communities to gather. Dakota people specifically used the location to camp below the mounds by the river while mapping out the stars above; the placement of the mounds was deliberate in order to bring relatives together in a time of grief.⁵



Seth Eastman's watercolor painting of burial mounds above the river

The Mississippi River didn't just play a role in the creation of the mounds but also in what went in them. Uncovered grave items including sand, clay, mussels, and shell fragments all came from the river.³ These river objects all had to be carried up to the bluff for burial, requiring work and time that only valuable items would surpass the needed effort for. Overall, it can be concluded that the Indigenous creators had their own highly significant communal burial practices and customs that revolved around the river for construction materials and offerings.

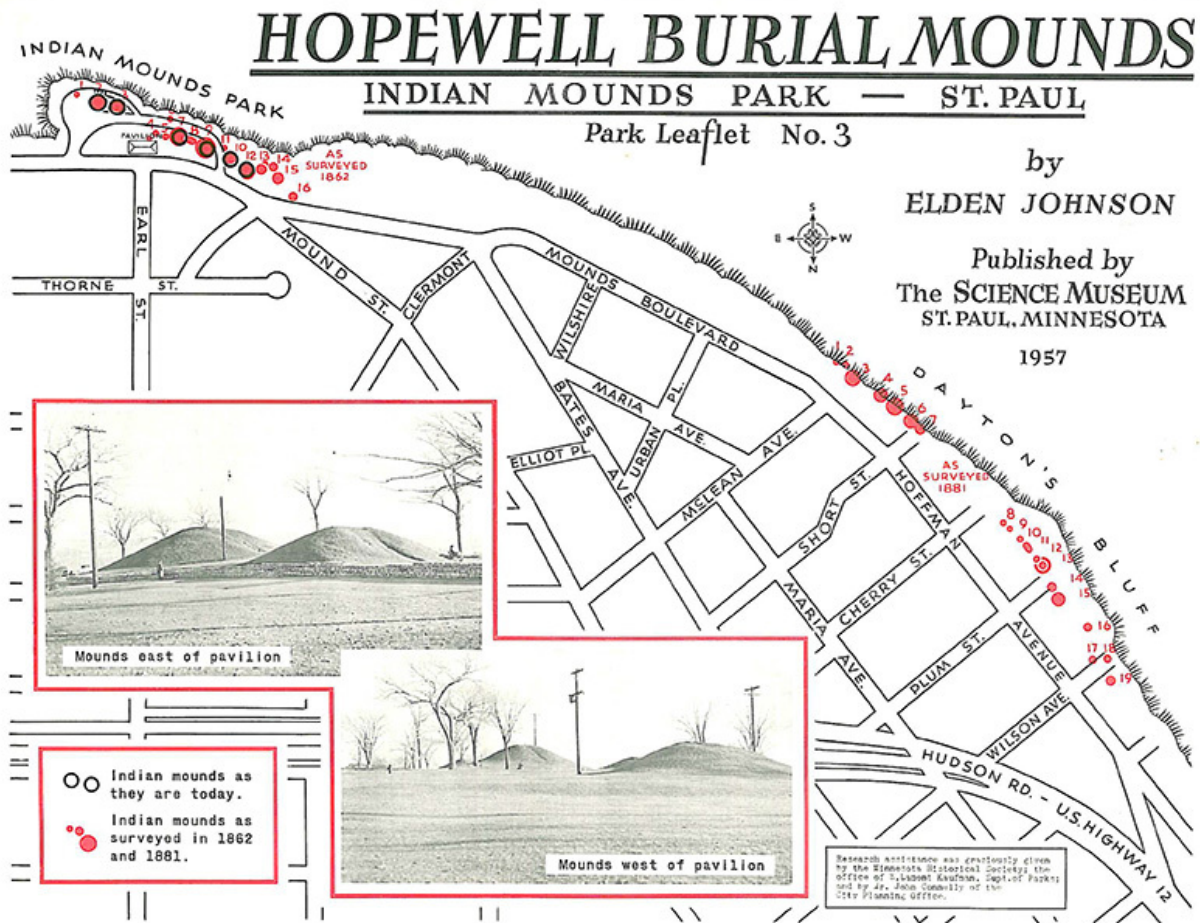
Why This is Important to Know

Although we view our own cemeteries as sacred, a Western viewpoint typically does not recognize the importance of the Indigenous mounds, as seen by the removal of all but 6 gravesites and the stealing of sacred artifacts for display. We need to promote a culture of acceptance; this can be built by practicing empathy, even if it is difficult to fully understand different burial traditions. Dakota people visit the remaining mounds to pay respect to the deceased as this burial ground acts as a homeland. They still feel the pain of their discarded deceased and the remains that have been displayed like pieces of art by Westerners. Indian Mounds Park is not only valuable because it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but because it is not only relevant to the past; Indigenous people still visit the land and use it. ⁵ We cannot tread over other traditions because they appear different than ours or spark curiosity; all of the deceased are sacred, and their resting places are sacred too. According to a survivor of the 1862 Dakota War, “We managed to find our way back, because our makapahas were here,” and makapahas is a word symbolizing graves. ⁵ The land is valuable, and we cannot forget about all the ancestors that resided here or their families who still return to grieve and find peace.

Walking Tour Proposal

The Plan

The story of the original mounds at Indian Mounds Park is an important one that goes untold due to the desecration of the site. In an effort to spread awareness of what has occurred here to prevent it from happening again, we need to educate the general public on our mistakes, the grief they caused, and how we would feel if we were from an Indigenous perspective. If given permission from Indigenous people in the area to share their story, I propose a walking tour that helps people understand that Indian Mounds Park is “a sacred place of burial.” ⁵



Where

The tour would start at the overlook located east of the mounds, by the lip of the bluff they are located on. According to the public, the acoustic properties are remarkable, and it is a natural gathering spot. This is where the tour guide would give a brief explanation starting with the excavation of the mounds. Then the tour guide would reveal to visitors that originally, there were around 50 mounds. They would quickly cover who built the mounds and when, and what they were used for. The guide would then start the tour and stop at three seemingly normal locations, but describe that this was once a part of the sacred cemetery site. Here, the buried artifacts found and what they showed about the civilized culture would be discussed, then the comparison between Indigenous mortuary traditions and Western ones to build empathy, and lastly the importance of the cemetery to the Dakota would be discussed. This would all be relatively brief to stay away from any overbearing emotional stress on tourists. A fifth location would be included near

the Mississippi River to go over the significance of the burial land in relation to the river for the Dakota people. Then, the group would walk to the remaining mounds to view what is left of the rich history discussed and take a moment of silence for the deceased.



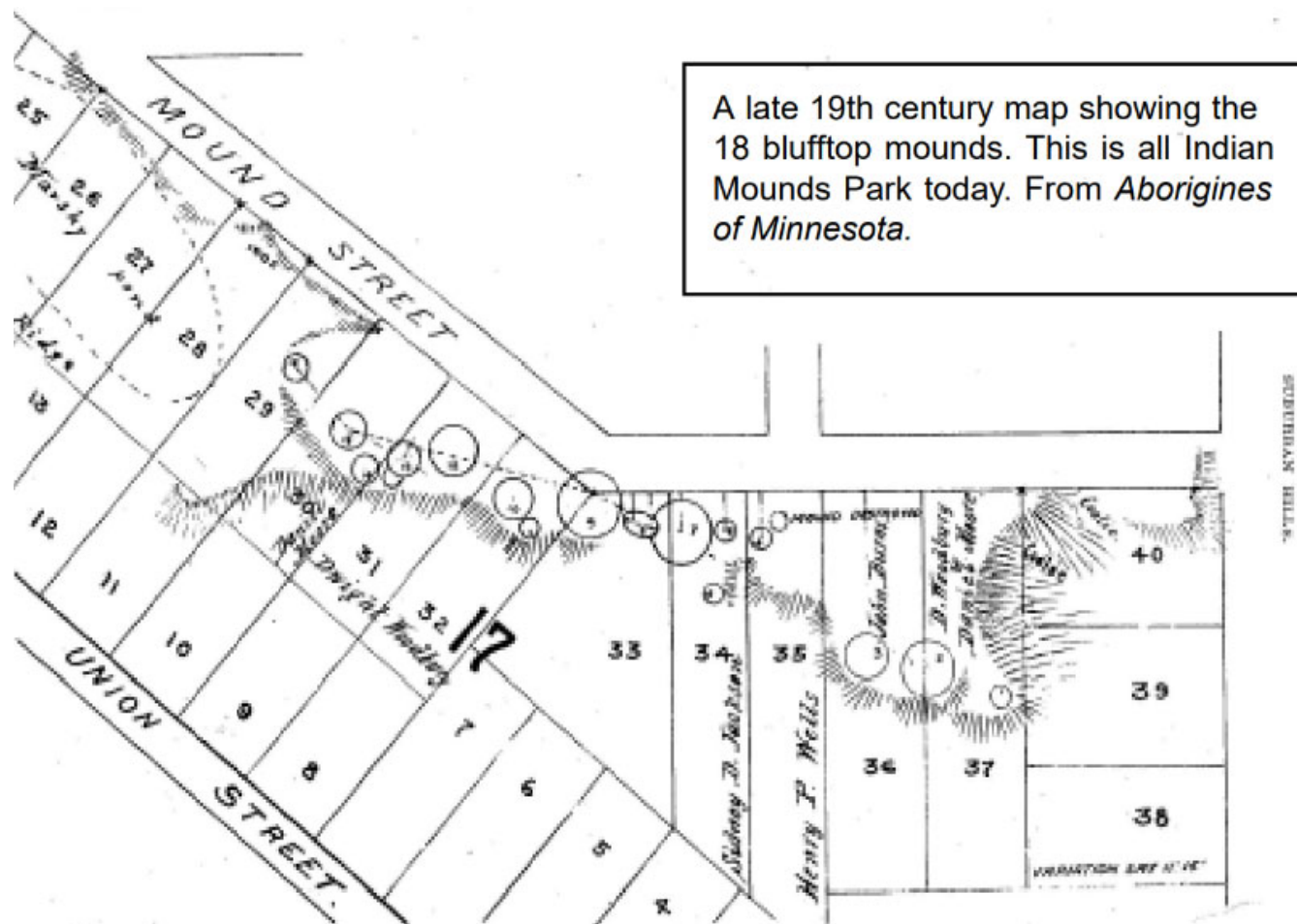
When

The tour would be around 45 minutes, or 7.5 minutes for walking and talking per stop. This ensures that the conversation does not become too heavy for tourists to enjoy but still provides them with centuries of history. It would be best to open the tour up from May to September due to weather, but not on Indigenous holidays where people may gather for ceremonies of remembrance at the remaining graves.



Who

The tour would be open to anyone as death is a worldwide experience that is inevitable; every person can benefit from a change in mentality that makes unique mortuary services more acceptable in society. It is my hope that the Indigenous people would allow this story to be shared, but also attend the tour to help others recognize a strong need for protection of the mounds and the story. ¹



What

The walking tour's purpose is not to make tourists feel defensive for the excavation of the mounds, but to educate them in hopes that similar attitudes to those that defiled the graves are eliminated. Instead, the goal is to build a connection between Western funeral practices and Indigenous traditions to create an understanding and recognition of the site as sacred.



Why

This story is important to teach all people because we are the only ones that can ensure a change is made in attitude. Indigenous perspectives are often overlooked, but with public support, we can keep the remaining mounds sacred not as a cool feature to look at, but as the homeland of many Dakota and their ancestors.

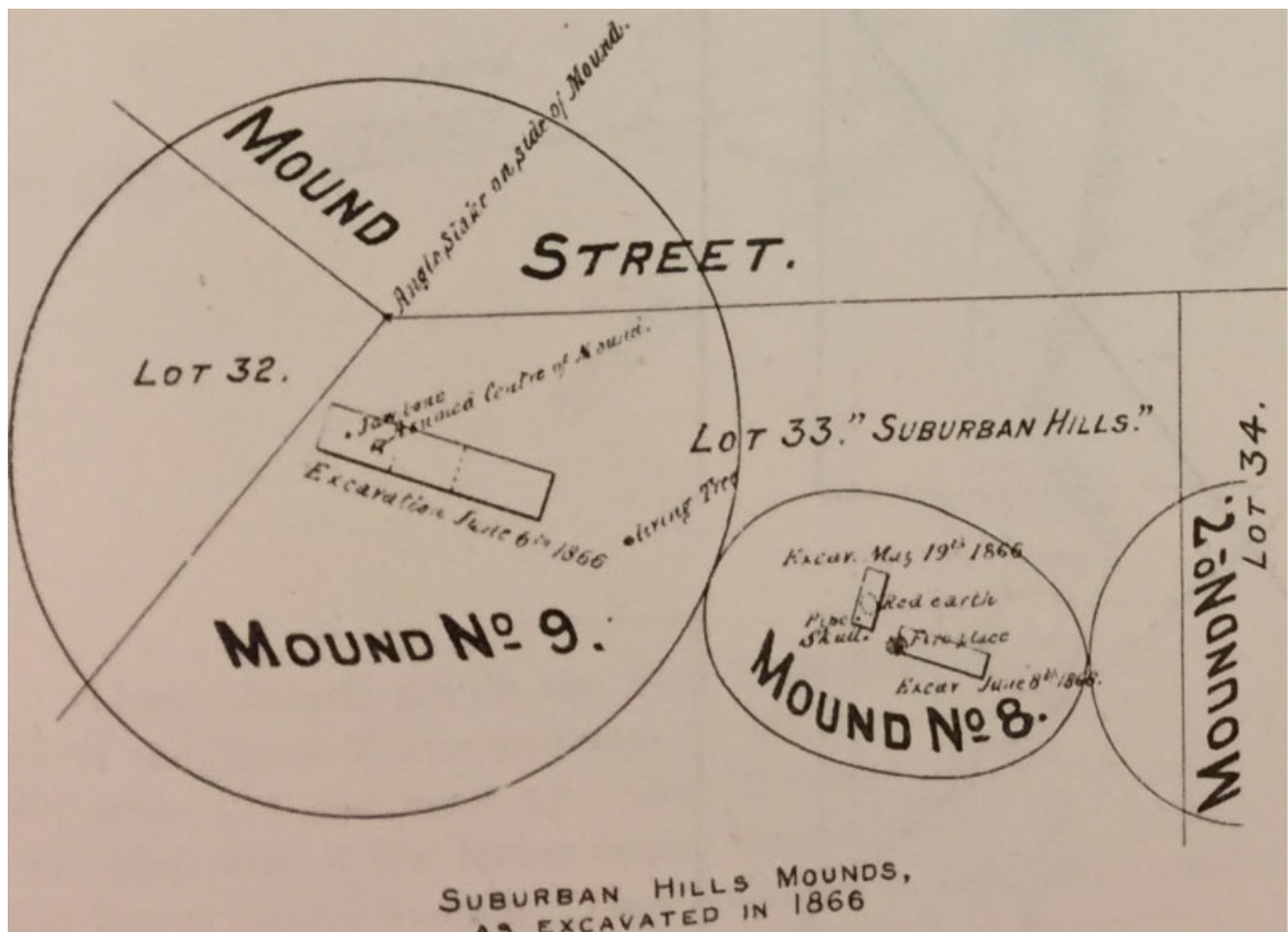
Help from the City of St. Paul

Although all of the other basic questions have been answered, 1 remains: how? In order to pull off an effective, informational walking tour, we need the support of the City of St Paul. There are three main categories that their information, power, and advice is needed in:



Including the Indigenous

A sensitive story that belongs to the Indigenous located in the area is being shared at this tour. For this reason, I request that the City of St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department includes their “associated Indigenous communities” to make decisions about what can be told, and which sites are most significant that they would like the three intermediate stops to be made at. ⁵ The City of St. Paul would be able to more accurately identify the process to go about getting permission and acceptance appropriately.



Providing the Information

Although a plan is proposed, the City of Saint Paul holds much more information about the original mounds. I would like their data on the mounds and when they were excavated so that appropriate steps can be made that are both safe yet hold shock value. Moreover, they can provide the public with information by promoting the walking tour on their site and making it available to sign up for. Not everyone is excited to learn about death practices, but promotion can spark their interest and reach those that are willing to learn.



Protecting the Site

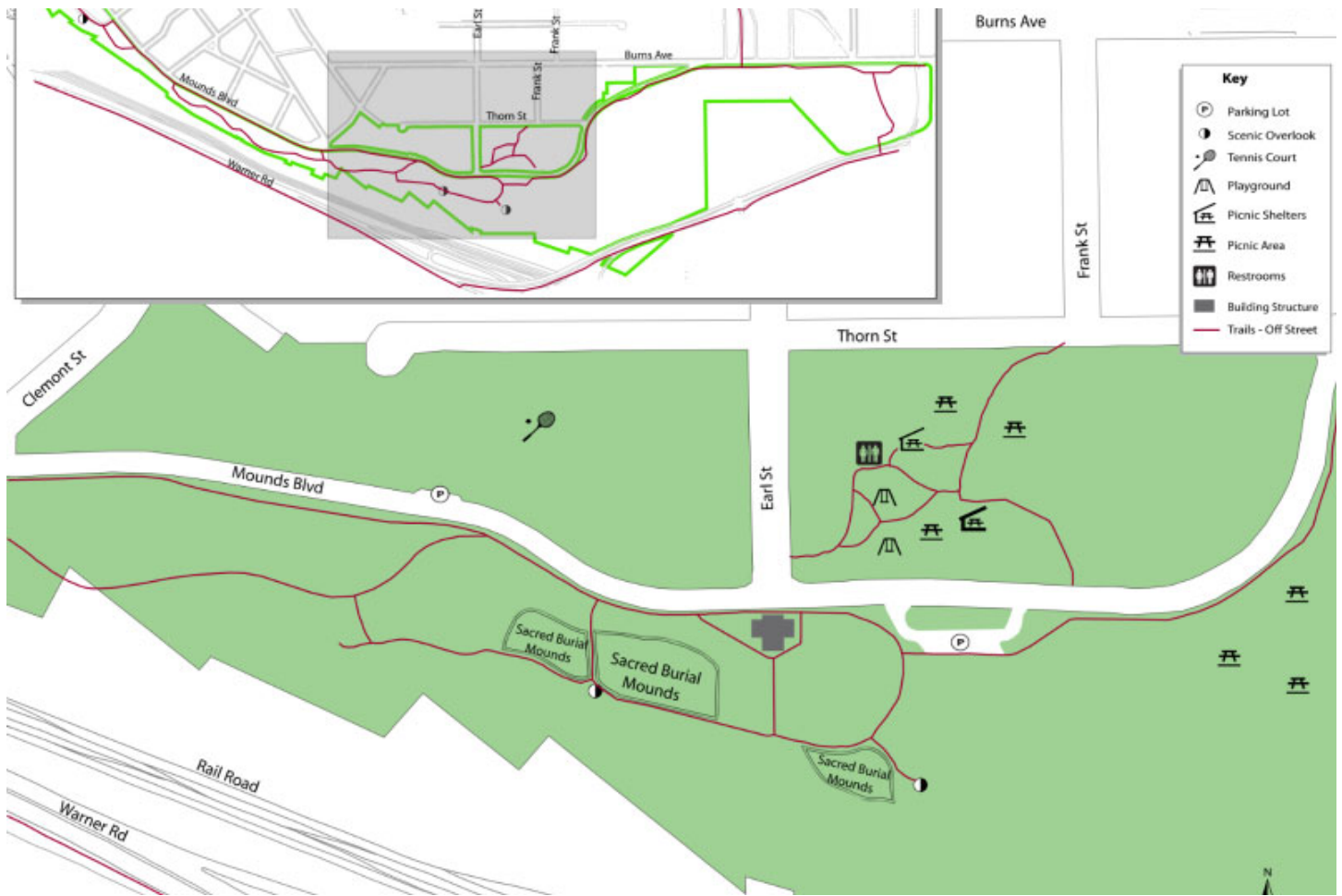
The City of Saint Paul has admitted that when the park was established in 1892, connections of the living Indigenous people to the sacred site were “not understood, considered, or valued.”¹ This walking tour is a chance to change that with more than an informational plaque at the park based off of assumption; the city can truly put the work in to redeem their lack of protection for the cemetery. The tour would allow the city to closely monitor that no one jumps the protective fence or violates the mounds. It also gives them the opportunity to show interest in educating the public about past mistakes to further protect the land.

This Story in HSEM 3205H

A Place in the Modules

A walking tour can provide the community with the message that we need to accept all burial wishes no matter our views on the traditions. This is a story that should become widespread amongst those who can truly make a change to last a lifetime—emerging young adults. HSEM 3205H, taught at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, focuses on the river outside of a pretty piece of nature to look at and could educate students on the story of Indian Mounds Cemetery to a point where they would be optimal tour guides. Weeks 5 & 6 are titled “What’s Been Erased” and “The River as Sacred.” Week 5 would be an excellent place to fit in a section about the original mounds located at Indian Mounds Cemetery since the story shared today is one that goes unheard of. This would open up discussion on the lack of existing acknowledgment at the park for what truly existed at the location, as only an informational plaque stands that is based on assumptions.⁶ Meanwhile, Week 6 would focus more on the relevance to the Mississippi and introduce students to the use of the river’s physical features in burials as well as the symbolism of the river as a place to put the dead between the water—the place of Dakota creation— and the heavens.³

The sites that students would discuss to match both the course’s existing format and the story of the original mounds include:



Indian Mounds Regional Park | Saint Paul Minnesota (stpaul.gov)

This provides students with St. Paul’s existing acknowledgement of the mounds’ history, as well as the park.



Indian Mounds Park, St. Paul | MNopedia

MNopedia is a site frequently used in HSEM 3205H and this page briefly informs students about the mounds and what happened to them.



INDIAN MOUNDS

A SACRED PLACE OF BURIAL

<https://www.stpaul.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01/IndianMoundsCulturalLandscape%20Study%2BMessagingPlan.pdf>

Chapter 2, Site History, would be used for Week 6 to exemplify the sacredness of the Mississippi River to Dakota burial traditions.

Coursework to Compliment

At the end of each week, students take a quiz in HSEM 3205H that allows them to state their understanding and thoughts on the material. Since the topic of Indian Mounds Park would just be a mere part of what is covered in a week, suggested questions for each quiz to engage the students in the story are:

Week 5 - “Explain one thing you thought the City of St. Paul did well and one thing they did poorly to acknowledge the existence of the excavated mounds at Indian Mounds Park.”

Week 6- “Explain one thing you learned about why the burial mounds at Indian Mounds Park are located close to the Mississippi River.”

Conclusion

All points considered, Indian Mounds Cemetery should not just be recognized for the mounds that still remain, but for the abundant amount of those that once stood. It is sacred land connected to the also sacred Mississippi for not just the Dakota people, but many Indigenous communities. In order to prevent recurring mistakes, we must inform the public, especially local college students, about the presence of Dakota burial traditions in St. Paul and how deeply emotional this site is. Westerners are not the only people that exist; we may understand our own cemeteries, mortuaries, and funerals, but that does not allow us to ignore others'. Knowledge is power and understanding the honorable death traditions of the Dakota people give us more than just information, but also a new empathetic viewpoint of the world.



Layout of Indian Mounds Cemetery

Bibliography

¹ City of St. Paul. (2022). *Indian Mounds Regional Park*. Saint Paul Minnesota. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from

<https://www.stpaul.gov/facilities/indian-mounds-regional-park>

² Nelson, P. (2021, December 3). *Indian Mounds Park, St. Paul*. MNopedia. Retrieved December 8, 2022, from <https://www.mnopedia.org/place/indian-mounds-park-st-paul>

³ Nelson, P. (2008, May 20). *St. Paul's Indian Burial Mounds*. Macalester College. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from http://www.wisconsinmounds.com/St.Paul_s_Indian_Mounds.pdf

⁴ Pond, S. W. (1986). *The Dakota Or Sioux in Minnesota as They Were in 1834*. Minnesota Historical Society Press.

⁵ Quinn Evans Architects, Ten X Ten, & Allies, LLC. (2020). *Indian Mounds A Sacred Place of Burial Cultural Landscape Study and Messaging Plan*. City of St. Paul.

⁶ Trimble, S. (2022). *What is Known About the Indian Mounds?* Saint Paul Historical. Retrieved December 5, 2022, from <https://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/184>

⁷ Westerman, G., & White, B. M. (2012). *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota*. St. Paul Minnesota Historical Society Press.