Dakota County History

The Newsletter of the Dakota County Historical Society

Lawshe Fund makes a difference

Feature: Pike Island; two families a century apart
Historic Pike Island, bordered by the Mississippi River to its north and the Minnesota River to its south, belongs to the State. At the island’s eastern end, the two rivers meet. The Minnesota River vanishes at this point and the Mississippi becomes ever wider on its way to the Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico.

Dakota County can make no claim to Pike Island. It can claim two families who lived and farmed on the island. Two families who lived a century apart. Two families who called the island home.

Picnic Island, southwest of Pike Island, once was a part of Dakota County. It too belongs to the State. The man-made island was created to aid in barge traffic on the Minnesota River side. The islands are a part of Fort Snelling State Park, a forested recreational river valley park, and a shelter for wildlife in the metropolitan area.

Early explorers

Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike, for whom the Pike Island is named, was not the first to explore the Mississippi River. His 1805 expedition, like Lewis and Clarks 1804 journey, to explore the little known the Louisiana Purchase would be of great value to a young nation.

French explorers Medard Chouart, better known as Sieur des Groseilliers, and his brother in law, Pierre Esprit Radisson, the first white men to see and explore the Mississippi River in 1655, preceded Pike by 150 years. The honor of the river’s discovery was given to Louis Joliet and Father Jacques Marquette in 1673 for having made the knowledge of its existence known to the world.

Daniel Greysolon, Du Luth, and Father Louis Hennepin saw the river in 1680. Robert de La Salle, the greatest explorer of “New France,” saw it in 1682.

Nicolos Perrot and Pierre Charles Le Sueur established a fur trading fort on Prairie Island in 1695, the first island locally inhabited by white men forty years after Groseilliers and Radisson spent fourteen months on the island in 1655.

Jonathan Carver was the first Englishman to explore the region in 1766 after France renounced its claims in North America to Britain after the Seven Years’ War in Europe (1756-1763) and the French and Indian War of North America (1754-1763). The age of French discovery and domination in Minnesota came to an end. English speaking fur traders would control the exploration of the area.
Lt. Pike receives his orders

Lieutenant Pike received orders in 1805 from General James Wilkinson, the commander of western forces and governor of Louisiana, to explore the upper streams and lakes of the Mississippi. Pike’s expedition had a three fold purpose: first, to negotiate treaties with the Native Americans; second, to see that the agents of British fur trading companies were in conformity with American laws; and finally, to extend geographic exploration. President Thomas Jefferson was later told about and approved the expedition.

Pike left St. Louis, Missouri, on August 9, 1805, with twenty soldiers, one sergeant, two corporals and seventeen privates, in a seventy-foot long keelboat, with provision for four months.

The purchases

Seven weeks later he landed on a large island at the mouth of the Minnesota River. A few days afterward Pike made a formal purchase by treaty from the chiefs of the Dakota of a large tract of land reaching from the Minnesota River to the falls of St. Anthony, and a second tract at the mouth of the St. Croix river for the purpose of establishing a military presence in the area.

Major Thomas Forsyth, Indian Agent at St. Louis, paid $2,000 in trade goods to the Dakota for the first parcel in 1819. Colonel Henry Leavenworth acquired the land and began construction of a military fort in 1820.

Perched 105 feet above Pike Island, Fort St. Anthony, later known as Fort Snelling, became the center of government policy and administration prior to Minnesota statehood. The fort would be a refuge for later explorers and travelers seeking safety and fellowship.

"Mr. Ferrebault"

Jean Baptiste Faribault, a Canadian born fur trader for the Northwest Fur Company, met Pike on Saturday, September 21, 1805, when Faribault was camped beneath the bluffs along the Minnesota River, then known as the St. Peters River, in what is today Mendota. Pike mentions "Mr. Ferrebault" in his diary.
"Passed the encampment of Mr. Ferrebault, who had broken his perogue and had encamped on the west side of the river, about three miles below St. Peters." Pike meant to write pirogue the French word for "Indian canoe." Faribault was making repairs on his canoe when he met Pike who made camp "on the northeast point of the big island opposite St. Peters," the big island now known as Pike Island or Pike's Island.

On Monday, September 23, Pike spoke to the chiefs of one of the seven tribes of the Dakota nation, Le Petit Corbeau, chief of the Kaposia band, and Way Ag Enagee, chief of the Gens du Lac, signed the treaty for the Dakota. Faribault was present at the treaty signing.

Faribault spent most of his life trading with the Potawatomie, Winnebago, Sac, Fox, Iowa, Wahiekute, and the Dakota.

Born at Berthier, Quebec, Canada in 1774, Faribault learned the fundamentals of the business at Quebec as a clerk with an import firm. He joined the Northwest Fur Company in 1798 by taking charge of a trading post on the Kankakee River near the south end of Lake Michigan, a part of the United States. From 1799 to 1802 he was stationed at the Redwood trading post on the Des Moines River in central Iowa.

Faribault came to Minnesota in 1803 and took charge of the trading post at Little Rapids on the Minnesota River at what is today's section 31 of Carver Township, Scott County, south of the present day city of Chaska, and remained there for several years. He married Pelagie Hause there in 1805.

A son, Alexander, was born a year later while Faribault was at Mackinac, the great depot of the fur trade. He had left his wife with her friends in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, while he was trading.

In 1809 he established himself as an independent trader at Prairie du Chien. Faribault was employed with the Northwest Fur Company for ten years.

During the War of 1812, or the Second War of American Independence, he remained loyal to the United States. Refusing to participate with the British army he was made prisoner and suffered for his allegiance. Pelagie and their children escaped to Winona, Minnesota.

After the war, Faribault became an American citizen and established himself at Prairie du Chien. He became associated with the American Fur Company and bought his trading goods from them.

Road from Fort Snelling down side of bluff to landing opposite Pike Island. Minnesota Historical Society

In 1820 Faribault met Colonel Leavenworth at Prairie du Chien who was en route up the Mississippi to establish a military post near the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers.

Leavenworth suggested to Faribault that he locate his trading post at Pike Island and offered him military protection. Faribault agreed to the arrangement and moved his family and business to the island. A log cabin was constructed and a trading post established. Several acres of land were soon under cultivation. Pike Island became an island farm and Faribault its first farmer.

In June 1823 rising water submerged the island and most of his property was destroyed, carried away by the swift current. Moving to the east bank, Faribault built a home and storehouse high above the river. In the spring of 1826 ice dams caused the river to rise again. Colonel Josiah Snelling, who had taken command and completed the construction of the fort, warned Faribault of the river's impending danger and assisted him and his family in saving their lives and valuable supply of furs and skins. The climbing river, gorged with serrated ice, sheared Faribault's home from the bluff. That same year the Faribault family moved to the west bank to what would become Mendota and constructed a log home.

In 1834 Henry Sibley arrived at Mendota to oversee the interests of the American Fur Company. He built a handsome stone home, a house that Faribault much admired. After living for several years in log homes Faribault was resolved to construct a stone home next to Sibley's in 1840. Both homes still stand today.

Faribault lived and farmed on Pike Island from 1820 to 1822. A century later another immigrant would also live on the island.
A Century Later
Edwin Shadrack Ruddle

Edwin Shadrack Ruddle was born at Glastonbury, England, in 1893. He left England for America in 1912 with his older brother George, arriving in New York and traveling on to St. Paul. Both worked at the St. Paul Farmers Market. George later moved to and began farming in the Lakeville area.

In June 1918 Edwin Ruddle married Clara Magdaline Burg at St. Paul. Looking for land to expand his business close to the Farmers Market, Ruddle found nearby Pike Island available. The large island, a mile and a half long and a half mile wide, had several soil types. The sandy soil near the river was ideal for growing potatoes and melons. The rich soil inland was perfect for growing vegetables and herbs. Although Pike Island was not pastoral, ample grass among the trees was suitable for grazing. The island had possibilities.

Down the bluff and a Ford ferry
Driving down the steep bluff road near Fort Snelling to the river, Ruddle built a ferry to transport his Ford truck and gardening equipment to the island. Like Faribault a century earlier, Ruddle began to till the island’s fertile soil. He did not need to coax the island to produce. After the first harvest, abundant of vegetables and herbs caused Ruddle to obtain a larger market stall.

Now an Island Home
In 1922 he built a modest home and moved Clara, and four-year-old daughter, Dolores, to the island. In the winter of 1923-24 the Koss Construction Company of Des Moines hired Ruddle as a part of crew to remove trees along the banks of the Minnesotta and Mississippi Rivers to make room for a new bridge. A swath of cottonwood, green ash, elm, and silver maples were felled from the top of the bluffs to the river’s edge. Willow trees along the marshes and wet meadows were also cut and removed. Construction of the Fort Snelling - Mendota bridge began in the spring of 1924.

Portion of 1896 map detailing city streets in St. Paul. Note the lack of streets in the Fort Snelling area and the railroad crossing from the Fort to Mendota.

In foreground are Ruddle’s horses on Pike Island. Atop the bluff is Fort Snelling. At water level is Ruddle's "pole" ferry for moving his truck and produce to the fort’s road to cross to St. Paul on the bridge from West Seventh Street.
Ruddle's truck farming business increased. Laying hens supplied an ample source of fresh eggs for the market and his family. Horses, cattle and swine were livestock additions to the island farm.

Vegetables and eggs were carefully gathered, crated, loaded, covered, and strapped to the bed of Ruddle's truck, ferried across the Mississippi and cautiously scaled the steep, narrow, earthen road to the top of the bluff and on to the market.

**Billy and Jeff**

The introduction of two dappled Percheron workhorses, Billy and Jeff, allowed more ground to be tilled and more vegetables planted. Surplus melons were used for making wine, a popular item Ruddle sold to the soldiers at the fort. The fruitful wine-making business came to an abrupt end when government agents visited the island.

Visitors had to shout to get Edwin's or Clara's attention to have the ferry brought over to transport them to the island. Clara's sister, Laura Anna Burg Stein, and her husband, Carl, were frequent visitors.

Not only did Ruddle's truck farming business grow so did his family. Two daughters and a son were born on the island.

In 1931 Ruddle needed more room. The family and the business outgrew the island. Pike Island
Above: Laura Burg Stein holds Grace Ruddel as Clarine Ruddel looks on.
Right: Edwin Shadrack Ruddel holds a pair of workhorses, c. 1922.

had served them well. With a brother farming in Lakeville and a brother-in-law farming in Vermillion, Ruddel looked to Empire Township. In 1932 he purchased a farm near the little community of Empire.

Pike Island is now within the Fort Snelling State Park. Visitors reach the island by walking over a sturdy bridge. Hiking trails are shaded by a canopy of trees; benches and fire rings are dispersed around the island for the comfort of its visitors.

The former island home of two Dakota County residents, Jean Baptiste Faribault and Edwin Shadrack Ruddel belongs to all Minnesotans.

Author David Schreier is the grandson of Edwin Shadrack Ruddel and son of Dolores Ruddel Schreier.

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Fort Snelling State Park
The Pike Island Trail

Today there are over three miles of trail on the most historic island in Minnesota for all to enjoy.

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