

A LOOK INTO CARVER'S CAVE/ WAKAN TIPI

Presented by Anne Ketz
The 106 Group Ltd.

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Introduction

On the east side of St. Paul, at the base of Dayton's Bluff, is a cave that is known to the Dakota as WAKON TIPI and to EuroAmericans as Carver's Cave. This cave has long held importance for both cultures, but, while many know its name, very few have had the opportunity to see this isolated cave. During the past year, The 106 Group Ltd., a cultural resources company located in St. Paul, undertook a National Register of Historic Places study of this important place. This evening I would like to share with you some of the results of our research.

Jonathan Carver

In the fall of 1766, Jonathan Carver, a self-taught English mapmaker from Connecticut, set out to explore the Upper Mississippi. He and his companions initially followed the route of earlier explorers through Lake Michigan and Green Bay and then along the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers. Upon reaching the Mississippi River near present day Prairie du Chien, they headed northward. On November 13, Carver and his two companions arrived at the mouth of the St. Croix River. The following day he wrote in his journal:

This day arrived to the great stone cave called by the Naudowessee *Waukon Teebee*, or in English the House of Spirits. This cave I found to be a great curiosity, in a rocky mountain just by the bank of the river.

Carver describes a cave containing a large room that is 30 ft. across and about 20 ft. high at the tallest point. Approximately 60 ft. from the entrance, Carver came to a lake within the cave. He notes "As 'twas dark I could not find out the bigness nor the form [of it]. I cast a stone which I could hear fall at a distance and with a strange hollow sound. I tasted of this water and found it to be very good." Near the entrance Carver found "many strange hieroglyphycks cut in the stone some of which was very a[n]cient and grown over with moss." Carver also mentions that the cave was near a Native American burial place. This account is the first published description of a cave in the Midwest. Carver spent the winter among the Dakota at an encampment near present day Belle Plaine. The following spring, as he returned down the river, Carver arrived at what he called the "great cave" shortly before noon on May 1, 1767. There he found an encampment consisting of at least three Dakota communities gathered near the cave. In the published version of his journal, Carver states that the Dakota bring their dead to the nearby burial ground "when the chiefs meet to hold their councils, and to settle all public affairs for the ensuing summer." Carver met with the communities gathered at the cave before departing later that same day.

Upon his return to the east, Carver's journals and his descriptions of the geography and inhabitants of the area were published as *Travel Through the Interior Parts of North*

America. The book quickly became a popular bestseller and went through numerous editions. In fact, more editions of Carver's journals were published in the United States prior to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase than any other geographical work. As a result, the "great cave" that Carver had described became a widely known landmark along the Mississippi River. The importance of the cave as a link with the historical events of Carver's visit and in particular his meeting with the Dakota chiefs on May 1, 1767, is reflected in the celebration of the centenary of this event and the continuous efforts throughout the cave's history to verify and document the cave.

Where is WAKON TIPI?

So where is the cave that Carver documented? Carver's journal provides us with a general description of the location of the "great cave" along the course of the Mississippi River (between the mouth of the St. Croix and the Minnesota Rivers), but he does not specify on what bank of the river the cave was found. An engraving of Carver's original map indicates that the "cave" was located on the east bank of the river at the bend near present day St. Paul. Carver's description of the cave also places it in a "rocky mountain just by the bank of the river" near a Native American burial ground and he further states that the cave was about 30 ft. from the water and approached by a steep 45-degree ascent. This description of a cave in a bluff near a burial ground that was, according to Carver's calculations, three-quarters of the way between the mouths of the St. Croix and the Minnesota Rivers corresponds to Dayton's Bluff and its associated burial mounds and historically documented burial scaffolding. The examination of historical maps also indicates that prior to the introduction of fill by the railroads and the stabilization of the

banks of the Mississippi, the cave that is now known as Carver's Cave would have been within 50 ft. of the river's edge and therefore would have been "just by the bank of the river" as Carver described it. Also, of the several caves within Dayton's Bluff, Carver's Cave would have been the most proximate to the river. A groundwater profile produced by Emmons and Olivier Resources also indicates that the original landform near the mouth of Carver's Cave was much steeper than the surrounding toe of the bluff and was an approximately 45° degree approach like that described by Carver. This synthesis of the historical, topographical, hydrological and geological evidence indicates that the general location of the cave that we know today as Carver's Cave corresponds to the location of WAKON TIPI described by Carver in 1766.

The Search for Carver's Cave

Since Carver's visit, the cave has had a history of being covered by rock fall from the bluff and then being "re-discovered." Many of the early American explorers that followed after Carver sought to locate the cave that he had described in 1766, but they often confused the much larger natural wonder of Fountain Cave on the west side of St. Paul for Carver's Cave. In 1835, Featherstonhaugh indicates why the site of Carver's Cave was overlooked when he notes that a short way above Little Crow's village, "The Indians say there was formerly a large cave here, but that rock fell in and covered it up. I landed, and endeavored to trace some vestige of the cave, but in vain, a talus of hundreds of fallen rock covering the entire slope." It was not until 1851, when Lyman Dayton, from whom Dayton's Bluff takes its name, cleared the mouth of the cave, that Carver's Cave again came to light.

As a result of Dayton's clearing of the cave mouth, Carver's Cave was thoroughly documented during the second half of the nineteenth century. Several of Minnesota's antiquarians and early archaeologists, including Edward Neill, Alfred Hill, and Theodore Lewis recorded the dimensions of the cave and Lewis documented the petroglyphs of snakes and animals that were inscribed on the walls of the cave. In 1867, members of the Minnesota Historical Society observed the centenary of Carver's visit with a trip to the cave and an evening lecture. The cave is located at the foot of Short Street and in its general dimensions and description as described in the late 1800s, it matched the cave described by Carver: having a main room containing a substantial lake and which was of a width and height that corresponds to the interior of Carver's "great cave." The most notable difference between the surveys of the late 1800s and Carver's description is the dimensions of the cave mouth. Carver had described the cave mouth as being 10 ft. wide and 3 to 5 ft. high, whereas Neill and Hill's cave is 39 to 47 ft. wide and 5 ft. high. The difference in the width of the cave mouth likely indicates that the cave entrance was already partially blocked by rock fall when Carver visited it in 1766 and likely became entirely covered shortly thereafter, which explains why subsequent explorers were unable to locate the cave. The earliest photographs of Carver's Cave also date to the late nineteenth century and they document the low, wide mouth of the cave and the main room containing a lake. These views from 1870 and 1875 provide a baseline of the exterior and interior of the cave as well as the surrounding bluff face prior any impacts by the railroad.

The introduction of the railroad to St. Paul had a negative impact on WAKON TIPI. In the 1880s the bluff face was blasted to provide more land for the railroad and the cave was once again covered by debris. When the cave was again opened in November of 1913, measurements and views indicate that the construction of the railroad removed the first 20 ft. of the cave and as a result the front portion of the main chamber of the cave had been damaged. The majority of the cave, though, which totaled approximately 100 ft. in length, still remained. Unfortunately by 1913, the petroglyphs within the cave were already being impacted by graffiti. In 1898, Winchell had commented that the numerous petroglyphs that he had seen within the cave in 1872 had been more or less obscured by the inscriptions of visitors and according to a 1913 newspaper article, the opening of the cave in that year further exacerbated the destruction of the petroglyphs as visitors sought to record their visit to the historic site on the walls of the cave. In 1926 it was said “ten years ago there were plainly to be seen snakes, birds, men, animals, fish and turtles” although they were being increasingly impacted by modern graffiti. These statements indicate that the petroglyphs within the cave survived the impacts of the railroad, but the subsequent graffiti and the soft nature of the stone may have resulted in their disappearance.

Carver's Cave's history of being covered by rock fall from the bluff and then being “re-discovered” continued into the 20th century and by the mid-century the cave entrance had again been covered by debris. The cave was most recently opened in 1977 by the City of St. Paul, but at the request of representatives from the American Indian Movement, the Red School House, and other Native American organizations, the cave was resealed until

additional research and consultation could be undertaken. Since 1977, the entrance of the cave has again been almost entirely covered by debris from the bluff. As a result of the dam created at the mouth of the cave by this material, the water within the cave has risen to within 2 ft. of the ceiling. While a metal barrier was placed at the cave's entrance in 1977, the soft limestone above the barrier has been carved or worn away so that persons who wish to enter the cave can crawl over the barrier and gain access to the cave. During the course of our study, we did not enter the cave, but these photographs, taken in 1999 by a local geologist, indicate the condition of the interior of the cave.

Importance of WAKON TIPI to the Dakota

According to Carver's account, the Dakota called the cave WAKAN signifying *sacred* or *mysterious* and TIPI signifying *house*. The Dakota who showed Carver the cave were likely members of the village of KAPOZA that was located just to the south of the Lower Phalen Creek area and on the east side of the Mississippi River until its relocation to the South St. Paul side of the river in compliance with the Treaty of 1837. Upon his return to the cave in the spring of 1767, Carver found a council consisting of at least three communities gathered near the cave and the nearby burial grounds. According to historical documents and Dakota informants, WAKON TIPI, was centrally located not only at the intersection of the roads between the three large Mdewakanton Dakota villages but also at the intersection of the Ho-Chunk, Anishinaabe, and Dakota tribes.

According to Dakota elders that we spoke with, the presence of petroglyphs within Carver's Cave indicates that the cave was a location for council meetings and sacred

ceremonies. According to elders, petroglyphs are “very ancient” “stories” made by man and spirits that indicate “the power of the place.” While petroglyphs of men, birds, animals, fish, and turtles were recorded within the cave, the largest and most notable petroglyphs within WAKAN TIPI were large rattlesnakes that appeared to be pointing to, or moving towards, a common point directly over the widest part of the cave. Chris Leith, a Dakota elder from the Prairie Island Mdewakanton Dakota Community, and the Reverend Gary Cavender, a Dakota elder who lives in Shakopee, in separate interviews told us that the snake is an icon of healing, power and medicine and that the presence of the snake petroglyphs indicates that the cave was a place for healing ceremonies. Furthermore, caves, in and of themselves, are sacred places because they allow one to enter simultaneously into the earth and darkness. Darkness is linked to both birth and death, which in turn are linked to Grandmother Earth. This is why sweat lodges and vision quests also occur in darkness. The presence of a spring within WAKAN TIPI furthers its importance as a location of healing as one elder said, “water is the most powerful medicine in the world.” Water is also associated with the UN KTE HI. Gary Cavender, who visited the cave in the 1940s or 1950s, and recalled that his grandfather would not let him go very far back in the cave, because the UN KTE HI, lives in the lake in the back of the cave.

The Future

For much of the past 100 years the cave has been rendered nearly inaccessible at the edge of an expansive railroad yard. With the decline of the passenger rail system, many of these tracks were removed, but in recent years, towering piles of rock and debris that

have fallen from other portions of the bluff have been dumped by the railroad in the area near the mouth of the cave. In November of 2002, the railroad's period of stewardship of the cave came to an end. With the assistance of the local community, the National Park Service, the DNR, and the Trust for Public Land, a 27-acre area along the Mississippi River that includes Carver's Cave was transferred to the City of St. Paul.

A grassroots neighborhood effort, known as the Lower Phalen Creek Project, has worked for years to restore native vegetation within the watershed and to re-establish a link from Swede Hollow Park, to the Mississippi River via the original path of Phalen Creek. Their work will culminate in the transformation of the former Burlington Northern rail yard into the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary. The development of this sanctuary will involve environmental cleanup followed by the restoration of vegetation and wetlands; the construction of trails; and the development of interpretive elements.

Because partial funds for the sanctuary project were provided by the National Park Service and a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 applies to this project. The act stipulates that all federal agencies must evaluate the effects of projects on properties that are listed on, or eligible for listing on, the National Register of Historic Places. As part of this process, the Park Service shall ensure that prior to any disturbances, the City shall identify and evaluate potential historic properties in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office or SHPO.

Because Carver's Cave is located within the proposed sanctuary, the city must survey and evaluate the historical importance of the cave. Based on the findings of our study, Carver's Cave was recommended as eligible for listing on the National Register. The results of this study were reviewed by the SHPO and the SHPO concurred that Carver's Cave meets the National Register criteria in the areas of Ethnic Heritage/Native American and Exploration/Settlement. Carver's Cave is considered important within these two areas because of its cultural importance to the Dakota people and its association with the English explorer Jonathan Carver and subsequent European explorers who tried to relocate the cave, which had become a landmark on the Upper Mississippi.

As the planned development of the nature sanctuary goes forward, tribal and public input will be gathered on the future treatment of this historic resource so that the cave known to the Dakota as WAKON TIPI and to EuroAmericans as Carver's Cave may be protected and preserved for future generations.

Thank you.