

A Brief History of Chaska

The Native Americans of the Woodland Culture, commonly known as the Mound Builders, were some of the first people to settle the area that is now Chaska, starting around 1200 BC. The site was an advantageous location where the Big Woods, that covered much of central Minnesota, met up with the Minnesota River. Although most of the burial mounds of this tribe have been destroyed, three remnants still remain and are marked in City Square.

The Mdewakanton Dakota followed soon after, and by 1769, the time that Chaska's recorded history began, they were the primary nation in the area. Native American tribes remained active in the area well into the twentieth century. Though the area was first called "Little Rapids," the eventual name of the city, Chaska (sometimes recorded in early history as "Shaska"), is actually traced to a Dakota word meaning the first-born son.

European-American occupation began in 1700 with the French explorer Pierre-Charles Le Sueur, charting what was then called St. Peter's River (the name was not changed to the Minnesota River until 1852). In 1766, early British explorer Jonathan Carver began to map out the area, while searching for a western water route to the Pacific Ocean. Fur traders are recorded as early as 1804, and Jean Baptiste Faribault ran the Little Rapids trading post in the area from 1826-1842. To further European culture, a Catholic missionary chapel-school was established to teach the Dakota in 1843.

The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, signed between the Dakota and the US Government, opened the area to settlement in 1851. Thomas Andrew Holmes canoed up the river to become the first settler, though he soon sold the land to David L. Fuller in 1852. The site became the County Seat in 1856 and was platted by the Shaska Company in 1857, one year before Minnesota became a state. The township was platted and bonded, but went through lengthy litigation and financial issues, resulting in many of the surrounding farmsteads being well settled before a town was established. This set up the expectation for a vital relationship between the city and the rural settlements, one that has served Chaska well throughout its history.

Most early settlers relocated from the East Coast, drawn by the area's fertile farmlands and river location. Many were of German ethnicity, with some Scandinavians as well. Early names of note include Byhoffer, Young, Eitel, Linenfelser, Noble, Schoenborn, Glatzel, Schindler, Iltis, Henk, Ochs, Ess, and DuToit — names which represent the diversity of the town and are still associated with extant historic buildings.

Due to its position as the County Seat and the market and transportation needs of the farmers, the town grew quickly. It also became an industrial center, primarily in relationship to its rich natural resources — bricks from the clay deposits, timber industry from the remaining Big Woods, and mills, sugar factories, dairies, canning and pickling plants (including Gedney) taking advantage of local agricultural bounty. The riverfront location allowed for easy transportation — as well as floods — with a thriving steamboat route by 1857

including daily trips by the *Antelope* to Saint Paul. Later railroad expansion connected the small community's resources to markets statewide.

Chaska was incorporated as a village in 1871. The end of the nineteenth century was relatively prosperous. Brickyards and agricultural industries were the major employers, though a thriving downtown developed. Saloons, boarding houses, and hotels were particularly prevalent, as well as services catering to those doing business in the county seat, such as attorneys and surveyors. In 1891, Chaska was determined a city by special legislative action.

For much of the twentieth century, Chaska remained a small town just outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Though certainly affected by world events, especially by its residents' service in WWI and WWII, in general the city kept to itself. The brickyards and mills stayed active, and the sugar industry rose to prominence, giving the town the nickname "Sugar City."

By the 1960s, however, suburban expansion had reached Chaska. It drew national attention for the groundbreaking New Town project of Jonathan in 1970, and concurrently became home to the exclusive Hazeltine Golf Course. Jonathan began with great promise but soon ran out of money, and was foreclosed upon in 1976, with only a few of the planned 10 neighborhoods completed. Today, however, these neighborhoods still thrive as part of the Jonathan Association, and many new developments have been built nearby. This relatively recent expansion gives Chaska a distinctive place in modern history.

From its early importance to Native American communities to its success as a thriving river town to its more recent urban planning developments, Chaska has remained a town with a unique sense of place. Its relationship to the river, its industrial history, its distinctive Chaska brick architecture, and its many family-owned businesses demonstrate this special kind of success. Social influences, such as the three major churches, and community functions, have also been crucial in the city's development.