

Context 5 – Transportation

Time Span – 1700-1950s

River, Road, and Rail

Paradoxically, the Transportation context is simultaneously one of Chaska's most influential contexts, while perhaps its least represented. Chaska's siting has always been predicated on transportation; the river was a crucial early Native American transportation network; the town's easy boat access allowed later settlement; the congruence of rail and river traffic led to its importance as a trading center; and Chaska's roads, from early plank roads to the current intersections of Highways 212 and 41, have always been important in its development. However, so many of these transportation elements —boats, trains, roadways, depots, and cargo stops — are ephemeral and have long ago been lost. Chaska is left with a rich transportation history, but with relatively few examples remaining of it.

The River

The river was an important early means of transportation for the M'dewankaton, and by early fur traders, who used log rafts, canoes, and larger keel boats. The keel boats were described as somewhat like a shallow barge, propelled by six pole-men to each side, and able to carry between seven and twenty tons of goods and passengers (including the pole-men, a cook, and a trader/agent). For quite some time, these smaller boats, which were fairly easy to navigate and able to support the volume of trade, dominated the Minnesota River (or the St. Peter's River, as it was called by early explorers).

As Minnesota land opened up to claims, the volume of passenger travel and the larger amount of goods imported necessitated a more powerful means of transport. Barges provided early service, and sporadic steamers ran up the Minnesota River as early as 1850. The first regular service recorded was the *Antelope*, piloted by George Houghton, which first began daily round-trips from Carver to St. Paul, with a stop in Chaska, in 1857. Rates to St. Paul were \$1.25, which was cheaper than by stagecoach. In 1862 the *Clara Hine* was added to Captain Houghton's fleet to allow expanded service, as well as the related *Ariel* and the *Albany* making upstream runs twice a week. By the late 1860s, the river level had fallen and some of the boats had begun to age, so Houghton ran the *Ariel* (with the *Antelope's* whistle!) and the *Mollie Mohler* to Saint Paul.

The river continued to sediment, however, and sandbars and low water levels began to preclude steamers from running the Chaska route. Low barges, keel boats, and even a steam powered flat boar called the *Polly Hawkins* began to run freight — including wood, bricks, and grain. Passengers switched to the newly inaugurated railroad line.

Barge traffic did pick up briefly in the late 1880s-early 1890s, when brick owners in particular sought an alternative to the railroads, whose rates they called “exorbitant.” The *Lorna Doone* began a brief bout of daily service from Chaska to St. Paul in 1895, and some excursion boats also ran. In general this renaissance was short-lived, and for the State of Minnesota and particularly in the Chaska area, river traffic had all but died out. Today, with the levee in place, no remnants of the formerly busy docks remain.

Roads

A second early method of transportation was upon crude roads. The first roads were based on early “Indian trails.” Road legislation passed by the 1849 territorial legislature required roads to be at least sixty feet wide, and required adult males to work two days per year on his area roads (four days if in lieu of all tax payments). The legislation also allowed for stock companies to build plank roads, and to erect toll gates upon them. Though early settler Thomas Holmes had originally planned to build such a road, it was never erected, and for quite some time the nearest major roadway was the stage line between Shakopee and Saint Paul.

By the late 1850s, however, a small network of roads had been created. The Chaska-Excelsior road intersected a road between Fort Ridgely and Fort Snelling. The Waconia Road (also called the Clearwater Road, later changed to the Creek Road), connected Waconia and Chaska. In 1858 the township dedicated \$1,500 for road and bridge repairs, including the purchase of two road scrapers for \$11 each.

None of these roads provided a direct route from Chaska to Minneapolis/St. Paul. In 1863, the legislature granted a petition for the Yorkville Road, to be built as a joint project between Carver and Hennepin Counties. This road was to have been completed, by legislative provision, within six months, but was almost lost because of delays by Hennepin County in particular. Soon after it opened, a Chanhassen settler who claimed the land put a fence over the road and blocked off traffic, and farm owner Henry Teach sued for damages in regards to the easement over his farmland. The road did eventually, however, open, and became the precursor to Highway 212.

Meanwhile, Chestnut Street expanded, eventually becoming busy Highway 41.



Historic truss bridge on Highway 41

Early stage routes were minimal — one between Chaska and Redfield, and another between Chaska and Glencoe. In 1865 Porter and Strait began service between Shakopee, Chaska, and Carver, with the trip between Chaska and Shakopee running about ninety minutes.

Cars began to replace horses, and in 1903 George DuToit purchased Chaska's first automobile, a Rambler. Motor vehicles soon became popular, and by 1915 Carver County had 907 autos — roughly one for every twenty-two people. Soon there were several auto dealerships, including The Ess Brothers who sold Jackson and Maxwell cars, Habegge and Sons with the Overland, National, and Garfield brands, and Dr. P.O. Hecklin who distributed Cuttings. A garage was added to the Ess Foundry holdings, and for a short time it even looked as if a manufacturing plant, presumably for Maxwells, might open in town.

The Railroad

Though rail service began in Minnesota in the 1860s, it did not come immediately to Chaska. The Minnesota Valley Railroad first served Shakopee and Belle Plaine, resulting in a stage or river connection for Chaska residents wishing to travel to Minneapolis or St. Paul. Soon after both Carver County and Chaska Township agreed to issue railroad bonds, and the rail era began. By 1872, the Hastings & Dakota line and the Minneapolis & St. Louis railroads served the area. Business was immediately brisk, hurting in particular the river steamers.

Rail rates were expensive, however, particularly for freight. The companies were known for high rates and for denying shipments, which led to local brick and grain merchants to look for other options. Both for speed for passengers and efficiency for freight, the railroads were uncontested. Rail service soon became essential for agricultural businesses such as the sugar factory, which had its own spur—which still runs.

Rail service was soon supplanted, this time by automobile traffic as Highways 212 and 41 grew. Today, very few historic transportation-related artifacts remain — just a few tracks, potentially some small warehouses on Stoughton Avenue, and a former passenger depot in downtown Chaska.

Other Transportation

The Shaska Company envisioned a canal project — the Chaska, Minnetonka, and Liverpool Canal — connecting Chaska with Lake Minnetonka. Similar to Holmes' early plank road project plan, however, funding never came through and the idea was abandoned.

Lost Resources

Today, roads provide Chaska's main transportation network. River traffic is long gone, and there is very limited rail service, relating only to agricultural freight. There are very few reminders left of the city's transportation history, with river and railroad resources generally lost (the exception to this is the small passenger depot remaining downtown, currently used as a wine store). Identification of remaining cultural resources related to this context should be a priority for the HPC.

Property Types

River Traffic

Ferries

Ferry Crossings and Landings

Yorkville

Walnut Street

Chestnut Street (used for a brief period)

Ferry boats

Steamers

Albany

Antelope

Ariel

Clara Hine

Daisy

Mollie Mohler

Barges

Leviathan

Landings and Docks

Excursion Boats

Riverboats

Rescue and Coast Guard

Warehouses

Dams

Levees

Flood Plains

Navigation Aids

Railroad

Tracks

Depots (freight and passenger)

Bridges and Crossings

Repair Shops

Roundhouses and Section Houses

Railroad Cars

Telegraph

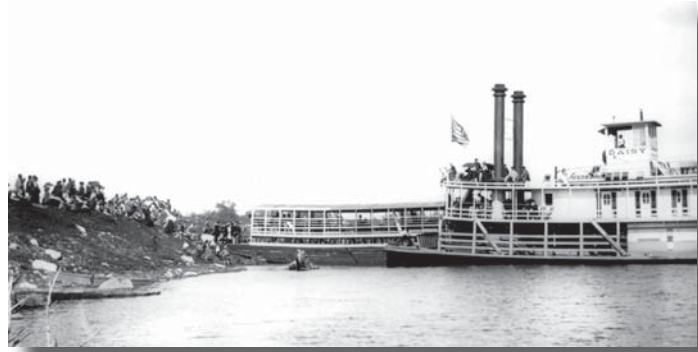
Warehouses

Support Buildings

Roads

Current roads

Remnants of Early Roads and Trails



The Daisy Steamer in the late 1800s

Stage Stops
Truck Stops and Facilities
Gas Stations

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. As discussed at length in this section, very few transportation-related resources still exist. Those that do, such as remaining warehouses and support buildings, should be surveyed and cataloged with particular attention paid to the importance of this context.
2. As some items, especially boats, were sometimes rebuilt and reconfigured (such as the placement of the *Antelope's* whistle on the *Ariel*), it is possible that some parts of previous resources still exist. The HPC should attempt to catalog these as they come to their attention.
3. The HPC should investigate a transportation-related exhibit at the History Center, which would give people a better sense of the importance of river, rails, and road to the city.
4. Currently, Highways 212 and 41 provide more of a dividing line than a historic resource. The City of Chaska and State of Minnesota should work to make it easier to cross these roads, and to incorporate them into the community traffic patterns.
5. The expansion of roadways, such as the Highway 41 river crossing, could threaten fragile historic resources. The Minnesota Department of Transportation should locate such expansions where they do not threaten resources of historic character, and should provide appropriate mitigation should any resources be affected.
6. Re-connecting to the river could strengthen the historic connection between the Chaska settlement site and its natural environment. The City of Chaska might consider the introduction of such features as an historic walking trail along the levee, and the re-establishment of the docks with excursion and other leisure boating activities.