

1997 Project Abstract

For the Period Ending June 30, 1999

This project was supported by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

**TITLE:** Development of Birch Coulee State Historic Site

**PROJECT MANAGER:** Wayne Cavadini

**ORGANIZATION:** Minnesota Historical Society

**ADDRESS:** 345 Kellogg Boulevard West, St. Paul, MN 55102-1906

**WEB SITE ADDRESS:** www.mnhs.org

**LEGAL CITATION:** ML 1991, Ch. 216, Sec. 15, Subd. 5(D)

**APPROPRIATION AMOUNT:** \$253,000

Statement of Objectives

The objective of this project is to improve public access to and interpretation of the state historic site at Birch Coulee. This objective will be met by conducting archaeological surveying and testing, constructing a new and improved access road, restoration and improvement of prairie environment, build self-guided trails with interpretive markers and a kiosk and provide basic visitor amenities.

Overall Project Results

People will benefit from this project by being able to learn more about the Battle of Birch Coulee and its part in and importance to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. The direct results of this project are ¾ to 1 mile of new interpretive/recreation trails, one interpretive kiosk and 13 interpretive markers, a new picnic/gathering area, new portable restrooms and water availability, and 55 acres of restored/improved prairie environment. The site was also regraded to remove contemporary trails and roads so that the site now appears as it did at the time of the battle in 1862. With these new features, the Minnesota Historical Society will be able to interpret the site to approximately 3,000 people who visit the site on an annual basis.

Project Results Use and Dissemination

Development of this site will help disseminate the story of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 that is told at sites along the Minnesota River Valley. Information gathered in the completion of this project will be used to improve and expand interpretation of the sites' history for site visitors. This information will also be used as part of the educational programs at other Dakota history and Dakota War related sites. The Minnesota Historical Society will market this site in conjunction with other Society and non-Society historic sites in the Minnesota River Valley and surrounding area. Through these efforts, information will be disseminated to 40,000 plus people per year. The Society will also use its web page, address [www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org) to market the site and deliver information about it.

SEP 20 1999

*Meeting*

**Date of Report:** July, 1, 1999

**Date of Next Status Report:** July 1, 1999

**Date of Work Program Approval:**

**Project Completion Date:** June 30, 1999

**LCMR Final Work Program Update Report**

**I. PROJECT TITLE:** Development of Birch Coulee State Historic Site

**Project Manager:** Thomas R. Ellig

**Affiliation:** Minnesota Historical Society

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**Telephone Number:** (507) 697-6321 **E-Mail:** thomas.ellig@mnhs.org

**Fax:** (507) 697-6310 **Web Page Address:** www.mnhs.org

**Total Biennial Project Budget:**

**\$ LCMR:** \$253,000

**- \$ LCMR**

**Amount Spent:** \$242,703

**= LCMR Balance:** \$10,297

**A. Legal Citation:** ML 97, [Chap. 216], Sec. [15], Subd. 5D.

**Appropriation Language:** This appropriation is from the trust fund to the Minnesota Historical Society to improve public access to the state historic site at Birch Coulee, with self-guided trails, interpretive markers and basic visitor amenities.

**II. PROJECT SUMMARY AND RESULTS:**

Birch Coulee is the site of a major battle in the United States-Dakota Conflict of 1862. With approximately 60 casualties, it was the most severe engagement of the conflict. After 130 years, these events still have great importance to the people of the region. The site's development will contribute much to the stories already told at Fort Ridgely and the Lower Sioux Agency state historic sites.

Birch Coulee historic site is undeveloped, with very limited use to the public in its present state. New access roads, upgraded toilet facilities and walking

trails will make the site usable for visitors. Interpretive signs will make it possible for visitors to learn the story of Birch Coulee and experience the powerful sense of place that this site evokes.

The master plan for this site was completed in 1978, so we will conduct new research to determine strategies that will meet the current needs of visitors and the goals of the Society. The project is expected to include prairie restoration and a reconstruction of the knolls and depressions that existed during the Battle of Birch Coulee in 1862. This will greatly enhance the visitors' ability to understand those events.

### **III. PROGRESS SUMMARY:**

**SIX MONTH WORK PROGRAM UP DATE (May 1998)** – The project is progressing along with an Architect hired in December 1997. The Exhibit team visited the site on early May of 1998. There was a community information meeting held on May 6, 1998, in the City Hall of Morton, Minnesota. Construction documents will be ready by early September with project awarding to be completed November 1998. The Archaeology will be completed by September 1998.

**SIX MONTH WORK PROGRAM UP DATE (October 1998)** --- The project has progressed to the point of a contract being awarded to Schmidt Construction and they are trying to start the site work and road work in November 1998. Through the process there have been a couple of areas that have gone over budget but there have been construction sections that have been bid under the original budget. The overall affect is that the project will have all work completed as originally budgeted. The project is on schedule to be all completed by June of 1999.

**FINAL WORK PROGRAM UPDATE REPORT:** This project is now complete. The Society was not able to complete all of the work described by the 30 June, 1999 deadline due to the weather. The spring of 1999 was the wettest on record for the area and this caused a delay in the completion of the trails and the prairie restoration. The Society used other non-state funds to pay for the \$10,297 work of work that was completed after 30 June.

All of the components of the project have been delivered and the site is now open and interpreted for the public. On June 3, 2000, a grand opening event will be held in conjunction with a celebration at the Lower Sioux Agency historic site which is 7 miles away. The Lower Sioux Agency site will be celebrating the installation of a new exhibit, restoration of the historic Stone Warehouse, and the completion of the site's interpretive trails. This will be a two day event showcasing the improvements at both sites.

#### IV. OUTLINE OF PROJECT RESULTS:

##### **Result 1: Archaeological Monitoring**

LCMR Budget: \$10,000    Actual Spent: \$14,494    Balance: \$0  
Completion Date: August 1998

Archaeological investigation is an essential part of the initial research for this project. Especially at a site of this nature, we must know what is now in the ground before we disturb it in other ways. The budget will be used to pay salary and expenses for project archaeologists to conduct this work. Their work will be overseen and augmented by the head of the MHS archaeology department (non-LCMR dollars). Archaeologists will monitor the project through its completion.

The Archaeology investigation and report has been completed; monitoring will be done during construction. The actual costs have caused a variance from the original budget but the overage will be covered by lower construction costs for the visitor amenities. There will be no change in the visitor amenities because of the revised budget(11/2/98).

The archaeology was completed as originally planned and outlined and monitoring was done through out the construction phase. The results of the archaeological survey and testing yielded little new information about the site, but did insure that no significant site cultural or historical information was destroyed during the project (July 1, 1999).

##### **Result 2: Architectural/Engineering Fees**

LCMR Budget: \$20,000    Actual Spent: \$22,106    Balance: \$0  
Completion Date: September 1998

A landscape architect will be hired to prepare construction documents for the access roads, knoll replacement, and trails. This budget figure is a rough estimate of the cost for these services.

The landscape architect has completed design and specifications to include construction documents as of September 1998. In addition to the landscape architect, we have had an engineer complete a topographic and boundary survey of the whole site. The topographic survey was used as an over lay for the design of the site work to restore the site closer to historic significance. The budget change and variance will be covered by lower construction costs for the prairie restoration (11/2/98).

The architects design for the trails and new access road were very compatible with the site and accomplished what was hoped. Visitors to the site now have access to the entire site and there are functional amenities for visitor comfort (July 1, 1999).

**Result 3: Site Preparation**

LCMR Budget: \$63,700    Actual Spent: \$63,700    Balance: \$0  
Completion Date:    May, 1999

This result involves grading of the site and removal of grass, brush, and trees to prepare for building the trails. It also includes the recreation of knolls and depressions and planting new trees in appropriate locations. Contractors will be hired to do the work according to the specifications created in Result 2.

The contractor has been issued a notice to proceed based on a favorable bid received. Funds have been encumbered but no invoices have been paid as of today. Invoices will be paid as they are submitted with the final payment being made in June 1999 (11/1/98).

The site has been regraded to match as closely as can be determined, the grade that existed at the time of the battle in 1862. The prairie was burned in the fall of 1998 and non-period trees and brush were removed. The new grading has reestablished original knolls and low spots which will provided site visitors with a much better understanding of the battle (July 1, 1999).

**Result 4: Access Road and Parking**

LCMR Budget: \$30,000    Actual Spent: \$30,000    Balance:\$0  
Completion Date:    May, 1999

The access road and parking area will likely be gravel. The exact locations are not determined, but will be finished in the initial research phase. Access road and parking lot will be gravel and are included in the construction contract (11/2/98).

A gravel access road, meeting County State Aid standards and about ¼ mile in length has been completed. This road is has enhanced access to the site and improved the safety of the interchange with the County Road by improving visibility of both roads. This new road provides access along the south edge of the site rather then to the north. The new parking area has room for ten vehicles plus space for RV's or buses (July 1, 1999).

**Result 5: Trail Construction**

LCMR Budget: \$39,300    Actual Spent: \$32,490    Balance:\$6,810  
Completion Date:    July, 1999

The trail will begin at the parking lot to take visitors on a logical route through the site. It will be from ¾ to 1 mile long. The trail will likely be built of crushed limestone aggregate, which has proved most cost-effective and least intrusive while providing full accessibility to all visitors.

The new trail is about ¾ of a mile in length. It is eight feet wide and build of gravel base with a aglime surface. The aglime is laid, wetted then rolled and packed to provide a hard surface. The trail meets ADA standards and is handicapped accessible in both grade and materials. The trail begins at the

parking lot and first takes visitors to the trail head kiosk and gathering area. At the kiosk, people will learn about the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, the history of the site and how to traverse through it. At the gathering area, people will be able to sit at picnic tables protected from the elements, to rest, contemplate the site or have a picnic lunch. The trail provides visitors access to the entire site and along with the interpretive markers, tells the story of the battle and its relevance to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 (July 1, 1999).

**Result 6: Prairie Restoration**

LCMR Budget: \$20,000    Actual Spent: \$17,900    Balance: \$2,100  
Completion Date: July, 1999

The site now contains intrusive plants that will be replaced with prairie grasses and flowers that were once found in the area. Over an area of about 50 acres, native seeds will be planted into the existing plants.

The Prairie Restoration portion of the project is included with the construction contract with notice to proceed issued in October 1998. The company and the contractor will determine if a fall 1998 dormant seeding is appropriate or a spring 1999 seeding is best. In either case the prairie restoration will be completed by the completion of the project construction contract. The reduction in the actual costs has allowed funds to be used to support the overage with the architect design and engineer work (11/2/98).

The site was not ready for seeding in the fall of 1998 and so the work was postponed until spring 1999. The spring of 1999 was the wettest on record for the area and this resulted in the seeding not being completed until July. The site was seeded with a mixture of native prairie grasses and flowers. Special attention was given to the areas that were graded. Since it takes a year for the native grass seeds to germinate and grow well, winter wheat and rye grass seed was added to the mix. These grasses will germinate quickly and act as a cover crop until the native grasses mature (July 1, 1999).

**Result 7: Interpretive Research and Design**

LCMR Budget: \$20,000    Actual Spent: \$20,000    Balance: \$0  
Completion Date: December 1998

This part of the project will begin immediately, but will continue through most of the project's development and inform decisions along the way. The work will be led by salaried historic sites staff, but much will also be done by exhibits project staff who will be paid from LCMR funds for the portion of their work that relates to this project.

This portion of the project is being worked on by MHS exhibit teams and they are using archaeology findings, architect designs and additional research to develop wordage to inform the visitors about the history of the site. The research for the

story is continuing and the markers will be placed along the trail to assist visitors in understanding the significance of the battlefield and the encounter. (11/2/98).

The research yielded substantial new information about the site, participants in the battle, battle strategy and the aftermath of the battle. This information lead to the development of a story line that used a Dakota soldier and U.S. Army soldier perspective to interpret the site. This multi-cultural interpretation will broad the visitors knowledge of the site and provide them with more opportunities to understand the human component of the battle.

The design of the markers is driven by the desire to make these markers compatible in design with markers at other MHS sites (July 1, 1999).

**Result 8: Interpretive Markers and Kiosks**

LCMR Budget: \$25,000    Actual Spent: \$20,902    Balance: \$4,098  
Completion Date:    June 1999

A large kiosk will be placed adjacent to the shelter at the trail head to orient visitors and give an introduction to the history of the site. Markers will be placed along the paths to tell the story of Birch Coulee. They will prompt visitors to think about the importance that terrain and vegetation played in the battle. By exploring the decisions made by the people engaged in the battle, the signs will give a human scale to the drama and help modern visitors envision the setting and conditions in 1862 (11/2/98).

A three sided, covered kiosk is at the trail head. This kiosk is designed to set the stage for the visitors walk through the site and to provide information about other sites in the area where people can learn more about the War and the history of Dakota people. Eleven markers have been constructed and located at strategic points on the trail to tell the story of the battle. Besides the markers, there are two sets of interactives that help people better understand the location of soldiers from both sides and the strategy of the battle. These interactives include a set of footprints that direct visitors to look at a marker that identifies the location of combatants (July 1, 1999).

**Result 9: Visitor Amenities**

LCMR Budget: \$25,000    Actual Spent: \$21,111    Balance: \$3,889  
Completion Date:    June 1999

Visitor amenities at the site are very poor, despite being adjacent to an active county park. The project will build a small shelter at the trail head to give visitors protection from the often severe elements on the prairie. MHS staff will work with County park staff to determine the best option for restroom facilities. The two options are portable facilities at the battlefield site or an upgrade of the facilities further down in the park itself. There is a well at the site that will be used for a drinking fountain at the trail head.

A small kiosk shelter and a picnic shelter at the trail head will be pre-fabricated with a coloring to blend in with the surrounding landscape. Both are part of the construction contract and will be on a cement slab with a roof, open sides and tables in the picnic shelter. The well will have a older type pump handle installed to allow for accessibility to water on the site. The actual costs bids were lower than budgeted with the variance used to support the overage in archaeology actual costs. (11/2/98)

Those amenities described in the 11-2-98 report have been provided. Portables toilets have also been provided. Since this site is away from any towns, it is important to provide comfortable amenities for visitors. If additional picnic space and toilets are necessary, they can be found at the county park that is immediately adjacent to the site (July 1, 1999).

#### **V. Dissemination:**

In the initial research phase, we will consult extensively with interested local groups and branches of government to determine how they would like the site to be used and developed. Once the site is properly developed, we will be able to fully promote it along with the rest of the historic sites across the state. By mid-1997 the MHS will have a fully developed web site, and we will use this as a promotional venue.

#### **VI. CONTEXT:**

##### **A. Significance:**

Development of this site will help complete the story of the Dakota Conflict that is told at sites along the Minnesota River Valley. Other state historic sites related to this topic include the Lower Sioux Agency, Fort Ridgely, and Traverse des Sioux. Each has their own significance, and this project will finally allow the Birch Coulee story to be told.

The 80 acre site is jointly owned--70% by MHS and 30% by Renville County, which uses its portion for a county park. This park is heavily used by local people. Over the last few years, it has been the site of an annual pow wow. Nevertheless, it is an isolated site that is several miles from the nearest town and in dire need of basic amenities to make it attractive to a larger number of people.

##### **B. Time:**

All aspects of the project will be completed by June 30, 1999.

The time line for project completion is still June 30, 1999 (11/2/99).

Due to wet weather in the spring of 1999, this project was not able to be completed on time. See section III, Progress Summary for more details.



**C. Budget Context:**

|                   | July 1995-<br>June 1997                  | July 1997-<br>June 1999                     | July 1999-<br>June 2001                                  |
|-------------------|--|---|--|
|                   | Prior<br>expenditures on<br>this project | Proposed<br>expenditures on<br>this project | Anticipated<br>future<br>expenditures on<br>this project |
| 1. LCMR           | \$                                       | \$253,000                                   | \$   |
| 2. Other State    | \$                                       | \$  | \$4,500 (annual)   |
| 3. Non-State Cash | \$                                       | \$  | \$   |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>\$</b>                                | <b>\$253,000</b>                            | <b>\$4,500 (annual)</b>                                  |

**BUDGET:**

|              |                  |
|--------------|------------------|
| Personnel    | \$30,000         |
| Equipment    | \$               |
| Acquisition  | \$               |
| Development  | \$203,000        |
| Other        | \$20,000         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>\$253,000</b> |

**VII. COOPERATION:**

The project team will include the following MHS staff members (non-LCMR funding): Thomas Ellig, Southern District Manager; Jill McNutt, Site Manager of Lower Sioux Agency; Michael Cook, Program Coordinator. MHS will also cooperate with the Renville County Historical Society, residents, and county government.

**VIII. LOCATION:**

A map of the state and of the local area is attached to this work program.

**IX. Reporting Requirements:**

Periodic work program progress reports will be submitted not later than May 31, 1998 and November 30, 1998. A final workprogram report and associated products will be submitted by June 30, 1999, or by the completion date as set in the appropriation.