

Summary of Sacred Sites Tour - May 18, 2024

Notes compiled by Bruce Elliott, an attendee

Storytelling by Jim Bear Jacobs: mnchurches.org or healingmnstories.wordpress.com
(If you google Jim Bear Jacobs, both of these sites will come up.)

Jim Bear Jacobs led a tour of three sites, describing the history of events at each of them as it relates to the Dakota tribes in Minnesota.

Site 1: St. Peter's Catholic Church in Mendota Heights:

There are 11 sovereign nations recognized in Minnesota, 7 of them Ojibwe/Anashinabe and 4 Dakota. The Dakota tribes are indigenous, and their history recognizes no other predecessor place or home. The Ojibwe/Anashinabe tribes, by contrast, have made their home in Minnesota since the 1600's.

The Dakota called this land, which surrounds the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, Bedotah, which means "confluence" in Dakota. The first treaty with the Dakota was reached in 1805, at a time prior to Minnesota being recognized as a territory. At that time, westward expansion had reached Minnesota, but the land itself was part of what the US had acquired via the Louisiana Purchase. Fort Snelling was built as an outpost that was intended to represent the edge up to which settlement in that area could occur, with white settlers free to settle east of Fort Snelling but with Dakota retaining their rights to live west of the Fort. The treaty of 1805 did not involve ceding Dakota land but instead was a treaty that was premised on cohabitation with white settlers and the Dakota people. The land specifically identified for cohabitation extended from the Fort nine miles to the north and west along the Mississippi river up past St. Anthony Falls and then looping back to the Fort, thus encompassing Minneapolis, the land at which the Mall of America is placed, and the falls at St. Anthony.

The validity of the Treaty is questionable, because contrary to Treaty Law, signatures of a majority of the Dakota chiefs were not obtained, as only two of seven signed the document. The treaty appeared to have been breached not long after the ink dried in that the payment for the rights of cohabitation--\$200,000--was never made. Only \$2,000 found its way to the Dakota Tribes. Moreover, the intended purpose of the treaty to mark the edge of Western expansion was doomed from the start, with Lewis and Clark already adventuring further west, and because the Manifest Destiny "doctrine" ultimately justified control of all land to the west coast of the continent.

The fort was a typical expression of Manifest Destiny, colonization ethics and expression of the claimed supremacy and dominion of the United States, and as such the fort, not coincidentally, was built at the very heart of the Dakota lands.

Similarly, St. Peters Church, the oldest church in Minnesota, was placed at the heart of Dakota lands, also an expression of the link between the Catholic Church and Empire, a relationship that had been

fostered over centuries, perhaps beginning with the alliance of the Catholic Church and the Roman Empire in about the third century AD.

While St. Peters thus had a dubious claim to the land at the outset, it has recently done much to improve its relationship with the Dakota people, including allowing the church buildings to be used for tribal business, allowing its fields to be used for the annual Powwows in the second weekend of September every year, and in planting four directional oaks on the church property, those oaks having been taken by graft from the original "four grandmothers," oak trees sacred to the Dakota people. The Four Grandmothers were four Burr Oaks planted by the Dakota people to create a map of the four directions, and in such close proximity that they shared a common canopy. These oaks were located near a natural spring which produces about 100,000 gallons of clean, drinkable water daily, thus rendering this land particularly habitable. When the light rail was being put in about 20 years ago, the Four Grandmothers were destroyed, despite substantial social and political opposition to it. One arborist took samples from those four trees and was able to successfully grow four new oaks which he then gave to the Dakota to plant in replacement of the original oaks. At that point in time, the Dakota owned no land in and around Mendota, and St. Peters agreed to have the four oaks placed on their grounds where they thrive today.

Site 2: Fort Snelling State Park:

The second site was in a part of Fort Snelling State Park almost directly under the Mendota Bridge on its western edge, and about five hundred yards upstream of the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. This specific area is the situs of many Dakota origin stories, of the creation of man, of creation generally, and stories surrounding the advent of light, sound, birth, and genesis. As such, Dakota women would often travel 2 to 3 days on foot from their homes in order to give birth in this part of the river valley, thus aligning their own families' creation and growth with the stories of the first people's origin.

The Dakota concept of time is vastly different from the Western view. Dakota stories are not stuck to a linear timeline, and therefore cannot be dismissed as events to which those currently living do not have a connection. Rather, for the Dakota, stories and history are not tied to specific time but to specific places. Thus, the disruption of place has entirely different impact and consequences in this world view.

In the Dakota world view, it is thus beyond ironic that the very part of the river valley that is the site of their sacred stories of origin is also the place where their people were consigned to live in the first concentration camps established in the United States. How this came to pass requires the telling of Minnesota and US History of particular ugliness, cruelty, illegality, inhumanity and barbarism.

In 1849, Minnesota became a territory and the territorial governance wanted to move as quickly as possible to the more desirable condition of statehood. To accomplish that, the territory needed to create legal ownership of land via the treaty process and build the number of white male settlers to a point where occupation of those lands was realistic. In 1849, neither condition existed.

The treaties by which land was acquired were negotiated in 1851 to 1855(?). These treaties severed the notion of cohabitation which had continued to be the case following the earlier treaty of 1805. The relevant treaty terms were that the Dakota would cede 36 million acres of their land (the entire state of Minnesota today consists of 52 million acres) for the exclusive use and occupation and ownership of the United States in exchange for \$3,000,000, \$305,000 of which was to be paid immediately and the balance paid through annual payments administered by agents of the Federal government. Further, the Dakota were to vacate the ceded land and agree to live on land reserved to them, which consisted of a strip of land along both banks of the Minnesota River that was 20 miles wide and 150 miles long. The treaty was not in all likelihood signed by a majority of the Dakota chiefs who were separated by significant distances, and otherwise beset by logistical problems precluding any informed consideration and discussion of the treaty terms. Instead, it appears that Dakota people who were not chiefs and who favored the treaty were found to sign the document. Further, those who did sign were asked to sign a separate document which many or all assumed was a duplicate copy of the treaty. The terms of the second document were never explained to the Dakota. This document, called the Traders' Papers, was a list of all white persons who claimed that they held a debt with a member of the Dakota Tribes, and which required that these debts to listed persons be paid first, skimming from the top of the agreed upon treaty payments.

Of particularly odious character in this charade was one of our first governors, Henry Sibley, after which the high school in Mendota Heights was named, though it has recently been changed to Two Rivers High School. Sibley wrote most of the Treaty and the Traders Papers. Sibley himself ran an unsuccessful business as a fur trader and identified himself as a person who had extended \$66,000 in loans to the Dakota people. This is not likely to have been true. But, in accord with the terms of the Treaty and Traders' Papers, when the first \$305,000 payment to the Dakota was to occur, Sibley took \$66,000, other traders on the list took their share with the result that only \$60,000 went to the Dakota people. Further, the payments to be made annually were reduced via the Traders Papers resulting in a cycle of graft, corruption and kickbacks between those US agents who administered the payment program and the business lenders and traders who put themselves on the list. Sibley himself was elevated from his deep debt in his furrier business to solvency and ultimately to the governor's office.

In further breach of the agreement, the land retained by the Dakota on the Minnesota River to which all Dakota were to now live was being settled rapidly by immigrating Norwegian and German families, thus creating significant tension between those groups in western Minnesota. Aggravating these tensions, during the Civil War, the US simply did not make a Treaty payment at all in 1862. This caused merchants and lenders to refuse to extend credit to the Dakota, even on their traditionally vastly usurious terms, though credit was extended to the settlers who were on the Dakota reserved lands. The disallowance of credit created a crisis of starvation for the Dakota on their own land, which in 1862 was entering a fourth year of drought. Dakota women were relegated to following soldiers' horses to collect the bits of oats or grains that might be salvaged from their manure in order to feed the tribes' children who were starving. Others boiled grass and fed the grassy water to their starving infants. A meeting took place between the Dakota, Sibley, and primary creditor, a Mr. Myrick, and US Agent Thomas Galbraith in the summer of 1862 at which the Dakota pleaded for credit and the release of goods and food supplied to

the agents. Though it was not a case of lack of supplies, the meeting failed. Mr. Myrick commented that the Dakota were not people but animals, and that they should continue to eat grass.

In August of 1862, 3 or 4 Dakota young men killed the 5 occupants of a homestead in Western Minnesota. Their chief, Little Crow, urged that they turn themselves in because he feared an indiscriminate attack on all members of the tribe. The men refused to do that, and so warning that they could not win in a war, Little Crow nonetheless stood by his people and thus the war began. It was over in a year, with soldiers from Fort Snelling crushing the resistance and rounding up all Indian people they could find. The captured were divided between men of fighting age and women, children and the aged. The first group were tried by summary process producing a list of 303 men who were to be hanged. That list was sent to Abraham Lincoln for his blessing and permission. The 1700 women and children and aged were force marched 150 miles by foot in six days to a stockade of about two and a half acres at the very place of the tour site in Fort Snelling State Park. Lincoln rejected the proposed list of persons to be executed for practical reasons associated with the negative impact mass killing would have on the Government's ability to negotiate treaties with other tribes. He ultimately agreed that it was reasonable that a mere 38 should be hanged and signed the Emancipation Proclamation and the Order requiring the mass execution of the Dakota men within days of each other in 1862. Gallows were built in Mankato where the men were kept, and on December 26th, 1862, all 38 were executed by a public hanging attended by a crowd of 5,000.

The dead were "buried" en masse on a river sandbar, and were presumably washed away in the spring of that year, all of this in contravention to the rites of passage honored by the Dakota.

As for those confined in the concentration camp at Fort Snelling, disease and other factors were causing them to lose three hundred people a year, and the soldiers there took the bodies out of the stockade to be buried nearby, also in contravention of the rites of passage honored by the Dakota. Rather than having the dead mistreated in this fashion, the Dakota began digging graves within their crowded encampment in the unfrozen soil near their fire pits. In this fashion, the sacred site of their origin stories now carried, as well, the stories of death, disease and genocide.

In 1863 the Minnesota legislature passed the Dakota Removal Act, making it illegal for any Dakota person to live in the state and allowing anyone to kill any Indian person for scalp values payable from \$25 to \$200 dollars a scalp. The people in the stockade were accordingly taken by cattle boat down the Mississippi, and up the Missouri, to a god forsaken location in South Dakota known as Crow Creek, where they continued to be prisoners of war until 1864 when the restrictions on their travel were lifted. As a result, the number of Dakota today in Minnesota is only 2,000 people while the vast majority of the Dakota moved elsewhere from Crow Creek to other parts of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Montana and Canada. This period of Indian Wars was not limited to the Dakota, but the war in Minnesota was at the leading edge of that period and it ended in December of 1890 with the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Jim Bear's view on Reparations:

When asked what he thought about reparations, Jim made three points:

1. The budget is a moral document that shows the Church's financial commitments, and thus Reparations should be a part of the budget.
2. He believed that the reparations payments can be most usefully applied to Indigenous and Cultural Reclamation Projects.
3. He believed that the long term vitality of any effort at reparations is established by forming long-term relationships with indigenous organizations.

He offered that a Land Acknowledgement isn't reparations, and it isn't work towards reparations, it is what it is, merely an acknowledgement of the fact of theft of labor and land.

He suggested that giving back land is difficult, but if long term relationships of trust are established, perhaps agreements could be reached where the property of a church is deeded back to the relevant indigenous community with the understanding that the church could continue to perform services there in furtherance of their mission.

Site 3: Pilot Knob Hill:

Pilot Knob Hill is a beautiful piece of land that is now a protected site on the National Registry of Historic Places adjoining Acacia Cemetery in Mendota Heights. It is a hill where the Dakota people would take their dead. The practice was to place a loved one on an elevated platform for months or a year allowing their remains to return to the earth and sky, after which the bones would be buried at that same site. At some point, 30 feet of land was shaved off the top, the soil to be used in construction sites. This resulted in the mass disturbance of graves, the creation of a "bone shed," without any effort to maintain the integrity of what was being disturbed. This area was slated for high end condos but outrage regarding the desecration of this burial ground ultimately stopped that from happening via the work of native activists allied with "big-hearted white women of the suburbs" who took the developers on. In contemplation of the condo development a spur road was bulldozed and paved through this same land with similar disregard to the known history of this land. The other side of this same hill is Acacia Cemetery, and the juxtaposition of these competing narratives--the beautifully protected and maintained cemetery for whites, and the utterly desecrated cemetery for the Dakota--separated by a mere fifteen feet of road was saddening.