

50 COOLEST FREE PLACES IN DAKOTA COUNTY

Dakota County is home to many interesting, free and sometimes surprising local attractions. Below are 50 of the coolest sites - in no particular order - based on recommendations from residents and my own travels throughout our scenic county. For an online version of these locations on Google maps, go to: <https://bit.ly/2AiLO1s>

1. Chimney Rock (near Hastings)

Towering nearly 30 feet high, this rare sandstone pillar is the last of three water- and wind-sculpted spires still standing in Dakota County. Dating back 14,000 years to the time of the last receding glacier, Chimney Rock served as a landmark for settlers moving into the area in the 1800's.

For decades Chimney Rock hovered near the top of a DNR list of unusual areas needing protection, and in 2012 it became the star attraction of a 76-acre wooded tract purchased by the DNR and Dakota County. The \$80,000 in county funds came from a county bond issue approved by voters in 2002 to preserve farm and natural areas.

For more info and directions: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/snas/detail.html?id=sna02040>



2. Pine Bend Bluffs (Inver Grove Heights)

People are amazed to find this stunning 256-acre Scientific and Natural Area with its spectacular views of the Mississippi River Valley located just a few hundred feet off of Hwy 52/55 at 111th Street.

Situated 200 feet above the river, the Pine Bend Bluffs SNA is one of the least disturbed sites along the river in the Twin Cities and is home to numerous rare and endangered species, including James' polania and butternut, kitten-tails and the red-shouldered hawk.

Parking Instructions: Pine Bend Bluff SNA is located in Inver Grove Heights. Travel south on US Hwy 52 exiting on 117th Street. Drive a half mile back on the east frontage road. Turn right (east) on the road by the trucking company and park at Dakota County's new Pine Bend

Trailhead. A sign will lead to the gate, taking you behind a neighbor's barn (which will be on your left) and through the woods to beautiful bluff top views (see photo) of the Mississippi River from the ridge's goat prairies.



3. Vermillion River (near Farmington)

Regarded by some as the best trout stream in the world, the little-known Vermillion River lies right here in Dakota County, just south of Farmington.

Local folks chuckle when they hear about anglers who travel hundreds or thousands of miles to places like Montana or even New Zealand in search of monster brown trout, hoping to catch and land a trophy brown over 30 inches. Rivers that consistently hold fish this large are rare, so many people are shocked to learn that one of the very best is in our own back yard.

For directions: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/fisheries/eastmetro/troutstreams/vermillion.html>



4. The House of Eight Gables a/k/a Reuben Freeman House (Inver Grove Heights)

The House of Eight Gables in Inver Grove Heights has the most romantic name of all the buildings in Dakota County on the National Register. After spending a long winter in 1875 reading Hawthorne's novel, The House of Seven Gables, German-born farmer Reuben Freeman

decided to go Hawthorne one better and build this gem-of-a-house.

Location: 9091 Inver Grove Trail, Inver Grove Heights. The home is still privately-owned and occupied, so look but please don't trespass.



5. Lebanon Hills Regional Park (Eagan)

Lebanon Hills is the largest park in the Dakota County park system. Containing almost 2,000 acres, the park offers miles of trails and many lakes for year-round outdoor sports, recreation and environmental education.

For more info and directions: <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/parksTrails/LebanonHills>

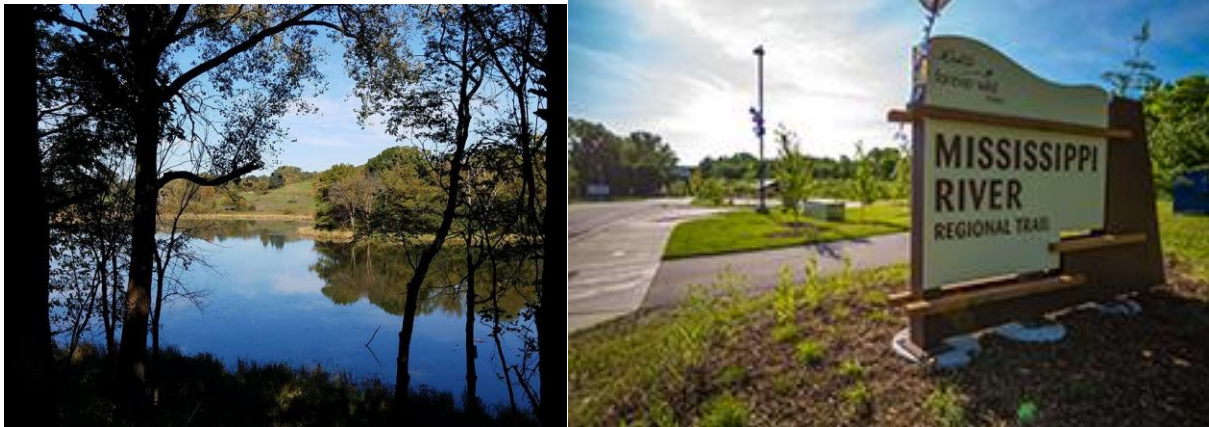


6. Spring Lake Park Reserve and Schaar's Bluff (Hastings)

Simply put, this county park offers one of the most spectacular views of the Mississippi River you will find anywhere along its 2,320 miles. There are also hiking and biking trails, picnic shelters, a pavilion, sand volleyball court, playground, and fire rings.

Location: 8395 127th Street, Hastings. More info:

<https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/parksTrails/SpringLake/Pages/default.aspx>



7. Castle Rock (Castle Rock, duh)

Perhaps the saddest yet most venerated spot on our list is Castle Rock – the rock formation, not the town. Known to the Dakota as Inyan Bosndata or “Rock-standing-on-end,” it came to be known as Castle Rock by white settlers and was among Minnesota’s most revered features by both Native Americans and early settlers alike. To the Dakota, the Inyan or “Rock” is the symbol of the most powerful force in the land and served as an object of worship. Large boulders were chosen and painted red and green, with smaller stones often set up on end and similarly painted, then surrounded by eagle feathers, red cloth, and tobacco. To thousands of tourists who flocked from across the nation to see it in the 1800’s, this unique formation was the must-see culmination of a cross-country trip.

The spire fell in a strong storm on September 28, 1895, and led C.P. Carpenter, founder of the *Dakota County Tribune* and publisher of the *Northfield Independent*, to reflect on its loss:

“The practical destruction of that picturesque and historical landmark known as Castle Rock, as reported in our correspondence, which has stood as the greatest and the most interesting natural curiosity of this section ever since the state was settled, will be universally and sincerely regretted by all, and especially by the old settlers. To them it will be like the sudden and sad departure of an old friend.

“Ever since the first white settler passed through Poplar Grove and beheld with wonder its rocky spire pointing toward heaven, it has stood there through storm and shine, through summer heat and winter cold, a guide to the traveler, the object of innumerable pleasure parties, a wonder to the passerby, of interest of all. Tourists have visited it from all parts of the nation, the thoughtless and careless have carved their names upon it, thus assisting in its ultimate destruction; the thoughtful have gazed upon it with wondering awe, as their minds vainly sought to follow its history back through the ages of the past – back to the time when the swirling floods swept around it, carrying away from its base the loose soil, and wearing the furrows in its sandy sides – down through the years since that time, when the fierce winds have beaten upon it and the rains have helped to almost imperceptibly undermine its picturesque spire. With grim fortitude it stood there,

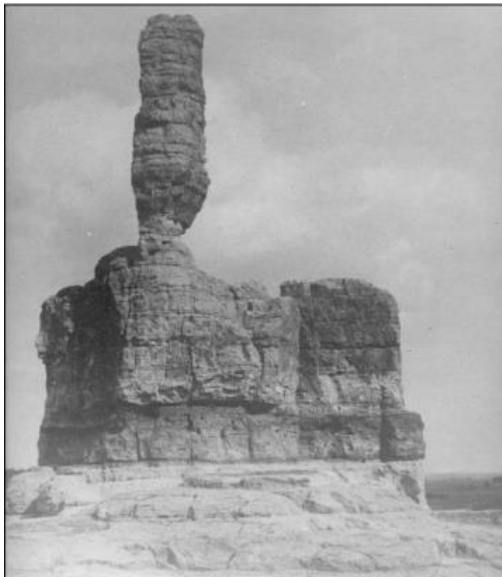
helpless to stay the ravages of time, helpless to resent the injuries done it by wanton hands. Like a grim sentry upon the battlements of time, it ever held aloft its spire, doing its duty well to the last minute, until Saturday, September 28, 1895, unable longer to withstand the mad fury of the elements which beat pitilessly upon it, having done its full duty in its day and generation, it fell, and was crushed and destroyed, while the cold winds gave a shriek of victory. To the old settlers the destruction of this historic landmark will be like the loss of a valued friend; to the lover of the historic, the picturesque, the beautiful and the things of olden times, its fall will carry a feeling of sadness and sorrow.

“Tourists by thousands have visited it, picnic and pleasure parties almost without number have made it their destination, great celebrations have rallied around it, voices long since hushed in death echoed from its sides, memories of both pleasure and sorrow were entwined about it. But it is gone! No more shall we look upon its graceful spire. It has become but an unsightly sand rock, which will continue to be worn away by time until crops shall grow where it once stood, and ages hence, if the world lasts, someone may wonder why that part of the field is filled with such fine and beautiful sand.

“Good bye, old Castle Rock, good bye; thou wilt still live in history and the traditions of the people.”

Now worn away by both natural and human forces, the spectacular sandstone formation that once jutted up over 44 feet out of the smooth prairie and was visible from many miles away, today is a mere 11 feet tall, but Inyan Bosdata’s place on this list remains deserved among those who know its story.

Location: The rock formation is located at the point where 275th Street and Cambodia Avenue join in Castle Rock, on private property, and while now barely visible its history remains sacred.



8. Carroll’s Woods/Schwarz Pond (Rosemount)

You have to like a park that has its own Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Carrolls-Woods-Park/151122884903707>.

Location: Carroll's Woods is next to Rosemount High School and is a quiet oasis just ½ mile from busy Highway 3. With access from Cobbler Avenue, Connemara and Clover Lane, its 44 acres contain three miles of paved and unpaved trails through rolling woodlands and around Schwarz Pond.



9. Thompson County Park (West St. Paul)

This charming 57-acre county park provides a quiet getaway just off Highway 52 in West St. Paul. The park features a large picnic area that overlooks Thompson Lake and miles of wooded trails that connect to the North Urban Regional Trail — a trail system linking Thompson Lake Park to Kaposia Park in South St. Paul and to the Mississippi River Trail.

For more information and directions:

<https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/parksTrails/Thompson/Pages/default.aspx>



10. Kaposia Park & Kaposia Village (South St. Paul)

Created in 1937 as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project during the Great Depression, 85-acre Kaposia Park remains mostly natural with mature trees and varying topography. While its most recognizable feature is Kaposia's historic log pavilion, there is also a picnic shelter, small ballfield, horseshoe pits, and volleyball area. Most unique is the park's premier 24-hole disc golf course, which has hosted state, national and international tournaments. Bicyclists and walkers can also access Dakota County's regional trail from Kaposia Park. By heading east down the trail visitors encounter Kaposia Village, where the Dakota and Chief Little Crow spent the summer months from 1837 until an 1851 treaty moved them further west.

The park is located just off Highway 52. Exit east on Butler, and make a quick right into the park.



11. Dakota County Libraries

Award-winning Dakota County libraries offer a great place to kick back and relax with a good book. Our nine county libraries checked out 4.7 million materials to over a million visitors last year. Check out the offerings – which go way beyond just books – at a library near you:

<https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/libraries>



12. Whitetail Woods (Empire Township)

Dakota County's newest addition, the 456-acre Whitetail Woods Regional Park, is located in the center of Dakota County, near Farmington. Bordered by the Vermillion Highlands Wildlife Management Area to the east and the Vermillion River Wildlife and Aquatic Management areas to the south, Whitetail Woods focuses more on a nature experience with an old-fashioned approach to recreation, featuring play areas with stumps, rocks and a water pump as well as 10

miles of trails, a 53-foot sledding hill that is lit on winter nights and a picnic shelter for 100, with an outdoor fire pit and kitchen. Whitetail Woods Park is also home to the Twin Cities best hike, according to an article in *City Pages*.

For more information and directions:

<https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/parksTrails/WhitetailWoods>



13. Mississippi River Greenway (South St. Paul to Hastings)

Featuring some of the best views of the Mississippi River in the country, particularly from the Pine Bend Bluffs and Schaar's Bluff, 27 miles of the national Mississippi River Greenway run through Dakota County, with the final local segments set for completion by the end of 2020.



14. Hastings Sand Coulee SNA (Hastings)

Home to the largest native prairie in Dakota County, this 267-acre Scientific and Natural Area received its SNA designation in 2007, a classification reserved for only the highest quality and culturally significant ecological areas in the state.

For more information and directions:

http://www.minnesotaseasons.com/Destinations/Hastings_Sand_Coulee_SNA.html



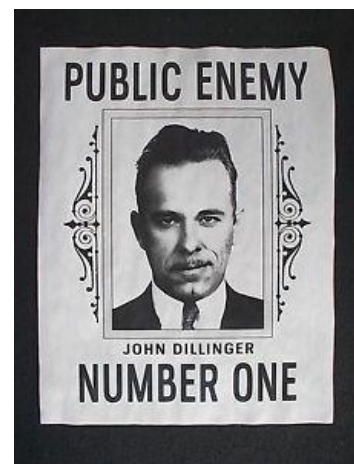
15. Rock Island Swing Bridge (Inver Grove Heights)

Constructed in 1894-95, the Rock Island Swing Bridge is perhaps most famous – or should we say infamous – for serving as an escape route for gangster John Dillinger during a running gun battle with Dakota County deputies as he fled across the river to St. Paul Park.

The historic double-decker swing bridge, which carried trains and vehicles 1,661 feet across the Mississippi, was the longest of its kind on the Mississippi and among the longest in the world. When it was closed to traffic in 1999, after being deemed unsafe, it was the only remaining toll bridge in Minnesota. Eventually, on November 24, 2008, a 200-foot portion of eastern span collapsed into the river and the entirety of the bridge was scheduled for demolition, leading to it being named one of the state's 10 Most Endangered Historic Places by the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. Local leaders and a Simley High School history class led an effort to save the bridge.

On May 16, 2009, a mere three days before a wrecking ball was set to take down the western portion of the bridge, a last-minute legislative reprieve in the form of a moratorium was signed by Gov. Pawlenty. After numerous fundraisers and other efforts, the remaining sections were turned into a recreational pier and the land around the bridge into a park, for roughly the same amount it would have cost to demolish the bridge. Today the site offers great views of the Mississippi and is a popular spot for wedding and prom photos, walkers, cyclists and history buffs.

Location: 4465 66th Street East, IGH. Just two blocks east of Concord.



16. Byllesby Dam & Lake Byllesby Regional Park

Dakota County owns a dam that helps form Lake Byllesby Regional Park, which is nestled in the scenic Cannon River Valley. The dam generates enough electricity to power 2,400 homes. Trails for hiking in the summer and dogsledding in the winter, together with a playground, campground, beach and boat launch are just a few of the amenities.

For more info and directions: <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/parks/parksTrails/LakeByllesby>



17. Pilot Knob/Oheyawahi (Mendota Heights)

Recently added to the National Register of Historic Places, Pilot Knob/Oheyawahi is a 25-acre site that overlooks the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. Visitors are treated to spectacular vistas looking northwest toward Historic Fort Snelling, Fort Snelling State Park, and downtown Minneapolis. Wildlife is also attracted to this scenic hilltop. It isn't unusual to see whitetail deer browsing foliage in autumn and turkeys strutting in spring. Many species of birds summer here and, being on a major migratory route, the site attracts many birds during migration that are rarely seen in the Twin Cities area. To the Dakota this prominent hill was known as *Oheyawahi*, or "a hill much visited." It was here that the Dakota buried their dead, and Dakota villages dotted the river below during the early 1800s. The hill remains a sacred place to the Shakopee Mdewakanton.

For more info and directions: <https://www.nps.gov/miss/planyourvisit/pilotknob.htm>



18. Harmon Park (Inver Grove Heights)

This is my favorite place to mountain bike in the Twin Cities! It isn't overly technical, which means riders with mediocre skills like me can tackle it. It is the best flow trail I have encountered locally, like a cardio-controlled roller coaster with banked turns, rolling terrain, modest jumps, and consistent surfaces.

For more info: <http://mnbiketrialnavigator.blogspot.com/2012/06/head-to-salem-hillsharmon-park-reserve.html>



19. Holz Farm Park (Eagan)

Originally settled in the 1870s, this picturesque farm remained in the family until 1993 with the passing of Otto and Ella Holz. Local residents persuaded the Eagan City Council to save the site in 1995 as a living history farm.

Holz Farm bridges Eagan's past and present, old and young, and rural and urban communities, providing the community with an educational, cultural and historical resource.

Location: 4665 Manor Drive, Eagan



20. Albert Park – The World’s Smallest Park (West St. Paul)

This 1,790-square-foot, triangular swath of land was reportedly recognized by *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* in 1967 as the World’s Smallest Dedicated Park, according to an inscription on one of the park’s stone markers.

Created in 1931 as a memorial to 15-year-old Albert LeFevre, a Boy Scout and Humboldt sophomore who drowned while rafting on the Mississippi on October 25, 1930, I was first told about Albert Park by my dad, who grew up a block away. This neat little park contains a stone obelisk surrounded by a circular shrub arrangement and a flagpole. Flower beds adorn each corner and a sidewalk wraps around it.

The most meaningful monument at the park is a small, yet heavy, 300-pound, black granite marker that had gone missing for nearly 50 years. The masonry contractor who created the foundation for a new, much larger marker in 1967 was instructed to remove the original black granite marker. The contractor, Bob Licha, said he didn’t feel right about removing the marker, which had been purchased and placed at the park by Albert’s father. Licha stored the original granite marker for 46 years, until the individual who instructed him to remove it was no longer around. He then called and talked to the West St. Paul parks director. On September 12, 2013, 87-year-old Bob Licha was on site as city park workers re-installed the original monument memorializing a father’s love of his lost son.

Location: The intersection of Smith, Dodd, and Bernard in West St Paul.



21. Pine Bend Cemetery (Rosemount)

Dakota County’s second-oldest cemetery is the resting place of veterans of Korea, World War II, World War I, the Civil War, even the War of 1812, as well as some of the county’s earliest settlers. I visit Pine Bend Cemetery every Fourth of July. It is located along the Highway 52 frontage road directly east of Flint Hills Refinery.

This was also roughly the location of Chief Medicine Bottle's Dakota village until 1852, not to mention the inauspicious end in the early 1900's of the St. Paul Southern Railway, Minnesota's first and least successful attempt at an electric intraurban rail system. In between, plans for a robust town nearby earned the area plenty of attention on maps, but far less attention from settlers. Read more about the St. Paul Southern at https://publishing.rchs.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCHS_Fall2006_Diers.pdf

Location: At the intersection of 117th Street and the Highway 52/55 east frontage, head east past the "Road Closed" sign, winding south about three blocks to the cemetery entrance.



22. Dakota County Historical Society (South St. Paul)

Explore ever-changing exhibits, dive into historical records, do genealogical research, or just come to see the world's largest map of Dakota County on the floor.

Website: <https://www.dakotahistory.org/>

Location: 130 3rd Ave. N., South St. Paul.



23. Dodge Nature Center (West St. Paul)

Dodge has 460+ acres of prairies, hardwood forest, and wetlands, along with miles of hiking trails, a working farm, orchard, bee apiary, and a variety of animals to discover.

Location: 365 Marie Ave. W., West St. Paul, MN



24. Antler's Park & Dan Patch Line

Lakeville's Antler's Park opened on the 4th of July in 1910 at Lake Marion. The park offered amusements, swimming, boating and a dance pavilion. It proved so popular that the "Dan Patch" rail line scheduled 12 runs a day from Minneapolis and St. Paul.

For more info and directions: <http://www.ci.lakeville.mn.us/Facilities/Facility/Details/Antlers-Park-1>



25. Church of the Advent (Farmington)

It was Bishop Whipple himself who is credited with the design selection of the Church of the Advent.

Location: 412 Oak Street, Farmington



26. Daniel F. Akin House (Farmington)

The Daniel F. Akin House holds a unique position in state and national history – it has been the site of continuous weather observation since 1885.

Location: 19185 Akin Road, Farmington



27. Salem Church – “The Little White Church” (Inver Grove Heights)

The state’s first congregation of the Evangelical Association of North America, the “Little White Church” was built in 1875. Regular worship services there ended in 1910, but descendants of the church’s founding families have continued a Christmas Epiphany service held on the first Sunday in January and a Founders’ Day Service on the first Sunday in June.



28. Stockyards Exchange Building and Armour Gates (South St. Paul)

In 1919, Armour & Company opened the largest meatpacking facility in the history of the world in South St. Paul. It was also the largest building in Minnesota when it was finished.

Less than a mile north is the still-standing Stockyards Exchange Building, which was constructed in 1887 and has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Armour’s employed as many as 4,000 people at the plant and expended upwards of \$90 million annually for livestock - the equivalent of \$1.3 billion in today's dollars. Together with Swift's, the area grew to be the largest stockyards in the nation.

When the first Fortune 500 list debuted in 1955, Armour's had grown so big and successful that it ranked No. 7. (The next 10 smaller companies on the list were Gulf Oil, Mobil, DuPont, Amoco, Bethlehem Steel, CBS, Texaco, ATT, Shell Oil and Kraft.)

While Armour's eventually closed in 1979, its gates still stand at the corner of Armour and Hardman in South St. Paul, an everyday reminder of the hard work by so many local men and women - including Joe Atkins’ own grandfather - to make better lives for their children and grandchildren.



29. Fasbender Clinic Building (Hastings)

Most folks drive by this medical clinic, with its enveloping metal roof, without realizing it is one the rare late-career works by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's visionary work cemented his place as the American Institute of Architects' "greatest American architect of all time."

Location: 801 Pine Street, Hastings



30. George W. Wentworth House (West St. Paul)

On December 31, 1979, the Wentworth House became the first site in West St. Paul to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. George Wentworth was an emigre from England who traded in horses; he was also involved in local politics, working to organize the city of South Saint Paul. In the late 1880s, a dispute arose between the farmers in the western portion of the city, whom Wentworth represented, and the people living around the stockyards in the eastern portion of the city. West Saint Paul separated from South Saint Paul in 1889 and Wentworth remained politically active in the new city. After his death in 1908, the house remained vacant for many years before being renovated by subsequent owners.

Location: 1575 Oakdale Avenue, West St. Paul



31. B52 Crash Site Memorial (Inver Grove Heights)

I would not call this site “cool,” but I do believe it is important, sacred, and ought to be remembered. On September 16, 1958, an Air Force B-52 bomber on a training flight slammed into the Kahl farm in Inver Grove, killing seven of the eight crewmen on board. Several members of the Kahl family suffered injuries, and their farmhouse and barn burnt to the ground. “The craft dug a furrow 300 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 25 feet deep,” the Pioneer Press reported at the time, “Metal parts were found over a 5-square-mile area.” We dedicated a monument when I was mayor to ensure those lost would be remembered.

Location: A stone marker and plaque mark the site near the intersection of Brooks and Broderick boulevards near Inver Hills Community College.



32. Henry Sibley House (Mendota)

Still standing and now operated by the Dakota County Historical Society is the 1836 house of pioneer leader Henry Hastings Sibley (1811–1891), who was also a fur trading captain, U.S. Representative, state constitutional convention delegate, first state governor, and general. The Sibley House is believed to be the oldest existing private home in Minnesota.



33. LeDuc Historic Estate – free to see. Tours of inside are \$7.

Construction on the LeDuc house began in 1862 and was completed in 1866. Following LeDuc's service as Quartermaster in the Civil War, the family moved into the unfinished home in August, 1865. In March, 1865 he had been brevetted a brigadier general for "efficiency, intelligence and zeal in the discharge of his duties."

William G. LeDuc came to St. Paul, Minnesota Territory in 1850 from Ohio to open a book store and law office. In 1854 he purchased a quarter share in the town of Hastings from Alexander Faribault. In 1856, he and his wife Mary Bronson LeDuc, with their two daughters moved downriver to Hastings, where they had also acquired two wheat farms and 160 acres with a small grist mill on the falls of the Vermillion River. It was on this property that William and Mary decided to build their dream home.

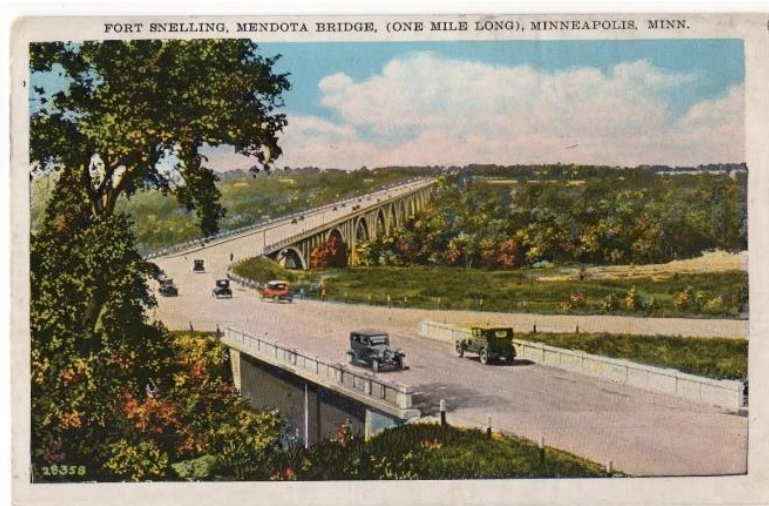
They chose a Gothic Revival home featured in Andrew Jackson Downing's 1852 book Cottage Residences. Downing was a pioneer in American landscape architect and author, whose reputation as a horticulturist was widespread. He inspired Americans to surround their homes with the beauty of nature and encouraged the use of good design even in planning farmsteads. More mansion than cottage, the house has ten fireplaces; its limestone walls are three feet thick and, except for the cherry staircase rail, all the woodwork is made from white pine finished at the site. William and Mary chose three Downing designs for their rural home site; their residence, Carriage Barn and Ice House. The estate is an unusually complete example of the Gothic Revival style of Andrew Jackson Downing.



34. Mendota Bridge

When it opened to great celebration on November 8, 1926, the 4,119-foot Mendota Bridge was the longest continuous concrete-arch bridge in the world. Two huge caravans of 15,000 cars met in the middle of the bridge, where a telegram from President Calvin Coolidge was read and Gov.

Theodore Christianson untied golden ropes symbolizing the bridge's formal opening. The bridge was dedicated to the "Gopher Gunners" of the 151st Field Artillery who died in WWI.



35. Kelley Park (Apple Valley)

With a great splash pad, playground, and picnic shelter, this is a fun place to spend a summer day.

Location: 6855 Fortino Street, Apple Valley



36. NIKE Missile Site (Castle Rock Township)

The Nike Missile site MS-40 is the best-preserved Nike installation in Minnesota. Built in 1959, the Nike missiles represented the United States' first and most widely deployed air defense missile system during the Cold War and were installed to defend the Twin Cities from enemy aircraft attacks. After decommissioning, the missiles, fueling and guiding systems were removed, but all the underground magazines are reportedly clean and dry and the elevators and doors are still functional. The Nike site offers a haunting reminder of a time when families built bomb shelters and children did nuclear drills at school.

The site is located at 1462 260th Street, with a Farmington address, though it is about seven miles southeast of the city.

A photo of the launchpad is below and a good video about the site can be found at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhWlf4aLi0U>



37. Mississippi River Bottoms

Accessed behind the Sibley House in Mendota, the Mississippi River Bottoms offer an unexpectedly cool experience for both hikers and off-road cyclists. “Cool” is both literal and figurative when it comes to the river bottoms. Sunshine barely dapples the ground beneath a thick canopy trees lining this active and scenic working river, offering respite from even the hottest summer day.



38. Vermillion Falls (Hastings)

Visitors and residents alike are often surprised to learn that Dakota County is home to the stunning, 100-foot-high Vermillion Falls. Vermillion Falls Park is on the south side of Hastings, just off Highway 61 and County Road 47, near the Con Agra flour mill. The Vermillion Falls

first began to power a mill in the 1850s that most notably produced the first saleable graham flour in the state. Miles of scenic trails wind along both the Mississippi and Vermillion rivers in the area that are sure to entice anyone who loves the outdoors.



39. St. Peter's Church (Mendota)

Dakota County is home to Minnesota's oldest church in continuous use. St. Peter's dates back to 1837 when the Vatican established a new diocese encompassing Iowa, Minnesota and parts of both North and South Dakota. To read more about the history of St. Peter's Church, go to: <http://www.stpetersmendota.org/wp-content/uploads/150th-Anniversary.pdf>

Location: 1405 Sibley Memorial Highway, Mendota



40. Serbian Home (South St. Paul)

Dedicated in 1924 and on the National Register of Historic Places since 1992, the building was deemed one of the state's 10 Most Endangered Historic Places by the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. Read more at <https://www.twincities.com/2010/12/31/immigrants-son-toils-to-save-south-st-pauls-serb-hall/>

Location: 404 3rd Ave. S., South St. Paul



41. Hastings Downtown

Historic downtown Hastings features charming shops and restaurants in preserved buildings dating back to the 1800's. Lying next to the Mississippi, high water marks are found in multiple locations. Visitors can sit along the waterfront and relax on a sunny day, watching bald eagles, busy boat and barge traffic, or hop on a bike and ride the Mississippi River Trail.



42. Caponi Art Park (Eagan) - <http://www.caponiartpark.org>

Located on 60 acres of rolling, wooded hills embedded with art, the Caponi Art Park has miles of walking paths, a vast sculpture garden, outdoor amphitheater, and spaces for quiet reflection and relaxation.

Location: 1220 Diffley Road, Eagan



43. Big Rivers Regional Trail

Located along the northern edge of Dakota County from Eagan to Lilydale, the Big Rivers Regional Trail is a scenic 4 1/2-mile paved trail that overlooks the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers.

The trail also links to the 72-mile Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, hundreds of miles of trails throughout the greater Twin Cities area and historic landmarks including Fort Snelling, Pike Island and, one of Minnesota's oldest settlements, the city of Mendota.

The Big Rivers Trailhead provides access to a nearly flat paved trail built on an abandoned railroad bed. Highway 55 in Mendota Heights, Interstate 494 in Eagan, and Interstate 35E in Mendota Heights are additional access points to the Big Rivers Regional Trail.

Location: 1498 Mendota Heights Road, Mendota Heights. Another good place to access this trail is at Lucky's 13 Pub, 1352 Sibley Memorial Highway, Mendota.



44. Miesville Ravine Park Reserve (Miesville)

Miesville Ravine Park Reserve is a large nature preserve that provides miles of trails to enjoy the picturesque Cannon River Valley.

Located at the confluence of Trout Brook and the Cannon River near Miesville, this beautiful park offers the feel of scenic southeastern Minnesota in our very own backyard.

Location: 27970 Orlando Trail, Cannon Falls



45. Dakota Woods Dog Park (Rosemount)

Admittedly Dakota Woods Dog Park is not free, as it costs \$5, but I figured it would be nice to include an option on this list for our four-legged friends. Plus, this is a spectacular dog park, with is a 16 acres of fenced woods where dogs can run and exercise off leash.

Location: 16740 Blaine Avenue, Rosemount



46. The Spot Where Women Voted for the First Time in the United States Following Enactment of the 19th Amendment (South St. Paul)

Eighty-seven South St. Paul women were the first women in the United States to vote after the passage of the 19th Amendment. The constitutional amendment passed on Aug. 26, 1920. The

next morning, the South St. Paul women cast a vote in a special election to build a water tower in the city.

Location: Just north of South St. Paul City Hall, 125 N. 3rd Avenue, South St. Paul



47. Lone Rock Trail and Vermillion Highlands

Vermillion Highlands' 2,822 acres provide ample opportunity for a number of recreational activities. Lone Rock Trail offers horseback riders, hikers and cross country skiers a pleasant and scenic experience, including gently rolling terrain, wooded areas, agricultural land and two significant wetlands that flow into the Vermillion River.

Directions: : The trail head, at the north end of the Farm Loop, has parking and restroom facilities. From the UMore Park Administrative Office on Co. Rd. 46, travel west one tenth of a mile to the first intersection, Station Trail Road. Turn south on Station Trail and continue. The trailhead is located just off Station Trail Road, south of 170th Street



48. Minnesota River Greenway (Burnsville to Lilydale)

The Minnesota River Greenway is along the south side of the Minnesota River in Burnsville. The trail is in place between I-35W and Cedar Avenue. Trail users can park at the Minnesota Riverfront Park Trailhead and enjoy views of the Minnesota River and Black Dog Lake (part of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge).



49. Rosemount Splash Pad

This would have been way higher on the list, but it is only free on special dates like for the community's annual picnic. Even on normal days, however, the admission charge is modest, especially compared to other high-priced water parks. The Central Park splash pad is approximately 3,700 square feet in size and has a variety of ground nozzles that spray water upwards out of the splash pad's rain deck. It also has a moving water feature, the Water Journey, which allows smaller children to play in and direct water as it flows through a maze.

Location: Central Park, 2893 145th Street West, Rosemount



50. Waterford Bridge (Waterford Township)

Added to the National Register of Historic Places on August 26, 2010, this is a rare surviving example of Minnesota's once-common camelback through truss bridges—built in 1909—and one of the state's oldest bridges with rigid rather than pinned connections.

Location: The bridge is located in rural Waterford Township about 2 miles northwest of Northfield in south-central Dakota County and now carries a pedestrian trail across the Cannon River.



FIVE MORE BONUS SITES... There are so many free, cool places in Dakota County that we couldn't stop with just 50.

51. Ma Barker's Hideout (West St. Paul)

An unassuming home at 1031 Robert Street in West St. Paul was once the hideout of some of the most notorious kidnapers and bank robbers in American history.

Ma Barker and her gang laid low at the home between kidnappings in 1933. They had already kidnapped and held the owner of Hamm's Brewing for a \$100,000 ransom in June 1933. They then kept busy robbing banks while plotting another kidnapping - that of Edward G. Bremer, Jr., a wealthy Twin Cities banker, and a payroll holdup in South St. Paul. The Bremer kidnapping took place in January 1934, netting the gang a \$200,000 ransom, the equivalent of about \$3.9 million in today's dollars.

These kidnappings brought considerable publicity due to the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in the same era, and the fact that President Roosevelt mentioned the kidnappings in a fireside chat.

This publicity led to a neighbor seeing a picture of Ma Barker in a detective magazine, which he reported to police. Tipped off, the Barker Gang left in a hurry just before police arrived.

Bernice Hannegraf, a 10-year-old who lived next door to the Barker Gang in 1933, recalled Ma Barker as a short, stout lady who was friendly. Her boys constantly carried violin cases. "We thought they played in orchestras," Bernice recalled.



52. The Rex Speedway (Inver Grove Heights)

Starting in 1949, Dakota County was home to one of Minnesota's most popular racetracks. Aerial photos still allow one to see where Rex Speedway once stood near 105th and Barnes Avenue.

The Rex was a high-banked, 1/2-mile dirt track that held stock car and hot rod races, along with an occasional "wreck race," a/k/a a demolition derby.

Unfortunately, fatal crashes three years in a row prompted the Dakota County Sheriff to shut down the speedway in 1954. Historian John Wycoff notes that the Rex Speedway holds the distinction of being the only track in America where a fan got killed while sitting on a toilet. This occurred when a stock car careened into the infield, striking a restroom.

Despite the closure of the track, some drivers continued to go down and race illegally until one night a driver hit a refrigerator that was left abandoned on the track. This caused the track's permanent closure.



53. The Sperry Tower & Central Park (Eagan)

Built in 2016, Sperry Tower is 198 feet tall and made up of six rings of 5,448 LED lights at varying heights. The lights illuminate Eagan's skyline each night from just after sunset until midnight and again from 4:00 a.m. until just before sunrise. The tower lighting has nearly limitless capabilities including an indefinite range of colors as well as dynamic features to celebrate holidays and special occasions.

Sperry Tower also has a practical purpose; it holds and hides City, County and private telecommunications equipment. The newly built tower replaced an existing water tower that was not needed for water capacity and had not been used since 2009. Instead of performing extensive and expensive repairs on the water tower it was removed and rebuilt. The approximate cost to operate the tower is \$2.30 per day.

Central Park is just south of Sperry Tower and is home to a splash pad, lots of activities, and walking paths.

Location: 1401 Towerview Road, Eagan



54. Dakota County Fairgrounds and Dakota City Heritage Village (Farmington)

Located on the Dakota County Fairgrounds, which is home to Minnesota's largest county fair, Dakota City Heritage Village is a living history museum and five-acre village that includes 22 buildings dating to the early 1900s. Visitors have the opportunity to experience Minnesota's rural past with costumed interpreters and demonstrations. And, of course, Dakota County is home to one of Minnesota's most popular county fairs in August of each year.

Location: 4008 220th Street, Farmington



55. Northfield's First National Bank & Defeat of the James Gang in 1876

Shared by Dakota and Rice Counties, the City of Northfield is home to two beautiful college campuses and an historic downtown that was the site of a bold daytime bank robbery.

Attempting a bold daytime robbery of the Northfield Minnesota bank, the James-Younger gang suddenly finds itself surrounded by angry townspeople and is nearly wiped out on September 7, 1876.

The James Gang began with a diversion on September 7, 1876. Five of the men galloped through the center of town, hollering and shooting their pistols in the air. As the townspeople ran for cover, three other men wearing wide-brimmed hats and long

dusters took advantage of the distraction to walk unnoticed into the First National Bank. Brandishing pistols, one of the men ordered the bank cashier to open the bank safe. Though the cashier recognized the famous face of the dangerous outlaw, Jesse James, he stalled, claiming that the safe had a time lock and could not be opened. As Jesse James considered his next move, a brave—or foolish—bank teller made a break for the back door. One of the robbers fired twice, hitting the teller in the shoulder, but the man managed to stumble to safety and sound the alarm.

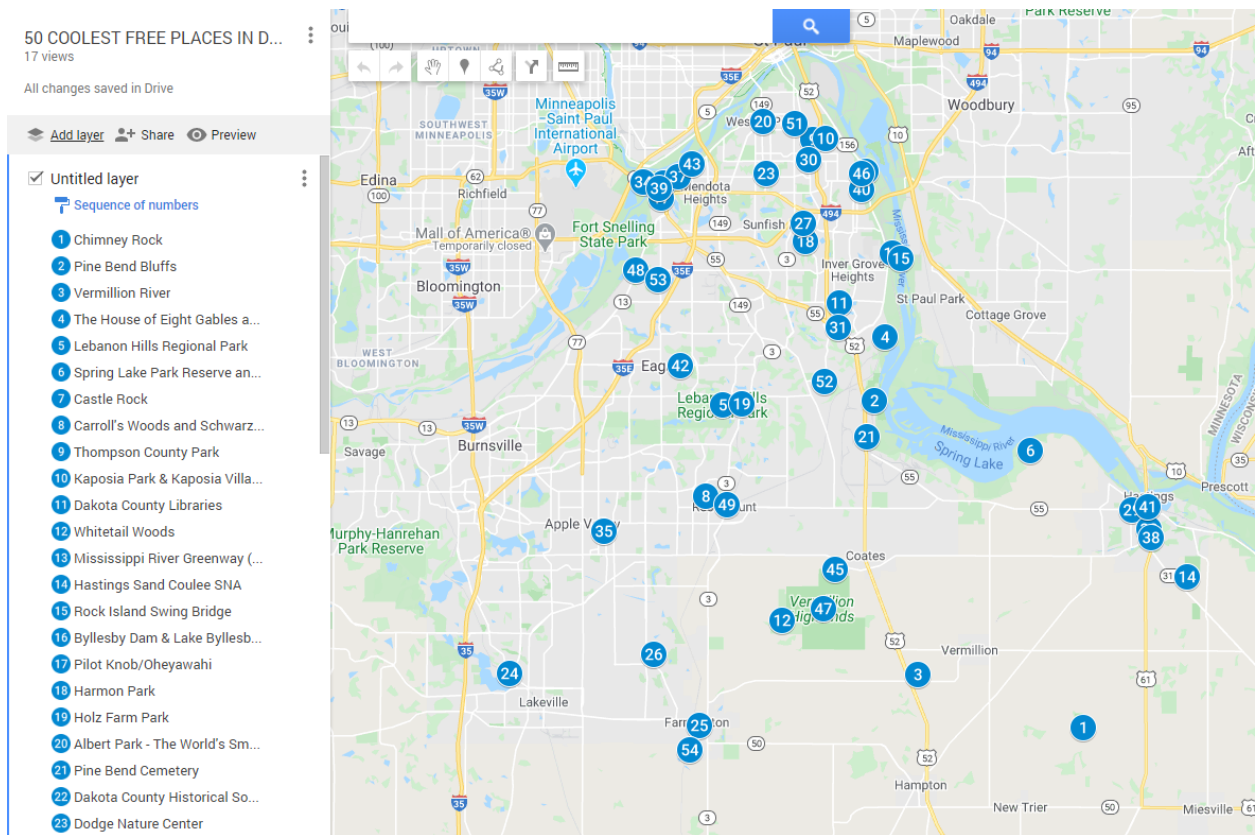
The citizens of Northfield ran to surround the bank and mercilessly shot down the robbers as they tried to escape. A 19-year-old medical student killed one gang member, Clell Miller, while the owner of the Northfield hardware store mortally wounded Bill Chadwell, peppering his body with bullets from a rapid-firing Remington repeater rifle. Jesse's brother, Frank, was hit in the leg, while their criminal partners—Jim, Cole, and Bob Younger—were also badly wounded.

Jesse was the last one out of the bank. After pausing briefly to shoot the uncooperative cashier in the head, Jesse leapt onto his horse and joined the rest of the survivors as they desperately fled town. For the next two weeks a posse pursued them relentlessly, eventually killing or capturing four more of the gang members. Luckily for Frank and Jesse James, the two brothers had decided to go their own way, escaping to Dakota Territory. After things had cooled down, they went to Nashville, Tennessee, where they started rebuilding their gang and planning new robberies.

Location: 408 Division St S, Northfield



For an interactive map to all of the sites, go to Google Maps at: <https://bit.ly/2AiLO1s>



I hope you have enjoyed this list of the 50+ coolest free places in Dakota County. Thank you to all those who contributed to it.

To send me additional suggestions for sites to be included in the next version, or to offer comments or corrections, please email me at Joe.Atkins@co.dakota.mn.us or give me a call at (651) 438-4430.