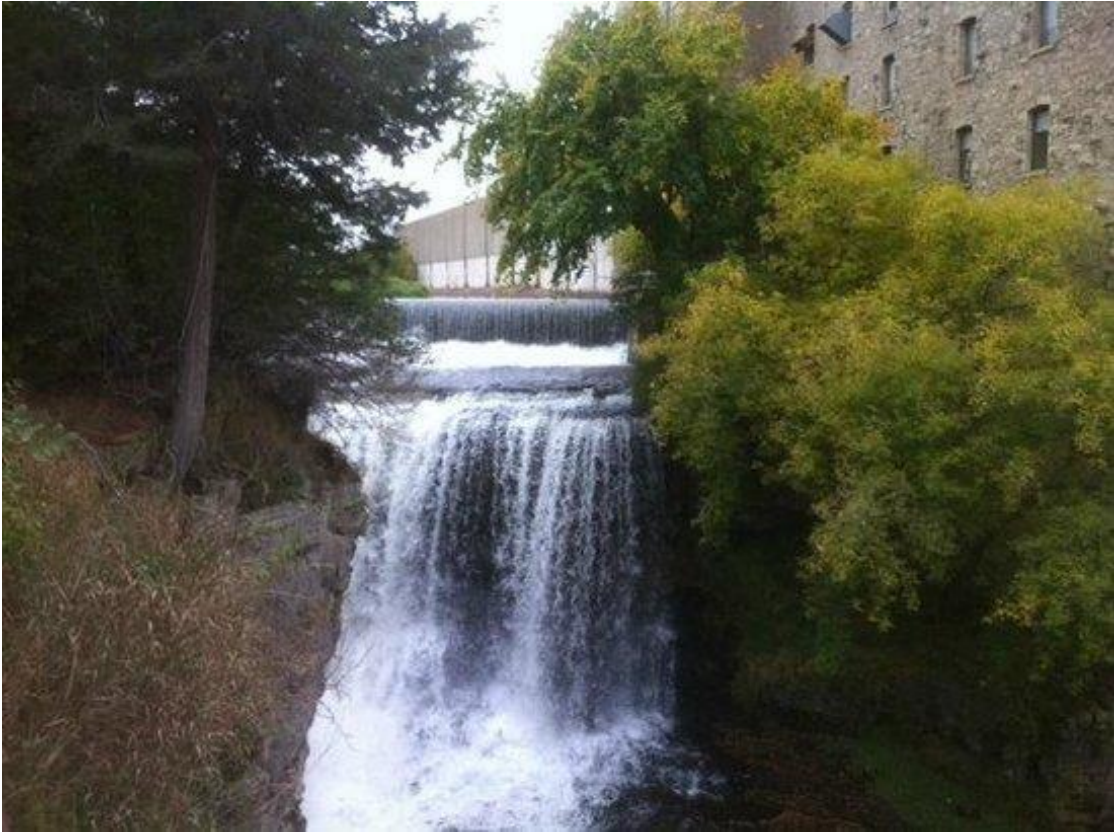


67 COOLEST FREE PLACES IN DAKOTA COUNTY

An updated guide to parks, trails, historic sites, natural wonders and surprising local destinations





Compiled by Joe Atkins
Updated June 2026

Always confirm hours, access conditions and seasonal closures before visiting. Historic homes and several landmarks are on private property; admire them from public roads and never trespass.

A bigger and better list

Dakota County is filled with memorable places that cost nothing to visit. The original guide featured 50 destinations. The companion online map grew to 63, and this edition adds four more: Heritage Village Park's inclusive playground and splash pad, Ritter Farm Park, Patrick Eagan Park, and the Black Dog Lake riverfront trails.

The list is intentionally eclectic. It includes waterfalls, bluffs, prairie, river trails, museums, historic churches, architectural landmarks, neighborhood parks, and places connected to stories that helped shape Minnesota. Readers voted to select and rank the 10 coolest free places in Dakota County. Those top 10 appear first, in order of the reader vote. The remaining 57 destinations are not ranked and appear simply as additional places worth exploring. Joe is also working on expanding the online map at <https://tinyurl.com/50-Coollest-Places>.

Some attractions are free to visit but may charge for special programs, rentals, camping, or reserved facilities. Conditions and rules change, particularly on natural-surface and river-bottom trails.



1. Bison Herd

Dakota County's bison herd roam in 150 acres of paddocks next to our Mississippi River Greenway that traverses Spring Lake Park Reserve. They are not just fun to watch; the bison play an important role in restoring our native prairie. Those massive hoofprints create pockets in the soil that help hold moisture. Their grazing and movement spread seeds and encourage plant diversity. Even their wallowing helps create habitat for other species.

Quick Facts:

- Dakota County is Minnesota's first county with its own bison herd
- Made possible by grant funding
- The bison part of the acclaimed Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, helping restore a genetically important population with no detectable cattle DNA

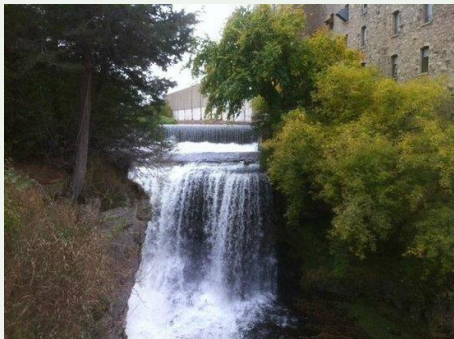
Map coordinates: 44.75199, -92.98459



2. Rock Island Swing Bridge

The Rock Island Swing Bridge opened in Inver Grove Heights on April 9, 1895. At 1,661 feet, it was the longest double-decker bridge of its kind in North America, carrying trains above and horses, wagons and later automobiles below. It was also Minnesota's last toll bridge and even figured in gangster lore when John Dillinger used it as an escape route during a gun battle with Dakota County deputies. After part of the bridge collapsed into the Mississippi in 2008, the rest was slated for demolition. Instead, local leaders, residents and Simley High School students helped save the Dakota County side, which reopened in 2011 as a recreational pier and scenic overlook. Today, it remains a favorite place for walking, biking, fishing, birdwatching and photos along the river.

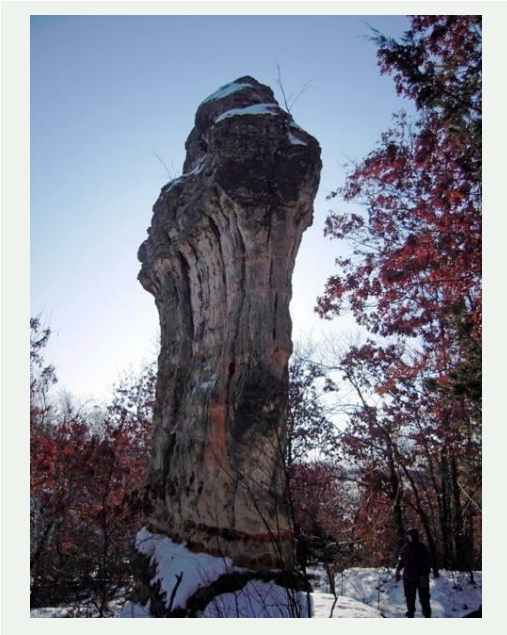
Map coordinates: 44.85331, -93.01219



3. Vermillion Falls

Visitors and residents alike are often surprised to learn that Dakota County is home to the stunning, 35-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 are sure to entice anyone who loves the outdoors.

Map coordinates: 44.72523, -92.85001



4. Chimney Rock

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 voters approved in 2002 to preserve farm and natural areas.

Note: Chimney Rock is fairly close to the road, but difficult to see through thick foliage in the summer. Long pants and boots are recommended at all times of year, since there is not much of a trail.

Map coordinates: 44.63777, -92.89449



5. Commemorative Air Force Museum

Step back into aviation history at the Commemorative Air Force Minnesota Wing Museum at Fleming Field in South St. Paul. Visitors can get an up-close look at six historic aircraft, a large collection of military vehicles, and fascinating World War II artifacts. The museum's best-known aircraft is Miss Mitchell, a restored B-25 bomber that still takes to the skies. The Minnesota Wing was the first charter unit established by the national Commemorative Air Force, and volunteers continue to restore, maintain, and fly these remarkable pieces of history.

Fleming Field also played a fascinating role in the early history of space exploration. On June 2, 1957, Air Force Captain Joe Kittinger lifted off from the airport beneath an enormous helium balloon as the pilot of Manhigh I. He climbed to nearly 97,000 feet, almost 18 miles above the earth, to study how humans could survive in the upper atmosphere. The pioneering flight helped pave the way for America's space program. Kittinger later became famous for a record-setting parachute jump from the edge of space, but that extraordinary career began with his historic launch from South St. Paul.

Map coordinates: 44.86133, -93.02861

6. Ma Barker's Hideout



An unassuming home at 1031 Robert Street in West St. Paul once served as the hideout for some of America's most notorious kidnapers and bank robbers. Ma Barker and members of the Barker-Karpis Gang stayed there in 1933 after kidnapping Hamm's Brewing president William Hamm Jr. and collecting a \$100,000 ransom. While hiding in West St. Paul, the gang continued robbing banks and planning more crimes, including the kidnapping of wealthy Twin Cities banker Edward G. Bremer Jr. and a payroll robbery in South St. Paul. Bremer was abducted in January 1934 and released after a \$200,000 ransom was paid, the equivalent of several million dollars today. The kidnappings drew national attention during an era already gripped by the Lindbergh baby case, and President Franklin Roosevelt even referenced the crime wave in a fireside chat. The gang's West St. Paul hideout was eventually exposed after a neighbor recognized Ma Barker's photograph in a detective magazine and contacted police.

Map coordinates: 44.91531, -93.08094

7. Albert Park - The World's Smallest Park



Albert Park in West St. Paul may be tiny, but it has a remarkable history. Reportedly recognized by [Ripley's Believe It or Not](#) in 1967 as the world's smallest dedicated park, the park at Smith, Dodd and Bernard was created in 1931 to honor 15-year-old Boy Scout Albert LeFevre, who drowned while rafting on the Mississippi River. Albert and his father had cared for the city-owned land for several years, and after Albert's death, his father asked the city to dedicate it in his memory. The park includes a stone monument, flagpole, flower beds and a 300-pound black granite marker that disappeared for nearly 50 years. A contractor had quietly saved the original marker rather than discard it, and in 2013, at age 87, he returned to watch it reinstalled.

Map coordinates: 44.91639, -93.10158

8. Stockyards Exchange Building



In 1919, Armour & Company opened the largest meatpacking facility in the history of the world in South St. Paul. It was 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. 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.) Together with Swift's, the area grew to be the largest stockyards in the nation.

Map coordinates: 44.89330, -93.03486



9. The Spot Where Women Voted for the First Time in the United States Following Enactment of the 19th Amendment

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 improve the water system in the city.

Pictured is Margeurite Newburgh, believed by many to have cast the very first ballot that morning.

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

Map coordinates: 44.89226, -93.03744



10. Pine Bend Bluffs

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.

Map coordinates: 44.78797, -93.02949



11. Byllesby Dam & Lake Byllesby Park

Dakota County owns a dam that helps form Lake Byllesby Regional Park. Nestled in the scenic Cannon River Valley, there are trails for hiking in the summer and sledding in the winter, together with a playground, campground, water features, beach and boat launch. In 2026, upgraded turbines at the Byllesby Dam will enable Dakota County to generate twice as much electricity as our buildings and facilities use, with 100% of the electricity we generate coming from renewable energy sources. We are not aware of any county government in the nation that has achieved this milestone. The new turbines will provide enough electricity to power over 4,000 homes and will bring in \$1 million in annual revenue to Dakota County. This revenue is enough to pay for operations, maintenance and repayment of an internal loan for the cost of the new turbines and upgrades to the dam.

Map coordinates: 44.51170, -92.93996



12. Vermillion River

Regarded by some as the best trout stream in the world, the little-known Vermillion River lies right here in Dakota County. 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, check out:

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

Map coordinates: 44.66254, -93.00151



13. The House of Eight Gables

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 of Historic Places. After spending a long winter in 1875 reading Nathaniel 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.

Map coordinates: 44.81738, -93.02289



14. Lebanon Hills Regional Park

Lebanon Hills is the largest park in the Dakota County park system. Containing almost 2,000 acres, the award-winning 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>

Map coordinates: 44.78608, -93.12750



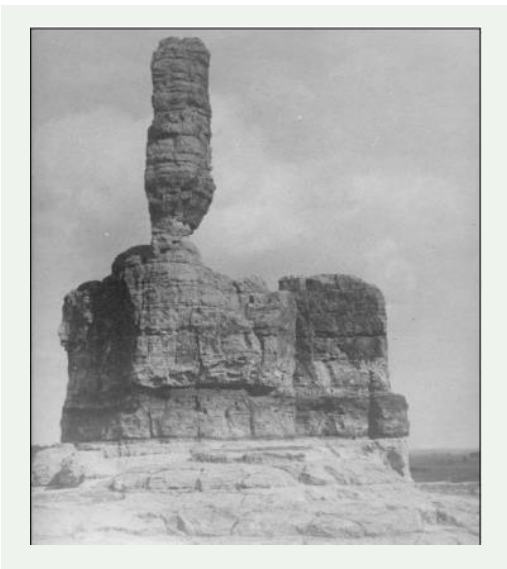
15. Spring Lake Park Reserve & Schaar's Bluff

Simply put, this county park offers one of the most spectacular views of the Mississippi you will find anywhere along the river's 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>

Map coordinates: 44.76542, -92.92865



16. Castle Rock

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 windstorm on September 28, 1895.

Map coordinates: 44.55078, -93.12659



17. Rosemount Splash Pad

This has moved way higher on our list, because it is now 100% free and compares well 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. For more info, check out: <https://ci.rosemount.mn.us/593/Splash-Pad>

Map coordinates: 44.74054, -93.12486



18. Thompson County Park

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 River to River Trail — a county trail system linking Thompson Lake Park to Kaposia Park and Mississippi River Greenway in South St. Paul and to the Big Rivers Trail in Mendota. For more information and directions:

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

Map coordinates: 44.90795, -93.06944



19. Kaposia Park & Kaposia Village

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.

Map coordinates: 44.90822, -93.06126



20. Dakota County Libraries

Twice named Minnesota's best public library system, Dakota County libraries offer a great place to kick back and relax with a good book. Our 10 county libraries checked out over nearly six million materials to well 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>

Map coordinates: 44.83282, -93.05215

21. Whitetail Woods



Dakota County's newest regional park, the 456-acre Whitetail Woods near Farmington, offers a quiet, back-to-nature experience in the heart of the county. Surrounded by the Vermillion Highlands Wildlife Management Area and the Vermillion River Wildlife and Aquatic Management Areas, the park features 10 miles of trails, nature play areas built with stumps, rocks and a hand water pump, a 53-foot sledding hill lit on winter evenings, and a picnic shelter for up to 100 people with an outdoor kitchen and fire pit. *City Pages* even named Whitetail Woods home to the best hike in the Twin Cities. For more information and directions:

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

Map coordinates: 44.68724, -93.08937



22. 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.

Map coordinates: 44.85596, -93.01812



23. Hastings Sand Coulee SNA

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

Map coordinates: 44.70701, -92.82682

24. Pilot Knob/Oheyawahi



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.

Map coordinates: 44.88095, -93.16729

25. Carroll's Woods and Schwarz Pond



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.

Map coordinates: 44.74443, -93.13868

26. Harmon Park



This is my favorite place for off-road biking 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. Another fantastic option is Lebanon Hills Regional Park. For more info:

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

Map coordinates: 44.86133, -93.07378

27. Holz Farm Park



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

Map coordinates: 44.78669, -93.11540



28. Harmon Park

Harmon Park may look modern after its recent renovation, but it is West St. Paul's oldest park. The city opened it in 1925 with help from a \$2,000 playground grant from philanthropist William E. Harmon, making West St. Paul one of just 50 communities nationwide to receive his support. Today, the 19-acre park includes five baseball and softball fields, a soccer field, splash pad, playground, skating rinks, concession stand, community buildings and the Neighborhood Center, which can host gatherings of up to 70 people. Harmon made his fortune by pioneering an installment plan for home purchases, then quietly used much of it to support students, nurses, artists, writers and everyday people in need. A century later, the park bearing his name remains one of West St. Paul's most popular places to play, gather and celebrate. Map coordinates: 44.91575, -93.09493



29. Pine Bend Cemetery

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 Waukan-ojan-jan's Dakota village until 1852, not to mention the inauspicious end in the early 1900's of the St. Paul Southern Railway, one of Minnesota's first and least successful attempts at an electric intraurban rail system.

Map coordinates: 44.77143, -93.03408



30. Dakota County Museum

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.

Map coordinates: 44.89171, -93.03692



31. Dodge Nature Center

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

Map coordinates: 44.89213, -93.09961



32. 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>

Map coordinates: 44.66278, -93.26558



33. Church of the Advent

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

Location: 412 Oak Street, Farmington

Map coordinates: 44.63880, -93.14246



34. Daniel F. Akin House

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

Map coordinates: 44.67158, -93.17212



35. The "Little White Church" - Old Salem Shrine

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.

Map coordinates: 44.86930, -93.07541



36. Fasbender Clinic Building

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

Map coordinates: 44.73802, -92.86246



37. George W. Wentworth House

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. In fact, to this day he is the only individual to ever serve on both the South St. Paul and West St. Paul City Councils. 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

Map coordinates: 44.89872, -93.07217



38. B52 Crash Site Memorial

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.

Map coordinates: 44.82169, -93.05267



39. Henry Sibley Historic Site

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 during the War of 1862. The Sibley House is believed to be the oldest existing private home in Minnesota.

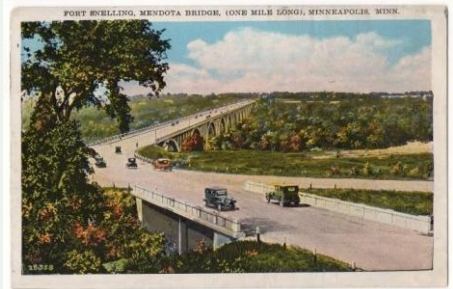
Map coordinates: 44.88792, -93.16590



40. LeDuc & Daniels Historic Home

William G. LeDuc came to St. Paul, Minnesota Territory in 1850 from Ohio to open a bookstore 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. Construction on the LeDuc house began in 1862 and was completed by 1866. Following William LeDuc's service as Quartermaster in the Civil War, for which he was promoted to Brigadier General, the family moved into the unfinished home in August, 1865. LeDuc was joined on the estate by George Daniels. Daniels escaped slavery and the Confederate Army in the early 1860's by outsmarting his captors. He then joined the Union forces.

Map coordinates: 44.72905, -92.85195



41. 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.

Map coordinates: 44.88833, -93.17915



42. Kelley Park

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

Map coordinates: 44.72820, -93.20461



43. NIKE Missile Site

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 good video about the site can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhWlf4ali0U>

Map coordinates: 44.57198, -93.07802



44. 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 of trees lining this active and scenic working river, offering respite from even the hottest summer day.

Map coordinates: 44.89113, -93.15647



45. St. Peter's Church

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

Map coordinates: 44.88569, -93.16859



46. Serbian Hall

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

Map coordinates: 44.88515, -93.03764



47. 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.

Map coordinates: 44.73960, -92.85253



48. Caponi Art Park

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

Map coordinates: 44.80434, -93.15492



49. Big Rivers 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. Location: 1498 Mendota Heights Road, Mendota Heights. A good place to access this trail is at Lucky's 13 Pub, 1352 Sibley Memorial Hwy, Mendota.

Map coordinates: 44.89670, -93.14764



50. Miesville Ravine Park Reserve

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

Map coordinates: 44.54303, -92.80273



51. Dakota Woods Dog Park

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 its 16 acres of fenced woods where dogs can run and exercise off leash.

Location: 16740 Blaine Avenue, Rosemount

Map coordinates: 44.71044, -93.05486

Note: Other good – and free – dog park options include Heritage Village Park in Inver Grove Heights and Kaposia Landing in South St. Paul.



52. 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. The trailhead is located just off Station Trail Road, south of 170th Street

Map coordinates: 44.69267, -93.06261



53. Minnesota River Greenway

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).

Map coordinates: 44.84812, -93.18401



54. Historic Waterford Bridge

Added to the National Register of Historic Places on August 26, 2010, this 1909 bridge is a rare surviving example of Minnesota's once-common camelback through-truss design. It is also one of the state's oldest bridges built with rigid connections rather than the pinned connections typically used at the time. Located in rural Waterford Township, about two miles northwest of Northfield, the historic bridge now carries a pedestrian trail across the Cannon River.

Map coordinates: 44.48748, -93.12842



55. The Rex Speedway

Beginning in 1949, Rex Speedway in Inver Grove became one of Minnesota's most popular racetracks, drawing thousands of fans to its high-banked, half-mile dirt track for stock car races, hot rods and occasional "wreck races," now known as demolition derbies. The excitement came with serious risks, however, and fatal crashes in three consecutive years prompted the Dakota County sheriff to close the track in 1954. Historian John Wycoff notes that Rex may hold the grim distinction of being the only racetrack in America where a spectator was killed while sitting on a toilet, after a car careened into the infield and struck a restroom. Some drivers continued racing there illegally until one hit a refrigerator abandoned on the track, bringing racing to a permanent end. Among the thousands of spectators who occasionally visited Rex Speedway were notorious gangsters hiding out in the St. Paul area.

Map coordinates: 44.79707, -93.06162



56. Sperry Tower & Central Park

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.

Map coordinates: 44.84391, -93.16962



57. Dakota City Heritage Village

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. And our Dakota County Fair now is free to attend!

Map coordinates: 44.62777, -93.14863



58. Northfield's First National Bank

Straddling Dakota and Rice counties, Northfield is known for its two beautiful college campuses, historic downtown, and the famous bank robbery that helped bring down the James-Younger Gang. On September 7, 1876, eight outlaws rode into town in broad daylight. Several created a diversion by galloping through the streets, shouting and firing their pistols, while three others slipped into the First National Bank. Inside, they drew their guns and ordered cashier Joseph Lee Heywood to open the safe. Heywood refused, falsely claiming it was secured by a time lock. Meanwhile, armed townspeople began fighting back, turning the robbery into a disaster for the gang and one of the most legendary moments in Minnesota history.

Map coordinates: 44.45585, -93.16048



59. Pine Bend Monument

The mysterious missing monument at Pine Bend in southeastern Inver Grove Heights has been restored and returned to its rightful place. It was originally built in 1939 by the National Youth Administration, a New Deal program that provided work for unemployed young people ages 16 to 25. The monument stood along Highway 52/55 near 117th Street until 2002, when it was removed for a road construction project. More than a decade later, when I went looking for it in 2015, no one seemed to know where it had gone. One report even suggested it had been dismantled and its stone reused for a project in Pine City. Fortunately, the monument was eventually found safe and sound, restored, and reinstalled for future generations to enjoy.

Map coordinates: 44.77642, -93.02887



60. Watt Munisatorum

The nation's biggest Cambodian Buddhist temple is located here in Dakota County. The Watt Munisatarum is stunning and unexpected, lying amidst a sea of farm fields on Highway 50 west of Hampton. If you stop to see it, please be mindful this is a working temple. The monks live on site. Be prepared to take shoes and hat off. The temple is free to visit.

Map coordinates: 44.63329, -93.04623



61. Heart of the City & Nicollet Commons

Burnsville's Heart of the City began taking shape in 2000 as a streetscape project and grew into a full downtown redevelopment featuring housing, shops, restaurants, and public gathering spaces. Its centerpiece is the Ames Center, formerly the Burnsville Performing Arts Center, which includes a 1,000-seat main theater. Next door, Nicollet Commons Park was one of the first town square-style parks developed in a Twin Cities suburb. The park features a 250-seat amphitheater, open green space, and an interactive water feature. The Heart of the City was later recognized as one of six "Great Places" in the Twin Cities by the Sensible Land Use Coalition.

Map coordinates: 44.77449, -93.27820



62. Alimagnet Park & Lake

Alimagnet Park is a heavily wooded 85-acre park with lake frontage, canoe launch access, and nature trails. Alimagnet Lake was named by two surveyors after three 12-year-old girls: Alice McQuillan, Margaret Davis, and Nettie Judd.

Map coordinates: 44.74122, -93.25087



63. Veterans Memorial Greenway

The first phase of the VMG starts at Rich Valley Park's playground, then winds through woods and a tunnel, past a replica of a WWII bunker and along bucolic farm fields. It is a great place for a leisurely stroll or bike ride, while appreciating the service and sacrifice of Dakota County's 22,000 veterans. There are two more phases of the VMG to come, which connect to Lebanon Hills Park on the west and the Mississippi River Greenway to the east.

Map coordinates: 44.79754, -93.07101



64. Heritage Village Park Inclusive Playground & Splash Pad

Heritage Village Park now pairs an inclusive playground and splash pad with an 11-acre off-leash dog park, trails and a connection to the Mississippi River Greenway. The new play area was designed for children of varied ages and abilities, making this former polluted and flood-prone railyard one of Inver Grove Heights' most welcoming family destinations. Park hours are 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.; the splash pad generally operates during the summer season.

Map coordinates: 44.86430, -93.05540

More information: <https://www.ighmn.gov/442/Heritage-Village-Park-and-Off-Leash-Dog->

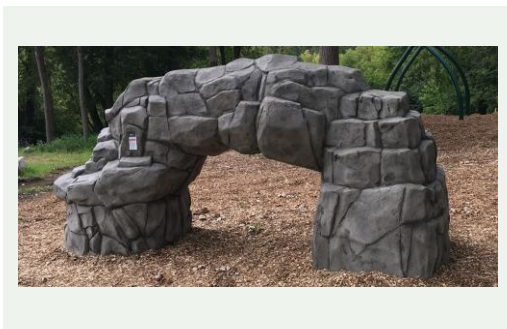


65. Ritter Farm Park

Ritter Farm Park is one of Lakeville's best places for a quiet walk in the woods. Its extensive trail system winds through forest, prairie and former farm fields near Lake Marion. Visitors also find historic farm features, environmental programs, winter recreation and a dog park. The Lake Marion Greenway adds another connection for walkers and cyclists.

Map coordinates: 44.65930, -93.29000

More information: <https://www.lakevillemn.gov/1295/Ritter-Farm-Park>



66. Patrick Eagan Park

Tucked into the middle of Eagan, Patrick Eagan Park feels surprisingly secluded. The park includes wooded hiking and walking trails, the Eagan Art House, a sun shelter and a nature-play area built around creative, outdoor exploration. It is a good choice for families looking for an easy nature outing without leaving the city.

Map coordinates: 44.81770, -93.14350

More information: <https://cityofeagan.com/parkslist>

67. Black Dog Lake & Minnesota Riverfront Trails



The Black Dog area in Burnsville offers an unusual combination of river-bottom forest, wetlands, wildlife and easy trail access close to Interstate 35W. The paved Black Dog Trail runs about 1.9 miles between Minnesota Riverfront Park and Cliff Road, while the Minnesota River Greenway includes a spur to an observation deck overlooking Black Dog Lake. Trails can flood seasonally, so check conditions before visiting.

Map coordinates: 44.78640, -93.27900

More information: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/minnesota-valley/map?trail=black-dog-trail>

Keep exploring Dakota County.