

# Fort Snelling State Park Management Plan Amendment

## Youth Camping



**Minnesota Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Parks and Trails**

**January 2011**

# Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

500 Lafayette Road • St. Paul, MN • 55155-40



## Division of Parks and Trails Approval of Management Plan Amendment for Fort Snelling State Park

The Division of Parks and Trails develops plan amendments to update management plans to reflect the current development and operational proposals for a state park or state recreation area. The plan amendment process assists in formulating, evaluating and documenting these proposals

This amendment to the 1997 Fort Snelling State Park management plan addresses the addition of a new program, youth camping, to the park, and the development of a youth camp site on Picnic Island. The youth camping program is conducted in partnership with youth and civic organizations, which provide sponsorship, supervision and monitoring of all activities. It is consistent with the DNR's Gateway Initiative, which seeks to get more people, especially youth and young adults, engaged with the outdoors.

The amendment received input and comment both within the Department of Natural Resources and from the public. It went through a public review period, including an open house held at the park, and was approved by the Central Region and Division of Parks and Trails management.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Courtland Nelson".

Courtland Nelson, Director  
Division of Parks and Trails

A handwritten date in blue ink that reads "3 Jan 11".

Date

# Fort Snelling State Park Management Plan Amendment



## State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Trails

This management plan amendment has been prepared as required by 2001 Minnesota Laws Chapter 86A.09, Subdivision 1.

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We would like to thank all who participated in this planning process.

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this management plan amendment is to amend the current Fort Snelling State Park management plan (adopted July 1997) to provide for the establishment of a youth camp on Picnic Island and related changes to recreational facilities on the island.

Management plans are required for state park units. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 4 requires that the construction of facilities and other development conform to the management plan. This amendment will bring the management plan into accordance with current programming and development proposals for the park.

## DESCRIPTION

This amendment addresses improvements and changes to existing facilities on Picnic Island to accommodate the use of the “Causeway” area for youth camping and outdoor education (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Picnic Island is located in the river bottoms between a backwater channel and the current main channel of the Minnesota River, and is connected to the west bank of the river by a narrow causeway. As its name implies, the island includes a large open picnic and event area with a shelter (“A” on Figure 2), playground and sanitation building on the northeast side. A second smaller picnic area with an open-sided shelter (“B” on Figure 2) and portable toilet is located on the east side, just below the Mendota Bridge. A gravel trail open to bicycles and foot traffic encircles the island. A boat ramp is located on the Minnesota River main channel just north of the bridge.

### *Background*

The original Fort Snelling State Park Management Plan, adopted in June 1978, noted that a site on the Dakota County side of the river south of the Mendota Bridge was used as a group camp, but recommended that this use be moved to one of the waysides of the Minnesota Valley State Recreation Area. The plan also recommended several sites for individual camping. The group camp was removed in the late 1960’s and the recommendations for other campgrounds were not implemented. Seasonal flooding, and ambient airport and traffic noise were considered to present a barrier to overnight camping in the park. The current management plan (1997) does not recommend overnight camping anywhere in the park.

### *Youth Camping Program*

In 2008 park staff began a pilot program, Kids at the Confluence. The pilot program is part of the Department’s Gateway Initiative, which seeks to get more people, especially youth and young adults, engaged with the outdoors and stem the decline in outdoor recreation participation by the “Next Generation.” The program’s purpose is: *To foster an appreciation of the natural world in young people by providing skill building recreational*



Main picnic area and shelter



Perimeter trail

*experiences along the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers within Fort Snelling State Park. The program's charter states:*

*The National Park Service, Wilderness Inquiry and Fort Snelling State Park will collaborate in 2009 to develop, market and present day and overnight programs for youth to experience the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers in the metro area.*

In addition to day use activities, the program has included overnight camping at two Picnic Island locations – the Causeway site, located on the west side of the island, and the Shelter B area on the east side along the main river channel.

Based on the results of the pilot program in 2009, the DNR has decided to continue the youth camping program and consider partnering with additional youth and civic organizations. Additional project partners under consideration include youth and civic organizations, community service agencies and groups, K-12 school and Community Education Programs, as well as DNR or National Park Service programs such as "I Can Camp" or NPS Junior Rangers. The program is designed so that a sponsoring organization will always be involved in and present at youth camping events to provide supervision and monitoring.

#### *Location and Seasons of Use*

The Causeway site is the preferred location for the program, as described in this amendment under "Site and Facilities." However, changes in conditions at that site, such as changing water levels, channel siltation, or impacts to the resource base, or changes in the program's needs, may result in the use of other sites on Picnic Island.

The program as it currently exists provides for summer camping only. Spring, fall and winter use may be allowed at the discretion of the park manager. Any winter camping would necessarily be "primitive" (with minimal amenities), since water and sewer facilities are not available on Picnic Island in winter.



Youth camping program (photos by Wilderness Inquiry)





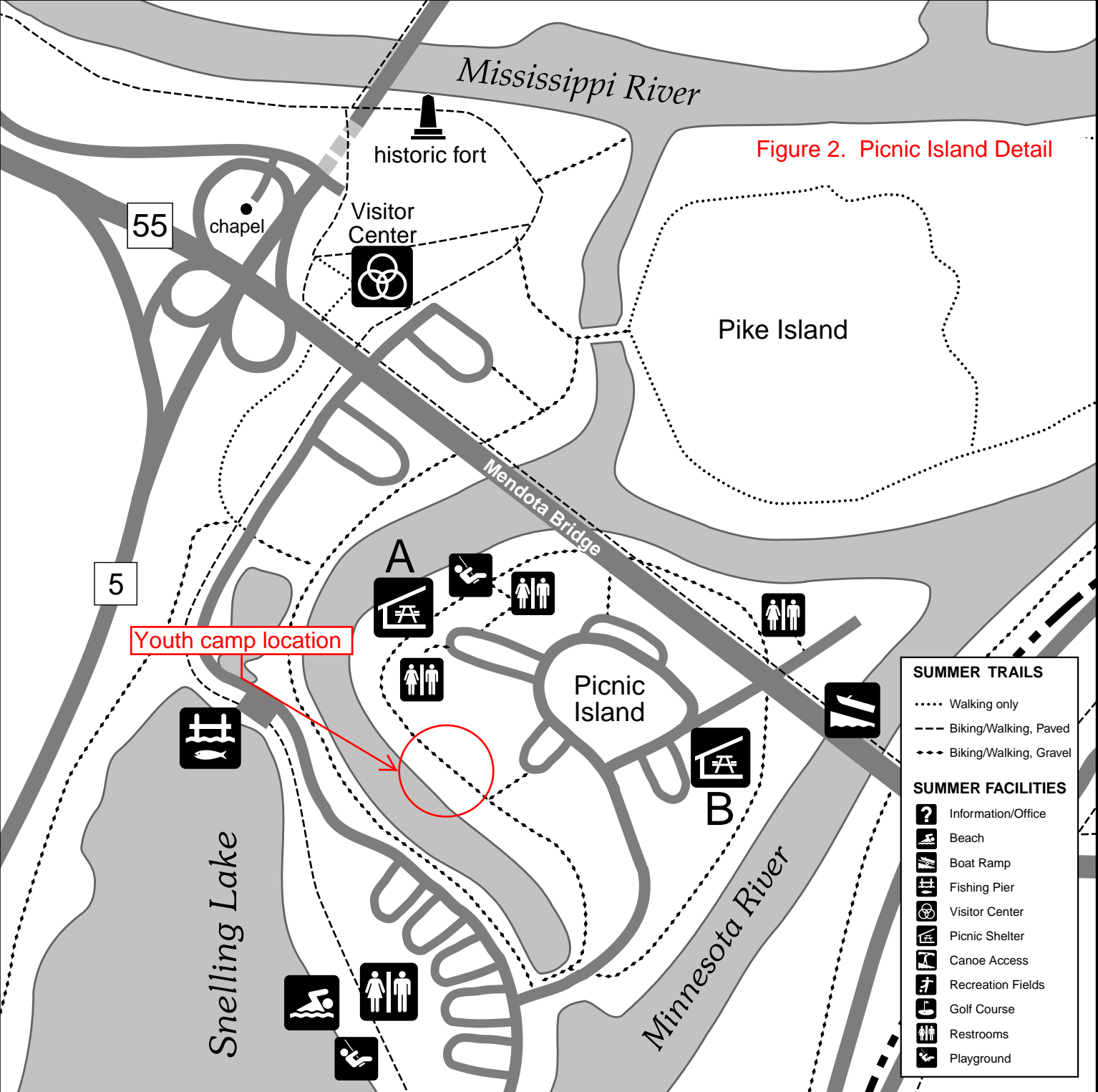
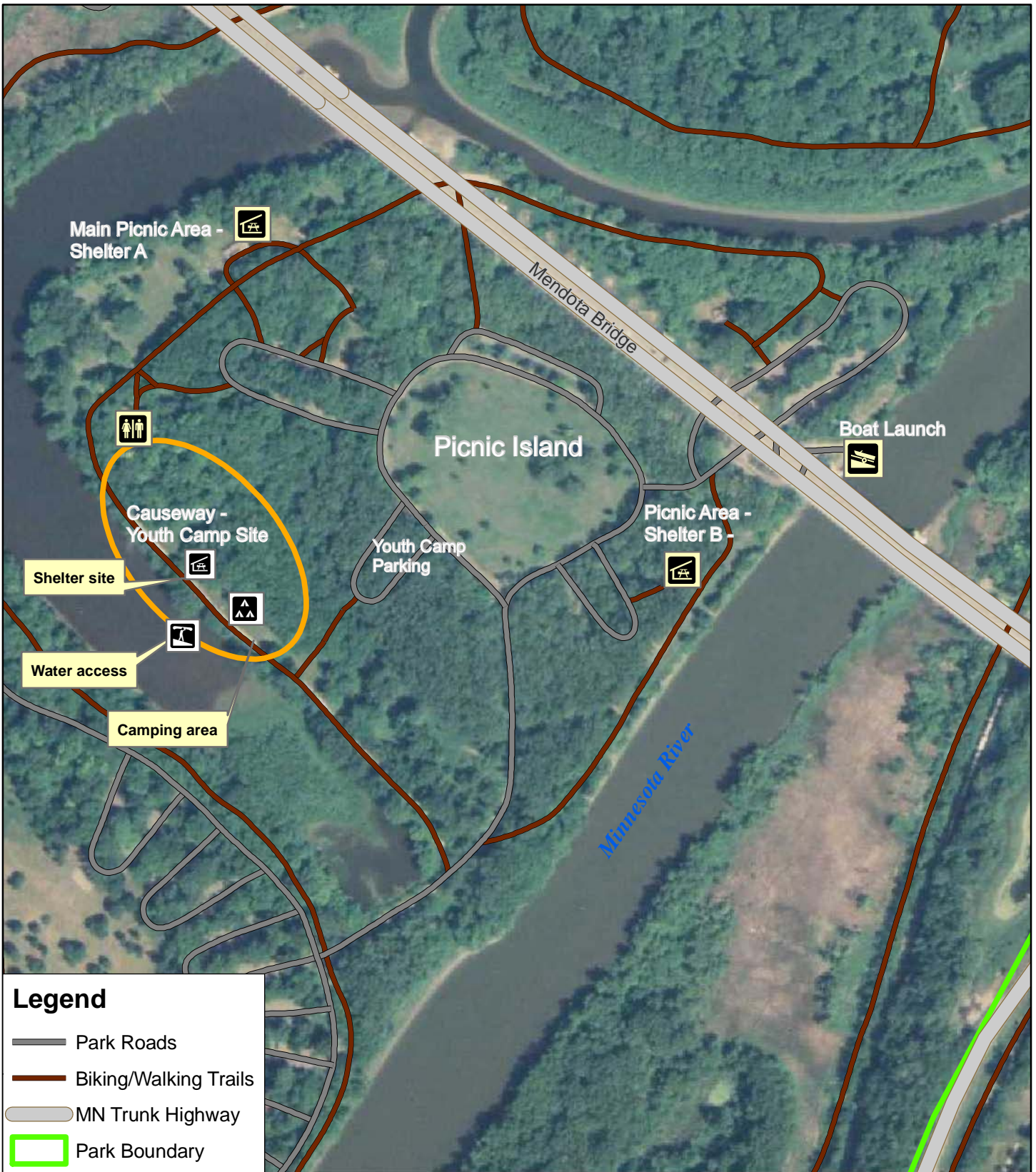


Figure 2. Picnic Island Detail

Youth camp location

SUMMER TRAILS	
.....	Walking only
----	Biking/Walking, Paved
-.-.-	Biking/Walking, Gravel
SUMMER FACILITIES	
[?]	Information/Office
[Beach]	Beach
[Boat Ramp]	Boat Ramp
[Fishing Pier]	Fishing Pier
[Visitor Center]	Visitor Center
[Picnic Shelter]	Picnic Shelter
[Canoe Access]	Canoe Access
[Recreation Fields]	Recreation Fields
[Golf Course]	Golf Course
[Restrooms]	Restrooms
[Playground]	Playground





**Figure 3**

Fort Snelling State Park Management Plan Amendment  
 Youth Camp Location and Proposed Facilities

0 125 250 500 750 1,000 Feet



DNR Division of Parks and Trails  
 Strategic Management Section  
 January 2011

## Sites and Facilities

The Causeway site is approximately 20 acres in size, and consists of an open grassy area with approximately 500 feet of waterfront. The site is bordered by a narrow strip of open meadow and the floodplain forest that occupies much of the island's interior. The camping area can be reached via a gravel trail from a nearby parking area. The hiking/biking trail around the perimeter of Picnic Island crosses the site and provides access to the sanitation building at the Shelter A picnic area. These facilities are about 600 feet from the camping area.

Site amenities include picnic tables, fire rings and pedestal grills. An unofficial trail providing water access is located at the foot of a steep bank. Frequently fluctuating water levels in this part of the floodplain mean that the water access site is usually muddy and that a structure such as a dock is infeasible.

This part of Picnic Island is particularly vulnerable to seasonal flooding. Therefore, any improvements must be designed to be easily removed or to withstand flooding with minimal damage. Proposed improvements include the following:

- An open-air pavilion-type shelter, similar to Shelter B, will be located toward the north end of the site in a separate clearing; the shelter would have electrical service.
- A route will be constructed leading down the riverbank to the water access to accommodate the steep bank and minimize erosion and bank destabilization.
- Soft but stable canoe landing areas will be constructed as demand and needs are determined.

Additional sanitary facilities are necessary to meet building code requirements at the site. The causeway site lacks water or sewer service, and the existing sanitation building in the Shelter A picnic area is distant from the site and only open during the summer season. A vault toilet will be installed or a portable toilet will be provided in the nearby parking area. Any permanent structures on the site must be flood-resistant.

Signage will be added to provide directions and notification to other park users. Signs will include:

- Parking area sign: "Youth Camp Parking"
- Sign on trail from parking area: "Youth Camp Access Only"
- Signs on perimeter trail: "Youth Camp Area"



Existing Causeway picnic area



Water access trail site



Riverbank at water access

## NATURAL RESOURCES IMPACT

Recreational development in the floodplain portion of the park began in 1963, and involved substantial filling of unstable floodplain soils to install roads, parking lots and structures. Dredge spoils from the Minnesota River and off-site fill materials were used in various areas of the park, including the center of Picnic Island. Perhaps because of the use of fill, many of the soils on Picnic Island have low development limitations, contrasted with the majority of the floodplain soils in the park, which have severe limitations.

The lower Minnesota River in the area of the park has been straightened and dredged by the Army Corps of Engineers to facilitate barge movement from the confluence to Savage. The Causeway channel was closed at the south end as part of this project.

Flooding throughout the floodplain section of the park is common, typically during spring but occasionally in the fall, and can result in closure of all or part of the park. The Causeway area is particularly prone to flooding and flood scour. Any new permanent structures on the site will be designed to be flood-resistant and to avoid increasing flood elevations in the surrounding area.

The interior of Picnic Island is largely covered by floodplain forest, silver maple subtype. The open field in the center of the island was originally wet meadow, but was filled in the 1960s. With the exception of Pike Island, most of the floodplain forest in the park is young and disturbed by past logging, filling, grazing and cultivation. Trees around the camping area will be assessed for safety and hazard trees or tree limbs may be cut or trimmed.

The proposed Causeway site is already developed as a picnic area, with tables and grills in an open lawn setting, bordered by an area of disturbed open meadow. Parking areas and walking trails already exist and will not need to be expanded to accommodate the camp. Addition of a new shelter and signage will slightly enlarge the impervious surface within this area and will likely require some clearance of vegetative and wooded areas. Native plantings will be restored and/or added as part of site development. Camping and trail areas will be monitored for soil compaction and erosion.

The addition of steps or a path at the water access will delineate the trail, reducing erosion and compaction along the slope. However, it will be necessary to monitor the trail and shoreline area for erosion as use of the site increases.



Causeway channel

## CULTURAL RESOURCES IMPACT

The confluence area of the park, centered on Pike Island, is important to the Dakota people, who consider it the center of their ancient homeland.

Permanent planting villages were located all along the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. The Dakota Internment Camp, where about 1,600 Dakota people, mostly women and children, were held following the US-Dakota conflict of 1862, was located on the west bank of the Minnesota River below the fort.

Two archaeological and historic sites were identified on Picnic Island in the 1978 Management Plan:

- Cantonment New Hope, 1819-1820: This site was selected by Colonel Leavenworth in the fall of 1819 on the alluvial grounds of the Minnesota River's south bank. Development consisted of a stockade and a 48-room hollow square of log buildings. The site is presently part of the park picnic area north of the Causeway site (see Figure 2, Picnic Island Detail).
- Steamboat landing on the east bank of the Minnesota River, ca. 1823-? This site is now part of the picnic area. No visible evidence remains of its use as a steamboat landing.

In the 1830s, Henry Hastings Sibley, then manager of the American Fur Company at Mendota, is also known to have used the Picnic Island meadows for pasturing of livestock.

The proposed Youth Camp is located near a small community that was part of the City of Mendota. There were numerous private residences, two small marinas and at least one entertainment business located along the bank of the Minnesota River. Access to these places was provided by a gravel county road. In 1966, this road access was severed by a US Army Corps of Engineers river channelization project. The road currently serves as a park trail. Some building foundations and depressions, as well as sealed water wells, can be found in the woodlands and fields in the vicinity of the proposed youth camp

Picnic Island is also part of the Mendota Historic Site, which includes the Sibley house, the Church of St. Peter, and other structures in the Mendota settlement.

The youth camp would not impact any known archaeological or historic sites. Significant fill was added to Picnic Island in the 1960's to try to raise it above flood stage. Additionally, the river's own scouring and alluvial deposit actions have removed or deeply buried archaeological evidence and resources from these sites. Therefore, actions related to proposed improvements or long-term operation of the youth camp will not impact these resources. An archaeological survey will be conducted prior to siting the shelter, vault toilet(s), or any other structure for the youth camp.

The proposed youth camp improvements to the Causeway site will have minimal impact to known cultural resources, since these resources are generally already disturbed or are located within existing developed areas. Archaeological resource assessments will be conducted prior to siting of any buildings or structures within the area.

The Fort-Snelling-Mendota Bridge, which crosses Picnic Island, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a site of national significance. It is a reinforced-concrete, continuous arch bridge built in 1925-26 according to plans by Walter H. Wheeler and C. A. P. Turner. It was the longest continuous arch bridge in the nation at the time it opened to traffic in November 1926. Activities at the youth camp, like other activities on Picnic Island, are not visible from the bridge and will have no impact on the historic bridge.

The youth camp site lies within the general viewshed of Historic Fort Snelling on the bluff above the river confluence. Activities at the camp will not be visible from the bluff, which is dominated in this direction by the much higher Mendota Bridge.

## RECREATION AND VISITOR USE IMPACT

The main impetus of this plan amendment is to expand the use of the park by urban youth, a group that is underrepresented among park visitors. This goal is consistent with one of the strategic direction of the Parks and Trails Division, "Connecting People to the Outdoors." The partnership aspect of the program speaks to another strategic direction, "Investing in Our Partnerships, Processes and People." The program also addresses the key trend of declining outdoor recreation participation among youth and young adults and helps fulfill the park's role as a "Gateway" urban park.

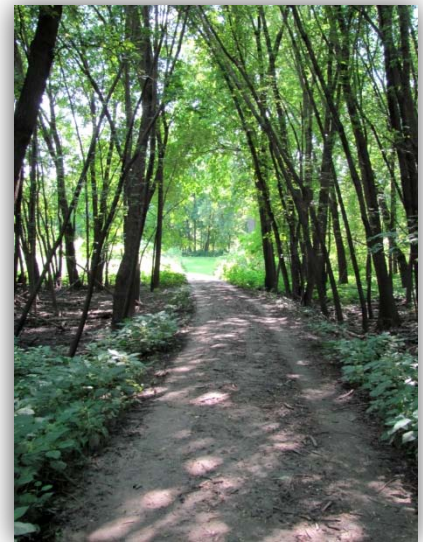
The new use of overnight camping will be managed and monitored to avoid detrimental impacts to other park visitors. Potential impacts and mitigation actions are summarized below.

### *Trail Users*

Signage near the youth camp will inform park users of its location and existence. Use of the perimeter trail around Picnic Island and near the camp will not be restricted. Temporary signs indicating that the camp is occupied will be used if needed.

### *Picnic Area*

Displaced use of the picnicking facilities at the Causeway by the youth camp should be easily accommodated by other areas on Picnic Island. The nearby picnic area (including Shelter A) is large and is well-used by a diverse population, including many family groups. The picnic area may see some increase in daytime and evening use by campers, and will also see increased use of the restroom building. Activity will be monitored to ensure that



Trail from parking area

maintenance is adequate and that campers do not interfere with shelter rentals and vice versa.

### *Parking*

The parking lot adjacent to the youth camp will be reserved for campers when the site is in use, with signage. The parking available on Picnic Island is adequate to serve the youth camp without displacing other users.

### *Safety and Security*

The youth camping program is designed so that adequate adult supervision is provided by the program staff and volunteers. Park staff is on call to respond to emergencies. Park staff also provides evening security on a seasonal basis; this includes locking the park entrance gate at 10 p.m. Various local law enforcement agencies also patrol the park. Consideration should be given to installation of electronically-controlled gates or another method to allow on-demand access in and out of the park for camping groups and other authorized users.

The Causeway channel is relatively calm, and boaters may underestimate the dangerous currents in the main channels of both rivers. River conditions will be monitored, and signs may be posted as needed to warn of dangerous currents.

### *Operations*

The youth camping program is currently managed under a special use permit process. A permitting/reservation process will continue to be managed at the park level so that staff will be able to assess demand, respond to changing conditions, manage the level of use at the site, and ensure an appropriate focus on connecting youth with the outdoors.

The continuation and growth of the youth camping program will impact park operations in many ways, including additional time spent on program management and administration, additional security demands, and the need for additional supplies such as firewood. Park staffing and budgets will be affected as the program continues and demands for it increase. These impacts will be monitored going forward.

## **MANAGEMENT PLAN TEXT REVISIONS**

This management plan amendment supplements portions of the Fort Snelling State Park Management Plan (1997): *Recreation Resources - Proposed Development* (p. 72-80) and *Interpretive Services Recommendations* (p. 96-99). The proposed youth camp program and related improvements are consistent with one of the primary directions identified in the plan: “Build bridges to the diverse cultural communities within the park’s service area through programming, facilities, transportation and trail access, marketing, and outreach.”

## **PUBLIC REVIEW**

The management plan amendment was released for public review on December 3, 2010. The amendment was posted on the DNR website and copies of the amendment were available for review at the park. An open house was held on December 9, 2010 at the park's visitor center. Comments were received at the open house and via e-mail; the majority of comments were positive.