

The Shadow in the Park

by Doug Johnson, St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and Charles Lee, Roseburg, Oregon, May 2004. Revised March 2026.

This is a report on historical research that has located the original line of the St. Paul & Pacific Railroad in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. This railroad became the modern Burlington Northern Santa Fe, hauling unit trains of Wyoming coal through Minneapolis on the right of way we are all know. 130 years ago, however, this pioneer railroad was built on quite another route, which wound around hills and hollows the later railroad would conquer with expensive cuts and fills. The pioneer St. Paul & Pacific, with high wheeled wood burning locomotives (including the William Crooks, now preserved at the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth), immigrant trains and freight trains, opened the Red River valley to settlement and markets, leaving Minneapolis via a meandering route today occupied by middle class neighborhoods, wetlands, parklands, and exclusive developments. Despite the years, the original route can still be found in many places.

In September 2003, GN Goat subscriber Ben Ringnalda passed along a request for help he had received through his website, www.greatnorthernempire.net. Charles Lee, of Roseburg, Oregon, had recently visited Minnetonka's Big Willow Park. There he observed people jogging on a path elevated above Minnehaha Creek, and thought the elevated ground seemed too straight and level to be a natural artifact. He suspected the path might be an old road or railroad embankment, especially because the line seemed to continue toward the modern BNSF right of way through what appeared to be excavated cuts. Subsequently, looking at some aerial photographs, there appeared to be a shadow visibly running through the park, north of the present BNSF main line, looking suspiciously like an old rail line. Being back in Oregon, Charlie requested on-the-ground help through Ben. I responded to the request and was put in touch with Charlie. I did local footwork on the ground, at the Hennepin County Historical Society, and at the Minnesota History Center, and both Charlie and I scavenged online and in books for any reference we could find to this shadowy line.

One resource we used a great deal is Microsoft's TerraServer, and the image in Illustration 1, below, started us off. The BNSF Wayzata Subdivision passes through the picture. The mysterious shadow crosses the current line heading west-northwest and arcs to the west-southwest between the buildings and Cedar Lake Road. Terraserver no longer exists as of 2024, but Google Maps and Minnesota Historical Aerial Photographs Online (MHAPO) have taken over its role.

Illustration 1.



The shadow turned out to be part of the original route taken by Great Northern predecessor St. Paul & Pacific Railroad from Minneapolis to Wayzata. Portions of that line are visible in many places in St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Minnetonka. The history of that route is as follows:

- **May 1857** Minnesota & Pacific Railroad Co. was chartered and proceeded to survey a route from St. Paul west to the Red River.¹
- **March 1862** Minnesota & Pacific Railroad had not laid a single mile of track, had forfeited its charter, and the legislature turned it over to the St. Paul & Pacific Railroad.²
- **1864** St. Paul & Pacific surveyed its own route west from Minneapolis, passing south of Cedar Lake.³
- **August 1867** St. Paul & Pacific reached Lake Minnetonka,⁴ building around the east and south sides of Cedar Lake.⁵
- **1869** Minnetonka Mill is built on the headwaters of Minnehaha Creek at Lake Minnetonka.⁶ A spur is run to the mill from the nearby StP&P station known as Minnetonka Mills. The Minneapolis & St. Louis RR also served the mill.

¹ Veenendaal, Augustus J., The St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, An Empire in the Making, 1862-1879, Northern Illinois University Press, 1999, pg. 29.

² Veenendaal, pg. 35.

³ Frear, Dana W., Minnetonka Town, A History of the First Hundred Years of Minnetonka, Minnesota, unpublished manuscript, 1964, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm M609, pg. 310.

⁴ Veenendaal, pg. 41.

⁵ Cedar Lake Park Association, Cedar Lake Park Concept Master Plan, 1995, pg. 24.

⁶ Minnetonka Historical Society, <https://www.minnetonka-history.org/history>

- **1872** Minnesota Railroad Commissioner report describes the St. Paul & Pacific line from St. Anthony to Wayzata as old, with badly worn light iron rails, and with soft and subsiding road bed.⁷ In the meantime, the railroad is proceeding to the Red River Valley.
- **May 1873** St. Paul & Pacific defaulted on its interest payments.⁸
- **1874** St. Albans Mill is constructed downstream from Minnetonka Mill on Minnehaha Creek, near the crest of the StP&P arc visible in Big Willow Park.⁹ The Minnetonka Mills station becomes known as St. Albans station in conflicting documents.
- **August 1874** St. Paul & Pacific leases right of way to Minneapolis & St. Louis RR eastward from Cedar Lake station to near their Minneapolis station.¹⁰
- **March 1878** James J. Hill's group buys the St. Paul & Pacific.¹¹
- **May 1879** St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba incorporated.¹²
- **1881** St. Albans Mill is closed and dismantled, its millpond having interfered with the larger Minnetonka Mill's waterpower.¹³ Lafayette Hotel and Minnetonka North Shore Line are built from Wayzata to Minnetonka Beach.¹⁴
- **1882** Surveys and estimates proceed regarding upgrading the line from Minneapolis to Wayzata to double track because of increased business to Wayzata and westward.¹⁵
- **July 1883** "Minnetonka Cutoff" (the current route) is completed across the north side of Cedar Lake to Wayzata.¹⁶ Western portions of the original St. Paul & Pacific route are abandoned from St. Louis Park to Wayzata.
- **1885** Minnetonka Mill and station of the same name closes¹⁷ and the spur to the mill is abandoned.¹⁸
- **1886** Hutchinson Branch is built, reusing a portion of the old St. Paul & Pacific line in St. Louis Park.¹⁹
- **1890** St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba is renamed to the Great Northern.²⁰
- **Late 1890s** Eastern portions of the original St. Paul & Pacific route in Minneapolis are abandoned.²¹

⁷ Veenendaal, pg. 87.

⁸ Veenendaal, pg. 107.

⁹ Dunwiddie, Foster W., "The Six Flouring Mills on Minnehaha Creek," Minnesota History, Spring 1975, Minnesota Historical Society, pg. 170.

¹⁰ St. Paul & Pacific RR, Agreement of 1874: First Division of St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Co. with Minneapolis and St. Louis Railway Co., 1874.

¹¹ Veenendaal, pg. 120.

¹² Veenendaal, pg. 125.

¹³ Dunwiddie, pg. 170.

¹⁴ Hidy, Ralph W. et al, The Great Northern Railway, Harvard Business School Press, 1988, pg. 45, 318.

¹⁵ St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railroad, 1882 Annual Report.

¹⁶ CLPA, pg. 24, 26. St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railroad, 1883 Annual Report.

¹⁷ Dunwiddie, pg. 172.

¹⁸ Frear, pg. 311.

¹⁹ Olson, Russell L., The Electric Railways of Minnesota, Minnesota Transportation Museum, 1976, pg. 73, and Hidy, pg. 63 & 318.

²⁰ Veenendaal, pg. 145.

²¹ Plat Map of Minneapolis and St. Louis Park, 1892, and Map of Minneapolis, Hennepin Co., Minn., 1897, City Engineers Office, continue to show a St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba stub along the east side of Cedar Lake.

- **1900** North Shore Line is extended to St. Bonifacius, connecting to the Hutchinson Branch.²² Original Hutchinson Branch from Hopkins to St. Bonifacius abandoned,²³ leaving a spur from Hutchinson Junction to Hopkins.
- **Today** Route was known as the “Willmar Line” in Great Northern days, and is currently the “Wayzata Subdivision” of the BNSF.²⁴

Illustration 2 is a section of page 3, Map of Hennepin County, Minnesota, compiled by Geo. B. Wright, 1874, Minnesota Historical Society reference MAP 6F G4143.H4G46 1874.W7. The St. Paul & Pacific and Minneapolis & St. Louis railroads are shown leaving Minneapolis and passing around the east and south sides of Cedar Lake. The MStL proceeds southwestward, while the St. Paul & Pacific heads west-northwestward, bends southwest and again westward, crosses Minnehaha Creek angling west-northwest to another arc, dipping west-southwest, then again heading west-northwest. The last visible northerly arc on the west end is today the shadow in Minnetonka’s Big Willow Park. St. Albans Station is just off the edge of the map to the west.

We used TerraServer’s satellite photos and topographic maps a great deal. Often the contour of the land still shows the cuts and fills the St. Paul & Pacific created. Hennepin County’s online tax records proved amazing. Many property descriptions still contain references to this abandoned railroad line. Tax ids referenced below can be located on Hennepin County’s web site, which has a very handy mapping service: <https://www16.co.hennepin.mn.us/pins/> Select “Search by property ID number” and enter the first ID. After that you can enter subsequent IDs on the map page itself.

I will proceed east to west listing evidence; online, old maps, and even visible and walkable, of the original St. Paul & Pacific line from Minneapolis to Wayzata. I am using tax ids to avoid using personal addresses, although addresses are usually available. I don’t want to make it too easy to intrude on the privacy of people along this route.

- Tax id 32-029-24-12-0002 is the StP&P side of the two railways passing along the east side of Cedar Lake. GPS 44°57'43.5"N 93°18'53.7"W.
- Tax id 32-029-24-42-0001 continues the StP&P side. The Metes & Bounds say “That part of the 56ft Rt of Way of GN RY Co...” The MStL right of way along the east side is still in use today, although impacted by Southwest Light Rail. GPS 44°57'16.8"N 93°19'04.4"W.
- Illustration 3 is the SW corner, Map 40, Davison’s Atlas of the City of Minneapolis, 1887, copied at the Hennepin County Historical Society, showing where the StP&P departed from the MStL at the south end of Cedar Lake in Minneapolis.
- Short little Depot Street is the likely location of the St. Paul & Pacific’s Cedar Lake depot. Note that it leads to St. Paul Ave and St. Louis Ave is just south of that.

²² Hidy, pg. 318, 320.

²³ Hidy, pg. 325.

²⁴ Trains, December 2003.

- Sunset Blvd follows the old roadbed for a bit, note how the homes along the street have their backsides to it.
- Tax id 31-029-24-41-0030 has Metes & Bounds: "...that part of abandoned R&W of G N RY..." This property is along the south edge of Cedar St., St. Louis Park, today.
- Tax id 31-029-24-41-0004 has Metes & Bounds: "That part of the abandoned R&W of the Great Northern RY Co..."
- If you zoom out from here with the county's mapping tool you get a very clear picture of the route the railroad took through this area. Illustration 4 encompasses the route from tax id 32-029-24-12-0002 to 31-029-24-41-0004 and beyond.
- Tax id 31-029-24-42-0009 is county tax forfeited land owned by the City of St. Louis Park. The roadbed is still visible on this property and to the west-northwest, on a fill through a marsh that you can walk along.
- Zooming out and panning west-northwest in the county online tax maps, a diagonal line is visible through the lots, continuing this old route with no actual references in property descriptions.
- Tax id 31-029-24-23-0006 is Wat Promwachirayan Thai Buddhist Center, on the west side of Highway 100. The StP&P right of way is visible as a cut through the church's back yard, 44°57'21.9"N 93°20'56.6"W.
- The next visible and walk-able evidence can be seen as a low fill in the southeast quadrant of the former interchange between the Minneapolis, Northfield & Southern and the GN. The route arced north of the "Minnetonka Cutoff" present day line. GPS 44°57'29.9"N 93°21'27.9"W. Illustrations 5 and 6, from a 1939 Atlas, show this portion clearly, with evidence that the cutoff was built west to east with a temporary connection from the new route to the older route in the middle of this quadrant.
- Tax id 08-117-21-24-0010 is Cedar Knoll Park, next to Carlson Field. The outline of the StP&P right of way is preserved on the online tax map, as it bends back southwestward. You can walk the line on fill across a low area next to the dog park until you reach the current BNSF line, which is above your head on much higher fill at that point.
- The southwestward bend of the StP&P line corresponds with the original Hutchinson Junction and Hutchinson Branch. Illustration 7 is a small section of Plat of Minneapolis and St. Louis Park, 1892, Minnesota Historical Society reference MAP 6F G4144.T89 1982. M5. "Hannan Lake Park" appears where the previous tax id, 08-117-21-24-0010, is today. The original Hutchinson Branch followed the old line to a point alongside today's Aquila Park.
- Tax id 18-117-21-13-0002, on the west side of Aquila Lane S, is where the original StP&P turned westward. The roadbed is walk-able for a short distance west from the park. Later in time the Hutchinson Branch, which is a bike trail today, continued southwestward from here to Hopkins. GPS 44°56'45.7"N 93°23'25.5"W.
- Tax id 18-117-21-24-0001 is tax-forfeited land with Metes & Bounds: "That part of SE ¼ of NW ¼ Nly of the abandoned RR R&W..." GPS 44°56'44.4"N 93°23'44.3"W.

- Tax id 18-117-21-23-0002 has Metes & Bounds: “That part of Sly 50 ft of abandoned R&W of St P M and M RR...” Next to it on the east, property id 18-117-21-23-0001 continues the line. Tax id 18-117-21-23-0003, along the south edge of the above two properties, is described as “lying N and W of creek and S of old R&W of GN RY...”
- The preceding areas are illustrated on the TerraServer topographic map in Illustration 8. I have highlighted the line in pink as it isolates a bow in Minnehaha Creek, where you can walk along the fill, and proceeds west through a marsh interrupted by Highway 169 today. Crossing to the north side of Minnetonka Blvd, the old right of way is Manitoba Road today.
- On the west side of Hopkins Crossroad the old St. Paul & Pacific line can be found behind a canoe landing on Minnehaha Creek and a Hopkins composting area. You can walk it all the way to where it crosses to the north side of the “Minnetonka Cutoff” BNSF main line again. We are now in the area covered by Illustration 1, i.e. the satellite photo at the beginning of this article, and Illustration 9, where my pink highlighting is continued. GPS 44°56'51.5"N 93°25'27.7"W.
- On the north side of the BNSF tracks there has been continuing development since the satellite photo was taken, and the old roadbed is no longer visible until you reach Big Willow Park.
- In Big Willow Park the line is an unofficial footpath along the north side of Minnehaha Creek. Pilings are still visible from the StP&P bridge over Minnehaha Creek, where it passes south of the site of St. Albans Mill. GPS 44°56'55.8"N 93°25'55.2"W. West of there you can walk along the line nearly all the way (GPS 44°56'54.5"N 93°26'03.3"W, and 44°56'52.4"N 93°26'10.1"W), until interrupted by private property, to where the Minnetonka Cutoff rejoined it, near where Cedar Lake Road crosses over the tracks today. The St. Albans Depot site is just west of the Cedar Lake Road overpass, on the south side of the current tracks.
- Creek Road West follows the original route of Cedar Lake Road. Proceeding west down that cul-de-sac, you come parallel to the StP&P route. Looking east from a few feet down the private drive of 12601 Creek Rd. W, tax id 14-117-22-22-0053, the StP&P line can be seen exiting the park through a cut, coming towards you.
- Illustration 10 is a detail from Map of the Minnetonka Mill Company's Subdivision of Part of Sec's 14 and 15, T. 117N.R.22W, 1881, copied at the Hennepin County Historical Society, showing the StP&P route, labeled as successor “Manitoba Rail Road,” the original Cedar Lake Road, and the spur to Minnetonka Mill. St. Albans Depot is just off the edge to the west. The MStL spur to the mill is along the south edge. The StP&P spur departed from the main line probably within property tax id 14-117-22-22-0036.

The difference between this low line winding through the hills and marshes of St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Minnetonka, and the high and wide replacement built by the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, is remarkable. James J. Hill and his partners certainly

built to last. Illustration 11 shows the Minnetonka Cutoff when it was only a few years old. <https://digitalcollections.hclib.org/digital/collection/p17208coll11/id/66/rec/1>

Illustration 2.

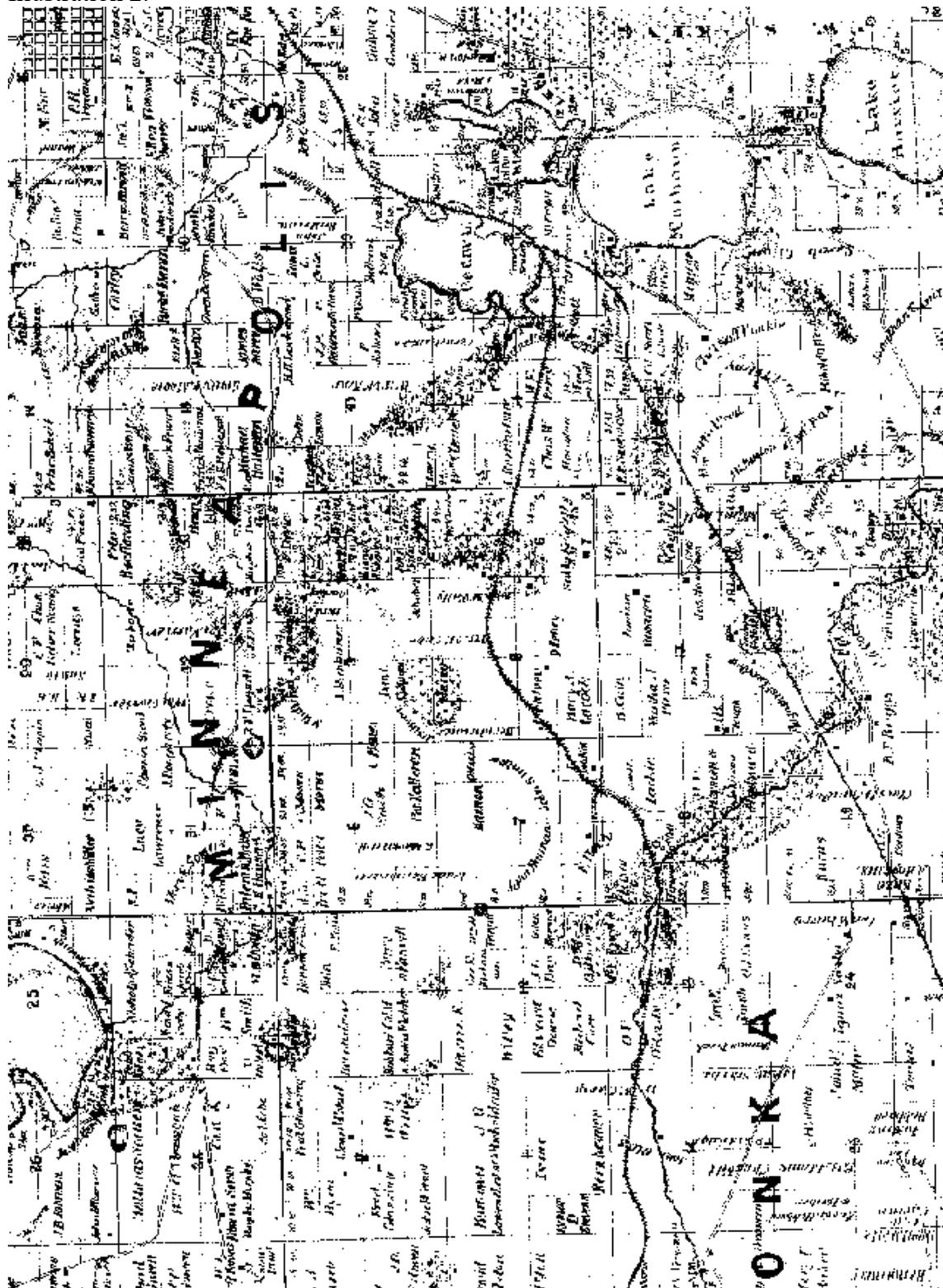


Illustration 3.

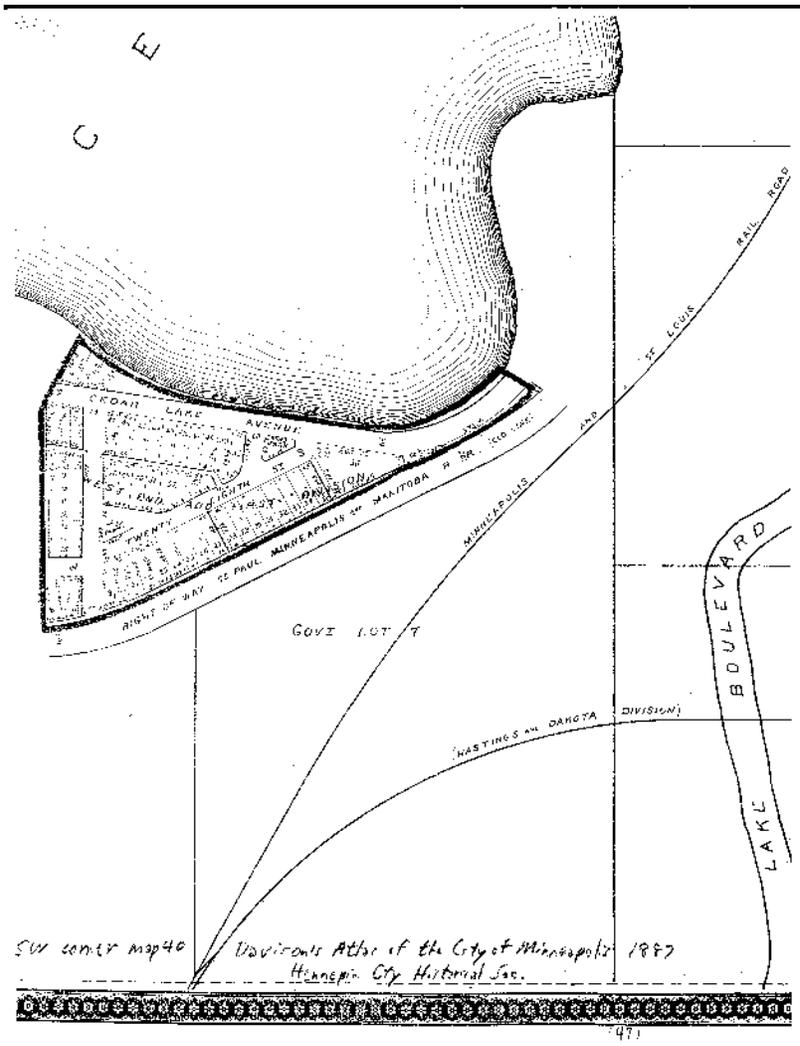


Illustration 4.



Illustration 5.

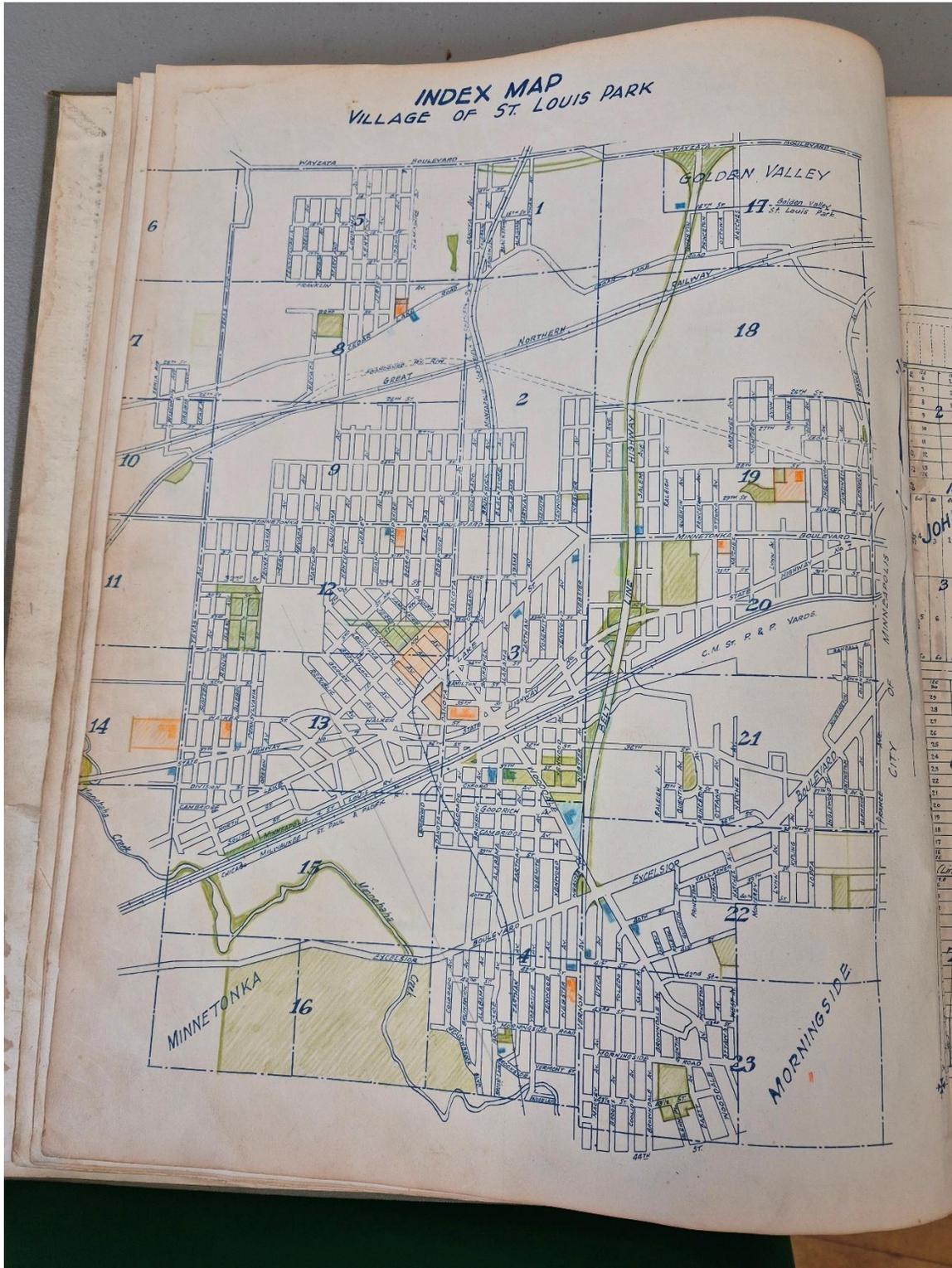


Illustration 7.

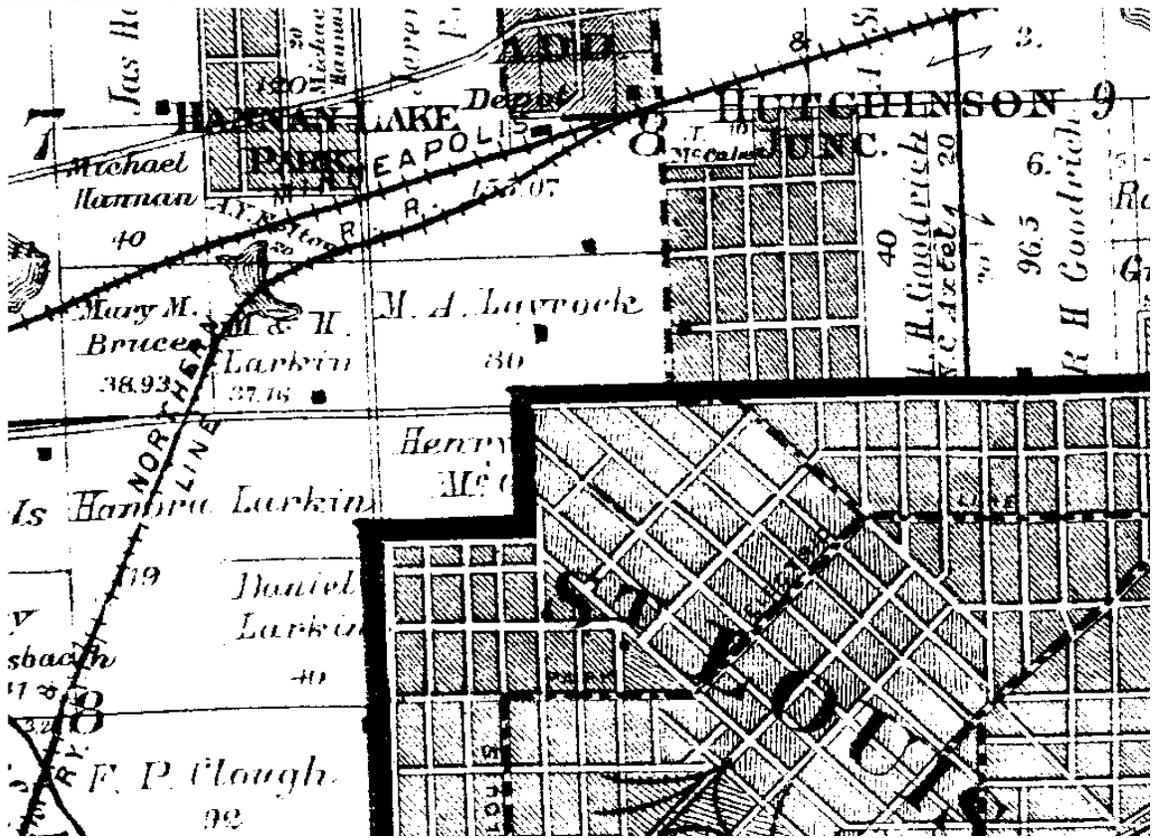


Illustration 8.

Page Server Image Courtesy of the USGS

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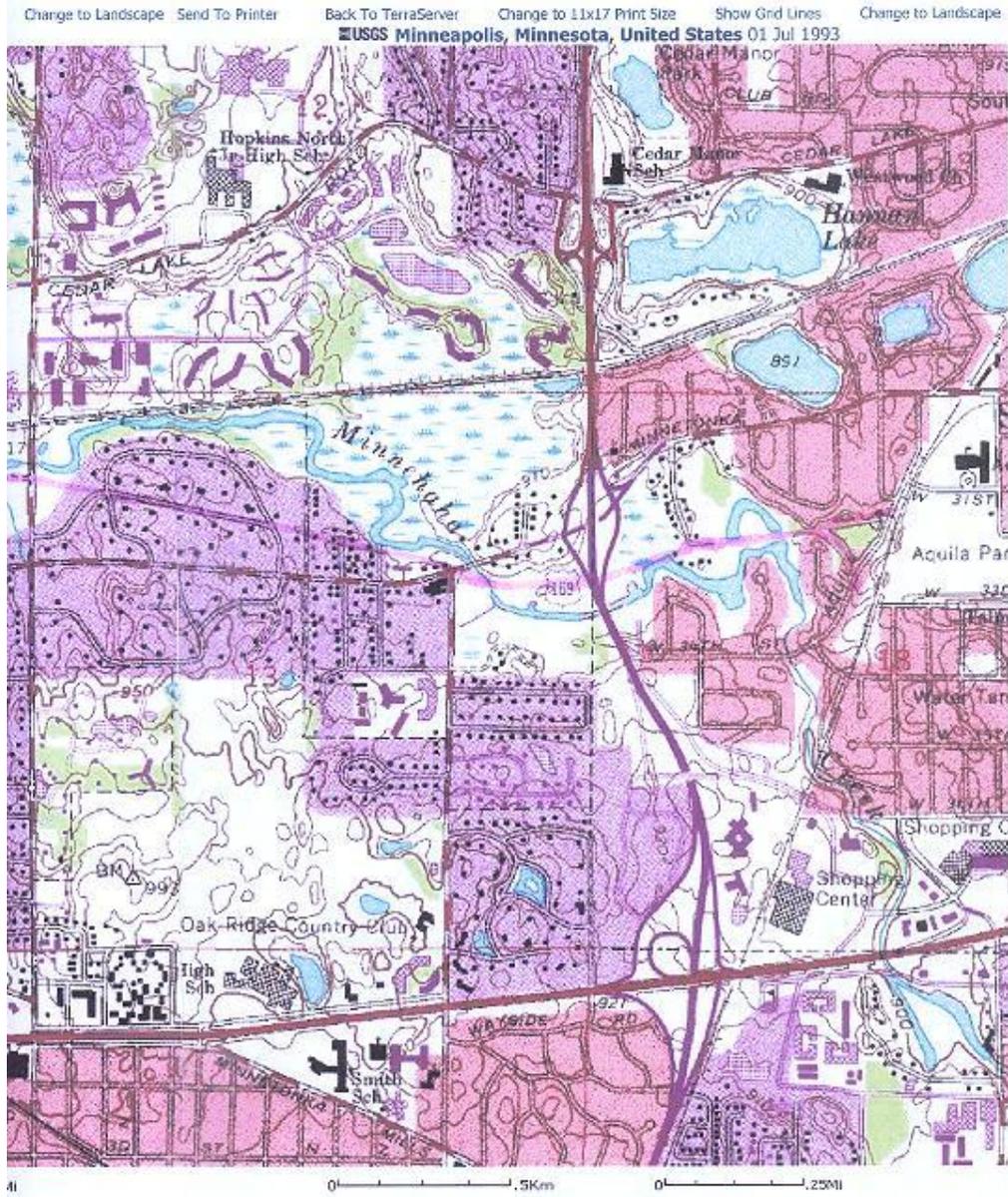


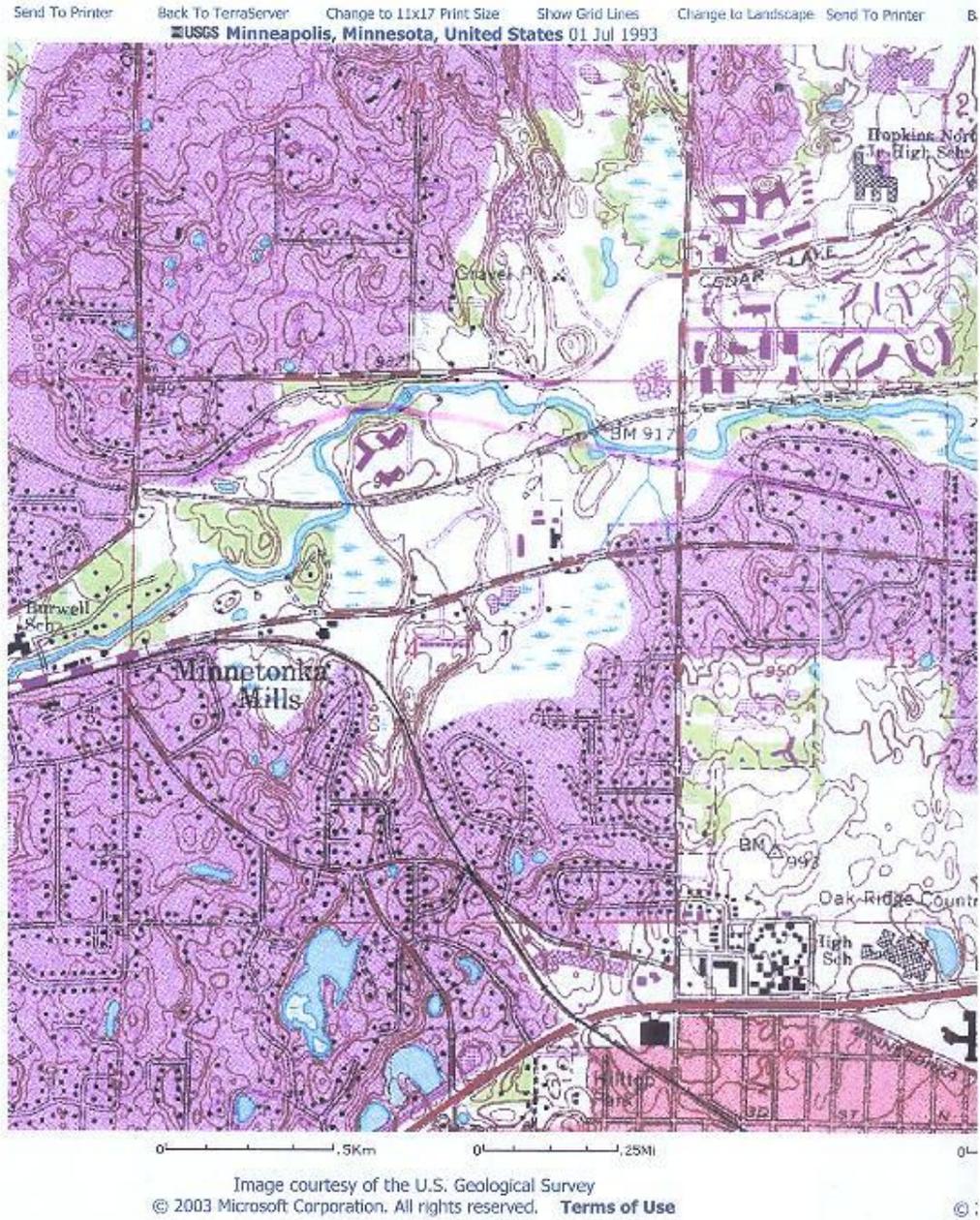
Image courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey
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15&W=1&P... 10terraserver-usa.com/printimage.aspx?T=2&S=12&X=585&Y=6220&Z=15&W=1&P... 10/24/03

Illustration 9.

TerraServer Image Courtesy of the USGS

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Illustration 11.



ID NUMBER: W081

TITLE: GREAT NORTHERN RAILROAD TRACKS ON NORTH EDGE OF CEDAR LAKE
GOING WEST

TIME PERIOD: 1898. 189-