

THE FALLS INITIATIVE

Project Orientation
April 2023

Project Overview

The *emerging* vision for *The Falls Initiative* is to transform the vacant, largely inaccessible land around Minneapolis’s Upper Lock into a **place of healing, restoration, education, and connection** - an iconic destination that honors both Indigenous history and the beauty of the Falls. *The Falls Initiative* will be the next step in bringing us back to the river that has been a source of identity, inspiration, and opportunity for everyone who has called this land home.

This shared vision has grown out of an expansive community engagement process coordinated by Friends of the Falls and guided by a Native Partnership Council. To realize the vision, the Friends has evolved to a **Native-majority board of directors** and recruited **Shelley Buck**, a Dakota tribal member and elected leader from the Prairie Island Indian Community, as the organization’s new President.



Owámniyomni (St. Anthony Falls).

Owámniyomni

Many people raised in Minnesota are familiar with “St. Anthony Falls,” a name given by Father Hennepin to describe the place where the Mississippi River once cascaded over a 50-foot limestone drop. Far fewer know the deeper history of this site – a history that has not just been ignored but in many cases actively silenced or erased.

The Dakota, who call the place **Owámniyomni**, or “turbulent waters,” believe the River to be a relative that provided and continues to provide abundance. The strong waterway and **Wíta Wanaǵi (Spirit Island)** are places of life, ceremony, and connection to our ancestors.

In the early nineteenth century, the Falls also attracted European settlers and soldiers,

who began a cycle of systematic oppression, displacement, and genocide, including the imprisonment of Dakota people at Fort Snelling and the force abduction of Indigenous children to attend Christian- and government-run boarding schools. Indigenous communities were torn apart, separating people from the river, their relatives and their culture, language, and history. The Falls themselves became a catalyst for sawmilling and flour milling, and ultimately it became one of the most heavily geo-engineered sites in the region.

The Upper Lock, built in the mid-twentieth century to control river traffic over the Falls, closed to commercial navigation in 2015 to halt the upriver spread of invasive carp.

Today the site has limited public access and is a barrier, not a gateway, to the River.



Aerial illustration depicting early design ideas. Illustration by GGN.

Bringing the Past into the Future

At this time, an initial cycle of design work – what we think of as our “first season” – has been completed, creating a sense of possibility and potential cost. Project opportunities include:

1. Telling the **actively silenced history** of the Indigenous people who have inhabited this land for hundreds of generations.
2. **Supporting a living culture** through programs that teach Indigenous languages, medicines, food systems, history, and other forms of heritage.
3. Providing **environmental and ecological restoration** for a desecrated site and waters considered sacred by many.
4. Establishing the Falls as Minneapolis’ most **iconic site** and using its physical beauty and rich history to present ourselves to the world.
5. Connecting with and appropriately **complementing other projects** along the Mississippi and across the region, with a particular focus on Indigenous-themed projects.

Additional opportunities and priorities may emerge with continued planning and engagement. Before going further, however, Friends of the Falls is centering the question of ownership.

Ownership

The site in question is currently owned by the federal government through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Congress directed conveyance of property adjacent to the Lock - about 3 acres - to the City of Minneapolis or its designee.

The City is receptive to the site being transferred to Native or Dakota ownership. Friends of the Falls is committed to supporting that process and has begun an **exploratory process with the four Dakota Tribal Nations in Mní Sóta.**

If there is not an interest, an alternative model, acceptable to the Tribes and local government, could include ownership by a local government entity with Friends of the Falls or a successor, Native-based organization charged with operational responsibility.

No matter how the ownership question is resolved, the project will be **Dakota-led and focused on Native history and culture.** It is easy to say ownership is too complex to tackle, but until we fully grapple with land ownership, we will never fully grapple with the legacy of colonization.

Timeline

The project is now entering its “second season,” which will focus on ownership and the refinement of project vision and design. A third season, focused on transformation of the site itself, is anticipated to **begin in 2024.**



Early design ideas for the Falls. Illustrations by GGN.

For more information:

Visit TheFalls.org

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