

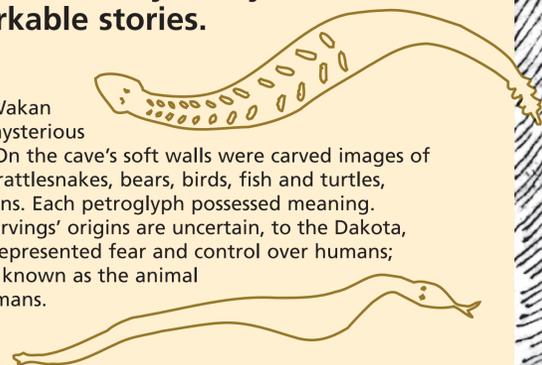
# Carver's Cave: Spirit Dwelling, Alliance Cave, Landmark



Many accounts of Carver's Cave, located near the Mississippi River at the base of Dayton's Bluff in St. Paul, recall its rich and varied past. To Dakota Indians the cave was a dwelling place for spirits and a meeting place for alliance. To early European explorers it was a landmark, while nineteenth century immigrants viewed the cave as a tourist attraction. To industrialists it was in the way. To those touched by the cave's history today, it remains a teller of remarkable stories.

## Wakan Tepee

Dakota Indians have called the cave "Wakan Tepee," which may be interpreted as mysterious house, spirit dwelling, or church. On the cave's soft walls were carved images of animals including rattlesnakes, bears, birds, fish and turtles, as well as humans. Each petroglyph possessed meaning. Though the carvings' origins are uncertain, to the Dakota, rattlesnakes represented fear and control over humans; the bear was known as the animal closest to humans.



## Alliance Cave

Carver's Cave is better known as Alliance Cave to many Dakota. An alliance of 56 Indian nations called "Wodakota" is said to have met at the cave to keep peace ("wookiye") and maintain good relations. This great alliance included Nakota, Dakota, Lakota and Sakota peoples. The cave's location was central to the system of rivers by which Alliance members traveled. The lake inside the cave could accommodate large canoes and decision-making business may have been conducted without leaving the canoes. Decisions are said to have been made with consideration for seven generations to come.

Graphics above and at right: **Petroglyphs in Carver's Cave.** Theodore H. Lewis sketched the animal figures depicted here in 1878. Four are of rattlesnakes, each between 3' and 5' long, and averaging 1 1/2" deep; all pointed toward the center of the cave at its widest part. The other two sketches may be of bears; the animal at right may be a bison.



Sketch above: Members of the Minnesota Historical Society examining Carver's Cave by candlelight in 1867, on the centennial of Carver's exploration of it. A rattlesnake is depicted on the cave ceiling. Artist: Robert O. Sweeny, courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

## European Discovery

In 1766, Jonathan Carver, a British explorer whose name is now applied to the cave, became the first white person to visit and describe the cave. He wrote about its floor of fine white sand, its petroglyphs, and the lake that began twenty feet from the entrance and extended "an unsearchable distance." Carver's best selling book about his travels in the interior of North America, first published in 1778 and later reprinted in 53 editions in nine countries, made Carver's Cave a landmark known around the world.



Photo at far left: Boy Scouts exploring interior of Carver's Cave, 1930. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

Photo at left: Re-opening of Carver's Cave, November 5, 1913. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.



Location of Carver's Cave near Mississippi River



## Destruction and "Rediscovery"

In 1869 and 1885 several hundred feet of the bluffs housing the cave were cut away to make room for the railroad. The excavations reduced the size of the cave, and the cave's entrance became obscured following the resultant landslides.

In 1913 the cave's entrance was cleared so the cave could become part of St. Paul's park system, and opened for "amusement and instruction." Plans called for a stairway from the blufftop to the entrance, and the installation of electric lights. These plans never materialized. Vandalism and the railroad's need for more land closed the cave once more. In 1976 a massive steel door was placed at the cave's present entrance.

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