



Ruins of a Forgotten Highway

Hitting the Books, Scouring the Archives!

In 2012, the NPS recruited Dan Ott, a Loyola University history graduate student who had worked as a seasonal park guide at the Riverway, to find out more about the Army Corps wing dams' origins, locations, and construction, as well as the historic context of their creation. Dan's research ranged from libraries and digital collections to the Minnesota Historical Society and the National Archives.

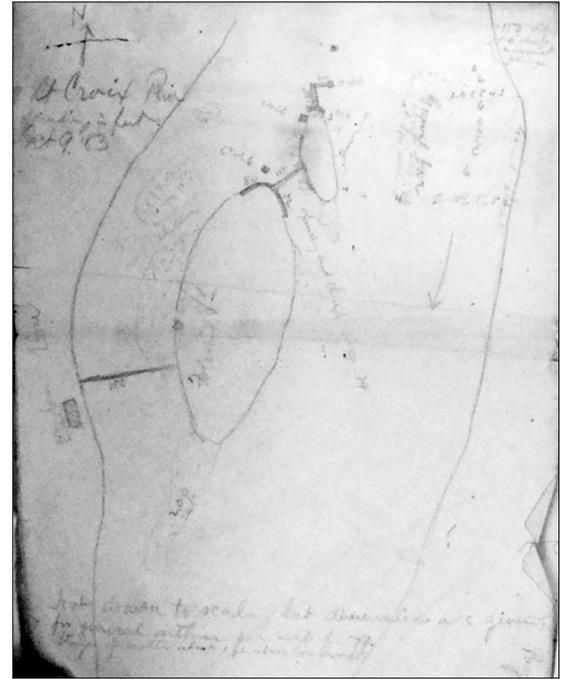
Detective Work

Historical research is detective work. It begins by identifying a historical mystery and research question (like Ranger Dale's curiosity about the wing dams) and progresses by reviewing what's already known the topic and then digging into archival materials in pursuit of new insights and information. Unfortunately, only a tiny fraction of what historic people created has been preserved, so researchers may never find the "smoking gun" that reveals exactly what they want to know. Despite this disadvantage, trained historians creatively interpret what has been saved to shed light on an historical mystery.

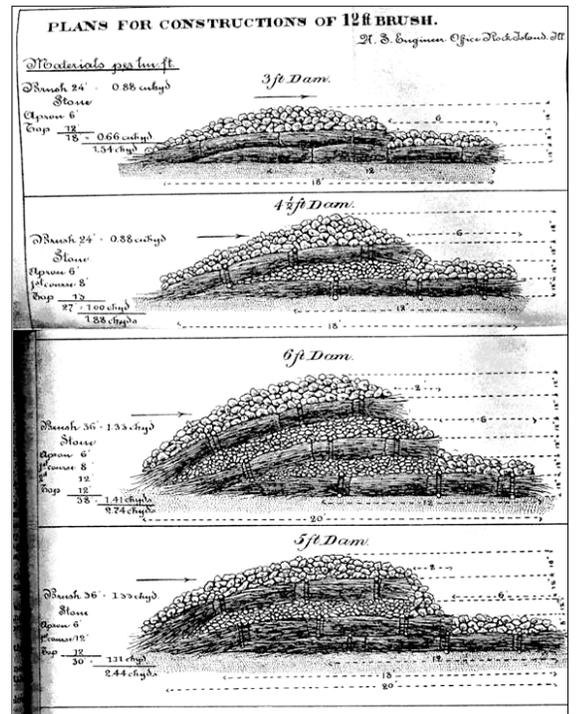
Dan began by reading books that included information about the dams and why they were built. He then turned to annual reports of the chief of engineers from the 1800s that contained surveys and plans for "improving" navigation on the St. Croix, progress reports, commercial statistics, and descriptions of major

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Illustrations detail how to build wing dams in an 1875 report from the Army Corps chief of engineers.



Sketch from 1882 shows Folsom Island. The dark lines indicate where structures where to be built around the island.



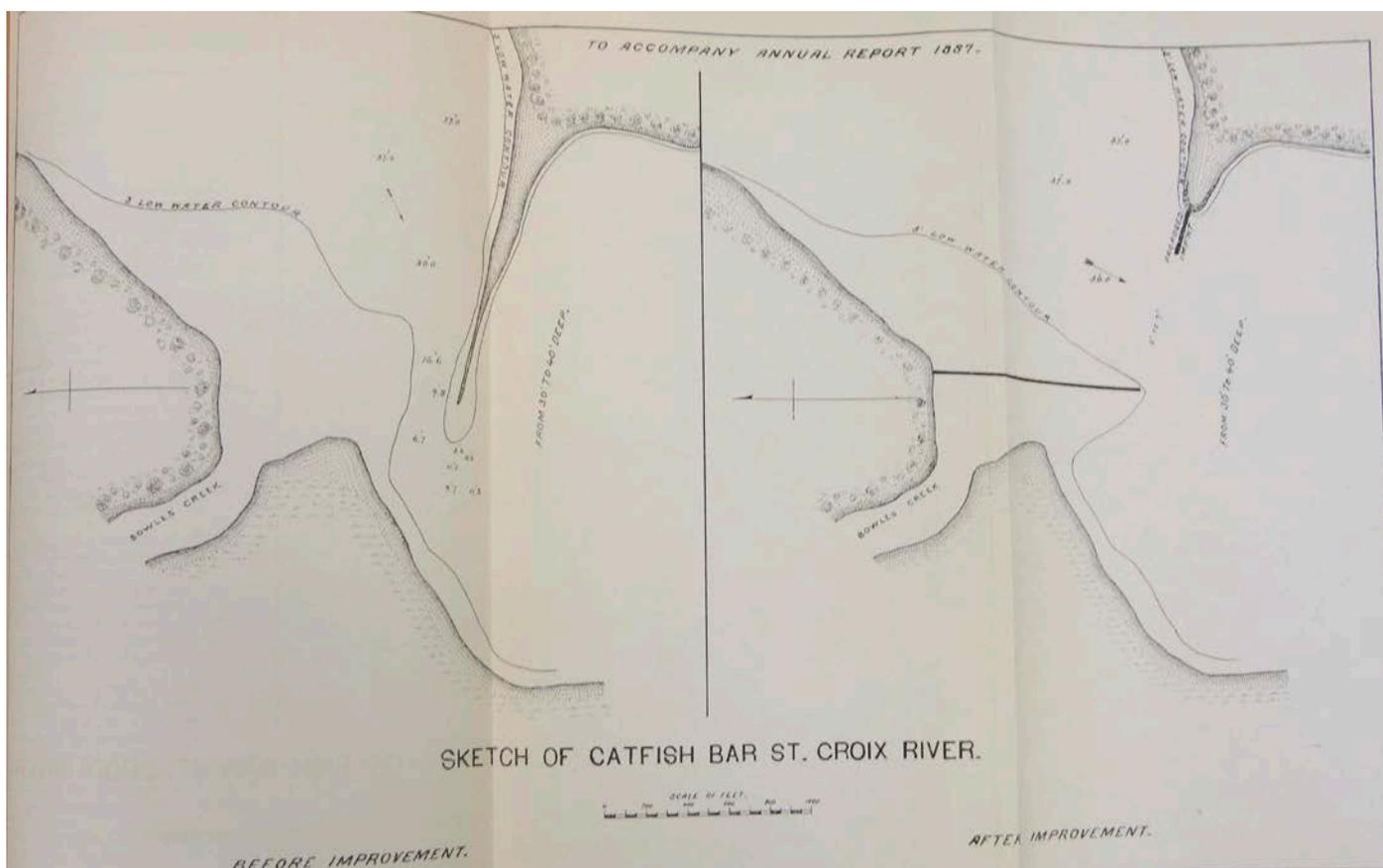
projects that were never carried out – like an 1880s reservoir plan to raise river levels or an 1890s proposal to carve a canal through the St. Croix to connect the Mississippi with Lake Superior. How different the river would have been!

Crucially, an 1879 survey included a description of 31 improvements, at 15 locations, listed by river mile, intended to create a three-foot navigation channel. The report also alluded to a master map of these structures. Unfortunately, the “smoking gun” map was not included – but the river miles were a good place to start.

National Archives

Additional research at the National Archives in Chicago and Kansas City uncovered surveys, sketches, correspondence, field notes, journals, gage readings, and other documents related to the Army Corps work on the St. Croix in the nineteenth century.

The master map was not found. With all the rich archival research, however, there was more than enough information to move forward with an archeological survey!



Another sketch from an Army Corps report indicates locations of water control structures.