The Falls of the Big Sioux River
THE FALLS OF THE BIG SIOUX RIVER:
City Birthplace and Namesake

Rand McNally illustration of the falls as they appeared in 1872.

Cover: Aerial photograph of the falls taken by Duane Waack using a remote control camera on a tethered balloon.
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The Past and Future of the Falls

The falls have drawn people to this area since prehistoric times. More recently, the falls have served as a ‘namesake’ for the city of Sioux Falls. Lying directly north of present day downtown, the “falls” of the Big Sioux River consist of a series of waterfalls cascading over a large area of exposed pink quartzite.

When the area was originally settled, the people of Sioux Falls saw the falls as a restful and quiet meeting place. By the end of the 19th century, the rise of the Industrial Revolution and its demands for modernization saw local feelings change. Besides admiring the picturesque beauty of the falls, the pioneers saw the Big Sioux River and its falls as a useful and inexpensive power source.
The falls soon became used for the economic advancement of Sioux Falls business and industry. During this period of economic growth, the community and industrial companies turned their backs to the natural beauty of the river and its falls. The river provided a relatively quiet and reliable power source and carried away the wastes of industry without complaint.

Now, the trend has turned full-circle. With the redevelopment of the area, Falls Park is once again becoming a quiet retreat for the people of Sioux Falls and a destination for visitors.
Prehistory and Geology

The pink quartzite at the falls is over one billion years old. Also known as Sioux Falls granite or jasper, the quartzite forms the bedrock of this area. The rock is the product of millions of years of sediment deposits, heat, pressure, and weathering. To better understand how the falls came to be, we should look at the slow geological processes that caused them to form.

Beginning more than 1.6 million years ago, when this area was a shallow Cretaceous seabed, erosion and waves put down a layer of sand. As the actions of waves near the shore worked on the sand they left ripple marks in many places. Many layers of sand built up and were buried deep underground. The sandstone metamorphosed because of a combination of heat, pressure, and silica cement which bonded with the individual sand grains. The rocks slowly changed from a sandy seabed floor to sandstone.

“Ripple” marks left by water moving over the sandy seabed.
Several different periods of glacial activity have affected the landscape of this area. Around 14,000 years ago the massive Wisconsin Glacier, which stretched from what is now Eastern Ohio to the present-day Missouri River, cut a wide path through North America. This mile thick sheet of ice carried away the sediment left by earlier glaciers and exposed the bedrock layer of quartzite around the falls. As the Wisconsin Glacier slowly melted, it also formed the Big Sioux River Valley. The large flow of water from the melting ice carved its way downward along the glacier's receding edge. At the present site of Sioux Falls, the river dropped over the bedrock quartzite nearly 100 feet in less than a half mile, creating the falls.

The variety of colors present in the quartzite layers and at different locations vary from pink to a deep red. The colors become darker as the level of iron oxides (commonly known as rust) in the rock increases. Lesser concentrations of iron in the rock result in the lighter color. The color and hardness were unique qualities of the quartzite that made it desirable for building material.

**Paleolithic and Prehistoric Inhabitants**

The falls seem to have been revered by many different Native American cultures. Although no formal archaeological excavations have taken place at the falls, area finds and scientific digs have recorded many stone tools as well as other evidence. This suggests that the area surrounding the falls was often used as a camp or living area, possibly as long ago as 10,000 years. Not much is known of these early cultures of "Paleo-Indians." They seem to have been a nomadic, tribal people who followed the herds of animals which they hunted. They lived in small bands and did not leave evidence of large villages.
We know more about the later inhabitants of the falls area from the visible burial mounds they built and from the village sites that have been uncovered. Archaeologists tell us that these "mound builders" were a hunting people who lived in the Big Sioux River Valley from roughly 500 AD to 800 AD. In the centuries after 800 AD, a group called the Oneota moved into the area. They lived an agricultural lifestyle and did not travel as much as the earlier nomadic people. Many anthropologists feel that the Oneota people were ancestors of the historic Mandan. The Mandan lived in fortified villages at the same sites that had attracted the Oneota.

The mounds built here were used for ritual burials. A few mounds are still visible and can be found along the Big Sioux River near Blood Run and at Sherman Park in Sioux Falls.

**Early Historic Period**

From the late 1600s through the early 1800s, contact between native people and white traders and settlers became more common. In the 18th century, the Lakota tribe moved into the area, driven westward by their eastern enemies who had obtained horses, firearms, and metal tools from the whites. When the Lakota arrived at the falls, the mounds and village sites of their predecessors were already centuries old.

The Lakota reportedly used the falls area as a seasonal rendezvous. The county's name, "Minnehaha," is the Lakota word for "laughing waters." The upper river was named "Watpaipakshan" (where the Sioux River bends), and the lower river was "Tchan-Kusundata" (thickly wooded river).
European Exploration

The earliest Europeans at the falls of the Big Sioux River were French explorers and fur traders who were eager to trade with the Lakota. In the mid-1700s, the central portion of North America was part of the French colonial territory called Louisiana. It was ceded to Spain in 1763 following the French and Indian War.

Lesuer’s Map, published in 1701.
By 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was made and this area was owned by the United States government. The Lewis & Clark party was sent out by the Jefferson administration to assess this new acquisition. Although they did not personally explore the falls, an August 1804 journal entry mentions the existence of "the falls of the ...Soues River."

The earliest documented visit by a white explorer to the falls was that of Philander Prescott. This trapper and trader wrote of camping briefly at the falls in December 1832. After this point, accounts of visits to the falls become more frequent. The United States government sponsored the map-making expedition of the Nicollett Party in 1838. The party's records make mention of the falls, but they are considered a secondhand account by most historians.

The best early firsthand description of the falls was made in 1844 by Captain James Allen, the leader of a group of mounted infantry soldiers (dragoons). This account, published in The States & Territories of the Great West by Jacob Ferris in 1856, inspired town site developers to seek out the falls.

"... the rock of these falls is massive quartz... The falls, as near as I could measure it, is 100 feet and 400 yards, and is made up of several perpendicular falls - one 20, one 18, and one 10 feet. The rock in the course and on the borders of the stream is split, broken and piled up in the most irregular and fantastic shapes, and presents deep and frightful chasms, extending from the stream in all directions. There is no timber here on the borders or bluffs, and only a little on the small island at the head of the rapids."

Captain James Allen, 1844
In 1859, Moses A. Armstrong made this sketch of the falls.
“...their appearance is one of the most beautiful imaginable, resembling drifts of snow trembling over the rocks of a steep mountain side.”

First Land Development (1856-1862)

The focus of intense land speculation in Minnesota and Iowa during the mid-1850s inevitability turned toward the Big Sioux River Valley. There were greater opportunities in selling town site land. Farm land was bought and sold by the acre, but town sites were bought by the acre and sold by town lots or blocks. The profit margin was much greater on commercial property, but only if people came. Therefore, town speculators also became promoters of frontier settlements.
Town speculators saw the possibility of building great wealth by finding out which town sites were most likely to be successful. Highest on the list were areas which possessed natural assets for becoming a town. Before railroads, the most promising sites were those located near rivers. A navigable river allowed a town to become a river port and prosper from riverboat commerce. A smaller river could still provide a successful town site if the power of the river current could be harnessed.

Probably taken in the late 1860s, this photograph shows how the falls looked when the land developers arrived.
It was the falls of the Big Sioux River that made this location a prime town site in 1856. Two rival town companies, the Dakota Land Company and the Western Town Company, competed for control of the site. Representatives from both groups arrived within days of each other and each laid out a claim of 320 acres. Under the United States Pre-Emption Act of 1841 they could buy the land for $1.25 an acre and after building a house, cultivating a minimum of five acres, and living on the land for a minimum of six months, it could be deeded over to the company.

Both companies quickly laid out streets and blocks. By June 1857 there were two town sites at Sioux Falls. The companies did work together for mutual protection. When the Sioux War of 1862 raged across the Minnesota/Dakota border the two town companies put aside their rivalry. They built a small fortification to protect the citizenry. They called the earthen structure Fort Sod.

The Dakota Land Company

The Dakota Land Company was formed in 1857 in St. Paul, Minn. Their plan for success hinged on Minnesota becoming a state in 1858, with the falls of the Big Sioux River left outside the western border. The company was confident that their connections with the Democratic administration of President James Buchanan would result in Sioux Falls being designated as the capital of the newly established Dakota Territory.

Unfortunately for them, the rival Western Town Company based in Dubuque, Iowa, beat them to the site by a few days and claimed the prime site below the falls. This forced them to make their claim of 320 acres above the falls.
The Western Town Company

The Western Town Company was formed in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1856. The company hired two men to survey the falls area. In May 1857 the men took up 320 acres bordering the falls in the name of the Western Town Company and named it “Sioux Falls.”
In August 1862 a bloody conflict between the Santee Sioux, led by Little Crow, and the settlers of Minnesota spilled over the border into Dakota Territory. On August 25, while cutting hay on the bluffs above Sioux Falls, Judge Joseph Amidon and his son William were killed by Indians presumably connected with the uprising. This event marked the beginning of a decade of intense fear, deep hatred, and military occupation.

Fearing that the conflict between the Sioux tribes and the white settlers was too close to the city, Sioux Falls was abandoned.

A few days after hearing news of the Indian “massacres” in Minnesota, the Dakota Territorial Governor ordered the Dakota Cavalry to escort the Sioux Falls settlers to the safety of Yankton. The town site was abandoned to the elements and was pillaged and burned by Indians shortly afterwards. For several years following, the town promoters tried to revive the plans for Sioux Falls by demanding the federal government bring in the military. They hoped that the security of an army fort would lure settlers back to the area.

The United States government finally responded to the requests by establishing Fort Dakota. It was a small, 80-man post located just above the main falls. The government also marked off a military reservation with a seven mile by 10 mile boundary. Within a short time, the need for the military fort decreased, and eager town developers clamored for the removal of the fort and the surrounding military reservation in order to open it up for settlement.
The "New" Sioux Falls and R.F. Pettigrew

In the late 1860s, a survey crew headed into the Big Sioux River Valley for a summer of surveying government land. With this small party was a young law student by the name of Richard F. Pettigrew. He was very much taken with this area and believed that it would make a fine town. When he came back in the spring of 1870, young Pettigrew cut short his college career for one in real estate.

Pettigrew and many others had been "squatting" on the military reservation when a bill was introduced in Congress to sell all of the land to an investor. Nye Phillips and Pettigrew quickly drew up a counter-proposal that would open the land for settlement under the Pre-Emption & Homestead Acts. Through connections both men had in Congress the counter-bill was introduced and passed. Pettigrew quickly became a leading promoter of the 'second' Sioux Falls City.
Building Boom in Sioux Falls (1870s and early 1880s)

After Sioux Falls was opened for settlement in 1870, many former residents returned, and a new wave of settlers arrived in following years. By 1873, the population grew to 593 and a building boom was underway. The village was incorporated in 1876 and at that time consisted of 1,200 acres. A city charter was granted to Sioux Falls in 1883. The arrival of the railroad ensured prosperous conditions throughout the 1880s. The population of Sioux Falls mushroomed from 2,164 in 1880 to 10,167 at the close of the decade.

The falls as they looked around 1870 before major settlement of the area.
Business and Industry Move In

Using the falls as a source of power was a popular idea, but the falls never developed into the economic force the early speculators hoped they would become. As commercial interests were given high priority, people tended to ignore the aesthetic aspects of the falls. It was common in the 1800s to dump raw sewage and dead animals into the river. Quarry companies removed stone from the falls, and a dam was built for a hydroelectric plant.

Construction of the Queen Bee Mill near the falls.

Not everyone supported the popular economic vision for the falls, however. An article appeared in the Dakota Pantagraph newspaper on May 9, 1878, calling public attention to the natural beauty of the falls. The article argued that business interests had caused the falls to be "...smeared and no longer a major attraction."
The Queen Bee Flour Mill

On the east side of the river are the one-and-a-half-story remains of the Queen Bee Mill. The mill tried and failed to utilize the power of the river. By 1878 the fertile land around Sioux Falls was producing large yearly crop yields. R.F. Pettigrew watched long lines of farmers in wagons waiting to unload their wheat at the train terminal. He felt Sioux Falls should have its own mill rather than ship to Minnesota or Wisconsin. After convincing mill operator James H. Drake, formerly of St. Paul, to establish a mill in Sioux Falls, Pettigrew acquired the land. He then traveled to New York to locate an investor. Pettigrew convinced investment capitalist George I. Seney to come to Sioux Falls in 1879 to view the site and hear more about the plans.

Panoramic view of downtown Sioux Falls showing the falls, Seney Island, and the Queen Bee Mill.

On visiting Sioux Falls and seeing the site, Mr. Seney was duly impressed. He and other investors enabled the Queen Bee Mill to become a reality. The construction of the Queen Bee began in 1879 and was completed in 1881. On October 25, 1881, the first wheat was ground.

The main mill building was originally 80 by 100 feet, seven stories high, and said to be the tallest structure west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. The building cost around $500,000 to build! It was designed to produce 1,200 bushels of wheat a day at full capacity. The complex included the mill, a grain elevator, a warehouse, and a copper shop with railroad connections.

Unfortunately, the mill was never a success. There just wasn’t enough water to power such a large mill for consistent periods of time. The lack of water was compounded by a lack of wheat to grind. Both problems were caused by a drought that began the year after the mill opened. The mill closed in 1883.
The man standing in the foreground in front of the completed Queen Bee Mill is thought to be George Seney.

The Queen Bee was reopened by the United Flour Milling Company of Minneapolis, Minn., in 1911. The mill was converted to electric power in 1916. That same year, the company determined it was cheaper to ship the wheat to Minneapolis to be processed than run the mill in Sioux Falls.

Commander-Larrabie Company reopened the building in 1929 as a warehouse for farm implements. In 1937, the building and property was sold to Ben Margulies as a storage warehouse. On January 30, 1956, a fire destroyed the building. The property and ruins were donated to the city of Sioux Falls in 1963.
George Ingraham Seney was born in Astoria, Ill., on May 12, 1826. He was the son of the Rev. Robert Seney. He attended Wesleyan University at Middletown, Conn., from 1842–43 and graduated from the University of the City of New York in 1846. In 1877, he became president of the Metropolitan Bank in New York City and held the office until 1884. He was one of the main investors in the Queen Bee Mill in Sioux Falls. The island above the falls was dubbed Seney Island in his honor.

George was a trustee of Wesleyan University from 1871–93. George founded the Seney scholarships at Wesleyan University and the Seney Hospital in Brooklyn, N.Y. George Seney died in New York City on April 7, 1893.

People enjoy a picnic on Seney Island.
Stone Cutting and Finishing Industries

The hard, versatile, and beautiful quartzite stone has been quarried as a building material in Sioux Falls for over 100 years. Many of the streets of Sioux Falls were originally paved with cut quartzite blocks. Between the mid-1870s and the early 1900s, locally quarried quartzite was a popular material for the exterior of buildings in Sioux Falls.

Many of these quartzite buildings have become icons of the community including the Old Courthouse Museum, Pettigrew Home and Museum, SD State Penitentiary, Federal Courthouse, the former Carnegie Library, Washington Pavilion of Arts and Science, the Sioux Falls Brewing Company, and other downtown area businesses and homes. The development of less expensive construction methods led to the decline of quartzite as a building material. Today, quartzite is used in crushed form for paving and concrete.

Drake Polishing Works

The Drake Polishing Works was established by James H. Drake in 1883. Drake was a friend of R.F. Pettigrew and was active in both the quarry and railroad industries. In the early days of Sioux Falls, Drake sent his plant manager to Apache County, Ariz., to pick up and haul back petrified wood logs by the wagon and railcar load. It became illegal to remove petrified wood from this part of Arizona after Congress made this former Indian reservation into a national park.
The Drake Polishing Works, located just above the falls.

The Drake company used the flow of the river at the lower falls to run the machinery to create polished stone monuments. The company was most famous for its work with petrified wood.

The Drake Polishing Works had its polished petrified wood creations displayed at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. The company also did a large business with many clients through Tiffany & Co., based in New York. R.F. Pettigrew was especially fond of polished petrified wood and used large quantities of it in his museum addition as well as the entrance to Woodlawn Cemetery near 26th Street and Cliff Avenue. Gradually the company reduced production and ceased manufacturing altogether in the 1940s. The Polishing Works operation was located near the present-day visitor information building.
Sioux Falls Light and Power

The quartzite building to the north of the ruins of the Queen Bee Mill is the old Sioux Falls Light and Power Company plant. The company was headed by E. W. Coughran, a local businessman backed by financiers in Chicago. The building for the plant was completed in 1908. Three 500-kilowatt hydro-electric generators were housed there. Originally, the electricity was used to power the city’s electric streetcar system. Also in 1908, the dam around the Queen Bee millpond was raised, cement retaining walls were constructed, and the channel around the west side of Seney Island was closed. These changes concentrated water in the main river channel, producing a stronger current for the power company.

In 1916, the Sioux Falls Light and Power Company changed its name to Northern States Power Company. The original plant was decommissioned in 1972, and the property was given to the city in 1977. Only the original quartzite building now remains.

The Sioux Falls Light and Power building near the base of the falls.
The Cascade Mill, established by James Drake in 1883, was a less ambitious venture than the Queen Bee Mill. In 1887 an electrical power plant generator was added at the mill.

"The Island"

The island above the falls was originally claimed by Wilmont W. Brookings and was commonly referred to as Brookings Island or Picnic Island. This was a favorite picnic spot for early Sioux Falls citizens who were attracted by the scenic beauty of the river and the woody, grassy setting. When New York investor George I. Seney provided a great deal of money for the Queen Bee Mill project, the island soon became known as Seney Island. Even though Seney Island was privately owned, the people of Sioux Falls thought of it as a public picnic area.
Seney Island remained a popular gathering place into the 1920s. Local residents spent their sunny afternoons wading in the river, picnicking, swimming, fishing, canoeing, or courting. Some residents drove their buggies over the shallow river bottom to the island. For a time there were even small excursion boats that operated on the river around the island.

A horse-drawn buggy crosses the shallow western channel of the Sioux River. Note the foot bridge on the right side of the photograph.

Unfortunately, the channel on the west side of the island became a dumping area for local garbage. Dumping was encouraged by the railroad company until the channel was completely filled by 1908. The railroad cut down the remaining trees on the island, and the once popular retreat gradually disappeared.
The Next Generation

The falls have undergone the same type of cycle as the city which bears their name. From natural splendor to industrial revolution to a new understanding of the beauty of nature. Recently, the falls have begun to recover some of their former glory. Park improvements, lighting, building reuse, and a new visitor center have all contributed to making Falls Park the center of the city again. Just as past generations enjoyed the falls, future generations will be able to visit a true landmark.

People fishing below the falls.
There have been times that the Big Sioux River has broken its banks and become a wild river. One of the most notable examples was the great flood of 1881. There was a square rock in the channel near the falls that was topped as a result of this flood.

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