

# **Little Falls**

# Ra v i n e

**The Missing  
Landmark**

**Story, Photos & Tour  
By Mary Warner**

Little Falls Ravine: The Missing Landmark  
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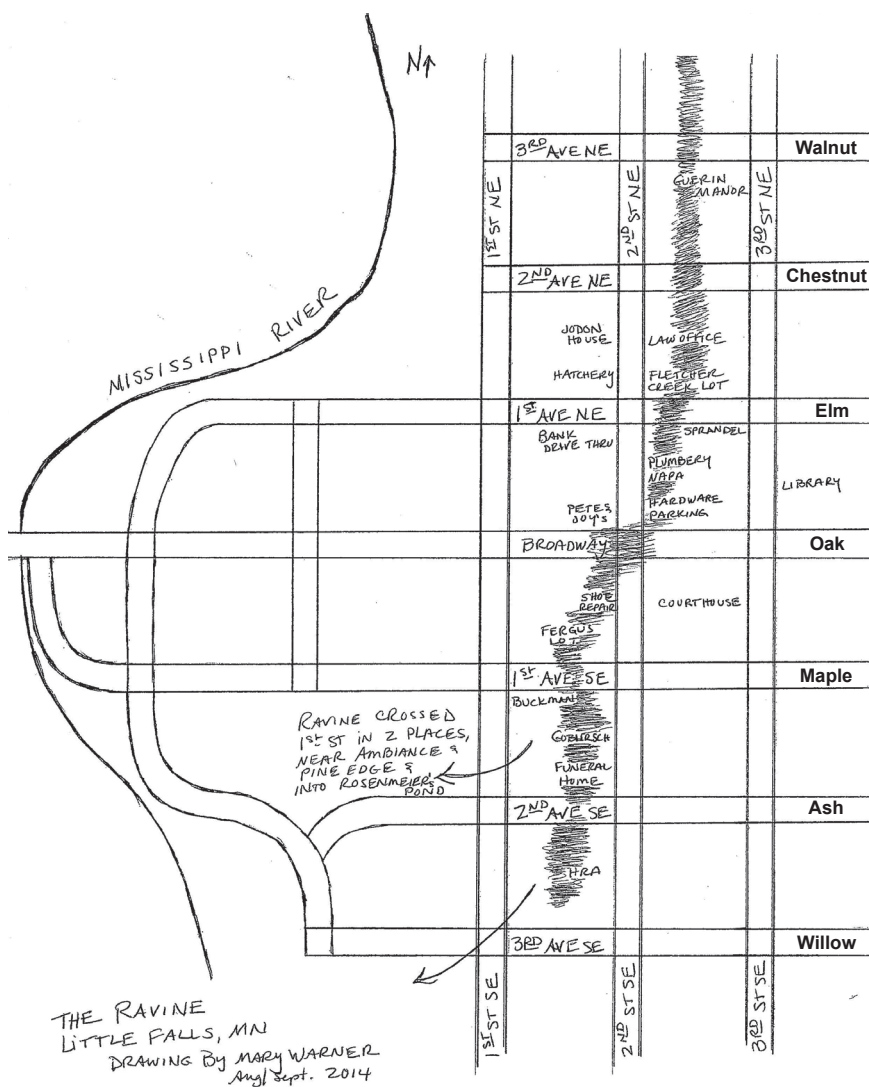
Layout & design by Mary Warner.

# **Little Falls Ravine: The Missing Landmark**

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Approximate location of ravine that used to run through Little Falls, Minnesota, drawn in 2014 by Mary Warner from conversations with Frederick Larson, Charlie Sprandel, Ed Tanner, and Rich May.  
Tree names on right are former street names.



# The Ravine

## (Story)

When thinking about the terrains of most cities, with the exception of hilly places like Duluth or San Francisco, it's easy to imagine that they are primarily flat. With cars, the ease of movement over slight hills makes the illusion of flatness more pronounced. Elevation changes in a city are like low-level background noise. We're so accustomed to them that they're not worth consideration or mention. Such was the case with a significant land feature in Little Falls, Minnesota.

Little Falls was once the site of a long, deep ravine. This wasn't a ravine on the edge of town; it was a significant slice through the heart of the east side business district, running beside the old City Hall. City residents would be hard-pressed to find it today, although, if you know where to look, signs of it still exist.

The ravine was part of the Fletcher Creek system. Fletcher Creek flows into the Mississippi River about 6 miles north of the city. It's difficult to picture an insignificant creek this far away as being connected with the Little Falls ravine. However, if you examine historic aerial photos of Morrison County on the DNR's Landview website (<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/maps/landview/index.html>), you'll see a series of streaks on the land that look like the shadows of mini rivers, echoing the Mighty Mississippi. The aerial maps make it obvious that these are former waterways and they run from Fletcher Creek right to the city.

There are several historical references to the connection between Fletcher Creek and the ravine. One is found in the WPA biography of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Heroux: "Many times when they were children, Mr. and Mrs. Heroux went to Little Falls from Belle Prairie in a rowboat in a big slough called "The Ravine." (March 1937)

In a July 1905 newspaper account of a City Council meeting, residents from the northeast part of town were on hand to discuss flooding. "There has been a great deal of trouble with water in that part of the city

and many cellars have been flooded and gardens ruined. The stream in the rear of the Hawthorne school flowing down the hill seems to cause most of the trouble, and added to the water from Fletcher creek to the north, have made conditions worse." (*LF Herald*, July 7, 1905)

A couple of years later, there was a repeat of flooding. "Fletcher Creek has again overflowed. Each year this little creek seems to take on too much water and overflows, the water rushing along a certain trend, which takes it along fourth street and fifth avenue northeast, filling several cellars and sometimes doing quite a little damage. Monday was the occasion of another of these annual visits, and a few cellars had their customary baptism of water. This was a mild visit, however, and the water has all been absorbed by Mother Earth." (*LF Herald*, March 29, 1907)

There has been some confusion about how Fletcher Creek, and consequently the ravine, got its name. According the Nathan Richardson's 1876 history of Morrison County, around the time the Little Falls Manufacturing Company built the second dam, c. 1857, a Mr. Fletcher erected a flour mill in town. "The dam broke in 1859 so that the mills could not be supplied with water; and Mr. Fletcher took down his flouring mill and moved it down on Sauk river, having seen enough of Little Falls water works." (*BHPM*, pg. 183) Could this be the origin of the Fletcher Creek name, particularly in light of the fact that the Fletcher Creek system hooks up to the ravine?

Not so fast.

According to the *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, "Harrison Fletcher made a claim on section six, township 41 north, range 31 west, but after several years, removed to Minneapolis where he now lives." (pg. 591) As it turns out, the piece of land with that legal description is in Belle Prairie Township and Fletcher Creek runs through it.

S o m e  
d i g g i n g  
turned up  
the full name  
of the flour  
mill Fletcher:  
William  
H. Fletcher.  
There's a short  
biography of  
this Fletcher

***Blake & Benfelt will commence work  
on their building south of the ravine bridge  
on Oak street next week. It will be a brick  
building 24 x 60 feet in size, two stories with  
stone basement.***

***~ Little Falls Transcript  
May 16, 1884***

in *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* that explains how he came to St. Anthony (Minneapolis), Minnesota, in 1857 to work in milling. He came to Little Falls in 1858 “but only remained one year, coming to Sauk Rapids, where [he then] resided.” (pg. 347) He eventually went into bee keeping and married Ada M. Everest.

Harrison Fletcher was actually William Harrison Fletcher, whose wife’s name was Harriet. Notice that we’re dealing with two William H. Fletchers, one up at Fletcher Creek in Belle Prairie, and one in Little Falls with a flour mill near the dam. Neither one remained long in the county, but they were around long enough to cause confusion regarding the ravine’s connection to Fletcher Creek. Here, we’ll have to defer to the aerial maps that show a topographical connection between William Harrison Fletcher’s creek in Belle Prairie and the ravine in Little Falls. We have no evidence that the Fletcher flour mill was on the ravine.

***A lot of rubbish in the  
ravine on the West side of First  
street southeast was discovered  
on fire Saturday night.***

***~ Little Falls Herald  
December 2, 1904***

To get a sense of the size of the ravine and its location, I walked the city streets with my husband Erik. We were guided by what I could find in historic documents and interviews with long-time Little Falls residents Fred Larson, Charlie Sprandel, Ed Tanner, and Rich May. The ravine ran a minimum of eight or nine blocks, likely longer as previously noted, from north of Third Avenue Northeast through Fourth or Fifth Avenue Southeast. It was located between Second and Third Streets Northeast until it reached Broadway, then it jogged to the west, running between First and Second Streets Southeast. When it reached Second or Third Avenue Southeast, possibly a little further south, it swung over to the west again to meet up with the Mississippi River in a couple of places. One of its outlets was Rosenmeier’s Pond. (See map.)

For as big as it was, mentions of the ravine are difficult to find in past local newspapers. There are few photos of it in the Morrison County Historical Society’s collections. The ravine was background, not something to comment on, until it became a nuisance. It only warranted mention when its bridges deteriorated; trash was dumped in it; or when

people and cars fell into it. In 1913 no less than the Honorable Clarence B. Buckman's car went into the ravine, with Buckman still inside. (*LF Herald*, July 11, 1913) The constant danger and maintenance presented by the ravine drove the city's desire to fill it in.

Filling the ravine happened in a couple of different ways. Dirt was brought in and dumped to bring the ravine up to grade, or buildings

***The earth from the excavation for the Kerrich & Moeglein building is being used to fill in the ravine in the rear of T. W. Mann's residence.***

*~ Little Falls Herald  
March 18, 1898*

were built in it, the ravine saving the time and cost of excavating for a lower level. Some of the buildings built within the ravine include the Methodist

Church that was on the corner of Second Avenue and Second Street Northeast; the church's school building (now a law office) south of the church; the E.C. Goblirsch house (the only Art Moderne house in the city) on Second Street Southeast between First and Second Avenues; and the HRA building (formerly the W.H. Ryan home and Wendy's Hair Estate) on Second Street Southeast between Second and Third Avenues.

There were others, including LaFond Motor Company at 114 First Avenue Southeast. This business used the ravine to its advantage by having customers drive their cars to the lower level for repair. At the current site of the Fletcher Creek parking lot, at the corner of Second Street and First Avenue Northeast, the Newman brothers used the ravine as a place for cows and horses. Bert and Clarence Newman had a livestock transportation company and Dr. John Newman was a veterinarian. As many as 50 head of cattle were kept in the ravine in the 1930s.

Imagine the size of the ravine if a herd of cattle could be kept in it. Not only that, but cousins Charlie Sprandel and Fred Larson used to ski in the ravine behind the Methodist Church and near the W.H. Ryan home location in winter. In the spring, when portions of the ravine would fill with water to a depth of three feet or more, kids used old doors as rafts and floated in the ravine. Charlie said this activity typically took place in the hole where the Shelley Funeral Chapel now is.

Ravine filling seems to have begun in earnest in the 1880s.

"It was a good scheme to utilize the dirt taken from the fire cisterns to fill Chestnut street across the ravine. This is a much needed improvement, and dirt enough can be had from that source to complete a good job. It will be a great convenience to many of our citizens." (*LF Sun*, January 18, 1883 – Note: Chestnut Street is now Second Avenue Northeast.)

"A quantity of brick has been delivered at the ravine bridge on first street this week. A brick culvert will be put in and the street leveled to grade at that point. A good idea." (*LF Sun*, September 4, 1884)

"The ravine on Oak street is to be filled up, and a culvert built underneath to carry off the water. This will be a decided improvement in appearance, and also in pocket to merchants adjoining the place." (*Royalton Record*, August 7, 1885 – Note: Oak Street is now Broadway.)

"More than half of the fill that is necessary to be made at present at the ravine on Oak street is now completed. All the property owners have agreed to build a retaining wall in the ravine ten feet from their property, and no assessment will be necessary by the village. The sand for the remainder of the fill will be hauled from Oak street near the river bridge." (*LF Transcript*, May 27, 1887)

Filling did not occur all at once, as portions of the ravine existed until the 1950s. Fred Larson remembers playing in the ravine under the sidewalk as a kid at the current location of the Hardware Hank parking lot.

Prior to filling, city residents used bridges to cross the ravine. The Little Falls Manufacturing Company was building ravine bridges as early as 1858. A company ledger shows expenses of \$305.39 for a ravine bridge that year.

***That portion of Second street between First and Second avenues northeast, where the old ravine runs through it, is being filled up. A wall of slab wood, hauled from the Pine Tree mill, will be put in along the street line up to grade and the remainder will be filled in with earth.***

***~ Little Falls Daily Transcript  
November 10, 1899***

According to the January 13, 1881, edition of the *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, "Hon. Moses Lafond has made an offer to the village council to build a bridge across the ravine on Chestnut street, near J.H. Rhodes' house, the bridge

to be made entirely of oak, for \$200. As the bridge will cost about \$100 more than that, the offer is an exceedingly liberal one. The bridge is much needed, and the council will probably accept the offer.”

In an article recounting improvements made by the village in 1880, the cost of building a bridge across the ravine on Maple Street was \$250. (*LF Daily Transcript*, January 13, 1881)

By November 1882, the newspaper reported, “The village authorities are derelict in duty in not having the ravine bridge repaired. It is in a terrible shaky condition, and unless soon repaired, some accident may happen.” (*LF Sun*, November 16, 1882) As there were several ravine bridges in town, it’s difficult to know which one the paper is complaining about. Maintenance of the bridges seems to have been a continual battle, as evidenced by the following:

“The village has replanked the Oak street bridge this week. This is the second time it has had to be planked in less than two years. As the frame work will not last longer than this set of planks, perhaps the city will fill up the gulch with slabs, and have something permanent.” (*LF Sun*, February 5, 1885)

But ravine maintenance wasn’t limited to its bridges:

“A wire fence has been constructed along the cement walk along the property, corner of Broadway and Second street northeast, to guard passerbys [*sic*] from falling in the ravine.” (*LF Herald*, October 30, 1908)

“Complaint was made that the crossing of cows on Second avenue and Second street southeast was causing the ground to be pawed down and that as a result the sidewalk was sinking down and would cave into the ravine. The street commissioner was directed to put a fence across the cow path to prevent them from passing. (*LF Herald*, October 6, 1911)

“The attention of the city authorities was this week called to the fact that the ravine between First and Second street southeast, just north of the W.H. Ryan home, was again being used for a dumping ground for refuse. This ravine was cleaned up by the city some time ago and the council does not intend to permit its becoming a dumping ground again.” (*LF Herald*, August 26, 1921)

It’s difficult to know exactly when most of the fill was completed on the ravine, although word of its demise appeared as early as 1903:

“The “oldest inhabitant” claims that years ago, when a big rain storm like that of last week struck the city, the ravine which used to run through the center of the city easily handled the water. But the ravine has disappeared.” (*LF Herald*, July 24, 1903)

The “oldest inhabitant’s” claim was a little premature. Little Falls resident Ed Tanner, whose family has been in the area since the 1850s, thought ravine filling was finished in the 1940s or 1950s.

Just because a ravine is filled, water doesn’t get the message to stop following it. According to Fred Larson, that’s exactly what the excessive waters of the historic 1972 flood wanted to do. The water rushing toward the northeast side of Little Falls was attempting to find its outlet through the ravine. Instead it was diverted to the Mississippi River by an order from Mayor Kenneth Flolid to cut through Highway 371.

Water still settles in former ravine areas. Walk behind the law office on Second Street Northeast during a wet spring and you’ll see evidence of what was once a dramatic landmark of the city.

*A very exciting runaway occurred on Second street this morning. A team of horses belonging to the Sisters of St. Gabriel's hospital was being driven up that street by a boy about 12 years of age, one of the inmates of St. Otto's orphanage. When in front of Stuart's livery stable the team took fright and dashed up the street at a tremendous pace. They ran directly toward the elevated sidewalk just west of the Little Falls house, but turned before the railing was reached. The sleds swung around and tore off the railing, and the rear portion of the sleds went over the walk and nearly carried the rest of the rig into the deep ravine on the other side of the walk. The team was caught by bystanders before it could get away again. It was a lucky escape for the boy, for had the team and rig gone over the sidewalk, which they only missed doing by a hair breadth, there were great chances of his either being killed or badly injured. The lad made a desperate effort to regain control of the team, but they were too badly frightened, and though he still held the reins his strength was not sufficient to manage them.*

*~ Little Falls Daily Transcript  
December 10, 1896*

# The Ravine

## (Photos)

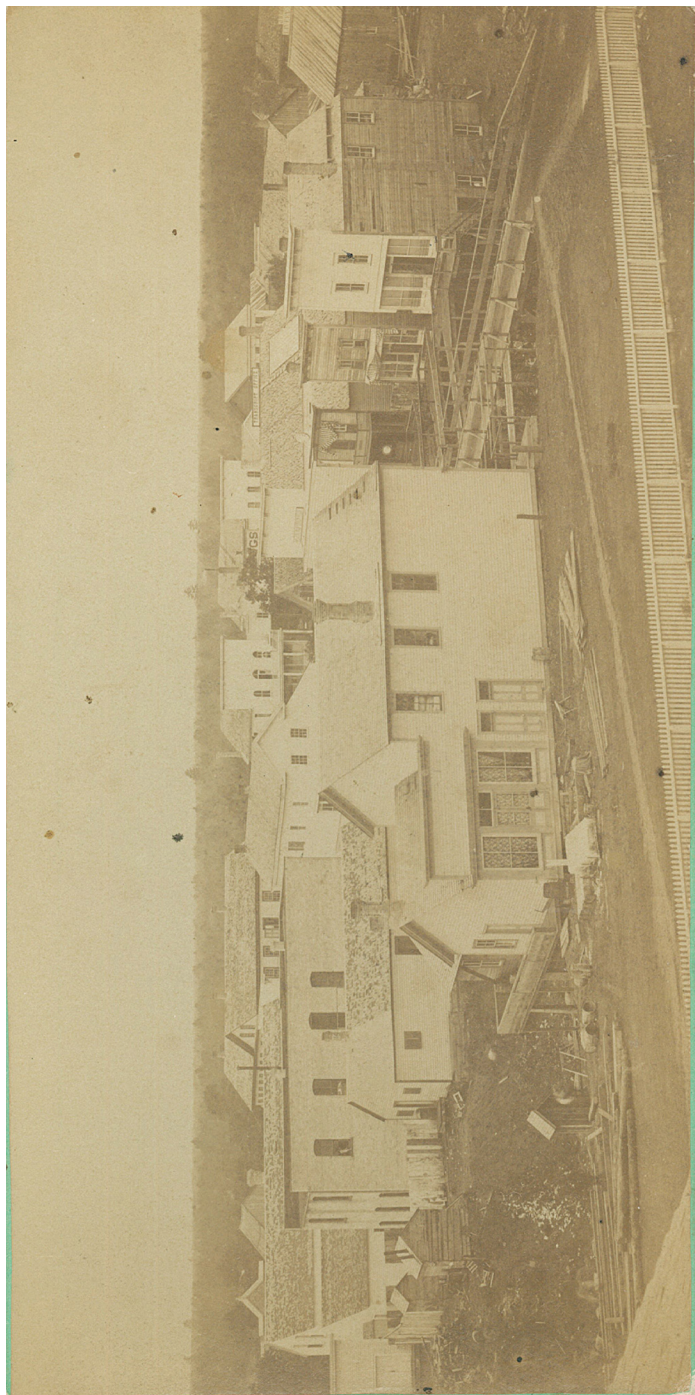
The Little Falls ravine was such a large geographic feature in the city that it's hard to fathom why there is so little photographic evidence of it within the Morrison County Historical Society's collections. Aside from two photos by Neal & Simmons in the 1880s that obviously show the ravine, it seems as though no one thought the ravine was important enough to capture on film. In looking again through photos of the downtown district, I was surprised to find that there *are* photos that show the ravine, but I had to look closely, with the ravine in mind, in order to actually see it. Feels a bit like that video where a gorilla runs through a basketball game but viewers are so intent on watching the ball that they miss the gorilla completely. The ravine is Little Falls' gorilla.





**This is the clearest image available of the Little Falls ravine and a couple of the wooden bridges that used to span it. It shows the corner of Broadway and Second Street Northeast, Little Falls, MN, the current (2015) location of Pete & Joy's Bakery. Note how deep the ravine is.**

**The white building in the photo is O. L. Clyde's Store.  
Half of a stereographic image produced by photographers  
Neal & Simmons in c. 1883-1885.**



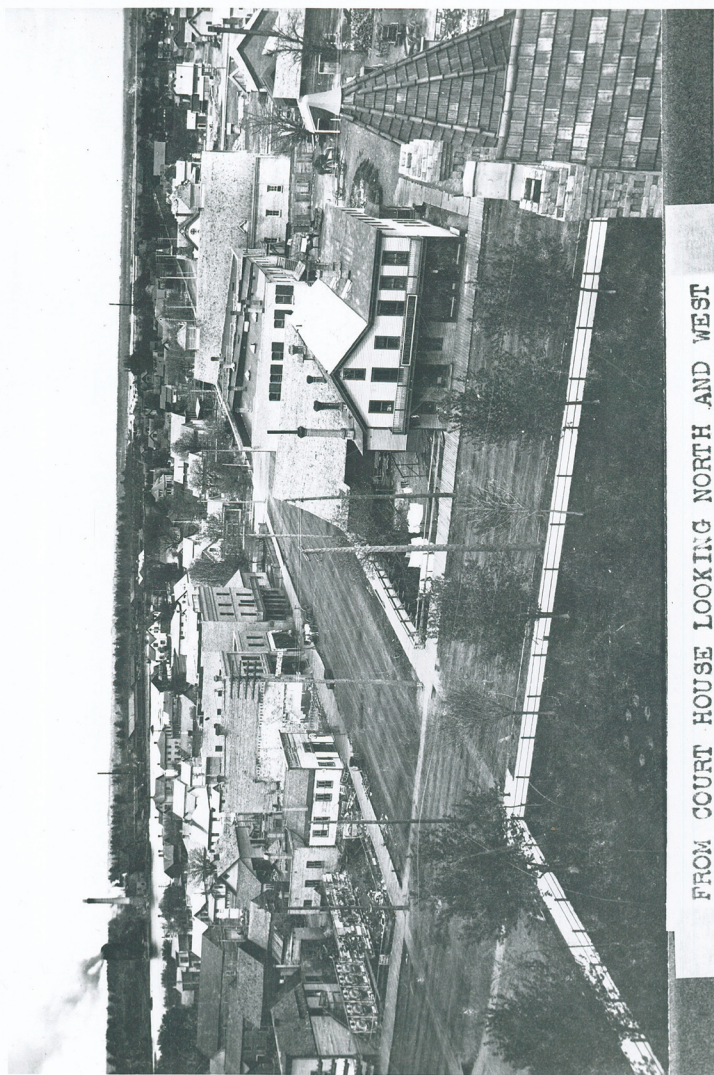
Another Neal & Simmons photo from c. 1883-1885 showing the Little Falls ravine. This was taken from the courthouse square, looking down on Second Street. The date of the photo indicates that it was taken prior to construction of the Historic Morrison County Courthouse with the clock tower that is currently at this site. Note O. L. Cyde's Store on the corner and the ravine bridges (right side of photo). The building in the center of the photo is the American House hotel. On the back side of the hotel, there's a deck with posts that are anchored down in the ravine. This photo indicates how the ravine veered southwest from Second Street.

Now that we've had a look at the Neal & Simmons photos that focus directly on the ravine, let's have a look at the ravine in two not-so-obvious shots. On the next two pages (pages 12 and 13) are two reproductions of the same photo, both showing a section of the ravine at the corner of Broadway and Second Street Northeast as seen from an upper level of the Morrison County Courthouse. The first photo is undoctored while the next photo has finding aids, including two arrows in the middle of the scene that point out two sections of the ravine. One section, the piece of ravine on the west side of Second Street (left arrow) is where Pete & Joy's Bakery is currently located. The other section (right arrow) is now the parking lot for Hardware Hank. The building to the east of the ravine, the one with all the windows and the balcony (marked with an "X" in the marked photo), is a hotel called the Little Falls House. At the time it was torn down in 1923, it was considered the oldest building in town, having been constructed in 1876. This photo shows how the city was managing safety around the ravine by using railings. Another thing to note is all the stuff in the ravine. Next to the Little Falls House, there's laundry hanging out to dry in the ravine. Could this be hotel laundry?

On pages 14 and 15, there appears another photo with its marked duplicate that shows Second Street Southeast from the vantage point of the Historic Courthouse. The ravine is apparent by examining the area between the two arrows on the left side of the photo. Note that the full-grown trees in the ravine have their tops almost level with the roofs on the buildings. The second arrow points to a deck/bridge between two buildings. The double arrow in the center points out a building in the process of being constructed (bottom) and the Mississippi River bridge (top) at the time. The bridge is very faint in the photo, but it helps to date the photo as prior to 1903 because that's the year this bridge came down. The arrow with the underline on the right side of the photo points to the Butler Block (now U.S. Bank), construction on which was started in 1891, also helping to date the photo.

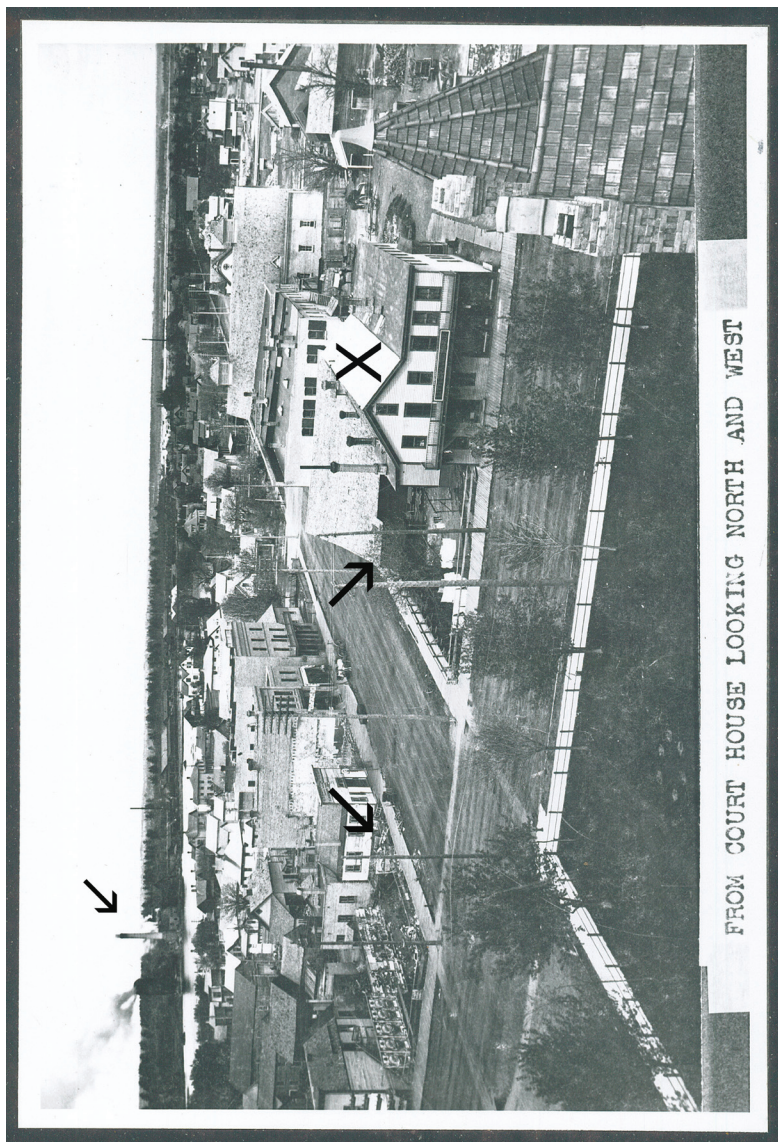


View of Little Falls,  
 Minnesota, from the  
 Morrison County  
 Courthouse, looking  
 north and west, pre-  
 1904/05. The street  
 running left to right  
 is Broadway, while  
 the street running off  
 into the horizon in  
 the photo is Second  
 Street Northeast.  
 Copy photo by  
 W.E. Christnagel,  
 Morrison County  
 Historical Society  
 collections, #0.0.139.



FROM COURT HOUSE LOOKING NORTH AND WEST

For orientation, the arrow at the top of the photo is pointing at the Pine Tree Lumber Company Mill on the west side of the Mississippi River. The building with the "X" on it is the Little Falls House, a hotel that was built by Philip H. Gross in 1876 and was torn down in 1923. The two other arrows point to sections of the ravine. Note the railings around the edges and the laundry hung out to dry in the ravine section next to the Little Falls House.





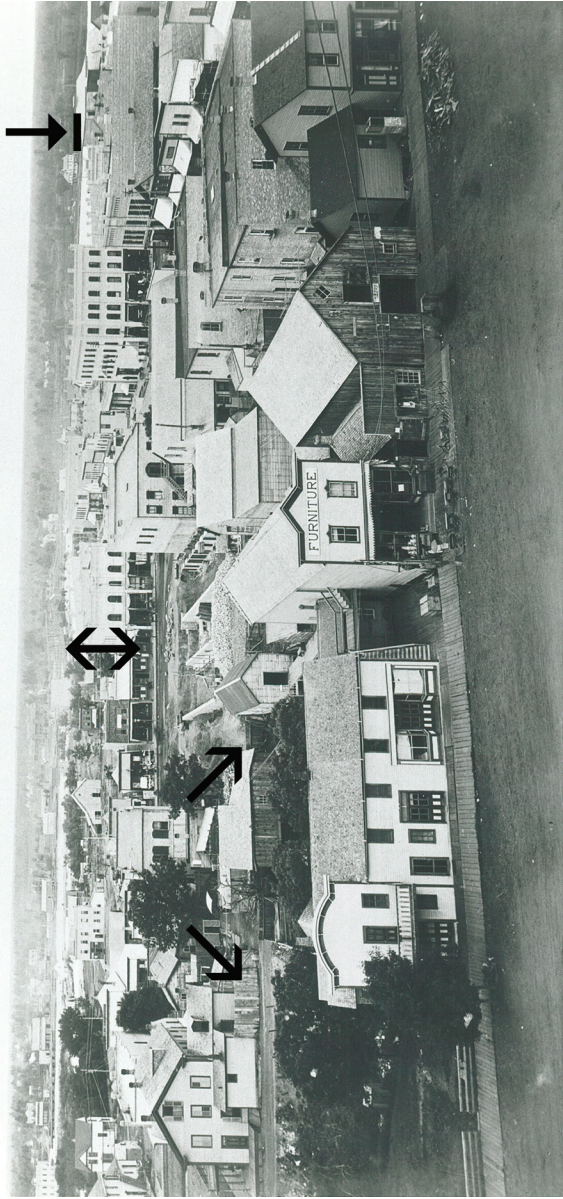
View of Little  
Falls from the  
Morrison County  
Courthouse,  
looking west  
over Second  
Avenue

Southeast, dated  
c. 1891-1903.  
Photographer  
unknown.  
Morrison County  
Historical  
Society  
collections  
#1990.29.31.

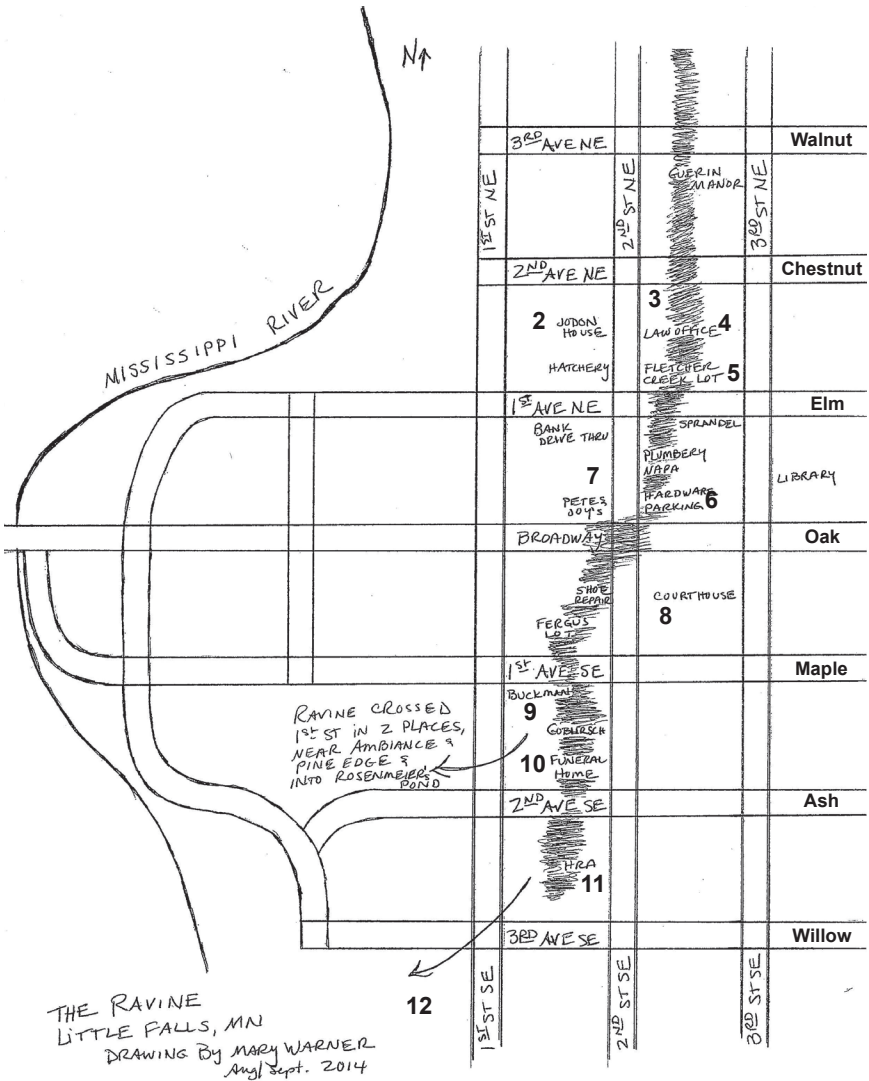


The two arrows on the left point out a section of the ravine, with the right arrow also indicating a deck/bridge between two buildings.

The double arrow points out a building foundation in the process of construction (bottom) and the Mississippi River bridge (top, very faint). The arrow with the underline on the right points out the Butler Block. The other large building to its left is the Flynn/Buckman/Kiewel Block.



↑ 1 13th Ave NE & Haven Rd





# The Ravine

## (Tour)

The Little Falls ravine served historically as an outlet for Fletcher Creek, which is 6 miles north of Little Falls, MN. Whenever Fletcher Creek experienced high water (mostly in the spring), it would overflow into the ravine, with the water making its way into the city and then into the Mississippi River. It was not uncommon for basements along the ravine to have flooding.

While much of the ravine has been filled, there are still low areas that indicate where the ravine used to be. These low spots continue to collect water when conditions are right.

For a full tour of the ravine, one would have to start at Fletcher Creek and follow the ravine into town. That would make for a long walk, likely over mostly private property. For that reason, this tour is concentrated along a short section within the city, with one outlying spot (#1 on the tour) at the north edge of town. Some of the city sections of the ravine are on private property, in backyards, or accessed through alleys. Please respect private property owners by staying on public roads and sidewalks while taking the tour.

- 1 13th Avenue NE & Haven Road** (1st Street NE turns into Haven Road) - Near this intersection, which is where the old Crestliner boat complex is located, a ravine-related drama played out during the 1972 flood. That year on July 21 and 22, a storm dropped between 6 and 14 inches of rain on Morrison County. Flooding washed out some roads and made others impassable. Flood waters made their way toward Little Falls, following the path of the old ravine. Mayor Kenneth Flolid, in defiance of orders from the State of Minnesota, ordered Highway 371 to be cut near this area in order to divert flood waters to the Mississippi River.
- 2 Jodon House, 213 2nd St NE** - Built by Dr. Zachariah Jodon in 1858, this Greek Revival house is the oldest in the city. Jodon and the ravine played a dramatic role in the Little Falls War of 1858. One of the ruffians causing the war was chased and shot in the ravine by Jodon. The ruffian, John June, survived.

- 3 **Bieganek Insurance, 214 2nd St NE** - This building is on the site of the former Methodist Church that was built on the ravine. Local kids used to ski and go sledding in the ravine behind the church. If you look at the ground to the north of Bieganek Insurance, you'll see a depression, evidence of the ravine.
- 4 **Rosenmeier Law Office, 210 2nd St NE** - This building was built as a school for the Methodist Church. Gordon Rosenmeier, who served as an influential state senator, ran his law practice here. The ravine is readily apparent on the back side of this building. The area still floods during heavy rains.
- 5 **Fletcher Creek Parking Lot, northeast corner of 2nd Street NE & 1st Avenue NE** - The Fletcher Creek Parking Lot is named for William Fletcher, namesake of Fletcher Creek, a major source for some of the water that ended up in the ravine. This site was also part of the ravine. At one time cattle and horses were kept in it by the Newman brothers. Dr. John Newman was a veterinarian and Bert and Clarence Newman were owners of a livestock transportation company located across the avenue.
- 6 **Hardware Hank Parking Lot, northeast corner of 2nd Street NE & Broadway** - The photos on page 12 and 13 show the ravine at this location, with laundry hanging next to the Little Falls Hotel. Local resident Fred Larson remembers hiding in the ravine under the sidewalk at this location.
- 7 **Pete & Joy's Bakery, northwest corner of 2nd Street NE & Broadway** - This was the former location of O.L. Clyde's store, pictured on page 9. The ravine was bridged across Broadway in this area.
- 8 **Courthouse Square, 2nd Street SE between Broadway & 1st Avenue SE** - The ravine veered south and west from O.L. Clyde's store into the block opposite the Courthouse. Businesses in this area took advantage of the ravine by building in it. The photos on page 14 and 15 show this portion of the ravine.

- 9 **Former Little Falls City Hall, 1st Avenue SE between 1st Street SE & 2nd Street SE** - The ravine continued veering southeast and ran roughly through the alley in this block, to the east of the former Little Falls City Hall, now part of the Buckman Apartments. Note the depression in the alley.
- 10 **Northern Pines Mental Health, 210 & 212 2nd Street SE** - This building was built by osteopathic physician Dr. E.C. Goblirsch to serve as his office and home. It is the only Art Moderne building in Little Falls. The back yard is sunken, indicating that it was part of the ravine. The ravine continued south, through the area next door that is now a funeral home. This portion of the ravine was so deep that it served as a swimming hole for kids.
- 11 **Morrison County HRA, 304 2nd Street SE** - The building now serving the Morrison County HRA office was originally built as a home for the W.H. Ryan family. It is constructed of Little Falls yellow brick and was located on the ravine.
- 12 **Rosenmeier Pond, 1st Street SE** - The ravine crossed 1st Street SE in a couple of areas along this stretch, with one of those crossings heading into Rosenmeier's Pond. Prior to the ravine being filled, these sections of the ravine were bridged.



**Evidence of the ravine behind Rosenmeier Law Office.  
Photo by Mary Warner, September 2015.**

**Morrison County Historical Society**

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