

**VERENDRYE SITE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

Historic Name: Verendrye Site

Other Name/Site Number: Verendrye Monument

**2. LOCATION**

Street & Number: Between 2nd and 5th Streets  
and 2nd and 4th Avenues

Not for publication: \_\_\_\_\_

City/Town: Fort Pierre

Vicinity: \_\_\_\_\_

State: SD County: Stanley

Code: 117

Zip Code: 57532

**3. CLASSIFICATION**

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Private: \_\_\_\_\_  
Public-local: \_\_\_\_\_  
Public-State: X  
Public-Federal: \_\_\_\_\_

Building(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
District: \_\_\_\_\_  
Site: X  
Structure: \_\_\_\_\_  
Object: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property  
Contributing

Noncontributing

\_\_\_\_\_  
1  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1

\_\_\_\_\_  
buildings  
\_\_\_\_\_  
sites  
\_\_\_\_\_  
structures  
1  
objects  
1  
Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing: \_\_\_\_\_

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
National Register
- \_\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
National Register
- \_\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: OTHER

Sub: EXPLORATION SITE

Current: LANDSCAPE

Sub: PARK

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification:  
N/A

Materials:	
Foundation:	N/A
Walls:	N/A
Roof:	N/A
Other Description:	N/A

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**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.****Summary**

The Verendrye Monument stands on Verendrye Hill, the site where Francois and Louis Joseph de la Verendrye, French explorers of the interior of North America, placed in 1743 a lead plate bearing the names of King Louis XV of France; the Marquis de Beauharnois, the Viceroy of French Canada; and their father Pierre; as well as their own. The plate was discovered in 1913 by a group of children playing on the hill.

The current monument on the site, honoring the explorers, was erected in 1933 and rededicated in 1989. The Verendrye plate has been in the possession of the South Dakota State Historical Society since its discovery. It was publicly exhibited at the rededication of the monument.

**The Verendrye Monument**

The Verendrye Monument is a granite marker about 4' in height, which is engraved with the following legend:

HERE ON  
MARCH 30, 1743  
THE VERENDRYES  
BURIED A LEAD  
TABLET TO CLAIM  
THIS REGION FOR  
FRANCE. THIS  
TABLET FOUND  
ON FEB. 16, 1913, IS  
THE FIRST WRITTEN  
RECORD OF THE  
VISIT OF WHITE  
MEN TO  
SOUTH DAKOTA.

Beneath this legend is carved in smaller type:

ERECTED BY  
STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY  
AND FT. PIERRE  
COMMERCIAL CLUB  
1933

The flags of the United States, France, and South Dakota are flown on three flagstaffs that ring the monument.

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The Verendrye Plate

The Verendrye plate is a flat rectangle of lead 3/16" thick, 8-1/2" long, and 6-1/2" wide. On the face of the plate, beneath the royal seal of France and fleur-de-lis at each corner, is cut with die punch type in Latin language capitals:

ANNO XXVI REGNI LVDOVICI XV PROREGE .....  
 ILLVSTRISSIMO DOMINO \* DOMINO MARCHIONE..  
 DE BEAVHARNOIS M\*C\*CC XXXXI:.....  
 PETRUS GAULTIER DE LAVERENDRIE POSUIT:...

Translated, this text reads:

In the 26th year of the reign of Louis XV,  
 Most Illustrious Lord, the Lord Marquis  
 of Beauharnois 1741  
 Pierre Gaultier De La Verendrye placed this.

On the obverse is a another inscription, in French, scratched crudely into the lead. Parts of it are quite difficult to decipher. It appears to read as follows:<sup>1</sup>

POSE PAR LE  
 chevaLy de la V  
 Lo Jo Louy La Londette  
 A Miotte  
 le 30 de mars 1743

which translated, reads:

Placed by the Chevalier de La V[erendrye]  
 Lo[uis] Jo[seph] Louis La Londette,  
 A. Miotte  
 30 March 1743

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<sup>1</sup> Minor differences in the translations of both texts and in the transcription of the French text, as they appear in various sources, are not of consequence. The French translation, as rendered by Dr. Louise Kellogg, appeared in Doane Robinson's Encyclopedia of South Dakota (Pierre, S. Dak.: By the Author, 1925), p. 749. (Photographs of both sides of the plate are appended to this study.)

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide:      Locally:     

Applicable National Register Criteria:           A X   B X   C        D     

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):           A        B        C        D        E        F        G     

NHL Criteria:   1, 2

NHL Theme(s):   II.   European Colonial Exploration and Settlement  
                  B.    French Exploration and Settlement  
                  3.    Mississippi Valley

Areas of Significance:           Period(s) of Significance   Significant Dates  
Exploration/Settlement           1743                           March 30, 1743

Significant Person(s):   Francois and Louis Joseph de la Verendrye

Cultural Affiliation:   N/A

Architect/Builder:   N/A

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**SUMMARY

The Verendrye Site, on the crest of a hill on the edge of the town of Fort Pierre, South Dakota, just northwest of the confluence of the Bad and Missouri rivers, is one of a mere handful of verifiable sites associated with the first Europeans to explore the upper portion of the present midcontinent United States. Though the Verendryes' epic achievements were dismissed as a failure in their era, because they found no Northwest Passage to the Pacific, this site is of significance for its association with them and for the part their explorations played in the French effort to achieve colonial dominance in North America.

The small party of explorers reached this site, near the geographical center of North America, in late March 1743, 61 years before Lewis and Clark first arrived in the area. The Verendryes secreted a lead plate there to lay the basis for French sovereignty on the upper Missouri, seeking to define the bounds of French Louisiana to include the entire Mississippi River drainage.

Now within a small state-owned park, the Verendrye Site overlooks a major southeastern bend in the Missouri River that offers dramatic views to the north, east, and south. This section of the Missouri is one of the few that has not been greatly disturbed by dam and reservoir construction. The site would be of scenic interest even if it were not one of the most important sites in the history of the European exploration of North America.

HISTORYThe Verendryes

From time immemorial even to landings on the Moon, explorers have placed markers. These artifacts have celebrated their feats and generally laid claim to the territory explored for their nation and its leaders.

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Verendrye (1685-1749), and his four sons were explorers of major note in Canadian and U.S. history, first exploring, during the 1730s, what are now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Minnesota, and North Dakota. They discovered the Red River of the North and the Assiniboine and Mouse rivers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The general biographical information on the Verendryes is abstracted from Louise Phelps Kellogg, "La Verendrye, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes," Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Scribner's, 1943), XI: 37-38.

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As they progressed, the Verendryes planted a chain of forts to organize the fur trade, extend French influence, and develop a reliable mid-continent route to the Pacific. These posts were designed to thwart the British, who might fan out from Hudson's Bay and the East Coast Colonies, and to define French territorial claims by linking Canada to the lower portion of the Louisiana Territory, and, hopefully, to the Pacific.

In 1732, the Verendryes founded a post, Fort St. Charles, in present extreme northwest Minnesota at the Lake of the Woods. They reached Mandan villages on the Missouri in present North Dakota in the late 1730s. Then, in 1742-43, two of Pierre's sons, Francois (the "Chevalier") (1715-94) and Louis Joseph (1717-61), with two voyageurs, Louis La Londette and A. Miotte, pushed south and west through the present Dakotas, and, although their exact itinerary is much disputed, perhaps present Montana and Wyoming, before turning east in South Dakota and striking for the Missouri, along which they intended to return north. On reaching the Missouri, they buried a lead plate at present Fort Pierre on March 30, 1743.

When they placed it, Chevalier Verendrye's account noted:

On an eminence near the fort I deposited a lead tablet, bearing the arms and inscription of the King and placed some stones in a pyramid for the General. I told the Indians, who had no knowledge of the lead tablet I had put in the ground, that I was setting up these stones in memory of the fact that we had been in their country.<sup>2</sup>

On April 2, the expedition set out on its return to Mandan villages in present North Dakota, where they arrived on May 18, concluding this phase of their explorations.

### Study of the Verendryes' Explorations

Since the late 19th century, the significance of the Verendryes' explorations has been acknowledged by British and American scholars, as well as French. The records left of their wanderings, however, have proved so obscure that historians have alternately despaired and argued over the identity of the landmarks and Indian tribes referenced in them. The discovery of the Verendrye plate made it possible to clarify many of those references and also verified the Pierre area as the place where

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<sup>2</sup> The translation used here is one prepared by G. Hubert Smith, which appears in full in "Explorations of the Verendryes, 1738-1743, with Special Reference to Verendrye National Monument" (Minneapolis, 1951), p. 132. Dr. Smith based his text on a comparison of previous transcriptions and translations, including among others those (referenced in the Bibliography of this form) by Pierre Margry and Lawrence J. Burpee.



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the explorers had reached the Missouri on their 1743 return journey.

The historical problems in dealing with the routes and feats of the Verendryes, and many other explorers for that matter, have been a virtual cottage industry for historians, geographers, and editors, who have invested great effort in trying to track their precise routes. Few sites can be identified with great precision because explorers like the Verendryes were usually more concerned with survival than with careful record keeping and mapmaking--with the exception of large and well equipped expeditions like that of Lewis and Clark.

The Verendryes had but a tiny band, with little equipment, and indeed in 1743, traveling in winter, had a broken, and hence useless, astrolabe.<sup>3</sup> Changes in topography and river courses also make the task of identifying exploration sites with precision even more difficult. What is remarkable is that any record of the expedition survives and that it is possible to discern as much about their travels as can now be done.

### Discovery of the Plate

As scholars puzzled and argued over the Verendrye records, trying to correlate the explorers' descriptions of the areas they had traversed with current and historically identifiable peoples and locations, they speculated as to where the plate described in the Chevalier's account might be found. Francis Parkman, for example, believed it might be found near the mouth of the Niobrara, about 100 miles south of Pierre.<sup>4</sup> Others postulated a location near Pierre.<sup>5</sup> The latter guessed correctly.

It is, however, deliciously ironic and properly humbling to historians, archeologists, and treasure seekers, that the long-sought plate was finally found not through any of their learned documentary studies and site investigations, but by local schoolchildren playing on Verendrye Hill in 1913. The children found a small part of the plate protruding from the surface, dug it out, and carried it into town, where they showed it to local dignitaries, who quickly realized its importance and contacted

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. The translation of relevant text in the Chevalier's account reads: "I should greatly have wished to take the latitude at this place but our astrolabe had from the beginning of our journey been useless, the ring being broken."

<sup>4</sup> Francis Parkman, A Half-Century of Conflict (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1897), II, 23 et seq.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Bishop Thomas O'Gorman, "Verendrye and Other Early Explorers," South Dakota Historical Collections, 2, 1 (1903):120.

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the South Dakota State Historical Society. The plate has been in the custody of the society since then.<sup>6</sup>

### Authenticity of the Plate

The Verendrye plate is strikingly similar to other French "possession plates" placed at locations in the Ohio Valley by Celeron de Bienville. Collectively, such artifacts were physical evidences of the French efforts to assert and maintain hegemony over the entire Mississippi Valley drainage.

Initially, some scholars and skeptics questioned whether the plate was authentic, and, failing that, whether it was discovered at the spot where the Verendryes placed it. The preponderance of evidence, as well as common sense, argues for its, and the site's, authenticity. Those who questioned their genuineness also had, in some instances, possible ulterior motives, such as a stake in other possible locations for the event because of its implications for revising, retrospectively, the Verendryes' presumed exploration route.

There are a number of factors supporting the plate's authenticity, in addition to its similarity to those recovered at other locations in the Mississippi Valley. The naive manner of its discovery argues against a hoax. The notion that the local Indians, who were not informed that it was being buried, or settlers, dug it up at another location at some unknown date and reburied it on Verendrye Hill makes little sense.

As for the pyramid of stones discussed in the explorers' accounts, local lore in Fort Pierre reported that a mound of stones once stood on the site, and that the stones were removed and likely used in the construction of a wharf in the town,<sup>7</sup> the builders being unaware that the priceless relic of the explorers' visit lurked just below the surface. It was left to the strong winds that sometimes blow across the hill to slowly uncover this anachronism of Louis XV's imperial pretensions, finally to be found by children almost 170 years after the little band of explorers had placed it, and more than a century after the French had liquidated their colonial interests on the mainland of North America.

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<sup>6</sup> Doane Robinson, superintendent of the South Dakota State Historical Society at the time, carefully investigated the circumstances of the discovery. See "The Verendrye Plate," Mississippi Valley Historical Association Proceedings VII (1913-14): 244-253. In his 1951 review of the issue G. Hubert Smith, op. cit., p. 152, also referenced affidavits by the discoverers.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, op. cit.

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CONCLUSION

The Verendrye brothers, like most North American explorers, were seeking a water route to the Pacific Ocean. Their search, which focused on finding a westward-flowing river that emptied into the Pacific, was not ludicrous, as it seems today when it is known that South Dakota is at the geographical center of North America, rather than on its western edge. The Verendryes had no way of knowing that half a continent of plains and mountains separated them from the unexplored coasts of northwest America, then a terra incognita.

They penetrated further into the heartland of North America than any previous European explorers, but their achievements were dismissed when they found no Northwest Passage. The fortunes of European wars and power politics led to the French exit from the mainland of North America and the Verendryes' feats, like their Bourbon masters, long languished as dusty footnotes to history.

With the Grand Portage National Monument and the Fort St. Charles Archeological Site (National Register), in present Minnesota, and the Menoken Indian Village Site, in North Dakota (a National Historic Landmark), which are associated with the Verendryes' earlier explorations, the Verendrye Site in Fort Pierre, as the only site that can be definitely associated with the last phases of their epochal explorations, illustrates their great achievements. Its recognition accords them, as the earliest major precursors of Lewis and Clark on the upper Missouri, their rightful place in the history of the European exploration and conquest of North America.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

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\_\_\_\_\_. The Search for the Western Sea. Toronto: Macmillan, 1935.

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Reese, Lisle M., ed. South Dakota, A Guide to the State. New York: Hastings House, 1952. Pp. 30, 134, 357-358.

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Smith, George M. South Dakota: Its History and Its People. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915.

Smith, G. Hubert. "Explorations of the La Verendryes, 1738-1743..." Minneapolis: April 1951. (Typescript in History Division, National Park Service, files)

State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Proceedings ..., 1913. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1914. Pp. 146-150.

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Tilberg, Frederick. "The Verendrye Expedition in Search of the Northwest Passage ..." (Typescript, March 27, 1940, copy in History Division, National Park Service, files)

"The Verendrye Expeditions of 1738-1739 and 1742-43 in Search of a Northwest Passage to the Western Sea ..." (Typescript, n.d., in History Division, National Park Service, files)

"Verendrye National Park and Monument, Fort Pierre, South Dakota." (Typescript, ca. 1936, copy in History Division, National Park Service, files)

## Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # \_\_\_\_\_
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # \_\_\_\_\_

## Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other: Specify Repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 16 acres

Latitude 44° 21' 19" North  
Longitude 100° 22' 40" West

## Verbal Boundary Description:

Situated within the town of Fort Pierre, almost entirely within the area bounded by 2nd Street on the east, 4th Avenue on the north, 5th Street on the west, and 2nd Avenue on the south.

## More particularly described as:

Block 26, Lots 15-23 incl., Lots 24-28 incl.  
Block 34, Lots 1-28 incl.  
Block 42, Lots 1-5 incl.  
Block 25, Lots 15-28 incl.  
Block 35, Lots 1-28 incl.  
Block 27, Lots 15-28 incl.  
Block 36, Lots 3-28 incl.

## Boundary Justification:

This boundary includes the State's holdings on Verendrye Hill and its slopes.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: James H. Charleton, Historian

Organization: National Park Service, WASO

Date: December 18, 1990

Street &amp; Number: P.O. Box 37127

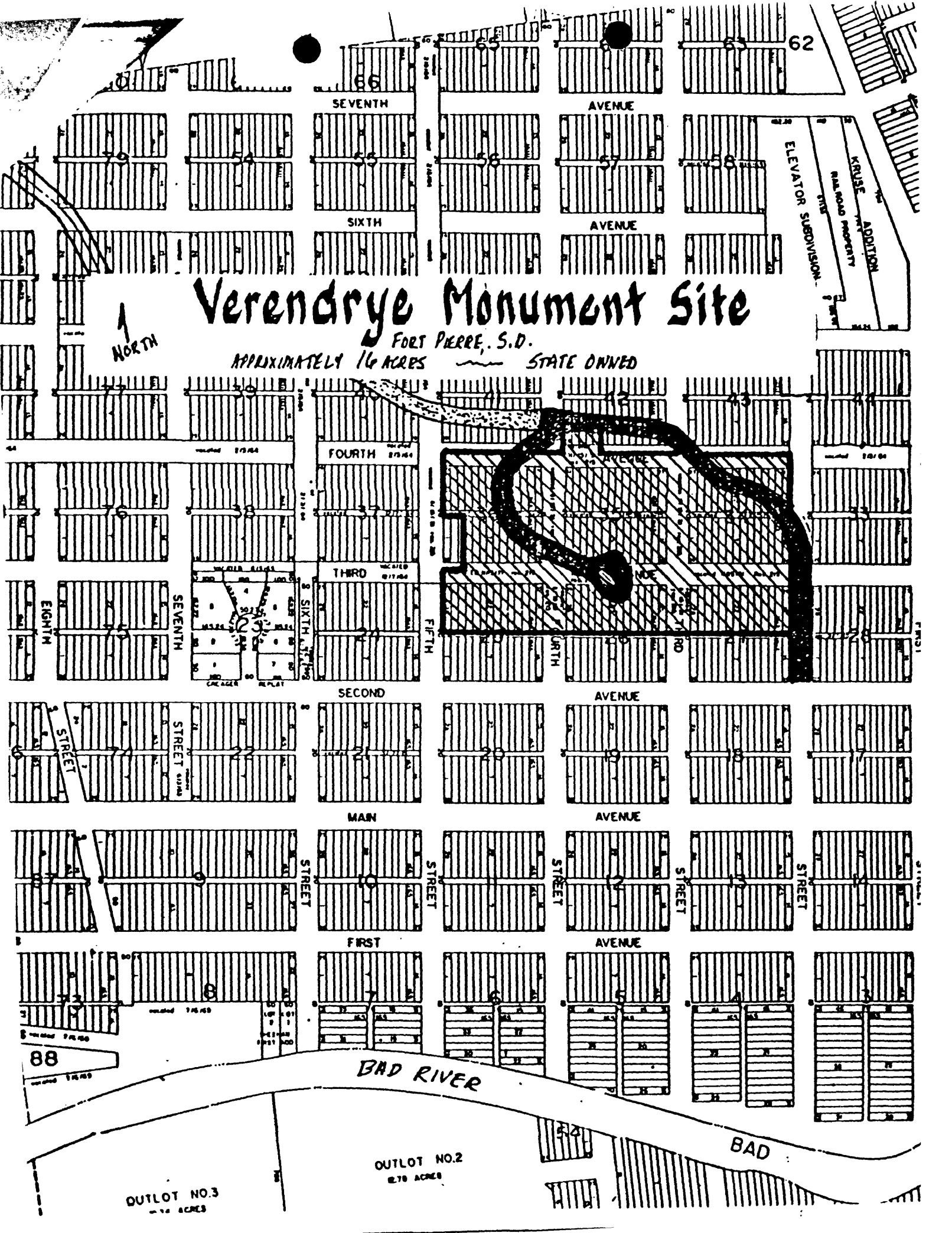
Telephone: (202) 343-8165

City or Town: Washington

State: DC

ZIP: 20013-7127

January 17, 1991



# Verendrye Monument Site

FORT PIERRE, S.D.

APPROXIMATELY 16 ACRES

STATE OWNED

NORTH

62

66

SEVENTH AVENUE

SIXTH AVENUE

FOURTH AVENUE

THIRD AVENUE

SECOND AVENUE

MAIN AVENUE

FIRST AVENUE

BAD RIVER

ELEVATOR SUBDIVISION  
RAILROAD PROPERTY  
CRUISE VEHICLE ADDITION

88

OUTLOT NO. 3  
0.14 ACRES

OUTLOT NO. 2  
0.70 ACRES

BAD