UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

STATE: Minnesota
COUNTY: Aitkin

1. NAME
COMMON:
Savanna Portage

AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION
STREET AND NUMBER:
Savanna Portage State Park
CITY OR TOWN:
near McGregor

STATE:
CODE
COUNTY:
Aitkin

3. CLASSIFICATION
CATEGORY (Check One)
District [ ] Building [ ]
Site [x] Structure [ ]
Object [ ]

OWNERSHIP
Public [x] Private [ ]
Both [ ]

PUBLIC ACQUISITION:
In Process [ ]
Being Considered [ ]

ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
Yes: [ ]
No: [x]

PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)
Agricultural [ ]
Commercial [x] Industrial [ ]
Educational [ ]
Entertainment [ ]

State of Minnesota, Department of Natural Resources

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY
OWNERS NAME:

State of Minnesota

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:
Aitkin County Courthouse

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY:
3200 acres

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS
TITLE OF SURVEY:
Minnesota State Register
DATE OF SURVEY:

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:
Minnesota Historical Society

STREET AND NUMBER:
690 Cedar Street
CITY OR TOWN:
St. Paul

STATE:
Minnesota
COUNTY:
Aitkin
CODE:
23
The Savanna Portage passes through about five sections of land within the Savanna Portage State Park in northeastern Minnesota. This six mile portage was generally considered the "worst carrying place in the northwest."

The best early description of the portage comes to us from the account of Dr. Alexander Wolcott, a surgeon who traveled the portage with Lewis Cass and his party in 1820. Wolcott says, "The length of the portage is six miles, and is passed at thirteen pauses. The first three pauses are shockingly bad. It is not only a bed of mire, but the difficulty of passing it is greatly increased by fallen trees, limbs, and sharp knots of the pitch pine, in some places on the surface, in others imbedded one or two feet below. Where there are hollows or depressions in the ground, tall coarse grass, brush, and pools of stagnant water are encountered. Old voyageurs say that this part of the portage was formerly covered with a heavy bog, or a kind of peat, upon which the walking was very good, but that during a dry season, it accidentally caught fire and burnt over the surface of the earth so as to lower its level two or three feet when it became mirey, and subject to inundation from the Savannah river. The country, after passing the third pause, changes in a short distance, from a marsh to a region of sand hills covered mostly with white and yellow pine, intermixed with aspen. The hills are short and conical, with a moderate elevation. In some places they are drawn into ridges, but these ridges cannot be observed to run in any uniform course....Where the portage approaches the sources of the West Savannah there is a descent into a small valley covered with rank grass - without forest trees - and here and there clumps of willows.....The valley is skirted with a thick and bushy growth of alder, aspen, hazel, &c. The adjoining hills are sandy, covered with pine. The stream here is just large enough to swim a canoe, and the navigation commences within a mile of its source."

Today the Savanna Portage is marked by guide posts and flags along its full length. Four miles eastward from the beginning of the trail at the western end of the park, the portage follows as far as possible the ridges of land, affording striking vistas of deep ravines and open valleys. Along this section, the trail passes through wooded areas, which, because of differences in the soil, vary from stands of aspen, maple, basswood, and birch, to stretches of spruce, tamarack, and cedar. Leaving the forested hills, the trail emerges onto a more level plain of brush and tall wild grasses. For the last mile and a half, the portage follows a pole catwalk laid by park employees through the bog to the eastern end at the East Savanna River.
During the days of the fur trade in Minnesota the Savanna Portage was one of the most important avenues of communication between the upper Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes, and has been described in the journals of traders, travelers, and missionaries who penetrated this region between 1763 and 1850. Historians believe that this portage had been used by the aborigines for centuries before the first white man set foot upon the trail. It seems reasonable that it was by this route that Du Luth made his epochal journey to the upper Mississippi country in 1679.

Among the earliest written references to the portage routes between Lake Superior and Sandy Lake are those of Jean Baptiste Perrault. Perrault wrote his narrative about 1830, basing it upon diaries kept during the years of his active participation in the fur trade of the Northwest between 1784 and 1797. In these accounts he makes mention of two portages between the St. Louis and Sandy Lake, which he calls the "portage de la prairie" and the "portage de la savanne".

Another traveler who left a record of the use of this portage route was David Thompson, a Scotch surveyor in the service of the Northwest Company, who, in May 1798, descended the Mississippi to "Sand Lake River", and crossed the divide to Lake Superior. Zebulon M. Pike refers incidentally to the portage, but it was not included in his route to the sources of the Mississippi.

In 1820, Lewis Cass, then governor of Michigan Territory, led an exploring expedition from Detroit to the upper Mississippi region, traveling by canoe to the head of Lake Superior. From here his party ascended the St. Louis and east Savanna rivers, portaged across to the West Savanna, and proceeded by way of Sandy Lake and the Mississippi to Cass Lake - at that time believed to be the ultimate source of the Mississippi. Henry R. Schoolcraft, who accompanied Cass as geologist in 1820, headed a second expedition to the headwaters of the Mississippi by way of the Savanna Portage in 1832.

The portage was also used frequently by missionaries in order to reach their posts on Sandy Lake and Leech Lake. Newton H. Winchell, with two companions, crossed the portage in 1878 while making a canoe trip for the Minnesota Geological Survey through the lakes of northeastern
9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Diana Mitchell, Survey and Planning (Approved: Charles Nelson)

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BUILDING 25, FORT SNELLING

ST. PAUL

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

- National
- State X
- Local

Name: Russell M. Fridley

Title: Director, Minnesota Historical Society

Date: 3-27-73

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Robert J. Utley

Chief, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date: 4/23/73

ATTEST:

Keeper of The National Register

Date: 4/16/73
8. Significance

Minnesota.

Historically the water routes of Minnesota are an important part of our pioneer heritage. The portages were unavoidable links in these water routes, passed on to us by the aboriginal inhabitants of the state. We are fortunate to have this publically owned site with which to interpret this facet of early travel and communication.
9. Major Bibliographical References

Schoolcraft, Henry R., *Narrative Journal of Travels...to the Sources of the Mississippi River in the Year 1820*, Albany, 1821.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Keeper

1/19/89
Note: These changes apply to Savanna Portage in Aitkin County, Minnesota.

REFERENCE NUMBER: 73000963

STATE: MINNESOTA

COUNTY: Aitkin

RESOURCE NAME (HISTORIC):

CITY:

VICINITY OF:

ADDRESS: off Co. Hwy. 5 in Savanna Portage State Park

CERTIFICATION DATE: JUN 17 1988

REMOVED DATE:

COMMENTS:

Nina M. Archabal
State Historic Preservation Officer
**PROPERTY MAP FORM**

*Type all entries - attach to or enclose with map*

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<td>3. Latitude and longitude reference.</td>
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