

The story of Yankton is really the story of Dakota...



That's not an overstatement, as the historical significance of Yankton actually predates the formation of Dakota Territory in 1861, which led eventually to the creation of both North and South Dakota in 1889.

Yankton's story actually starts before there was a Yankton. In 1804, the Corps of Discovery expedition of Lewis and Clark, which was sent out by President Thomas Jefferson to sail up the Missouri River and explore the newly-acquired territory known to history as the Louisiana Purchase, first encountered Native Americans at Calumet Bluff, located just to the west of present-day Yankton. Legend has it that the explorers wrapped a newborn baby in an American flag; that baby grew up into the Sioux chief Struck-by-the-Ree, who was one of the signees of the Treaty of 1858 that opened up this region to white settlement. In fact,

the site of modern-day Yankton was part of a place known as "Old Strike's camp."

White settlers began moving into the area in the late 1850s, and by 1861, there was a growing settlement at the Yankton site.

It's now generally held that Yankton's official "founding" was in 1861. In March of that year, Dakota Territory - a vast region that stretch from the present eastern Dakota border all the way to the Rocky Mountains - was organized, and Yankton was named the capital. (To that end, what is now the Yankton Press & Dakotan newspaper was started just three months later.) A territorial legislature was formed, with a permanent building eventually constructed at what is now the corner of Fourth and Capitol. The original building is long gone, but a replica of it now stands in Riverside Park along the Missouri River.

In 1862, a Santee Sioux uprising in the region forced the construction of a stockade in what is now downtown Yankton. The structure was never needed, but a monument to this fortification now stands near Third and Broadway.

Yankton became a bustling town, serving as a river gateway to the western frontier.

In 1873, Gen. George Custer and his westward-bound Seventh Cavalry spent three weeks in Yankton, where the soldiers were provided shelter from a spring blizzard. Custer's brief stay nevertheless has remained a prominent impact on the community's history.

In 1875, Yankton's fortunes boomed.

Gold was discovered in the Black Hills in what is now western South Dakota, and the community swelled in size as fortune hunters seeking their treasure flowed into and out of the community via the Missouri River. The gold rush also helped Yankton to cement its place in western lore: In 1877, the territorial capital hosted the murder trial of Jack McCall, who was convicted of killing Wild Bill Hickok in Deadwood. McCall was hanged in March 1878 near what is now the site of 31st St. and Highway 81. McCall is buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the Yankton cemetery.

The city's days as a territorial capital were numbered, as the governing seat was removed from the town under highly questionable political means in 1883 - a bitter fact that local residents remembered for generations. When North and South Dakota joined the union in 1889, Pierre was chosen as the state capital.

The Missouri River had always been a key facet of Yankton's character, but as the 20th century arrived and travel advancements were made, there was still no permanent bridge here. Pontoon bridges were deployed in the summer, and travelers had to make their way across the frozen river during the winter.

City officials knew that had to change in order for Yankton to grow and prosper. In 1924, the Meridian Bridge, a double-decked structure along what was later called the Meridian Highway, was opened. The bridge was built largely with local funds, and the city spent the following 29 years collecting tolls to pay off the debt. The books were cleared in 1953, leading to a "Toll Free in '53" celebration.

The river's unpredictability was also an inescapable part of Yankton life. Major floods - notably the flood of 1881, which wiped out the nearby town of Green Island - were constant scourges to Yankton residents.

Finally, in the 1950s, this changed with the construction of the Gavins Point Dam west of Yankton. This dam was part of a system of six federal dams created by Congress in the 1940s - a great experiment to tame the

wild river. In 1957, Gavins Point Dam was officially completed, and besides bringing the rampaging river mostly under control, it created Lewis and Clark Lake, giving the Yankton area a new state park that now attracts more than a million visitors a year and is the most popular South Dakota tourist draw outside of the Black Hills.

As Yankton entered the 21st century, it faced new bridge concerns.

The Meridian Bridge, has become probably the city's most recognizable landmark, was aging and had mostly outlived its usefulness as a motor-vehicle structure. Plans were finalized to build a new bridge just to the west, but there were fears that the old bridge would be torn down and a piece of history lost.

However, a deal was struck with federal officials to save the old bridge by converting it into a pedestrian walkway that would be owned by the city. In the fall of 2008, the Discovery Bridge - named in honor of the Lewis and Clark expedition - was officially opened. Three years later, the Meridian Bridge was reborn as a pedestrian walkway that has turned into a popular recreational attraction. The city is now planning to construct a plaza on the north end of the bridge as part of its ongoing commitment to develop the area.

Yankton in the 21st century may not look much like Yankton of the 19th century (even though there are several historical sites in the community), but the spirit is still growing strong. The town is changing and growing with the times. There is not only plenty of history to see and enjoy in the town, but also plenty of history left to be written.

