

## Signs of the past: Historical society's self-guided tour offers education, exercise

by JOSHUA SCHUETZ  
Staff Writer

Officials with the Jackson County Historical Society hope locals who haven't taken advantage of the society's self-guided tour of Jackson County yet will do so during the remaining few weeks of the summer.

The tour features color-coded signs marked with numbers placed at historical sites throughout the county. Some of the sites are as old as the county itself, and a great many of them are older than the cities that dot the county.

A book listing the sites and detailing their history can be found at the society's museum in Lakefield.

"I put it together originally for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sioux Uprising," said Mike Kirchmeier, society director. "We thought now would be a good time to revisit it."

Gwen Fleace, chair of the society's board of directors, said she felt the summer would be an especially good time for people to tour the various sites.

"I was thinking, with all of these things being shut down, people walking and

on their bikes could easily tour these," Fleace said. "All of these kids with nothing to do could go on these tours."

There's a lot of history in Jackson County, Kirchmeier and Fleace said, so much so that the society had to color code the signs for the different periods. Red signs denote sites associated with the early settlement of Jackson, such as the Brownsburg settlement and the Rathburn Dugout, which was the sight of the first recorded death in the county.

Yellow signs signify a

somber event, such as the massacre of settlers at the Springfield settlement. These tragedies took place in 1857, in and around the settlement of Springfield. The Wheeler cabin and James B. Thomas cabin are among the sites marked.

In 1862, the U.S.-Dakota War broke out and Jackson County served as an area of conflict. Norwegian settlers suffered a series of massacres during this period. Sites associated with the events of 1862 are marked with green signs.

One of the most famous historical markings in the

county is the Ashley Park Monument. The park itself is a cemetery, and the monument memorializes those who perished in the massacres of 1857 and 1862.

Kirchmeier and Fleace said many people in the county pass by some of these sites every day with no idea of what lies just beneath their feet.

"A lot of people see the signs and don't know what they're for," said Kirchmeier.

Fleace and the historical society want to change that and encourage more people, especially the young,

to engage with their history.

"It's right here. You can walk there if you want to," Fleace said, "This is available, and it is true."

For Fleace, an important part of her work is making sure residents of the county continue to remember their history.

"Our children need to remember their history so that they don't make the same mistakes," Fleace said. "History is still going on today."

## Death under the shade: Ashley Park's cemetery

by JOSHUA SCHUETZ  
Staff Writer

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a three-part series highlighting sites on the Jackson County Historical Society's self-guided tour.)

At the north end of Ashley Park, within earshot of children playing on the park's playground and picnickers chatting in the summer sun, stands a log cabin near a tall obelisk.

If the lower park is a monument to the hopes and joys of the living, this part is a monument to the dead, to dreams destroyed, to a world where violence was all too widespread.

Beneath the gleaming obelisk lie the remains of 19 people, slain in two mass killings, one in 1857 and one in 1862, during the U.S.-Dakota War.

The first killings, in 1857, took the lives of seven people and were perpetrated by Inkpaduta, a Dakota warrior who would later fight in the U.S.-Dakota War. The killings were another escalation in a series of broken treaties, invasions, attacks and broken promises that character-

ized settler-indigenous relations during the period.

What happened in 1862 was even worse, with a total of 12 dead. This massacre was part of a Dakota raid and the casualties were recent arrivals of Scandinavian descent. The victims were caught unawares, away from protection. These attacks were part of the broader conflict in the U.S.-Dakota War, during which numerous atrocities were committed against civilians.

Unbeknownst to many visitors, the monument isn't just a memorial piece; it's also a grave marker.

"The biggest surprise about the park is that most people don't realize that Ashley Park is a cemetery," said Mike Kirchmeier, director of the Jackson County Historical Society.

In 1898, victims of the 1862 killings were disinterred and reburied in the city park. A year later, victims of the 1857 attacks were also disinterred and reburied in the same park, which would eventually be called Ashley Park.

A decade later, Minnesota's state Legislature allocated funds for a memorial to the slain.

"They got \$2,000 to put a monument on the site," Kirchmeier said.

Just beside the cemetery stands the Olson-Slaabakken cabin, so named for the family that owned it and donated it to the park. The question of who built the cabin is one that remains unsolved.

"The Olsons said they didn't build it, but traded with a local Irishman for it," Kirchmeier said.

The most likely candidate for the original owner of the cabin is one Bartholomew McCarthy, who arrived in Jackson County in 1856. McCarthy, however, may have acquired the land and cabin from Joseph Coursolle, a local trader who operated out of a shanty and facilitated commerce between the settlers and the native population.

Southwest Minnesota's history is one of conflict, struggle, uncertainty, hope, pride and community. The cheerful playing of children at the base of Ashley Park serves as a reminder of the latter three. The somber obelisk, and the dead sleeping beneath the shade, reminds all of what came before.



PHOTOS BY JOSHUA SCHUETZ

Above: The Olson-Slaabakken Cabin sits beneath the shade at Ashley Park. Bottom left: The Ashley Park Monument serves as a tombstone for those slain in 1857 and 1862. Bottom right: The plaque on the Ashley Park Monument lists the names of the slain, though some names have been disputed by historians.



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