Immigrant Trail District (Mile Post 39.5 - 55.1)

The Immigrant Trail District story begins in recorded annals of European settlement of the St. Croix valley in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The stories bear witness to individual hardship and sacrifice, risk and reward; endured in order to carve out a new life in a new land near the center of the continent, and separated by thousands of miles from European homelands left behind forever. St. Croix valley European history, predominantly Swedish in this part of the valley, is a tale of remarkable courage, hardship, ingenuity and steadfastness that is linked to creation of the communities we recognize today for their historical roots in the birth of the State of Minnesota.

The Immigrant Trail story heralds pioneers and brings byway travelers to a rich assortment of physical sites and small communities that are testaments to early European settlement. The rich and lively immigrant story provides insights into early logging and farming in the region, nineteenth century life on rural homesteads, and the history, culture, and commerce of the first small river communities that developed between Marine on St. Croix and the logging camps north of Taylors Falls. Not every settlement and logging camp survived, but some of the best stories remain as a legacy to help bring them back to life and enrich byway travelers.

The story of the greatest influx of immigrants starts in New Scandia, a township for more than 150 years that became a city on January 1, 2007. New Scandia began as a Swedish settlement and dates from 1850, when three young men from Sweden established a farm near Hay Lake. The first Swedish Lutheran congregation (now Elim Lutheran Church) was organized and met in their log cabin in 1854. The first school also met there. Other Swedes, many from Skane and Varmland provinces, arrived during the early 1850s. A monument inscribed with names of these early Swedish settlers stands near the

Photos:  Bill Neuman
site of the original log house, at Hay Lake Historic Corner, about a mile-and-a-half south of downtown Scandia. Modern Swedish visitors consider the Hay Lake site a profoundly moving place to connect with their own ancestors, who left the homeland a century and a half ago to make their way in the new land. The reasons why they left Sweden may have differed from family to family but none can deny that the political freedom of the American republic exerted a strong pull on Swedish peasants who were some of the most literate in Europe, and consequently had access to the egalitarian and radical ideas that shook Europe in the 1840s. They brought those ideas to America and looked to the U.S. as a place to realize their ideals.

Scandia is home to Gammelgarden Museum, a fully restored eleven-acre Swedish homestead site that shows how early settlers lived and how they sought to achieve their ideals. "Gammelgarden" means “old farm” in Swedish. The homestead site, located in Johnson Park across from historic Elim Lutheran Church, invites modern visitors to step back in time to experience daily life of early Swedish immigrants in the only open-air museum devoted to Swedish immigration in the United States. In nineteenth century buildings that have been carefully preserved and restored, visitors get a glimpse of how life was for Swedish immigrants who constructed and lived on farmsteads like this throughout the area. Visitors are invited to participate in events and classes to learn more about the culture and times of early Swedish immigrants. Tours of the site provide information and insight into Scandinavian arts and crafts in the Välkommen Hus and a chance to soak in the beautifully preserved setting, walk the grounds, and experience the restored buildings that were home to immigrant families from the 1850s on: Prast Hus, Gammel Kyrkan, Ladugard, Immigrant Hus and Swedish Stuga.

Swedish immigrants came to America, most entering through New York City. They often settled in the Midwest. Swedish immigration to the United States reached its height in the decades immediately after the American Civil War (1861–1865). The
size of the Swedish-American community in 1865 is estimated at 25,000, a figure that was soon to be surpassed by the yearly Swedish immigration. By 1890 the U.S. census reported a Swedish-American population of nearly 800,000, with immigration peaking in 1869 and again in 1887. Most of this influx settled in the North. The great majority of immigrants had been peasants in the old country, pushed away from Sweden by disastrous crop failures and pulled towards America by the cheap land resulting from the 1862 Homestead Act. Most immigrants became pioneers, clearing and cultivating the virgin land of the Midwest. Once sizable Swedish farming communities had formed, the greatest impetus for further peasant migration came through personal contacts. The iconic “America-letter” to relatives and friends at home spoke directly from a position of trust and shared background. At the height of migration, familial America-letters could begin a chain of reactions that depopulated some Swedish parishes, dissolving tightly knit communities, which then re-assembled in the Midwest.

The rising Swedish exodus was felt throughout the St. Croix valley in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The enduring immigrant legacy is available to travelers who want to experience The Swedish Ring Historic Backway tour option which highlights the Scandinavian heritage of this portion of the Byway. The Swedish Ring Historic Backway departs from the Byway in Marine on St. Croix, the oldest European settlement site in Minnesota, takes Old Marine Trail to the site of the first Swedish settlement in Minnesota, travels through the beautiful Chisago Lakes area and the communities of Scandia, Chisago City, Lindström and Center City, turns north through rolling farmland to the Swedish community of Almelund, and makes its way back south along a segment of the Scenic Byway that leads to the old river towns of Franconia and Taylors Falls, from which many 19th century Swedish immigrants, after arriving by riverboat, set out on foot or by wagon to stake a claim to land on the American frontier as they pursued a new and better life in America. The Swedish Ring roads were selected to guide appreciation for Swedish heritage experiences that date from the 1850s, or even earlier, and continue to this day. The Ring route is a way to retell important immigrant arrival stories and to reveal the triumphs and travails the American frontier had in store for these early pioneers. The Swedish Ring experience is also devoted to highlighting traditions passed down from earlier generations, and to telling simple stories that are emblematic of Swedish immigrant families.

Departing from the Swedish Ring and returning to the St. Croix Scenic Byway near Scandia, an area of significance is the 136-acre Falls Creek Scientific and Natural Area, located in northern Washington County, at the foot of one of the most diverse natural areas remaining in the St. Croix valley. Folded and faulted rocks at this site show the largest displacement of any known Paleozoic rocks in Minnesota, revealing Decorah, Platteville, Glenwood, and St. Peter formations. Steep ravines line the intermittently active stream beds. Pine canopy openings on south slopes permit growth of many species native to bluff prairies. Oak forest occupies the drier ridge top. The site is unique for its stand of virgin hardwood and white pine forest, which is rare along the St. Croix. Several bird studies have been conducted, and a total of 124 bird species have been seen here. Several unofficial trails can be followed from the parking areas and provide good birder access.

The next six miles along the scenic byway have been identified as a high priority area for protection as a Franconia Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area. Inventories of plants in the Franconia Bluffs area, extending up nearly to Interstate State Park, indicate that pre-settlement native plants are largely undisturbed, and exist in diversity and numbers much as they did when Swedish immigrants first arrived in the area. It is a rare opportunity for modern byway travelers to experience a natural environment that has been preserved much as it was several hundred years ago. Just north of Falls Creek is Cedar Bend,
where the 1825 Treaty established a line separating the Dakota (south of the line) and Chippewa (Ojibwe) (north of the line) in hopes of preventing further bloodshed.

Several miles north of Cedar Bend the byway intersects Highway 243, the shortest Interstate Highway in the nation, two miles long. This short gem of a side trip begins with a sweeping descent down 243 to reveal a panoramic view of the St. Croix River valley, as the highway traverses a short causeway where the original road into Wisconsin was built across the first of two main river channels that split on either side of Pest Island, a destination for river boats heading north with their cargo of immigrants who disembarked at the site. For early immigrants who were too ill to continue their journey into the wilderness, Pest Island was the end of the line and, for many, the end of their quest for a new life in America. The island is a National Park Service site with boat landings (Osceola Landing), picnic and shelter facilities, fishing piers and a swimming beach. Views across the river draw the eye to sheer limestone and sandstone cliffs that rise several hundred feet above the water and provide a spectacular backdrop to an idyllic site that serves as a principal access point for the National Scenic River.

Venture past the landing on the steel and concrete bridge that spans the river at the site of the first log boom constructed on the river in 1857, to the historic river town of Osceola, Wisconsin. There, within little more than 200 yards of the river lie the 19th century ruins of the old grist mill that once cracked grain, a site that is located on the precipice of Cascade Falls, a 24-foot waterfall that can be viewed from main street in the heart of downtown Osceola or from Highway 243 by crossing a restored footbridge that spans the creeks that fed the mighty water turbines more than a century ago. A set of switchback wooden stairs will take the adventurous traveler to the base of the falls. A short distance away, the Minnesota Transportation Museum operates an historic working railroad train depot that offers scenic passenger tours through the St. Croix valley and
into Marine On St. Croix. Osceola’s downtown district and the 1916 Soo Line Depot are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This short Interstate Highway will soon become a link from the Minnesota St. Croix Scenic Byway to a second St. Croix Scenic Byway in Wisconsin that is planned to follow the St. Croix River with loop-over connections with the Minnesota byway.

Heading north from Highway 243 through rolling farmland, forest and bluff land, visitors soon arrive at the heart of the Franconia Bluffs, the old village of Franconia, a National Historic District. This area of lovely old homes was originally platted in 1858. The village originally housed several water-powered mills, a steamboat landing and a small steamboat building industry. Franconia is located on the banks of the St. Croix and was one of many jumping off points for early immigrants arriving by boat on the St. Croix River. Today the Franconia Landing serves fishing boats, kayaks and canoes as they put in for a river experience in this tranquil part of the river. Franconia displays some remarkable buildings, among which is the splendid Paul Munch Greek revival frame house, built in about 1855 and the residence of Civil War veteran and miller Paul Munch.

Franconia Sculpture Park, located at the intersection of Highways 8 and 95, provides a perfect pull off location. The Sculpture Park is an innovative arts organization that provides living and workspace to emerging and established artists. A lively schedule of programs and events for art lovers of all ages includes Kids Make Sculpture, Hot Metal Pour, artist-led tours and the Fall Arts Festival. The 20-acre park, with a rotating collection of over 75 contemporary sculptures, reflects the creative talents of local, national, and international artists and is free and open to the public 365 days a year. See the site at www.franconia.org/map.html

The Falcon Guide to Minnesota Scenic Drives describes the precipitous descent into Taylors Falls on the St. Croix Scenic Byway as one of the most exhilarating stretches of pavement in the state. As the road curls around a sheer sandstone cliff, a magnificent vista of the St. Croix River and soaring bluffs draped in oak, maple, fir, and tall red pine opens up to the right. This is also the location of the lower entrance to Interstate State Park, the second oldest state park in Minnesota (1895), a small park but one of the most heavily used parks in the Minnesota State Park System. Picnic grounds, camping, hiking, bird watching, and canoe rentals are available within the park. Some of the trails reach heights along the bluffs that afford hikers exceptional views across rugged basalt cliffs and the wild and scenic river.

Historically, a shallow pull-off between the lower park entrance and Taylors Falls offered excellent views of the St. Croix Dalles, a deep, ruddy canyon gouged out by an immense torrent of meltwater at the end of the last Ice Age. The views remain unchanged, but for reasons of traffic safety the pull-off locations are only accessible by foot and are integrated with trails from the upper entrance to Interstate State Park. Rock climbers can often be seen inching their way up the 200-foot basalt cliffs; on summer weekends kayaks and canoes dot the aquamarine waters below. The Dalles are protected from development by state parkland on both sides of the river. On the Minnesota side of Interstate State Park, a self-guided interpretive trail loops around potholes, giant cauldrons, and other geologic oddities carved into rock ledges high above the river.

Turn right at the bottom of the hill to reach the trailhead and interpretive center. Riverboat tours of the Dalles of the St. Croix leave from a dock just below the bridge. The Interstate Park Campground and Stone Buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers constructed the Campground and buildings in
1938-1941 with basalt stone quarried in the park. The other buildings and structures in the Park were also made of local basalt stone, including 1920’s examples of rustic-style construction that later influenced WPA workers. The Wisconsin Interstate State Park can be easily reached on foot across the Interstate Highway 8 bridge which crosses at the narrow gorge where the rapids are wild, just as they were one-and-a-half centuries ago when immigrant boats put in at Taylors Falls, unable to move upstream against the rapids. Wisconsin Interstate State Park preserves the east side of the scenic “Dalles of the St. Croix” and has an extensive trail system and a swimming lake. From the combined Interstate State Parks, visitors can also access several remarkable trails, including a walking trail that is being developed to connect the parks with the National Park Service Riverway Headquarters on the Wisconsin side of the river.

One of two separate entrances to Interstate State Park is located in downtown Taylors Falls. Taylors Falls also serves as the connection point for a number of regional trails that add to recreational and sightseeing opportunities for byway travelers. Connecting trails accessible from this segment of the St. Croix Scenic Byway through Taylors Falls include the Swedish Immigrant Trail, a 20-mile bike route being developed to the west from Taylors Falls, the Gandy Dancer Trail, a 98-mile, interstate trail that starts just across the river in St. Croix Falls, continues 47 miles north and then crosses into Minnesota for 32 miles, and then back again into Wisconsin on its way to its connection with the Saunders State Trail just south of Superior, Wisconsin. The St. Croix Scenic Byway also connects with the nearby 1200-mile Ice Age National Scenic Trail, which begins in St. Croix Falls and passes through 30 counties before reaching Lake Michigan. This segment of the St. Croix Scenic Byway is at the nexus of a complex web of bike and walking trails in addition to obvious opportunities afforded byway travelers associated with historic St. Croix valley river communities and the National Scenic Riverway, within the byway viewshed for a majority of its length.

The crown jewel in the Immigrant Trail experience is Taylors Falls. Lumbermen from New England founded Taylors Falls in the 1840s, harnessing their sawmills to falls that are now covered by a dam. Many buildings remain from the village’s golden age, including the 1884 county jail, now a bed and breakfast, and the William H. C. Folsom House, a masterpiece of Greek revival architecture built in 1855. The Folsom House, open for tours from late May to mid-October, is located in the Angel Hill National Historic District, a slice of New England perched atop a high wooded bluff behind the town.

Taylors Falls is a “gateway” community known for its history of logging, lumberjacks, Swedish immigration and most of all for its magnificent scenery at the Dalles of the St. Croix. Angel Hill National Historic District alone is worth a visit, with the 1855 W. H. C. Folsom House, a Minnesota Historical Society Site open for tours in season, the 1861 Methodist Church, still in use, and several dozen beautiful mid-19th century homes that contribute to the national status and ambiance of Angel Hill. Taylors Falls is home to the first circulating library in Chisago County. The Library, built in 1854, is listed on the National Register and was a wood-frame residence and tailor shop, later acquired for use as the town library in 1888. The small and still active public library sets on its original site. The Greek Revival Roos House (1854) and the John Daubney House (1869), an Italianate frame dwelling built in 1870s as a residence and a stop for rail travelers, are on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1852, Taylors Falls was designated as the Chisago County seat, remaining so until 1865. In 1851, Miss Susan Thomson taught the first school in Taylors Falls, with four students. Construction of a dual-purpose town hall and schoolhouse began the next year. It is recognized as Minnesota’s oldest existing public school building. During the summer, area students can
attend Pioneer School in the old school building. Students wear period dress and have an opportunity to experience what it might have been like for their early ancestors to attend a one room school.

Taylors Falls and the Dalles of the St. Croix have been described as Switzerland on the St. Croix. The geology of the area remains the most striking visual aspect in a setting of remarkably intact State Park lands, National Scenic River, and historic river towns with abundant examples of well preserved 19th century buildings. Taylors Falls grew out of a landscape cherished by generations of inhabitants who long preceded the great flood of European immigrants. European descendants and visitors cherish the same landscape today. In 1838 the small steamboat, Palmyra, chugged up the St. Croix River loaded with equipment to construct a sawmill at the falls where Taylors Falls and St. Croix Falls are located today. The sternwheeler Palmyra was the first boat to enter the St. Croix River valley. The boat tied up in Taylors Falls at the rocky gorge called the Dalles. It was a natural stopping point because boats were unable to proceed further against the wild rapids and the falls.

When that first boat arrived in 1838, local Ojibwe Indians came aboard and, through a fur trader acting as interpreter, were informed that a treaty was signed that opened the entire St. Croix River valley for laying claims to mill sites and pine land. The story of the upper St. Croix valley logging expansion unfolded quickly. Vast tracts of virgin timber reserves that had taken centuries to mature seemed to disappear overnight. The next story segment will reveal how European immigration culminated in a logging boom unprecedented in American history. So large were the timber reserves in the St. Croix valley and so great was the production, that when water flow decreased in the St. Croix River, the cost of lumber increased throughout the entire United States. As testament to the scale of logging in the St. Croix valley, more logs were driven down the St. Croix River than any other river in America.