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Preface

Pierre Charles LeSueur, a French fur trader and explorer was usually credited as being the first European to lay his eyes on the confluence of the Blue Earth and Minnesota Rivers, deep in the heart of the Santee (Eastern) Dakota territory. Although the wooden stockade (Fort L’Huillier) he built nearby has long since disintegrated and disappeared, LeSueur’s presence was preserved through his naming of geographic features: LeSueur River, LeHillier, St. Pierre’s River (Minnesota) and most notably, his recording of the Dakota name for blue earth—“mahkato” or “mankato.”

One hundred and fifty years after LeSueur’s visit in 1700, another group of pioneers came to the confluence of the two rivers. Unlike LeSueur, Nicollet, Carver and the other explorers who came to the wilderness to trade directly with the Indians, these Americans came to settle permanently, and in doing so significantly altered the geographic landscape. Parsons King Johnson and Henry Jackson built a townsite providing settlers with finished goods as well as an outlet for their raw materials. Business flourished. The name chosen for the townsite was “Mankato.”

The name for the town was appropriate because it demonstrated recognition by the founders of the important role rivers played in the development of a community. Rivers were the superhighways of their time, bringing people and goods closer together. Eventually, railroads and highways replaced the waterways as the primary means of transportation, but the Minnesota and the Blue Earth Rivers remained forces to be reckoned with.

The original plan for the townsite of Mankato called for laying out its center at the confluence of the two rivers. Realizing that severe flooding was likely, the town fathers wisely chose to relocate the town’s center several miles downstream at the great bend of the Minnesota River where it has been ever since. Even then there were periodic floods, as anyone alive in 1951, 1965, 1993 or 1997 can testify. Such calamities resulted in the construction of a concrete floodwall in the 1970s as a means of keeping the Minnesota River and its tributaries in check.

Living with the rivers has formed a key component of Mankato’s character as a city. Even the unique street pattern of the downtown area, in which a street suddenly changes direction while appearing to be straight, was a result of the town being built at the bend of the Minnesota River. Originally, streets were numbered up from the Minnesota River, beginning with “Front” Street instead of “First.” What should have been designated “Third” Street was