Once, large mills dominated the banks of the river, often standing over four stories tall. However, the milling industry declined in the 1930s and mill owners often destroyed the once grand mills. Now, all that remains of many of the majestic mills are the foundations and tailraces of Mill Ruins Park. This tour will identify many of the ruins you will see in the park.

1. At the entrance of Mill Ruins Park (near the intersection of Portland Ave. and West River Parkway) are the remains of the Cataract Flour Mill 1859-1928, Artic Flour Mill/St. Anthony Mill, 1866-1919, Union Flour Mill, 1863-1929, Holly Flour Mill, 1867-1919

Four mills once stood in this jumble of ruins. The Cataract Mill opened in 1859, and was the first flour mill built on the west side of the river after the construction of the canal. The Artic, Union, and Holly mills became its first neighbors. Each mill was made from Platteville limestone, a rock layer found at the falls, and stood four stories tall. Their owners had abandoned them by 1930. Today, the Cataract’s foundation walls are visible at the corner of Portland Avenue and West River Parkway, and one of its millstones rests on a wall.

2. Facing the ruins of the Cataract Mill, on the other side of the intersection are the remains of the Clapp Woolen Mill/Empire Mill/Pillsbury B Elevator/King Midas Elevator 1865-1881; 1888-1969 Ruins

These are part of the foundation of the Pillsbury B Elevator. Originally a woolen mill, this site became a flour mill in 1878, burning down three years later. The site remained vacant until 1888 when the Pillsbury Company built a grain elevator for its Pillsbury B Mill. The grain elevator remained in business until 1962 and burned down seven years later.

3. Follow Portland Ave. east, towards the Stone Arch Bridge. It should slope downward and underneath the bridge. However, before you reach the bridge, to your left will be two Minneapolis Eastern Railroad Trestles

These two stone columns once held the trestle that supported the rails of the Minneapolis Eastern Railroad and gave it access to the flour mills. The huge iron trestles over the tailraces in Mill Ruins Park also helped support trains.

4. Follow Portland Ave. underneath the bridge and take a right along the pedestrian trail. You will soon be in Mill Ruins Park. The back page of this brochure will help you identify the ruins.

5. Above Mill Ruins park are the Washburn-Crosby A Mill and Complex

The Washburn A Mill stood seven and a half stories high, making it the largest mill at the falls when it was built in 1874. However, four years later, the mill exploded and killed eighteen men. The explosion, resulting from flammable dust created by the milling process, shot the roof of the building hundreds of feet into the air and leveled a third of the falls’ industry. A month later, the remains of the Washburn A Mill still smoldered. However, by the next year, Washburn-Crosby rebuilt the Washburn A mill and the other millers rebuilt their mills. The mill produced flour until 1965. Its owners-abandoned it, and a fire destroyed most of the mill in 1992. In 2003, the ruins became part of the Mill City Museum.
What is a tailrace?

Unfortunately, all the sole reminder of many of these mills is their tailrace. Tailraces are tunnels from which water exited the mill, after turning the water wheel. In 1857, the Minneapolis Milling Company, which leased water to the mills, built a large underground tunnel to serve the mills. The canal, as it was called, focused water and increased its speed and water potential. From this underground tunnel came a whole network of tunnels which water flowed through turning waterwheels. The water always left through a tailrace.

The Buried Ruins

Each of these flour mills was made of limestone. The actual mills were destroyed in 1931, but their tailraces and wheel pits became part of the Consolidated Hydro Plant, producing electricity long after flour production ceased. Following their demolition, the ruins were filled with gravel and sand and await future excavation.