



Five Navy men pose with the 600-pound bell from *USS Minneapolis* and the 6-foot auxiliary wheel from *USS Minnesota* at a naval memorial on the shore of Bde Maka Ska in this photo from 1932. Photo courtesy of Hennepin County Library

MYSTERIES SOLVED

Ship's wheel taken from Bde Maka Ska naval memorial in 1975 surfaces at suburban high school along with missing 600-pound bell

By Karen E. Cooper and Zac Farber

The bustling northeastern shore of Bde Maka Ska seems an odd place for a military memorial. Walkers navigate a busy tangle of pathways. Kayaks are rented from a waterfront kiosk. Sailing classes are held. Cyclists circle the lake. Yet, in the midst of this tide of people, you'll find two rocks, each holding a plaque to commemorate sailors or Marines. They're easy enough to find — there's a tall white ship's mast standing over them.

For most of a century, a 600-pound bronze ship's bell hung on that mast. Beneath it, for more than three decades, was a 6-foot-high ship's wheel. The bell came from *Minneapolis*, a U.S. Navy cruiser so beloved by the citizens of Minneapolis that in 1895 they chipped in to buy the officers a silver service set costing \$5,000. The wheel came from the Navy battleship *USS Minnesota*, esteemed for carrying home Minnesota's local heroes from World War I.

Police reported the wheel stolen in 1975 and the bell was taken some time around 2014 — the Minneapolis Park Board isn't sure exactly when. Until a few weeks ago, the Park Board knew who took the bell though not where, and the fate of the wheel remained a total mystery.

In the reporting of this story, both the bell and the wheel have been found.

Six or eight years ago, the bell was liberated from its moorings by an American Legionnaire acting without the permission of the Park Board. Dick Ward, a former commander of Minneapolis Post 1 of the American Legion, hired a contractor who took the bell down and carted it away. He'd first asked the Park Board to take it down, he said, but was refused.

"Our staff apparently thought that he had permission to get it restored and then he refused to return it," Park Board spokesperson Dawn Sommers said.

When Park Board staff asked Ward for the bell's location, he replied that it had been moved to "a better place where it is appreciated," according to MaryLynn Pulscher, the Park Board's head of environmental education and resident "history geek."



Submitted photo



Photo by Isaiah Rustad

Left: The wheel was presented to Minnetonka High School in 2007 by Dick Ward, an American Legionnaire acting without permission of the Minneapolis Park Board. It is mounted on the wall of the school's atrium. Right: The memorial as it looks today.

Ward, 70, is a financial adviser and Vietnam-era veteran who has been active in the American Legion for more than 20 years. Reached by phone on May 14, he gave his reasons for taking the bell, which a local Legion post gifted to the city of Minneapolis in 1930.

Ward said he felt “it was an old and gracious monument that was being completely ignored.” He said the bell deserved the highest honor and that it should be appreciated and respected. He said thousands of people walked by the bell, never even thinking about it.

When asked about the bell’s current location, he responded plainly with the answer he wouldn’t give the Park Board: “It’s at Minnetonka High School.”

Once Ward had taken the bell, he said he looked for a home where it would be cherished. None of the American Legion posts in Minneapolis were interested, he said, and neither was the Navy Reserve out by the airport.

So rather than let it languish in some garage, he gave it to Minnetonka High School’s football team, the Skippers, in August 2014. He presented the bell on behalf of his American Legion post.

While other Legionnaires were involved in moving the bell, the post’s public liaison, Mike Krogan, said Ward is the “only surviving decision maker,” that the meeting minutes may be lost and that memories are hazy.

Krogan said he believes the Park Board asked the Legion to “relocate” the naval memorial in the late 1980s; the Park Board denies this. “We didn’t steal the doggone thing,” Krogan said, noting that those with evidence of the Park Board’s request are now dead. Pulscher said that if the Park Board had decommissioned the memorial, the correspondence with the Legion would be in the board’s archive.

Larry Schoppe, the current commander of Post 1, said that while he wasn’t very active in the Legion around 2014, he has no idea why the bell would have been moved.



The bell from USS Minneapolis was given to Minnetonka High School in 2014 and is rung after touchdowns during Skippers football games. Submitted screenshot

“I just wonder how much sense it made to give it to some high school at random,” he said. “Why were they the chosen ones? How come some school in South Minneapolis didn’t get it? How come it went to the Minnetonka Skippers?”

The letter Ward wrote to Minnetonka High School when he handed over the bell does not discuss the controversy over its acquisition. “The time has come for this treasure to be

held in a place of reverence and respect where people can be reminded of the ones who served with dedication and commitment,” he wrote to Dave Nelson, the school’s football coach. “What better location than Minnetonka High School, where hundreds of students, faculty and friends can come in contact each and every day.”

The high school has mounted the bell on an eight-wheeled, hand-pulled dolly. It’s kept in the school’s weight room, where students ring it when they hit personal fitness goals, and it is taken down to the football field on game days, where it’s rung after touchdowns. “When we score, they ding it,” said Ted Schultz, the school’s activities director. “It’s been a nice little piece of history.”

When informed on May 14 of the bell’s location, Pulscher summed up the excitement of the Park Board’s staff: “Holy cow!”

The Park Board is now discussing whether to request the bell be returned, how it could be moved and where it would be taken. “It’s not like you can walk it into our archive area or something like that,” Sommers said. “It’s a big bugger and it weighs a lot.” Hanging the bell on the mast will be a problem since the original mounting hardware is gone.

Despite the logistical challenges, Pulscher said she hopes the bell will be restored to its namesake city. “It’s from the USS Minneapolis; it should be in Minneapolis,” she said.

As Park Board staff deliberated, another discovery was made.

In spring 2007, about seven years before Ward gave the bell to Minnetonka High School, he had presented the school with the wheel from the battleship *Minnesota*.

Digging through the school’s archives on May 21, staff surfaced a letter, signed by Ward on behalf of Post 1, offering the wheel as “an historical artifact that may compliment” the Skippers’ new all-turf baseball diamond, Veterans Field.

“It makes for a striking proclamation when properly displayed,” wrote Ward, who was then the post’s vice commander. “It

reminds me of the Skipper ship’s wheel logo I have seen in the past.”

(Ward could not be reached to answer follow-up questions about how the wheel came into his and the Legion’s possession.)

Minnetonka Schools Superintendent Dennis Peterson said the high school has taken good care of both the bell and the wheel. In summer 2008, the wheel was refurbished and refinished and mounted on the south side of the school’s new atrium.

“Both of these items were probably not being honored by the previous keeper, and the Legion decided to place them with keepers who cared enough to maintain and honor them,” Peterson wrote in an email.

On May 25, after an early version of this story was published online, Park Board President Jono Cowgill wrote a public message to the high school’s athletics department on Twitter: “Hey, @TonkaSkippers could you please return our bell and wheel?”

Peterson said the Park Board should send an official request to his office, adding that “a Twitter message is hardly appropriate.” He has said the school will be happy to return the items if they belong to someone else.

In a follow-up interview, Cowgill said that “the onus is on Minnetonka Schools to return them — it’s not on the Park Board to somehow try to get them back.”

Pulscher said the Park Board didn’t pursue recovering the bell sooner because “you’ve got to have the wherewithal to track it on your list of priorities.” Cowgill said that the Park Board should have “ensured all the materials on our memorial were kept there [though] it’s hard to keep up all of our many monuments across the system.”

Asked whether park police will now become involved, Cowgill replied: “I don’t think anyone was doing anything out of ill intent.”

If the artifacts can be retrieved, he said, they will be placed at the naval memorial once again. For Pulscher, that would make for a happy ending.

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USS Minneapolis was so beloved by the citizens of the city that in 1895 they chipped in to buy the officers a \$5,000 silver service set. Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command

“I would love to see the site restored to look like the old photographs,” she said. “It would be great to have the whole collection together as was originally intended when they created the memorial.”

WWI and two respected ships

The bell was dedicated at Bde Maka Ska 90 years ago, but its history goes back even further.

USS Minneapolis was commissioned in the Navy in 1894. She was called the handsomest and fastest warship afloat. Perhaps that was an exaggeration. She looked enough like a passenger liner — quite deliberately — that she might have been mistaken for one. But she was a lightly gunned cruiser with expensive engines. In the Navy’s continued

quest for speed, Minneapolis was soon considered over-specialized and slow. However, Minneapolis had a career worth remembering. She brought Rear Adm. Thomas Selfridge to the coronation of Czar Nicholas II. She escorted the body of the Revolutionary War commander John Paul Jones home to Annapolis. And Minneapolis was beloved in her eponymous city. The Minneapolis Tribune noted that the citizens had a “certain sense of parental responsibility,” and they eagerly followed the news when she was at sea. Minnesota was another locally beloved ship. Second to bear the name, she was commissioned into the Navy in 1907 and joined the Great White Fleet of 16 U.S. battleships in

1908. The Fleet’s circumnavigation was both a goodwill tour and a show of force. Nearly sunk by a U-boat-laid mine off the coast of Maryland in 1918, she returned to service with the Cruiser and Transport Force. Minnesota carried home over 3,000 servicemen from World War I. Surely her proudest moment was in May 1919. She brought home Minnesota’s highly decorated 151st Field Artillery Regiment from the battlefields of France. During the First World War, both ships protected the North American east coast. At home, the city of Minneapolis played its own significant part in winning the war. When the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, trained sailors were in short supply. Those running the Dunwoody Institute offered to teach Navy recruits any skill Dunwoody had on offer. The local naval recruitment officer found barracks and training locations. One important setting was at West Lake Street & East Calhoun Boulevard. The Navy took over the clubhouse of the Athletic and Boat Club, located across the parkway from today’s boat launch site, just south of Lake Street.

Sailors learned boating skills on Bde Maka Ska. They also learned vocations the Navy needed, becoming cooks, bakers, radio operators, electricians and carpenters. Between August 1917 and February 1919, 4,000 men were trained through the Dunwoody program. Women helped win the war. A wealthy society woman named Elizabeth Backus became the statewide director of the Women’s Naval Service. This group sewed bandages and surgical gowns. They also organized dances for the sailors and ran the canteen at that old boat clubhouse, now called the Dunwoody Naval Training Station.

Creating a naval monument

When the war ended in November 1918, Elizabeth Backus used her position to commemorate the sailors of the U.S. Navy.

On Memorial Day 1922, Backus and the ladies of the Women’s Naval Service dedicated a bronze plaque to “the Boys of Our Navy who fought during the Great War.” It was placed on the northeast edge of Bde Maka Ska, on the lake where thousands had trained to fight and win the war. Five hundred people came out on a cold and rainy day to witness the dedication. The plaque was presented to the city and women strewed flowers on the lake from a Park Board launch. The plaque is on Navy Rock, a piece of granite brought in from Lake Minnetonka. It was placed just across the street from the naval training station in the old boat clubhouse. The club had actually gone bankrupt in 1915. Once the war was over, the Naval Reserve just stayed in the building. It became a real armory. The sailors took the artillery pieces with them when they moved downtown to the brand new W.P.A.-built Minneapolis Armory in 1935. The naval armory was the ideal place to stage Memorial Day events. Veterans’ organizations, active servicemen and women’s committees paraded in formation, usually with color guard and with music playing, as they crossed the street to Navy Rock. The rock became a focus for the women whose sons, husbands and brothers did not come home from their Navy assignments. On Memorial Day, flowers and wreaths spread out in the park near the rock. The honor of strewing flowers on the water was, however, taken over by navy pilots. Sometimes they used helicopters. After Minneapolis was decommissioned and sold for scrap, members of the American Legion’s Navy-Marine Post 472 wrote to the Secretary of the Navy to acquire her ship’s bell. In maritime history, the bell was perhaps the most versatile piece of ship’s equipment. It signaled changes of watch, alerted the sailors to fires and helped avoid collisions in fog. Even today, maritime law requires that ships carry a bell.

SEE NAVAL MEMORIAL / PAGE B4



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FROM NAVAL MEMORIAL / PAGE B3

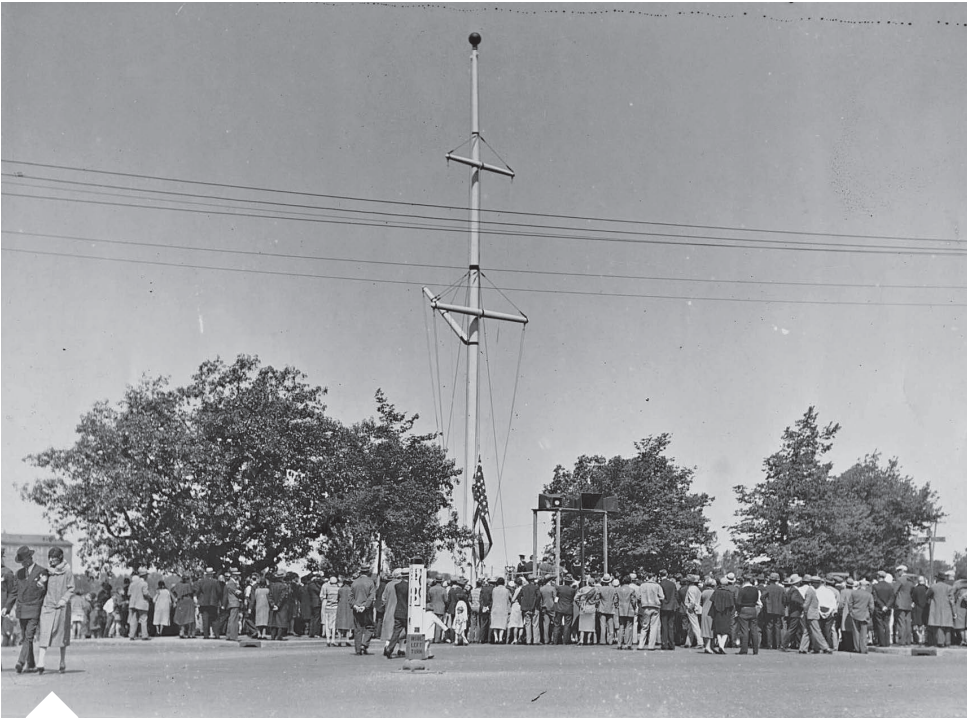
Several years after the post received the bell, it turned to Elizabeth Backus for help. Her husband was a millionaire lumberman with a paper mill in International Falls. Edward W. Backus provided an 80-foot-tall cedar tree trunk to stand in for a ship's mast. A former sailor working for the Park Board trimmed the mast, and Northern States Power crews stood the mast up. There's an 1893 coin under it, from the year *Minneapolis* was launched. That's an old sailor's good luck charm.

On May 30, 1930, the bell was presented to the city. Rear Adm. Theodore R. Wirth was the son of the famed Park Board superintendent. Ninety years ago, he was a lieutenant in charge of local naval recruiting. On behalf of Navy-Marine Post 472, Lt. Wirth formally presented the bell to mayoral representative W. A. Currie, who turned it over to the Park Board.

Navy-Marine Post 472 continued to support the Navy Rock memorial site. They acquired the auxiliary steering wheel from *Minnesota*. This was placed in front of the mast in 1932 and accepted for the city by Park Board Commissioner John H. Jepson on Memorial Day 1933. The wheel became a symbol of Minneapolis, and was used as the design for the Aquatennial's Skipper pins beginning in 1948.

In 1936, the Marine Memorial Association unveiled a plaque naming the city's lost marines of World War I. It was placed next to Navy Rock and presented to the city on Memorial Day. This monument is on the second rock at the site.

Between the world wars, dozens of veterans, military, and civilian organizations participated in the ceremonies at Navy Rock. The Legion played a big part, but so did the auxiliaries, the mothers' clubs and women-run relief groups, the Boy Scouts, the Pillsbury company band, and even the Civil War veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic.



These photos were taken on May 30, 1930, the day the bell from USS *Minneapolis* was installed on a mast-like monument at Bde Maka Ska. Photos courtesy of Minneapolis Park Board and Hennepin County Library



This was such a consequential site that Theodore Wirth drew up plans for “a permanent, dignified memorial.” A memorial plaza in the shape of a ship would have seated 350 people for Memorial Day exercises. It would have made “a pleasing and interesting entrance” to the park and lake.

The Legion and the many other groups who participated in Memorial Day ceremonies were invited to make this vision into reality by helping the Park Board pay for it. It was 1933 and the middle of the Great Depression. Even though Wirth offered to let these groups take as long as necessary to contribute, there was no enthusiasm for the idea.

Decline and restoration

The years brought changes. In 1947, the former naval armory became Woodrow Wilson Post 1491 of the Veterans of Foreign

Wars. That organization stayed in their building until they sold it in the 1980s. It was torn down in 1986. Today, the site is owned by the Park Board. It's now the little-used park across the street from where the lakeside refectory burned down a year ago.

Navy-Marine Post 472 continued to hold memorial services at the Navy Rock site for decades. Veterans fondly remember the time when poppies were dropped by helicopter onto the lake.

In 1988, Navy-Marine merged with other American Legion posts to form Minneapolis Post 1. Navy-Marine had been in decline for at least a decade, Dick Ward said. Ceremonies honoring Navy and Marine veterans are no longer held at Navy Rock. The wheel from *Minnesota* was stolen in 1968, somehow recovered, and stolen again in 1975. Its whereabouts between 1975 and

2007, when it was given to Minnetonka High School, are still unknown.

For years, the northeastern part of the Bde Maka Ska lakeshore has become more chaotic and crowded. As Ward observed, the Navy Rock site was too easily ignored and neglected. And lightning took the top 25 feet off the mast.

The Park Board addressed these issues when they created a master plan for Bde Maka Ska and Lake Harriet in 2017. Through the public engagement process that led to the master plan, preserving the historical elements in the Chain of Lakes was identified as a high priority.

The process included meetings at Park Board headquarters and in public. Ward helped organize a meeting of South Minneapolis American Legion posts, which included a presentation on the master plan by Park Board project manager Dan Elias.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1 The “M” in STEM, briefly

5 Bistro offerings

10 Darkened for emphasis, as text

14 New York canal

15 Quiver projectile

16 “Buy It Now” site

17 *Price a discarded item might fetch

19 Zonk out

20 Snail’s protection

21 Directs

23 “__ on Down the Road”: “The Wiz” song

26 Bus sked info

27 *Preliminary book copy for editing

33 Corp. money exec

35 Medical pros

36 Take great pleasure in

37 Ship frame

39 “__ one is better?”

42 Great Pyramid site

43 Physicist Newton

45 Surrey slammer

47 Butterfly catcher

48 *Salon job often shortened to its first four letters

52 RVer’s stopover

53 Interstate hauler

54 Glam or punk, to rock

59 Cinderella’s sweepings

63 Horror film assistant

64 Earthquake echo, or where the last words of the answers to starred clues might go

67 Sunscreen additive

68 Stale-smelling

69 Grape soda brand

70 “Well, I’ll be darned!”

71 “Family Ties” mother

72 Asian wheat noodle

DOWN

1 Total disorder

2 Word with enemy or rival

3 Grow weary

4 Shaman, for one

5 Dallas NBAer

6 Important period

7 Woody’s singing son

8 Shutter with slanted slats

9 Sugary goodies

10 Places to sleep

11 Flute’s orchestral neighbor

12 Lounge (around)

13 Hair salon colors

18 Flannel shirt pattern

22 Knocks loudly

24 Winter forecast

25 Mark permanently

27 Kind of ice cap

28 Endorse digitally

29 Cleaner’s cloth

30 Like sheep

31 Move like molasses

32 Greek campus group

33 Short golf shot

34 Firecracker-lighting cord

38 Perp’s escape

40 Webber musical based on Eliot poems

41 Sewing machine inventor Elias

44 Wedding reception centerpiece

46 Buddhist teachers

49 Generic

50 Probably more than you wanted to hear

51 Hindu deity

54 Thailand, once

55 Like eyesores

56 Explosive sound

57 Western writer Zane __

58 Crafter’s website

60 Worked the soil

61 Cavern phenomenon

62 Largest human organ

65 Sci-fi series extras

66 Whiskey grain

Crossword answers on page B5

Elias said no Legion member contacted him afterwards about the restoration of the Navy Rock site.

Even without active involvement from the Legion, stabilizing and then restoring the mast was a priority. The mast was evaluated for damage and deterioration in 2017 by architect Robert Mack. He found that Edward Backus’ cedar trunk was basically still sound. But some facing wood had delaminated, the lightning strike had cost the mast its protective cap and the entire pole badly needed repainting.

At the cost of over \$80,000, the Navy Rock memorial was put back in “fighting trim” with new rigging, fresh paint and repairs and restoration of the mast. Both commemorative rocks were moved to create a better memorial site. Customized pavers are being added through the People for Parks program. The neglect of past years is almost entirely gone.

The rocks and the mast can be found at this memorial site today, but some things are still missing.

The mast had a dedication plaque reading, “To the memory of the sailors and marines who sacrificed their lives in the world war, this memorial mast is dedicated. Navy-Marine Post 472 American Legion May 30, 1930.” That plaque has vanished.

The auxiliary wheel from *Minnesota* and the bronze bell from *Minneapolis* have now been found and may yet return to the memorial.

But what remains missing is a Memorial Day service at the site. This was always the reason the site was established. And it may be the biggest loss of all.

Karen E. Cooper is waiting for Hennepin History Museum to reopen from social distancing so she can ask to see the officers’ silver service from the 1894 cruiser Minneapolis. The museum owns the bell from the second ship named Minneapolis, one of the most decorated ships of WWII. That bell is currently on display outside the Minneapolis Convention Center.



A rifle squad from American Legion Navy-Marine Post 472 at a 1932 Memorial Day celebration. Photo courtesy of Hennepin County Library

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Crossword on page B4