

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

HE-RBC-025
CS 2735
Graeser Park

Historic Name Other Name	Graeser Park Robbinsdale Rock Garden R.P.A.	CS # SHPO Inv #	2735 HE-RBC-025
Location	NW corner of the jct of TH 100 and Broadway Ave W (CSAH 81)	Hwy District Reference	TH 100 Met W 12.1
City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM	Robbinsdale, City of Hennepin 118N 21W Sec 9 118N 21W Sec 16 Minneapolis North Z15 E472850 N4986800	Acres Rest Area Class	4
Designer	Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch	SP #	100-130-23 2735-03
Builder	Work Projects Administration (WPA)	SHPO Review #	94-3607
Historic Use Present Use	Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area	MHS Photo #	013549.12-24 013550.01-23 013551.01-02
Yr of Landscape Design	1940-41	MnDOT Historic Photo Album	Ols 2.19 Ols 2.20
Overall Site Integrity	Intact/Slightly Altered		
Review Required	Yes		
National Register Status	Eligible, see Statement of Significance Also member of eligible NR district: Lilac Way Historic District Property determined ineligible and District razed as part of TH 100 reconstruction.		
Historic Context	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960 Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1943		

List of Standing Structures

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	Fieldwork Date
01	Overlook Wall	1940	11-03-97
02	Curb, Stone	1940	
03	Picnic Table(s), Stone	1940	Prep by Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 90
04	Fireplace(s), Stone	1940	
05	Rock Garden	1940	Prep for Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit
06	Bridge/Culvert	Ca. 1940	
07	Flagstone Pad	1940	

NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table

Additional standing structures not previously noted: stone stairway (buried during TH 100 reconstruction; V-shaped retaining wall (also buried); and stone refuse container. See <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/roadsides/historic/files/wayrep-suppl.pdf> for additional information.

Final Report	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)
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■ BRIEF

Graeser Park, also known as Robbinsdale Rock Garden Roadside Parking Area, is located on the northwestern side of T.H. 100 between West Broadway Avenue (Co. Rd. 8) and T.H. 52 (now CSAH 81) in Robbinsdale. The park is located on the western side of the intersection of T.H. 100 and T.H. 52 (CSAH 81).

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Overlook Wall. Built 1940 by the WPA. The largest feature on the site is a stone overlook wall that faces southeast. The wall is built of tan, random ashlar, roughly-cut limestone. It is 18" thick and varies in height with the terrain. The wall is anchored at intervals by stone piers that have limestone slab caps (the wall itself has no cap). The wall has a basically symmetrical design with a 14'-wide curving lookout bay located at the wall's midpoint. The bay is paved with flagstone, creating a terrace. There are three 6'-wide sets of limestone steps that lead into the picnic areas from the wall. (The centermost set of stairs is missing the bottom step.) The inner side of the wall is lined with a 6'-wide walkway that is paved with asphalt (it was probably originally gravel). The wall is in poor condition with missing stones, cracked stones, and mortar work that needs repair.

Stone Picnic Tables. Built 1940 by the WPA. The site has 10 sets of stone picnic tables. In the picnic area south of the overlook wall are seven sets. Two sets stand in the picnic area east of the wall. One picnic table set stands south of the rock garden in the open grassy area very close to T.H. 100 on the edge of the site. Each set sits on a rectangle of flagstone. There are several (at least 10-12) additional flagstone pads visible that once held picnic tables. The tables and benches are built of tan, roughly-cut limestone, most of which is coursed. The stones were carefully chosen and cut -- some are pure triangles.

The tables are in two styles: Four of the picnic tables are square, with the table top supported by a cruciform shape. These tables have four benches. The seat of each is supported by two stone block pedestals. Five of the picnic tables are rectangular in shape, with two stone benches that are each supported by three stone blocks. The table tops and seats are simple slabs that have rockfaced edges. The picnic tables are in poor condition. Most are missing at least one bench.

Stone Fireplace. Built 1940 by the WPA. The focal point of the picnic area south of the overlook wall is a beehive-shaped picnic fireplace. It is built of tan, coursed ashlar, rockfaced limestone. It has dark red mortar joints that contrast with the light-colored stone. The fireplace has a 23' perimeter, is about 10' tall, and rests on a circular flagstone pad. It has three rounded-arched fire openings with metal cooking grates and brick-lined fireboxes. Between the openings are small limestone ledges (on which to set hamburger buns!). The structure is in poor condition. It is missing one ledge, several stones are missing, a few metal grates are missing, the flagstone pad is breaking up, and mortar repair is needed.

Stone Curbing. Built 1940 by the WPA. Tan limestone curbing runs along the length of the southeastern side of the parking area in front of the overlook wall.

Rock Garden. Built 1940 by the WPA. Near the southern end of the site is a rock garden that is almost hidden by overgrown brush. It is built of mortared tan limestone rubble.

There are 12 flagstone steps leading into it with side railings of small mortared rocks. The garden's curving paths are paved with flagstone, with a few limestone steps here and there. The paths wind around naturalistic mounds of stone. Along the curving path are four small 8'-wide niches, each of which shelters a small bench of striated limestone. (The benches are 2' wide, 8' long, and 18" tall with a backrest that is 2' tall.) Near the center of the garden are two oval-shaped ponds (about 3' deep) with poured concrete bottoms. One of the ponds has a stone cone-shaped fountain in the center, and the other has a waterfall along one side. The garden is now overgrown, but appears in early photographs to be only lightly planted with trees and planted with many varieties of water plants, etc. Flowers and plants surviving in the garden include day lilies and other perennials. The garden is surrounded by mature evergreens and mature ash and deciduous shrubs.

Stone Culvert. Built circa 1940 by the WPA. Near the southern edge of the site on the edge of the T.H. 100 shoulder is a low culvert built of coursed limestone that has a circular iron culvert running through it. (Only the northern end of the culvert was examined.) The culvert is located about 150' north of Bridge 5885 which carries Broadway Ave. over T.H. 100. (There are similar limestone slabs mortared onto the inslope under the bridge.)

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The park is basically a triangular-shaped parcel with a narrow section of land extending several feet to the north. The park is entered on the western side from Broadway Avenue W., or on the northern side from a drive that leaves the corner of Lakeland Ave. N. and 44 1/2 Ave. N. (This northern drive is lined with ten wooden posts in poor condition.) The drive within the park is paved with asphalt and the southeastern side of the drive has stone curbing. There are three clusters of picnic tables: one east of the overlook wall, one set southeast of the wall, and one set very close to T.H. 100 in the large grassy open area at the southern edge of the site. Overgrown gravel paths wind through the picnic areas. Bridge 5523 and Bridge 5885 (both built in 1940), which carry the Great Northern RR tracks and Broadway Ave. over T.H. 100, are visible to the southwest, as is the landscaping at the intersection of T.H. 100 and Broadway Ave.

The Broadway Avenue entrance has a small triangular island on which three mature juniper. The area southeast of the overlook wall is planted with 50-60 mature trees, mostly evergreen (e.g., pine, juniper, spruce) and a few birch, maple, elm, etc. A graceful row of mature spruce separate the two picnic areas. The park is screened by dense brush on at least three sides including woody shrubs such as lilac. Most of the eastern and southeastern portion of the site is planted with grass. There is a large area of overgrown grass between the park and T.H. 100 and T.H. 52. The narrow, northern extension of the site along T.H. 52 is landscaped with Russian olives, etc.

■ SETTING

Graeser Park is located in the northwestern corner of the City of Robbinsdale. It is bounded by West Broadway Avenue (Co. Rd. 8) and the Great Northern Railroad tracks on the southwest, T.H. 52 on the northeast, T.H. 100 on the southeast, and a residential neighborhood on the northwest. The park is located on the western side of the intersection of T.H. 100 and T.H. 52 (CSAH 81).

■ **INTEGRITY**

Alterations

Picnic tables and fireplaces have been removed. The walkway along the inner side of the overlook wall has been paved with asphalt (it was probably originally gravel). Some plantings may have been removed, but in general the landscaping seems fairly intact, although overgrown.

A stone stairway originally led from West Broadway Avenue into the park (see photo in Dombrowsky 1988). It was apparently removed circa 1988 when Broadway Avenue was widened.

In 1975 turning lanes were added to the intersection of T.H. 100 and T.H. 52 (now CSAH 81) and in 1984 ramps at the intersection were realigned, increasing the acreage of the northeastern corner of the park (Meyer et al. 1995:64, 69).

In general, the site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Notes on Condition

The wall is in poor condition with missing stones, cracked stones, one missing step, mortar work that needs repair, and an asphalt walkway that is breaking up. The picnic tables are in poor condition and most are missing at least one bench. The beehive fireplace is in poor condition. It is missing one ledge, several stones are missing, a few metal grates are missing, the flagstone pad is breaking up, and mortar repair is needed. The grass is being mowed and maintained.

■ **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Graeser Park, also known as Robbinsdale Rock Garden Roadside Parking Area, was built in 1940-1941 as part of a 1.24-mile-long roadside development project built in association with the original construction of T.H. 100 (S.P. 2735-03). The project included extensive plantings along the T.H. 100 roadside and the building of two parks with stone structures: Graeser Park and Graeser Park-South, which is located several feet to the south on the other side of Broadway Avenue. Bridge 5523 and Bridge 5885 (both adjacent to the south) were built in 1940. The WPA's construction of T.H. 100 was one of the largest federal relief projects in the state. The planning and construction of T.H. 100 is significant in the history of transportation in the state. (See Statement of Significance and Additional Background Information near the end of this document.)

The park was built by the Work Projects Administration. The Work Projects Administration had been established in 1939 to continue the programs of the Works Progress Administration, which had been working on T.H. 100 since 1936. Both were known as the WPA.

The plans specify that Graeser Park have three stone refuse containers, a stone oven-type fireplace, three stone fireplaces, 18 stone picnic tables, a rock garden with a rock water fountain, a stone concourse, a "Rustic Log Roadside Parking Sign", bituminous sidewalk, a flagstone walk, and 320' of stone curbing. The stone for the park was apparently quarried along the Minnesota River near the Mendota Bridge (Dombrowsky 1988).

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A copy of the title sheet for S.P. 2735-03 that accompanied a planting plan contains the notations "In Cooperation With Work Projects Administration" and "Final Plans Showing Material Placed Construction Div. W.P.A. November 30, 1941."

Graeser Park was originally designed to be approximately six acres, leaving space along the eastern side for a cloverleaf that was never built (Meyer et al. 1995:69). It was dedicated in 1939. It has historically been a popular park for community residents and has actively been used by churches and schools for picnics (Williams 1988).

Graeser Park was named for Minnesota Department of Highways engineer Carl F. Graeser of Robbinsdale -- called the "Father of the Belt Line" -- who was the "individual primarily responsible for the building of T.H. 100" and "developed the concept, promoted funding, and supervised construction" (see Meyer et al. 1995:79 for more information on Graeser).

Graeser Park was designed by A. R. Nichols, who was the Consulting Landscape Architect for the Minnesota Department of Highways during the 1930s through the early 1940s. Nichols designed the landscaping and roadside parks along the entire length of the "Lilac Way" as the original portion of T.H. 100 was called.

The highway department's 1938 *Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development* describes the department's roadside development along T.H. 100:

The Minneapolis Belt Line permits both north and south bound traffic to avoid the congestion of the city. . . . Stopping points have been provided for the travelling public along the Belt Line where they may stop to enjoy the scenery or picnic. These roadside parking areas are equipped with tables, fireplaces, drinking fountains or wells and are situated at strategic points along the Belt Line where right of way widths made possible such a development (*Annual Report 1938*).

Graeser Park is the largest and perhaps the most intact of the five roadside parks along T.H. 100 that were included in this Mn/DOT Historic Roadside Development Structures Inventory. The five parks are listed below as they appear on T.H. 100 from north to south:

Graeser Park
Graeser Park - South
Blazer Park
Lilac Park
St. Louis Park Roadside Parking Area

At least two other parks along T.H. 100 have been demolished:

Excelsior Blvd Roadside Parking Area (T.H. 100 at Excelsior Blvd)
Glenwood Avenue Roadside Parking Area (T.H. 100 at Glenwood Ave.)

This inventory also includes two other properties along T.H. 100:

T.H. 100 Culvert (Bridge 5442)
T.H. 100 and T.H. 55 Retaining Walls

See Additional Background Information below for more information.

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

A series of Section 106 reviews was begun in 1993 in association with the proposed reconstruction of T.H. 100 (SHPO 93-0130, 94-3607, and 98-0306). A portion of T.H. 100 has been determined by the Minnesota Historical Society to be eligible for the National Register as the Lilac Way Historic District. The eligible district includes the roadway itself, as well as bridges, roadside landscaping features, and roadside parks. Survey and evaluation of the segment of T.H. 100 between T.H. 7 (on the south) and 50th Ave. N. (on the north) was conducted in 1994-1997, in part pursuant to a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the FHWA, the SHPO, the ACHP, and the SHPO that was signed in 1997.

The 1997 MOA stipulated the following: For the northern segment of the project area (between Glenwood Ave. N. and 50th Ave. N.)--photo documentation of National Register-eligible landscape features and development of a video presentation on the history and significance of T.H. 100. For the southern segment of the project area (between the Soo Line RR bridge south of Glenwood Ave. N. and W. 27th St.)--an inventory of structures adjacent to T.H. 100 that predate 1947, and photo documentation of National Register-eligible landscape features. At the time of this writing (Spring 1998), the inventory had been completed and work on the other stipulations was underway. The documents that chronicle the Section 106 reviews (filed under SHPO review numbers 93-0130, 94-3607, and 98-0306) contain the MOA, several items of correspondence, and several reports (see primarily reports by Meyer et al. 1995 and Henning 1997).

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Graeser Park was built in 1940-1941 by the WPA and the MHD. The site is one of 23 properties in this inventory that were built by (or suspected to have been built by) the WPA. It is one of more than 60 properties in this inventory that were designed by, or attributed to, A. R. Nichols.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." It is recommended that the property is individually ELIGIBLE meets the following registration requirements:

Important Federal Relief Project. Graeser Park was built as part of one of the state's largest federal relief projects -- the construction of T.H. 100 (the Lilac Way) in 1934-1941. (National Register Criterion A.)

Rare Federal Relief Property Type. This wayside rest is one of only seven sites in this inventory that retain stone picnic tables, one of only two properties that retain stone beehive fireplaces, and one of only two that have elaborate rock gardens. (National Register Criterion A.)

Significant to the History of Roadside Development. Graeser Park was built as part of the "Lilac Way," an extensive highway landscaping project that was one of the Roadside Development Division's largest, most well-publicized, and most visible, single projects. Designed by MHD Consulting Landscape Architect A. R. Nichols, the Lilac Way's landscaping represents the Division's first large-scale use of flowering shrubs on highway roadsides, and includes a large, coordinated collection of Rustic style roadside parks, bridges, culverts, and retaining

walls that were designed to both serve the traveling public and to soften the view of the new highway from surrounding suburban areas. (National Register Criterion A.)

Furthermore, Graeser Park is among the 68 Depression-era properties in the inventory that represent the MHD's first large-scale effort to construct roadside development facilities in the state. It is important as an example of the work of the WPA in partnership with the MHD. Together, the MHD and various New Deal agencies like the WPA built a number of distinctive and well-constructed public facilities that met the objectives of roadside development while providing essential work and job training to the nation's unemployed. (National Register Criterion A.)

Significant to Transportation History. Graeser Park was built as part of a highway segment important to the history of transportation in the state. T.H. 100, built in 1934-1941, was a highway construction project of regional significance. The highway played a key role in the post-World War II economic development and growth pattern of the western Twin Cities metropolitan area. T.H. 100 is also significant to the history of highway design and engineering in Minnesota and includes such elements as the state's first cloverleaf intersection. (National Register Criterion A.)

Design Significance. Graeser Park is an excellent example of the Roadside Development Division's roadside parks of the 1930s. The site's landscaping and structures are unusually well-preserved examples of the "National Park Service Rustic Style" as applied to a roadside development facility. The site's masonry is well-executed, and the stonework displays the special labor-intensive construction techniques and distinctive use of indigenous materials that characterize both the Rustic style and federal relief construction in Minnesota. Graeser Park was built as part of the Lilac Way, an extensive highway landscaping project that is significant within the roadside development work of prominent landscape architect A. R. Nichols. (National Register Criterion C.)

This property is also located within the Lilac Way Historic District, which the SHPO has already determined is ELIGIBLE for the National Register under the "Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1943" historic context. It is recommended that the Lilac Way Historic District ALSO MEETS the registration requirements of the Roadside Development historic context. Graeser Park is a contributing element within the potential historic district.

This property may also associated with the "Urban Centers, 1870-1940" and "Tourism and Recreation in the Lake Regions, 1870-1945" historic contexts.

■ OTHER COMMENTS

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

T.H. 100 past this site is a busy, multi-laned highway. The parking area and picnic tables are far enough from the roadway and screened by enough trees that the noise and motion are not too intrusive.

The stone picnic tables at this site match those at Lilac Park, Blazer Park, and St. Louis Park R.P.A. (all on T.H. 100), as well as those at Babcock Memorial Park in Elk River. The beehive fireplace matches the fireplace at Lilac Park.

■ REFERENCES

Annual Report of the Accomplishments of Roadside Development Along the Trunk Highways in Minnesota. Minnesota Department of Highways. 1938 and 1939.

"An Appraisal Inventory of Work Done with W.P.A. and Other Federal Relief Funds Through the Functioning of the Department of Highways, State of Minnesota." Unpublished manuscript, 1938.

Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Highways of Minnesota. 1935-1936 (pub. Jan. 1, 1937; 1937-1938 (pub. Mar. 1, 1939); 1942-1944 (pub. Dec. 1, 1944).

Dombrowsky, Peter W. "Graeser Park." A Senior Thesis Project for the Landscape Architecture Program, University of Minnesota. June 13, 1988.

Henning, Barbara J. *Phases I and II Cultural Resource Historical Investigation: T.H. 100 (Lilac Way) S.P. 2743.* Prepared for Minnesota Department of Transportation by Rivercrest Associates, Inc., September 1997.

Lee, Rudolph. "Highway Department Approves 'Lilac Way' West of City." *Minneapolis Journal*, July 28, 1935, pp. 1 and 4.

"Lilac Way Here Soon." *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 30, 1938, p. 2.

Meyer, Scott B., Richard L. Mattson, Andrew J. Schmidt. *Phase I and II Cultural Resources Investigation for Trunk Highway 100 Reconstruction.* Prepared for Minnesota Department of Transportation by The 106 Group Ltd., Feb. 15, 1995.

Williams, Judy. "Robbinsdale Park is Still a Jewel on Highway 100." *North Hennepin Post-New Hope-Golden Valley Post-Plymouth Post*, March 17, 1988.

■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

T.H. 100 -- The Lilac Way

The Lilac Way Historic District has been determined to be eligible for the National Register as the most intact portion of the original western segment of T.H. 100. The eligible district is in two distinct segments, a northern segment (about 4.5 miles long) between Glenwood Avenue in Golden Valley and T.H. 52 (now CSAH 81) in Robbinsdale, and a southern segment (1.4 miles long) in St. Louis Park located between a set of Soo Line tracks south of T.H. 7 and W. 26th St.

Built between 1934-1941, largely by the WPA, Lilac Way (originally 12.5 miles long and running from T.H. 5 in Edina to T.H. 52 in Robbinsdale) was one of the state's largest federal relief projects. Lilac Way was the first section completed of the western leg of T.H. 100. The western leg of T.H. 100 was the first portion of a "Belt Line Highway" that, by 1950, encircled the Twin Cities with 66 miles of roadway. The National Register-eligible segment of Lilac Way is significant to the history of suburban development in the Twin Cities and regional transportation (affecting residential development, economic development, tourism, etc.), and significant as one of the state's largest federal relief projects. It is also significant

for its distinctive roadside landscaping that features wayside parks, hundreds of native lilac bushes, other intact landscaping elements, and as an excellent example of the work of landscape architect Arthur R. Nichols.

T.H. 100 was originally a Public Works Administration (PWA) project funded by the Economic Recovery Act (ERA). When the WPA was created in 1935, T.H. 100 became a WPA project that employed between 2,500 and 3,000 men during that year alone. The project used almost 800 workers daily in 1935 and approximately 1,500 men daily at the peak of construction in 1937 (Meyer et al. 1995:78). The building of T.H. 100, like the Thompson Hill Overlook and T.H. 61 in Duluth (also in this inventory) was a large federal relief construction project that was established close to one of the state's large urban centers where unemployment was high. Some of the workers on the T.H. 100 project were ". . . formerly unemployed masons hired to build the stone benches, grills, and posts in the roadside parks" (Meyer et al. 1995:79).

Historian Barbara J. Henning writes that,

The belt line was intended to provide safe, efficient traffic flow, but also an aesthetically pleasing experience. Features designed to enhance the parkway experience included grade separations at railroad crossings and major intersecting highways, cloverleaf connections, limited access points to the highway, absence of private frontage, two lanes in each direction, a median between them, extensive landscaping, and small parks (Henning 1997:10).

Henning describes landscaping along the segment of T.H. 100 in St. Louis Park:

Landscaping for the highway, including the number and types of vegetation, was extraordinary in scope. A dozen types of evergreen trees totaling 420 plants headed the plant material list for St. Louis Park. There were 37 varieties of deciduous trees, shrubs, and vines. The total number of deciduous plants called for in the plan came to 23,505. The largest units were American elm (1,890) in several sizes, sumac (9,478), three kinds of spirea (2,199), Persian lilac (2,487), and common lilac (5,408). Uncommon examples, perhaps representing in-place plants, included limited numbers of butternut (1), ironwood (5), horse chestnut (1), and Chinese matrimony vine (32) (Henning 1997:12).

The Lilac Way's lilac bushes were an exception to the Roadside Development unit's general policy of not planting flowers or flowering shrubs along highways. The landscaping include more than 7,000 bushes of 12 varieties of lilacs and thousands of other vines and trees ("Lilac Way Here Soon" 1938).

See sources cited under References for more information.