A Storied Trail

There are two kinds of trails in the trail world: destination trails and trails that lead you into and out of an area. In either case, nature or people write their stories into the path, carving out mini-destinations along the way. Natural peninsulas, wooden foot-bridges, statues, and benches—are all landmarks give the hiker reason to pause and to think, “How did this get here?” And for a well-traveled trail like the Chapel Trail in Saint John’s Arboretum, there is no shortage of stories to help complete your journey.

Not far down the Chapel Trail you enter a patch of old-growth pine trees, feeling a dramatic scene change from your start at Lake Sagatagan beach. Pining for the landscape of home (pun intended), the Abbey’s Bavarian monks planted these towering trees in 1896, after a tornado devastated the landscape two years earlier. Each of these seeds—Norway spruce, Scotch pine, and White pine—began their stories in the Abbey’s own nursery after surviving their journey by ship across the Atlantic. Connecting us to the early history of the Abbey, you can still see the planted rows when you look close as you hike past.

Further down the trail, the pine trees shade a stone statue of a Native American woman looking over the lake. This statue of Kateri Tekakwitha was carved in honor of the first Native American saint. A St. Olaf pastor recovered the statue from its original church, which had burned down, and it has been greeting generations of visitors on the Chapel Trail ever since.

On natural peninsulas, dead-end footpaths mark diversions from the trail that more than one hiker found worth making: the more distinct or eroded the path, the more visitors. In one such location, you can now stop to rest on granite benches or descend to the lake on a stone staircase installed in 2009 by the Saint John’s Summer Initiative crew. The installation was in direct response to both the hiker’s natural inclination to get closer to the lake and the severe erosion that followed.

Erosion tells us how walkers, runners, and rains slowly change the trail’s shape and size. Offering an open view of Lake Sagatagan, a wooden footbridge invites me to sit for a moment and dip my feet into the water. Even though these wood planks transition smoothly from the dirt, they were built in response to erosion and changes in water levels. In other words, the bridge tells the story of where the trail itself was at risk of disappearing into Lake Sagatagan and becoming a dead-end trail. Constructed in 2009 as well, this floating bridge brought the path above water and returned the Chapel Trail to its destination trail status.

About 1.5 miles into your hike you finally reach the Stella Maris Chapel. Constructed on what was once an actual island (Lake Sagatagan’s water level was higher in the past), the chapel has had a storied existence. Originally built in 1872, it survived the 1894 tornado, but burned down in 1903 after being Chapel, continued on page 2

Eleanor Gray
Getting to the Chapel was a social outing. “You can imagine ladies dressed in long-sleeved, full-length habiliments with great hats to shield them from getting an unladylike tan.”

Chapel, continued from page 1

struck by lightning. After eleven years as just a cement foundation, the Stella Maris Chapel was rebuilt by young monks with concrete blocks and white stones. A stolen cornerstone and crumbling cement prompted another set of repairs in 1943, a new roof and paint coat followed in 1989. More recently, in 2007, the chapel was renovated with new stucco walls and a more finished interior.

Although hiking the Chapel Trail is now the most popular way to reach the chapel, that wasn’t always the case. According to Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, OSB, nineteenth century accounts show that a trek by boat was once the norm. He explained that steamboats often went on excursions around the lake and there was even a steam launch on the shore. Getting to the Chapel was a social outing. “You can imagine ladies dressed in long-sleeved, full-length habiliments with great hats to shield them from getting an unladylike tan,” Father Hilary explained. Travel by boat is once again an easy option, although you now must provide your own “steam.” A dock at the Chapel provides easy access for people paddling by kayak or canoe.

Reaching the Chapel might signal the hike’s destination peak and the return back to the campus means following an already traveled path. But Abbey Land manager Tom Kroll finds that some hikers find a “back way” from the Chapel. The most obvious route used to be across a temporary construction bridge south of the Chapel. With that bridge gone and the water levels up, there is now very little chance of taking that route with dry feet. But there are still several ways to connect with the Lake Hilary Trail and your next adventure—back to campus or deeper into the woods.

Not just a destination, the Stella Maris Chapel is another story rich in both human and natural narratives along the Chapel Trail. And for this hiker, tripping on exposed roots, stopping on the footbridge, and touching the Chapel’s stucco side all bring me closer to this landscape’s past, present, and future.

Eleanor Gray is a student office assistant at the Arboretum. A favorite task for a student employee? Going for a walk in the woods in May to do research, especially when more and more research is necessary. Again. And again. And again. Just to get everything right, of course.

Thousands of footsteps have stepped over and around the exposed roots and loose stones that are prevalent along the Chapel Trail, inviting us to pay attention to even the most gradual changes along the way.
A Loop for Kids of All Ages

Emily Reimer

Ask the Arboretum staff about the Boardwalk Loop and you’re almost certain to hear about the kids. More than 8,000 preK-12 students explore the loop each year and Arboretum employees’ footsteps mark it scores of times as well. Hiking the same trail so often (sometimes several times a day!) might sound a bit tedious. But even though the trail is the same, the experience is new every time.

You can connect to the Boardwalk Loop from other trails but the kiosk in the prairie marks the beginning for most. Heading south from the kiosk, the fixed boardwalk takes you across the wetland, surrounded by wildlife. Red-winged blackbirds swoop and dip, landing on the top of the wetland grasses with perfect balance. Swallows skirt through the vegetation, providing a professional aerial show. Cattails sway with the wind, creating a whistling that accompanies you as you step off the boardwalk and enter the forest.

Continuing south brings you into the oak savannah where you can take in the view of the restored wetland. But heading east instead will lead toward a hilly haven of mixed deciduous and coniferous forest. Looking for bugs under logs or finding a salamander moving about is a highlight here. We often get to watch students as they overcome their fears of holding a caterpillar, or touching a frog in this unique experience outdoors.

Finally the trail moves downhill toward the floating boardwalk, passing ferns, mushrooms, and mosses along the way. Floating in the middle of the restored wetland, it is surrounded by open water. Many days Trumpeter swans or Mallard ducks can be seen swimming by. Dragonflies zoom in front of and around you. Water laps against the wood, and duckweed floats aimlessly on both sides, creating a layer of thick green at the surface of the water. Observing students dipping nets into the water and feeling the sway of the boardwalk against our feet, it is no surprise that this area is a kid favorite!

A small stand of tamaracks and conifers shelters you with shade and cooler air as you step off the boardwalk. Speckled along the trail are old pinecones, remnants of past attempts at new life. Creating a quiet transition, the conifers usher the trail into prairie.

At first glance the prairie has an understated persona compared to the wetland and forest. Prairie grasses shed pods and seeds of all sizes, creating many textures and surfaces to consider by touch. Monochromatic colors seem to dominate the landscape, but pausing for a closer look reveals eclectic spurts of bright colors of the prairie flowers.

The prairie’s appeal to the senses gives younger students the chance to make a prairie rainbow by collecting different colored objects from the prairie and placing them onto the path like a rainbow. Stepping back, everyone can see all of the colors present in this “mono-colored” prairie. It is a tangible reminder that in nature there is always more than meets the eye!

Back on the Loop the grasses hum as the waves of wind flow by and the plants chirp as various creatures move through them. In these tall prairie grasses, older students enjoy sweeping for insects, while the younger ones find excitement in “getting lost” out there. Younger students may only take a few hesitant steps out into the prairie, but once they begin it’s challenging to keep their bobbing heads in sight!

The prairie leads the trail back to the kiosk, exactly where it started. Students are often surprised at this and cannot believe that they just walked around in a huge circle, having visited so many places.

The Boardwalk Loop knows the feet of many people throughout the seasons. To each the trail feels different. A learning experience for some, a teaching experience for others, and often a spiritual experience for both, the trail captures the importance of nature for all of us.

Emily Reimer is a student naturalist at the Arboretum. She never gets tired of traveling the Boardwalk Loop, with or without a group of students.

In midsummer wetland plants fill in around the fixed boardwalk. The echoes of thousands of footsteps reverberate throughout this 1.5 mile loop through wetland, forest, and prairie each year.
Discover something new on your next trip out to the Arboretum, even in your favorite places. Pictured from left to right: Steinbach Creek, the Footbridge, the view from Hole 9, and beaver activity along Stumpf Lake. Photos by Katelynne Delfs.

Katelynne Delfs

There is always something new to see in the Arboretum, even when you find yourself drawn time and again to your most favorite sites. Whether you have never been to the Arboretum or you consider yourself an Arboretum expert, I hope to get you out to explore some highlights.

The Tallest Tree
If you’ve never been out to the Sugar Shack, summer might not seem like the right time. We aren’t making any maple syrup and you can’t even get inside to look at the evaporator. What you may not know is that from the shack, you can see the tallest tree in the Arboretum—a cottonwood. If you look a little south of the athletic fields, you can see its branches and leaves towering over the other deciduous trees in the canopy. From the Sugar Shack you can also connect with the Logging Road and Lake Hilary Trail. Hiking into the Sugar Bush, you can find massive logs in tidy stacks and fenced in areas protecting oak saplings from hungry deer.

Footbridge
The footbridge over I-94 was built in 1976 and is the fastest and shortest way to get from Saint John’s campus to the Lake Wobegon Trail. As much a walk through history as one through nature, while hiking to and across the footbridge you will be surrounded by old trails that were used by horses before the prevalence of cars. Go deep in your historical journey, let the sounds of the highway melt away, and imagine what it would have been like entering and exiting Saint John’s from here.

Watab Picnic Grounds
This area is tucked between Stumpf Lake and Fruit Farm Road. If you feel like roasting marshmallows and telling ghost stories, you can check the Arboretum website for information on how to host a bonfire here. My favorite tree in this area resembles a giant ladder; its branches start low to the ground and continue for almost 40 feet high. There’s plenty of open space for throwing a football around and places to sit and have a meal in the shade (please don’t leave trash behind!).

Abbey Energy
If you are interested in technology or sustainability, you must visit the Abbey Energy solar field. Although a contrast to the natural spaces that people typically picture when they think of the Arboretum, the solar field is equally aligned with the Benedictine tradition of stewardship. One of the largest solar projects in Minnesota, Saint John’s Abbey broke ground for this sea of dark, reflective panels in 2009. If you stay long enough, you may notice the panels rotate from east to west. The panels “track” the sun in order to be most efficient and they produce enough energy each year to power the equivalent of 65 homes.

Steinbach Creek
Head north and east from the solar field and you can hike into arguably the most charming spot in the Arboretum. Before I knew where it was, I got the same description from multiple people: “It’s just…the cutest.” Tucked behind the High Gemini prairie, the creek connects West Gemini Lake with a large wetland west of the solar field. There’s a little bridge and plenty of boulders to sit on near the edge of the soothing
Choose Your Own Adventure

With 2,830 acres to explore, the highlights are endless. Maybe you have a spot you like that takes you off the beaten path. Maybe you have a place that connects you to a memory—who you were with or what you were doing—rather than a particular landmark. Maybe you're looking for an adventure as you make your way down trails new and old.

Consider this a new summer checklist (hopefully a little more manageable than lawn work or cleaning out the garage). Challenge yourself to discover something new. And tell us about your favorites along the way.

Katelynne Delfs is a student naturalist at the Arboretum. If Katelynne ever disappears during the day, we now have a good list of places we might find her enjoying the summer sun!

Need help finding your way? Trail maps are available at the Arboretum offices and on our website.

water. Easy to find from Flynnstown, it might be a good spot for a relaxing lunch break. And if you get caught in overflow parking for a Johnnie football game, you can cross the creek for a shorter and more charming route to the game than walking along the county road.

**Beavers on Stumpf Lake**
Head out to Stumpf Lake, but don’t cross the bridge to go to the Watab Picnic Grounds. Instead, take the trail to the left to get to a peninsula on the southwestern side of the lake (also a great place for a picnic!). Make sure you follow the shoreline, because if you continue south on the trail, you’ll come to a bog instead. It’s a very understated and unnamed trail, but here you will find plenty of signs of beaver activity. There are chewed trees and an old beaver lodge close to the water.

**Oak Savannah**
Oak savannah once existed across millions of acres of Minnesota landscape. Less than 0.1% oak savannah remains, making it one of Minnesota’s most endangered plant communities. Existing in the transition zone between forest and prairie, you can find a small oak savannah restoration just north of East Gemini Lake. Only a short walk from the prairie kiosk across the fixed boardwalk, enter an area with towering Bur oaks and an understory of prairie grasses and flowers. There’s an unexpected rope swing hanging from an oak where you can contemplate the beautiful views of the wetlands and prairie. A summer bonus: you won’t be interrupted by field trips of first graders coming through and scaring away all the wildlife!

**Hole 9**
Even if you didn’t know Saint John’s had a disc golf course or what disc golf is, you can still enjoy this view. The course starts near the gate at the top of the hill leading to the athletic fields. Follow the granite slabs around the course (whether you bring a disc with you or not!). Near hole six and seven, there’s a bench to take a break. The ninth hole is my favorite because when you come out of the woods near the base of the sledding hill, you’re surrounded by daisies this time of year and you can enjoy a beautiful view of East Gemini Lake.
Summers at the Arboretum are a great time for relaxation and exploration, but for me this summer marks a time for transition. I have been a student naturalist at the Arboretum for the last two years and in my last week here I find myself at a summit.

For four years I have been anchored in environmental studies and peace studies. Environmental studies has helped me find ways to incorporate the natural world into every aspect of my life. In peace studies I was shown the hope that so many have for the world’s future despite its seemingly bleak present. Channeling those lessons into my work at the Arboretum was an easy fit, as I spent much of my time teaching about the natural world to our future. Connecting youth to their community and landscape through plants and insects, rocks and water quality, maple syrup and worms, has given me invaluable insight into my studies beyond anything I received in the classroom.

After graduation I was given the unique opportunity to work as a full-time naturalist at the Arboretum. Since January, I am proud to say I have made a difference in the educations of more than 4,000 students ranging from preschool to adult.

My experience at Saint John’s Arboretum will continue to shape my future and will always be a part of my journey that gives me a great sense of pride. I have been careening, over the last four years, on an uphill slope of academics, networking, and building career skills to find myself at an apex with no inclination of what will come next. It is as though I’ve followed a trail to a mountain top, arriving at midnight. I know that there are more mountains and their summits within range but it is still too dark to make them out on the horizon.

A giant thank-you to the Arboretum environmental education fellow, James Juip, who completed his year with us in May. Teaching thousands of kids looks easy when the teacher is as passionate and energizing as James (it helps to have the heart of a big kid, too!).

A warm farewell to Tiffany Miley. A gift to the Arboretum while other staff were on leave, Tiffany jumped into her role landing squarely on both feet. From preK-12 classes to events, to office management, she deftly kept the chaos at bay, and we are grateful.
Wildflower walk in the prairie led by Arboretum staff.

Demonstration and wonderful meal provided by Larry and Johanna Davis. Learn how to make amazing food with a Dutch oven AND sample the results. While the food is cooking, enjoy a wildflower walk in the prairie led by Arboretum staff.

Back by popular demand is our Dutch oven cooking demonstration and wonderful meal provided by Larry and Johanna Davis. Learn how to make amazing food with a Dutch oven AND sample the results. While the food is cooking, enjoy a wildflower walk in the prairie led by Arboretum staff.

Project WET, WILD, and MinnAqua Summer Institute

For Grades 7-12 Educators

Register by June 29

$125 per person

For classroom teachers, naturalists, scout and youth group leaders, or anyone who educates K-12 students, this institute is designed to familiarize you with MN Projects WET, WILD, and MinnAqua. Receive hands-on, interactive activities for middle and high school students. Included in the workshop fee: 24 CEUs, lunch all 3 days, activity guides, on-site field trips, and other supplementary teaching resources. Registration form is available on the Arboretum and MN DNR websites.

Leave No Trace Campout

Fri-Sat, July 20-21

$5 per person

Includes dinner, campfire snacks, drinks, and breakfast.

Join us for a night under the stars as we not only enjoy the spirit and fun of “roughin’ it,” but also learn how to minimize our impact on our favorite natural areas using the ethics and principles of Leave no Trace (LNT). Taught by a certified LNT educator, the overnight campout will include demonstrations, backcountry cooking, campfires, songs, and more! All are welcome, any necessary gear can be supplied, and no prior camping experience is required!

Teaching Outside the Box

Tuesday, July 31

$10 per person

Lunch included

Preregistration required.

K-12 teachers and administrators are invited to a 1-day workshop at the Arboretum. Presented by the MN Department of Education, the workshop is designed for those who are NEW to integrating environmental and outdoor education in the K-12 classroom. Contact Sarah Gainey for more information about how to register: 320-363-3133, sgainey@csbsju.edu. Limited to 30.

Summer Student Staff:

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Douglas Welch

Arboretum Advisory Council:

Terri Barreiro
John Benschoter
Mike Connolly
Scott Daninger
Kari Dresow
Emily Franklin
John Geissler
Lew Grobe, OSB

To volunteer, register, or get more information about Arboretum events, please call (320) 363-3163 or email arbotetum@csbsju.edu. Find us on the web at www.csbsju.edu/arboretum.
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Our Mission
- Preserve native plant and wildlife communities of the Arboretum lands
- Provide opportunities for Arboretum lands within the community of the Saint John's Abbey and University
- Model practices of sustainable land use, education and research
- Preserve native plant and wildlife communities of the Arboretum lands
- Make accessible a natural environment that invites spiritual renewal
- Foster the Benedictine tradition of land stewardship, education and environmental education and research
- Celebrate the unique beauty of Saint John's Abbey and University
- Protect and enhance the 2,830 acres of woodland in the 7,830 acres of Saint John's Arboretum

Our Vision
- Saint John's Arboretum celebrates the unique beauty and richness of God's creation in central Minnesota and fosters the Benedictine tradition of land stewardship, education and research
- Saint John's Arboretum encompasses the lakes, prairie, oak savannah, and woodland in the 7,830 acres of Saint John's Abbey and University

Every path leads to discovery.
- Choose your own adventure
- A loop for kids of all ages
- A storied trail

Grab an Arboretum trail map and explore.

As a guest of Saint John's Abbey, please respect the land and enjoy your visit.