


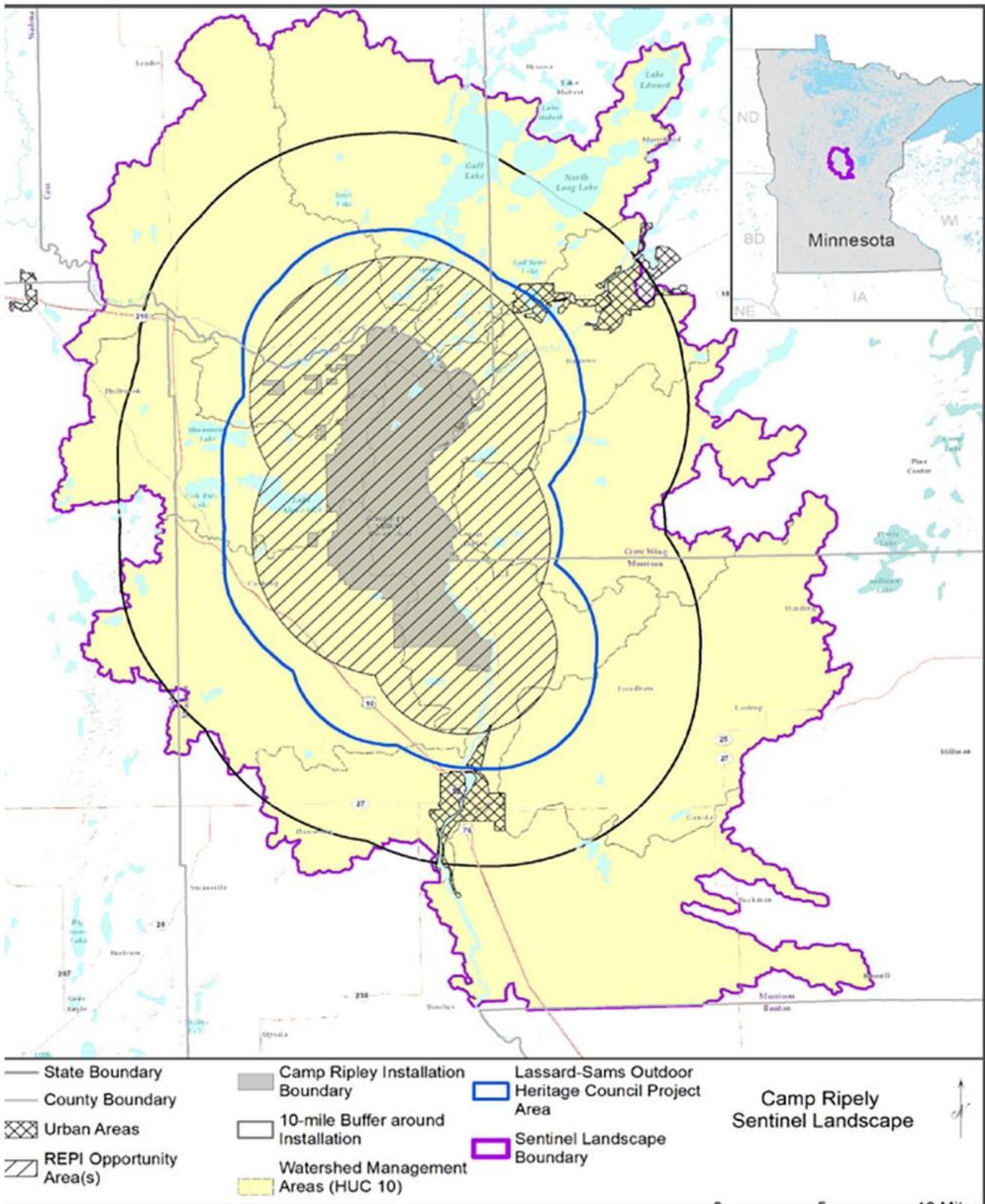
# Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape study aims to identify, locate culturally significant sites

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A new project is looking to unlock and map out the history of the Camp Ripely Sentinel Landscape (CRSL).

At 805,000 acres, the area consists of a 10-mile zone surrounding the Camp Ripley military installation. First recognized in 2015, the purpose of the landscape is to combine conservation easements with sustainable management practices to protect Camp Ripley's mission and enhance natural resources in the region.

On April 1, Sylvan Township in Cass County awarded a contract to Nienow Cultural Consultants, LLC, of St. Paul, to lead the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Cultural Literature Review and Report. The goal of the project is to more fully understand and appreciate the cultural elements which make up the CRSL area to foster better awareness, interpretation and protection of the cultural sites within the CRSL.

"This part of the state is incredibly culturally rich," said Todd Holman, CRSL coordinator and Nature Conservancy Program director. "That goes back to when the last glaciers left the area 10,000 years ago."

Jeremy Nienow, the project manager and principal investigator, and his team will spend the next several months gathering cultural information about the CRSL. This includes archaeological sites, areas of cultural significance to Native American populations, European settlers during frontier days all the way up to places of interest in the mid-20th century.

The work will be done by exploring known archaeological sites and historic standing structures, visiting with area landowners and residents and visiting and studying at historical societies throughout the CRSL — which includes land in Morrison, Cass, Crow Wing and Todd counties.

"What is currently on the landscape is the driving question of a literature review and report," Nienow said. "We are assembling all of the work that has already been done in the area. ... All of that information creates a large understanding of the cultural resources that are present within that area."

As a result of the study, all of the information Nienow and his team gathers will be built into a Geographical Information System (GIS) database. This will allow designated planners to look at an interactive map to find the locational information on identified sites. This will aid in future development within the CRSL and conservation of culturally significant areas.

It will also be the starting point for deeper studies. Throughout the process, Nienow and his team will identify "Alpha sites," or those which warrant further archaeological examination or historical fact-finding.

"We can identify where the places may be that should be developed first, or which ones should not be developed, when you're looking at expansion," Nienow said. "Maybe if there's a culturally significant site, developers can see where that is and not disturb the site. This has huge resource potential."

One specific topic he said is already being studied is the area's one-room school houses. Each township used to have a section set aside for a schoolhouse. Over the years, as schools have consolidated, many of these buildings have been converted for different use, moved or even torn down. Others remain standing.

Nienow said they will be marked as Alpha sites, and further examination will allow the history of that area during that time period to come into much clearer focus.

In the years since the CRSL was recognized, Holman said much attention has been paid to the natural resources within the area — such as the many river confluences within it. This project, which is being funded by a \$130,000 grant to Sylvan Township from the Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant program, via the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund administered by the Minnesota Historical Society, will allow further study of the area's cultural resources. Holman said those, though sometimes overlooked, are equally as important as the natural makeup when studying the history of a landscape.

“It adds value and understanding — context to where we live,” he said.

Some of the culturally significant sites which are already known in the area, Holman said, include several Native American burial mounds throughout the CRSL area. He said there are sites which are sacred to tribal communities, where travel routes once existed, along with important prayer and spiritual sites.

The land was home, at different points in history, to both the Dakota and Ojibwe tribes.

By 1848, when Fort Ripley was first established and Minnesota was still 10 years away from statehood, ox cart trails existed where European settlers traveled west. The area was used during the fur trade, and later during the timber trade.

“This is an opportunity for us to call attention to those sites, and to protect those sites,” Holman said. “All of them changed the landscape and are an important part of the history of the area.”

Holman said Nienow and his team will give an update on their findings at Camp Ripley's open house, which is scheduled for Sept. 19. They hope to release the summarization of their findings by spring 2022.

Anyone who has information about the project area is encouraged to contact Nienow at [jeremy.nienow@gmail.com](mailto:jeremy.nienow@gmail.com).

“We have a very diverse team of individuals working on this project,” Nienow said. “We're honored to have gotten it.

“We’re trying to cover as many bases as possible,” he added. “This is one of the largest projects I have ever worked on. It’s just a really cool opportunity, and we’re really happy to be doing it.”