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## **Farmhouses In Carver County**



### **Resources Worthy of Preservation**

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## Farmhouses in Carver County

### History of Chaska and Carver Brick Farmhouses

#### Introduction

Chaska brick is a distinctive cream-colored brick made in Carver County, Minnesota. While the brick industry was concentrated in the City of Chaska, some of the early bricks were also fabricated in nearby towns such as Carver and, perhaps, on early farmsteads. Regardless of their genesis in the country, the warm-hued cream-to-buff-to-golden-hued brick has long been collectively known as Chaska brick. And for just as long, Carver County residents have appreciated its high quality, fine appearance, and durability.

Chaska brick farmhouses are distinctive and worthy of preservation. Some of them may qualify for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This booklet contains information on the historical development of Chaska brick farmhouses, proper techniques for the care of brick and mortar, and the National Register nomination process. Sources for additional information on these topics are also included. As part of an effort to protect the state's historic resources, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) asked Barbara J. Henning, an architectural historian, to prepare this booklet. The sentiments expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of Mn/DOT.



#### Three Variables

The use of cream-colored Chaska brick shaped the historic identity and landscape of Carver County. Three factors resulted in the construction of Chaska brick farmhouses, smoke houses, barns, churches, and schools in the countryside. First, the presence of a rich vein of suitable clay prompted an early and successful brick industry in Chaska and Carver dating from the 1850's. Second, Carver County lay in the Big Woods in Minnesota. The Big Woods was an area covered with hardwoods, not exclusively prairie or pines. By clearing their land of hardwood, farmers both obtained land for farming and had a valuable commodity to trade or bargain for, fire wood. The Chaska brick yards required large amounts of wood to fire the brick. Farmers hauled in their wood to the brickyards and returned with building brick. The third factor that shaped this historic identity of Carver County was the composition of the rural population.

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## The Heritage of Chaska and Carver Brick

These immigrants from northern Europe (Germany and Scandinavia) sought brick as a building material, having come from a region where brick was preferred.

### **Natural Characteristics**

The brick industry was established early in the history of Carver County. The excellent and deep deposits of alluvial clay along or near the Minnesota River, at the southern boundary of the county, provided an ample supply of the basic brick-making material. The clay deposits were considered inexhaustible in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a not unreasonable conclusion given their depth of between 20 and 40 feet. By 1882, the clay bed at Chaska had already been worked to a depth of 45 feet. The principal reason brick burns to a cream color is the presence of a large amount of carbonate of lime. Early brick making involved wood as the fuel for scoveor beehive-kilns. It is said that this method resulted in the brick's variable appearance that is not reproducible today using modern brick making techniques.

### **Patterns of Settlement**

With its Minnesota River boundary and location just 20 or so river miles from Fort Snelling, a major center of activities in the Minnesota Territory, Carver County was among the first counties to be established, in 1855.

Much of the initial settlement occurred in new towns along the Minnesota River.

By the 1860's Chaska and Carver had emerged as important riverfront communities, and other settlements in interior Carver County had also been founded. These settlements served the increasing rural agricultural population. Germans, followed by Scandinavians, were the dominant ethnic groups farming in the country. By 1870, more than three-quarters of the country's foreign-born population came from Germany or Scandinavia.

### **Brick making**

Carver County farmers had access to commercial brick making operations in Chaska, and Carver as early as 1857. By 1866, Chaska County farmers could choose from no less than four brick yards operating during the brick making season (spring to fall) in Chaska. And they could get a good deal on the brick because they could provide the brick yards with wood fuel harvested from their farms. In the 1860's and 1870's, a number of brickyards were established in and around Chaska, and there were typically at least three or four in operation. Carver County rural residents thus had early and ample opportunity to avail themselves of locally made brick, and a number of the Chaska brick farmhouses in the county date from the 1870s. The Chaska brickyards flourished throughout the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1902, six yards operated in Chaska and employed 250 people.

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## Farmhouses in Carver County

Daily production was said to amount to 3.5 million bricks. However, consolidation set in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1910, Charles and Christian Klein owned two Chaska brickyards and had majority ownership of the other two yards. The Klein operations prospered until the 1930s before closing in 1961.

### Farmers and Brick

Personal preference, availability, and practical considerations seem to have been behind the construction of so many Chaska brick farmhouses in Carver County. Coming from a region where brick was the construction material of choice, German and Swedish-American farmers in Carver County sought brick for their farmhouses. Their preference was not unique in America. German settlers located west of St. Louis, Missouri, felt that brick buildings conveyed higher status and so the material was preferred. One need only look to St. John the Baptist parish in Stearns County, Minnesota to see the German preference for brick. The parish contains 32 red brick farmhouses built between 1883 and 1915.

The northern Europeans who settled in Carver County were familiar with brick, and they regarded its use as a symbol of status and prosperity. Presumably, they also recognized its advantages over wood: fire resistance, low maintenance requirements, and good insulation.

Unlike those who were not in the Big Woods country, they could afford brick by trading it for fuel with the commercial brickyards.

### Chaska Brick Farmhouses

Chaska brick farmhouses embody the distinctive characteristics of a method of construction. The principal features in common are the use of the attractive Chaska brick, restrained ornamentation, and solid, even severe, presentation of basic geometrical forms. Chaska brick farmhouses are cross-wing in form with intersected gabled roofs or they have hipped roofs and a rectangular form. (One known example is gable-sided in configuration.) The farmhouses typically have stone cobble foundations, a simple brick water table, and brick or limestone window sills. Known examples span a date range of 1860's to the 1920's, with a significant number constructed in the 1870's and 1880's. Despite construction dates of more than 125 years ago, many of the farmhouses remain in good condition, testimony to the high degree of workmanship employed.

By far, most known examples are cross-wing in form with one intersecting kitchen wing that is one to one and one-half or two stories while the main or dominant wing has two stories. Most of the cross-wing examples are T-shaped followed by X-shaped, L-shaped, and U-shaped.

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## The Heritage of Chaska Brick

There are eight hipped roofed houses, and one gable-side example. Hipped roof Chaska brick farmhouses tend to be of later construction than many of the cross-wing examples.

Most known examples of Chaska brick farmhouses (42) are of solid brick construction. Thirteen have brick veneer, with one being over logs and another seemingly over solid bricks. Eleven examples received stucco covering over the brick.

Brick window heads are the primary decorative enhancement. Eight variations have been identified based on the arrangement of the headers, the small end of a brick. The most popular arrangement, found on 27 farmhouses, consisted of a single or double row of headers topped by another row that projected slightly over the lower row or rows.



Other window head types are quite simple and include one curved row of headers, a double flush row of headers, three rows of headers not flush with the wall surface, bricks set vertically and flush with the wall, three rows of headers set flush and curving, an arrangement that included a row of bricks set at an angle, and a single straight row of headers.

### Summary

One student of Chaska brick farmhouses, Steve Martens, has waxed eloquent about the qualities of these distinctive buildings that enliven the Carver County countryside. He exhorted one to “drive around...in fall sunlight, noticing the color harmony between Chaska brick farmhouses and the corn stubble which remains in the field...I insist there is an [iridescent] quality (possibly produced by the sand used in molding the surface) of these lime-rich bricks which is an almost perfect match to autumn fields under late afternoon sunlight.” Such a characterization and appreciation of these relics of a bygone era is well warranted. Chaska brick farmhouses display nobility of form and material that continues to please the eye.

## Caring for Chaska and Carver Brick

### Key Points

The most important things to remember when caring for Chaska brick are the following:

- Evaluate carefully; the brick may not require any substantial cleaning or protection.
- Cleaning should always employ the gentlest method possible, such as water cleaning.
- Never, ever sandblast the brick.
- Use the right kind of mortar for tuck pointing, not pre-blended masonry cement.
- Seek guidance.

### Why Clean

A basic first step is to decide why you want to clean the brick. One reason is simply to improve the appearance by removing dirt or other soiling materials, or to remove non-historic paint. Removal of dirt may be necessary to retard deterioration caused by the dirt. Cleaning might also be necessary to provide a clean surface to accurately match repointing materials or patching compounds.

### Be Gentle

In general, water cleaning is the best approach because it is the gentlest method. There are four kinds of water-based cleaning: soaking, pressure water washing, water washing supplemented with non-ionic detergent,

and steam or hot pressurized water cleaning. For details regarding these and other proper preservation methods, see Preservation Brief 1, *Assessing Cleaning and Water-Repellent Treatments for Historic Masonry Buildings* and Preservations Brief 2, *Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Masonry Buildings* from the National Park Service. A copy of these valuable sources (and many others) can be printed directly from [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) web site or they can be ordered.

### Say No to Sandblasting

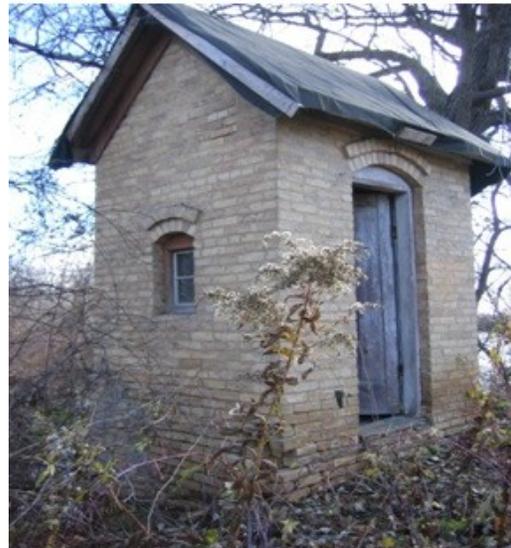
Sandblasting is commonly thought of as a way to clean up old brick, but it is one of the worst things you can do to a building. The damage is so permanent and so unnecessary that refraining from sandblasting is specifically mentioned in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Sandblasting removes the important fired outer "skin" of brick and also damages the mortar. The damage allows water to enter the brick, causing spalling. Over time, the brick deteriorates.

### **The Right Mix**

The selection of proper mortar mixes is just as important to the long-term health of Chaska brick farmhouses as proper cleaning techniques. In general, lime-based mortar should be used rather than modern cement-based mortars when re-pointing brick. The old Chaska brick is much softer than modern brick and requires the more flexible lime-based mortar mix.

### **Help is Out There**

Preservation Brief 2 mentioned above discusses mortar in a 21-page document. Clearly there is much to know. Fortunately, there are experts who can help. A starting place is the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office at the Minnesota Historical Society. See the Sources section for details.



Chaska brick outhouse  
Gehl-Mittlestad property



## The National Register of Historic Places

### Frequently asked questions

*What is the National Register of Historic Places?*

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of properties deemed worthy of preservation. Those listed may be important for their history, architectural history, archeology, engineering, or culture.

*How do I get my property listed?*

Listing is a great honor, one that calls attention to the important historic resources in a community. Thus, specific standards for eligibility and procedures for nominating historic properties have been established. Not all old buildings qualify for the National Register. Properties that have been so changed that they would not be recognizable to their historic occupants usually are not eligible. Each example must be examined individually. The nomination process begins with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office.

*How old does a house have to be before it can be listed?*

Most properties need to be at least 50 years old. Properties under 50 years of age must be exceptionally important and will be considered on an individual basis.

*Does having my property listed limit what I can and cannot do to it?*

While preservationists hope that National Register property owners will care for these significant resources, the fact is a private property owner is free to do anything to his or her National Register property. However, changes which significantly damage the historic appearance of the property could result in delisting from the National Register.

*Can I make changes to my property?*

Historic properties are meant to be used and appreciated, not set apart as museum pieces. Reasonable changes are acceptable. It should be noted, however, that some government programs that give tax breaks for historic properties may have rules and regulations that must be followed.

## Frequently Asked Questions

*My house is in a historic district. How does this affect me?*

There is another instance when some restrictions can be placed on what is done with an old building. Many communities have sought to protect their National Register properties by enacting ordinances with design review. Owners of designated properties -typically in an historic district in a city or town-must receive approval from the local preservation commission before making changes. The design review rules vary widely from broad to very detailed.

*How do I get a copy of the listing for my property?*

You may either contact your local historical society, the SHPO office or contact the National Park Service at: <http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/natreghome.do?searchtype=natreghome>



Guardian Angel Catholic Church  
Chaska

*I own a historic property. It needs work. What is the best way to approach fixing things? Are there grants available to help me?*

Fixing it right the first time is the best way of looking at repairing an historic property. A historic window, for example, must be replaced with the same type of window. The cost in the long run is much cheaper to do it right in the first place.

There are a number of organizations and resources to help decide what to use when doing repair work. In Minnesota, the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota is a great place to start as are the SHPO, local Historic Preservation Commissions, City of Chaska and local historical societies.

The Heritage Preservation Service, <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/index.htm>, is a good place to look for tax incentives. The State of Minnesota also passed tax incentives for historic preservation in 2010. This program may change each year so be sure to check with the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota or the SHPO for the latest news on this program.

## Sources

### **The Multiple Property Documentation Form**

The MPDF Chaska Brick Resources in Carver County, Minnesota is designed to make it easier for owners of Chaska brick farmhouses to nominate their homes to the National Register. The document develops the historic context for this resource and sets up criteria for National Register eligibility that can be applied to all Chaska brick houses, eliminating the need for extensive research on each house as it comes up for nomination.



Chaska brick house in the City of Carver

### **History of Chaska Brick**

An architectural inventory of Chaska brick farmhouses of Carver County, Minnesota was done in 2004. The files are located at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office in St. Paul.

Carver County Historical Society

Chaska Historical Society

*Chaska Weekly Valley News.*

Henning, Barbara J. Chaska Brick Farmhouses in Carver County, Minnesota. Phase III Mitigation Report. 2005. Copies on file with Minnesota Department of Transportation and Minnesota SHPO, Minnesota Historical Society

Martens, Steven C. "Ethnic Traditions and Innovation as Influences on a Rural Midwestern Building Vernacular." Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1988.

Peterson, Fred W. *Building Community, Keeping the Faith. German Catholic Vernacular Architecture in a Rural Minnesota Parish.* St. Paul: MHS Press, 1998.

## Sources

### Caring for Chaska and Carver Brick

[www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org) MN Historical Society

[www.mnpreservation.org](http://www.mnpreservation.org) Preservation Alliance of Minnesota

[www.nationaltrust.org](http://www.nationaltrust.org) National Trust for Historic Preservation

[www.nps.org](http://www.nps.org) National Park Service

NPS Preservation Briefs:

No. 1: *Assessing Cleaning and Water-Repellent Treatments for Historic Masonry Buildings*. Robert C. Mack, FAIA, and Anne E. Grimmer. (1975, revised 2000)

No. 2: *Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Masonry Buildings*. Robert C. Mack, FAIA, and John Speweik. (1976, revised 1998)

No. 6: *Dangers of Abrasive Cleaning to Historic Buildings*. Anne E. Grimmer. (1979)

London, Mark. *Masonry. How to Care for Old and Historic Brick and Stone* Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1988.

Sinvinski, Valerie. "Gentle Blasting." *Old House Journal* Vol. XXIV, No. 4 (July-August 1996): 46-49

Speweik, John P. "Repointing Right: Why Using Modern Mortar Can Damage a Historic House." *Old House Journal*. Vo. XXV, No.4 (July-August 1997): 46-51.

### The National Register of Historic Places

National Park Service National Register Bulletins:

Guidelines for completing National Register of Historic Places Form

How to Apply National Register Criteria for Evaluation

How to Complete the National Register Form

National Register Casebook: Examples of Documentation

Researching a Historic Property

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