

# **The Dowling Community Garden, 1943- 2003: Out of a Marsh and War Comes a Community Garden**

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Done for the Dowling Community Garden 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration, July 12, 2003.  
Updated March 2008

## Pre-settlement History

The land Dowling Community Garden sits upon has been under US Government control since 1805 when Zebulon Pike obtained the land from the Native Americans for the establishment of Fort Snelling. The land remained part of the Fort Snelling Military Reserve until the early 1850's when it was decided that the land was no longer needed for military purposes. Almost exactly 150 years ago in August of 1853, the land was surveyed for the government so that it could be sold to white settlers. By that time, much of the land in the area had already been claimed by settlers who had 'staked their claim'. They were able to formally buy the land from the Government in 1855 for \$1.25 per acre.

As luck would have it, the surveyors established survey lines on 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 38<sup>th</sup> Street, close to the present day garden boundaries on 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Dowling Street. Since settlers wanted to know what the land was like, the surveyors made note of the quality of the land for farming. Along with the field notes that the surveyors made, there was also a map produced which showed some of the major features of the land. One of the prominent features of the land around Dowling was a 5 block long and 4 block wide marsh! As the map in the Appendix shows, about 80% of the present day Dowling Garden was in the marsh except the SW corner of it! Of the marsh the surveyors said "unfit for cultivation"! It is likely that this marsh had little open water and was probably was well on its way to becoming solid land.

## 1855 to 1910

In the late 1850s and early 1860s the land where the Garden sits was in the hand of speculators who eventually were foreclosed upon by St. Anthony banker Richard Martin in 1862 (after a crash in the real estate market due to the Civil War). Since the property was so far from any sort of settlement, roads, or railroads, Richard Martin held onto the property and did not subdivide it into lots. Mr. Martin had a successful career in real estate in Minneapolis and New York where his family was from and he never married. He was handicapped and it was probably for this reason that in 1885 he stipulated in his will that the land he owned along the Mississippi River (which went from present day 38<sup>th</sup> to 44<sup>th</sup> Streets, east of 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue) be turned over to a charitable organization run by the Episcopal Church that would build an orphanage. He died in 1890 but it wasn't until 1900 that the land was finally turned over by his executor to Sheltering Arms who built an orphanage near 44<sup>th</sup> and West River Parkway in 1910 (which is now where Becketwood stands).

## William Eustis and Dowling School

Sheltering Arms set aside the land nearest their building for the use of the orphanage and their intent was to eventually sell the rest of their land to set up an endowment for the orphanage. In 1910 they sold off part of the land between 38<sup>th</sup> and Dowling Streets to a developer who divided the land into lots. This is why Dowling Street exists and the land is not part of the Dowling School site. In March of 1923 Sheltering Arms sold their land between Dowling Street and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to a developer named Arthur Skamser. When they sold the property, Sheltering Arms dictated how much the lots could be sold for and it was clear that this was a valuable piece of real estate. Mr. Skamser proceeded to divide this land into lots and was very close to recording his survey with the County and selling lots (perhaps within days) when he was approached by William Eustis. Mr. Eustis (1847-1928) was a successful Minneapolis lawyer, former mayor of Minneapolis (1891-1893), and developer who had quietly amassed a large sum of money. He was also handicapped (he used crutches) and had been quietly building his fortune which he intended to donate for the benefit of crippled children. Mr. Eustis was able to buy the land from Arthur Skamser in May of 1923 by paying 20% more than Mr. Skamser had paid only 2 months earlier.

Then about 2 weeks after his purchase, William Eustis donated the 21 acres that is now the Dowling School grounds to the Board of Education of Minneapolis with this condition: “The tract of land hereby conveyed is to be used by the Grantee [Board of Education of Minneapolis] as a site devoted exclusively to the physical, intellectual, and moral well-being of crippled children.” The land directly south of the Dowling School grounds (between 40<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets) was also purchased by Mr. Eustis and it was donated at about the same time to the University of Minnesota for use as a recovery hospital for crippled children (which was never built). In addition to the land, Mr. Eustis also donated a large sum of money for the construction of the school for crippled children on the site he donated to the School Board.

The Dowling School for Crippled Children moved to this site and was opened on November 19, 1924 (it had been established in 1920 at a different location). The school was named after Michael Dowling who was a prominent handicapped Minnesotan but did not contribute any money to the school and died in 1921. If it had not been for the shrewd business dealings and foresight of William Eustis the land that Dowling School and the gardens sit, would have houses on it!

### Development as a Victory Garden

The eastern most part of the Dowling School site was used for the School building but a large portion of the site remained open. A 1938 aerial photograph shows the area of the present day garden north of 39<sup>th</sup> Street along 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue as vacant with no trees (it looks rougher than nearby grassy areas so could have had brush and weeds on it). 39<sup>th</sup> Street looks as though it is a dirt road on the Dowling grounds and to the south of that road and along 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue there are piles of dirt and a grid of drainage ditches, indicating that the land was in the process of being drained and filled.

Since the current garden site was once a marsh, fill was brought in make the land useable. It is hard to say when Dowling Garden site was filled in. It probably started around 1920 since 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue was put through in 1920 and many of the nearby houses date from the 1920s. As any

Dowling gardener will tell you, the fill was low grade, mostly rocks and sand. A test dig done in 2002 by the author found about 2 feet of sand and rock fill on top of a dark, black peat soil, remnants of the marsh! The first foot or so of soil has been worked enough that it has some organic material and few rocks but the 2<sup>nd</sup> foot of soil before the peat consisted mostly of small to medium sized rocks and sand.

This was the soil that Rose Pearson and her husband Elof had to deal with when they started a Victory Garden in 1943. In a 2001 interview, Rose says: "A man came over from the university with a breaking plow. They had kind of an open space along 46th Avenue, and they went in there with that plow. I tell you, that was the worst mess. That plow was out of the ground more than it was in the ground, because it was so rocky." Due to limitations on gasoline and rubber during the war, most large victory garden plots were first plowed by horse drawn plows! By 1945, aerial photos show that most of the westerly half of the Dowling School grounds had been turned into gardens and the University land to the south (called the Eustis Gardens) had many gardens on it as well. From the pattern of gardens and written records of the time, it looks as though the Dowling gardens were haphazard and not well organized while the Eustis Gardens were much more formal and well organized. The University of Minnesota (Eustis Gardens) appear to have taken a much more active interest in establishing and promoting Victory Gardens than the Minneapolis School District did (the Dowling gardens).

The Victory Garden Rose and Elof started at Dowling was part of a much larger national effort to encourage home gardens. Home food production was very much a part of the home front which supported the troops overseas. The Victory Garden program got a small start nationwide in 1942 and by 1943 it had become a huge phenomenon. In 1943 the Twin Cities alone had 130,000 gardeners (20 million nationwide) and by 1944 it was estimated that 40% of all fresh vegetables in Minnesota were grown in Victory Gardens. It was not unusual in areas with small yards and a lack of open space (like the area near Dowling) for unused land on school and other public grounds to be opened up for Victory Garden plots. This gingle from a 1942 radio show "Farm and Home Hour" sums up the spirit of the day:

Get out and dig dig dig in the sunshine  
You can make one garden grow  
Every seed you buy will gladly multiply  
Til we've overcome our foe.

Get out and work work work for the nation  
We can keep our country free  
Help the rain above feed the ones we love  
Dig our way to victory.

Plantin' corn – every day  
Plantin' beans – come what may  
Turn the sod – trust in God  
And the earth will show the way.

Get out and dig dig dig in the sunshine

Every heart will feel a glow –  
As we turn the tide we'll be glad we tried  
To make ten million gardens grow.

Another slogan (which even present day gardeners should heed): “Let there be no slackers on the home front – the Victory Garden front.”

After the War, plots were huge and there were only a few gardeners. The average plot measured about 50 by 120 feet--roughly the size of a city lot, and big enough to fit 15 of today's Dowling plots. The early gardeners had grown up on farms and were used to gardening large spaces and knew how to preserve the harvest by canning and drying. According to Rose Pearson, the garden was moved south, off the Dowling property onto the University property, shortly after the War. From aerial photos, it appears that the garden moved to six old Eustis Gardens plots that were along 46th Avenue between the south Dowling property line and present day Coffey Lane. Apparently the soil was better there, not as rocky. It is unclear from aerial photos if the plots at the northwest corner of the school property (SE of 46th Avenue and Dowling Street) were still in use but according to Rose, they were abandoned.

By the late 1950s, the garden moved yet again, back on to the Dowling property along 46th Avenue just south of Dowling Street (which was then only a dirt path). The University had sold the land the garden was on to a developer who divided up the land into lots for houses. Even after the move, the garden wasn't very big with only a single row of large plots along 46th Avenue.

### 1960s to the 1980s

For much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the garden was only north of 39<sup>th</sup> Street and consisted of large plots. Since the plots were so large, there were many fewer gardeners than there are today. With such a small group, there was no garden committee and things were pretty informal. New garden spots were dug up as new people needed them. Water was a real problem with some gardeners even going to Minnehaha Creek to haul back water in 50 gallon barrels! Only those, such as long time gardener Bob Monhardt, who lived right across Dowling Street from the garden, could run a hose to their plots. By the early 1980s the garden had grown to only 15 plots, albeit very large plots which dwarf today's 20X20 foot plots.

For about 10 years starting in the early 1980s, the Dowling School grounds just to the east of the present day gardens were used as part of an horticultural training high school located in a wing of Dowling School. As part of their curriculum, the students installed a number of landscape features and plant nurseries around the school grounds. The area between the north gardens and the Dowling School parking lots was redone to recreate elements of a golf course, complete with a sand trap! Even today its not uncommon to see golfers practicing on the Dowling grounds. The nice asphalt paths on the east edge of the gardens are intended to be golf cart paths, complete with a turn around at the end! The orchard that is on the school grounds is part of students efforts as well. There were two tree nurseries established on the site, the newest being the one directly to the south of the gardens and the oldest being the one to the east of the south

gardens. The intent was to transplant the trees and shrubs in the nursery to schools and other public land around the neighborhood but this never happened and now we have a good sized forest to the east of the gardens and a rapidly growing forest to the south!

### Mid-1980s to the Present

By the early to middle 1980s, Dowling had grown big enough to get its first coordinator, Fred Burke. At this point, many of the original gardeners were reaching an age when a large garden seemed overwhelming and the new people didn't know what to do with so much space. Most people didn't can or preserve their harvest so a smaller plot was more than enough. Demand for garden plots was growing and the waiting list for a plot at the garden had grown to 30 or 40 people. As a result, under Fred's watch the lot-size plots of retiring gardeners were gradually subdivided into smaller ones and the population of Dowling gardeners began to steadily climb.

By the early 1990s when Steve Dosch took over as coordinator, there were approximately 50 plots which had been subdivided from the original 6. At about this time with demand growing for garden plots and fewer and fewer large plots left to subdivide, Steve expanded the garden south of 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Plots were also added to the east of the original north gardens, bringing the total to around 150 by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the mid-1990s, Steve also oversaw the construction of a garden shed between the north and south parts of the garden. Also in the mid 1990s, Dowling finally got water to the north and south gardens. The pipes were run from the school to water stations on the east side of both the north and south gardens, which consisted of 10-20, 55 gallon plastic barrels. Now about 1/3 of the gardeners at Dowling volunteer to help fill those barrels on a regular basis so finally the garden has a reliable source of water. After these accomplishments, Steve stepped down as coordinator in 1995 and Joan Krey became the coordinator, a position she still holds today.

Fall Harvest Potlucks were a tradition for many years at Dowling and were reinstated by coordinator Joan Krey in the past five years. Besides sharing their favorite recipes and harvest, gardeners regale each other with tales of the garden season past. Since 2000 the Potluck was expanded to include all three community gardens in the Longfellow neighborhood. Community spirit is still alive at Dowling with vegetable sharing, recipes and gardening help freely offered to fellow gardeners. Gardeners have long shared their harvest with other gardeners as well as with others in the community. In the past there have been efforts to donate surplus produce to area food shelves and the Danebo nursing home and in 2003 a more formal donation program was started by garden volunteers. Surplus produce is collected twice a week and donated to the charities Loaves and Fishes and Aliveness Project.

In Fall 2000, four raised bed gardens were built by garden volunteers using Longfellow Community Council NRP funds. The beds are approximately 5 by 12 feet and are designed for people in wheelchairs. They are built using non-toxic plastic lumber and the paths around the beds use an innovative porous plastic paver which is filled with wood chips and is approved for wheel chair use. The garden was awarded \$10,000 in Longfellow Community Council NRP funds for improvements to the garden. In the early part of 2001, a landscape designer was hired to create a plan for improvements to the garden which would make it more welcoming to neighbors and pleasant for gardeners. These plans call for improvements to the 39<sup>th</sup> Street

entrance to the garden which create a welcoming entrance and establish amenities such as bike racks and benches for gardeners. In 2003, Dowling Garden volunteers agreed to plant and maintain the vegetable gardens at the historic 1850 Stevens house in Minnehaha Park. This will be an opportunity to establish some heirloom varieties used in the 1850s and demonstrate sustainable gardening practices. During the 1990s the non-profit Sustainable Resources Center helped with liability insurance for the garden and helped Dowling and other gardens in the city prosper. Since 2000 the Dowling Garden has been a member of Minnesota Green, a program of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society which gives free seeds and plants for use in community gardens. Dowling has been able to give out free seeds for garden use at the past three Spring cleanup events.

In the past 5-10 years the garden has become more organized and there is now a formal Garden Committee which meets monthly year round. The Garden Committee is much more active than in the past, helping the coordinator with special projects and everyday management tasks (which have grown considerably in the past few years). There has been a garden newsletter for the past 10 years or so. At first the newsletter came out once a year but now it comes out at least twice a year, in the Spring and Summer. Each newsletter gives gardening tips, event information, and volunteer opportunities. Garden rules have evolved and become somewhat longer due to increased regulations on school lands. In 2000 the garden established a voicemail phone number and post office box, yet another sign of a growing garden. Since early 2001, Dowling has had its own web site, [www.dowlingcommunitygarden.org](http://www.dowlingcommunitygarden.org), which has recipes, pest control information, garden photos, garden rules, and periodically features Dowling gardeners. About 5 years ago some goals were established for the garden which have for the most part been fulfilled over the sixty years of the garden's history:

#### Dowling Community Garden Goals

1. To make available community garden space.
2. Provide a safe environment for gardeners.
3. Build a sense of community.
4. Serve gardeners with special needs, i.e. improve the path system so persons can move easier with carts and provide ADA accessible raised beds.
5. Provide gardeners with the opportunity to grow food, flowers and medicinal plants that give:
  - a. Economic value.
  - b. Safe food, such as no pesticides or herbicides.
  - c. Fun and exercise.
  - d. Education for children.
6. Promote sustainable gardening practices such as organic gardening and on site composting.
7. Provide a place of beauty for the community to enjoy.
8. Gardening and environmental education and outreach to the Dowling Garden, the Dowling parents and children, and the community at large.
9. Provide garden space for the Dowling School children and Dowling Kids.
10. Distribute excess produce to area food shelves.

## Dowling Garden Accomplishments Over 60 Years

- As a World War II Victory Garden, provided fresh produce in support of the war effort.
- Established a system to water garden plots
- Four ADA wheelchair accessible garden plots
- Built a garden shed with tools for gardening
- Garden requires sustainable gardening practices, no herbicides or pesticides
- Web site with lots resources and information
- Awarded \$10,000 in neighborhood NRP money for garden improvements
- Maintain the historic Stevens house gardens in Minnehaha Park.
- Provide garden plots for Dowling school children and Minneapolis Kids
- Sharing of excess produce with Danebo Home, local food shelves and others in need in the community
- Education of gardeners through the newsletter, classes taught by master gardeners and on site consultation by Master Gardeners (Hennepin County Extension Service)
- Oral and written history of the garden
- Awarded grant dollars through the Minnesota Horticultural Society to demonstrate organic gardening practices
- Intergenerational gardening
- Provide opportunities for those at the poverty level and new immigrants to grow food

## References

Information taken from a 2001 Dowling Oral History taken by Monika Bauerlein and Emily Green, the WWII collections at the Minnesota Historical Society, the University of Minnesota Archives, Deeds and Mortgages filed at the Hennepin County Records office, government surveys, and various published articles and books. Specific references are available upon request.

## APPENDIX

Original 1853 Government Survey map showing marsh

1853 marsh mapped out on a current day street map

1938 aerial photo of Dowling site

“War Gardens for Victory” poster

Excerpts from the March 5, 1942 Minneapolis Defense Council newsletter on Victory Gardens