



courtesy of Gary Alan Nelson

William O'Brien State Park

Park Overview



Established in 1947, William O'Brien was the first metro area state park. It's eastern border runs along the St. Croix River, which is a migratory pathway for birds and important habitat for many mammals. The river offers canoeing and kayaking opportunities.

In the 1970s the park expanded westward into the grasslands and forests. Many miles of hiking and skiing trails and camping grounds lie here. The visitor center is named for one of the leaders of Parks & Trails Council, Samuel H. Morgan, who was instrumental in the expansion effort.

Prior to white colonial occupation, Dakota and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) peoples called this area home. Furtraders used the river for transport in the 1600s, followed by lumberjacks in the mid-1800s. The park's namesake comes from a lumber baron who owned the land prior to passing it on to his daughter, Alice. She donated the first 180 acres that formed the nucleus of the park.



Land Projects at a Glance



PROJECTS

8



ACRES PROTECTED

1,076



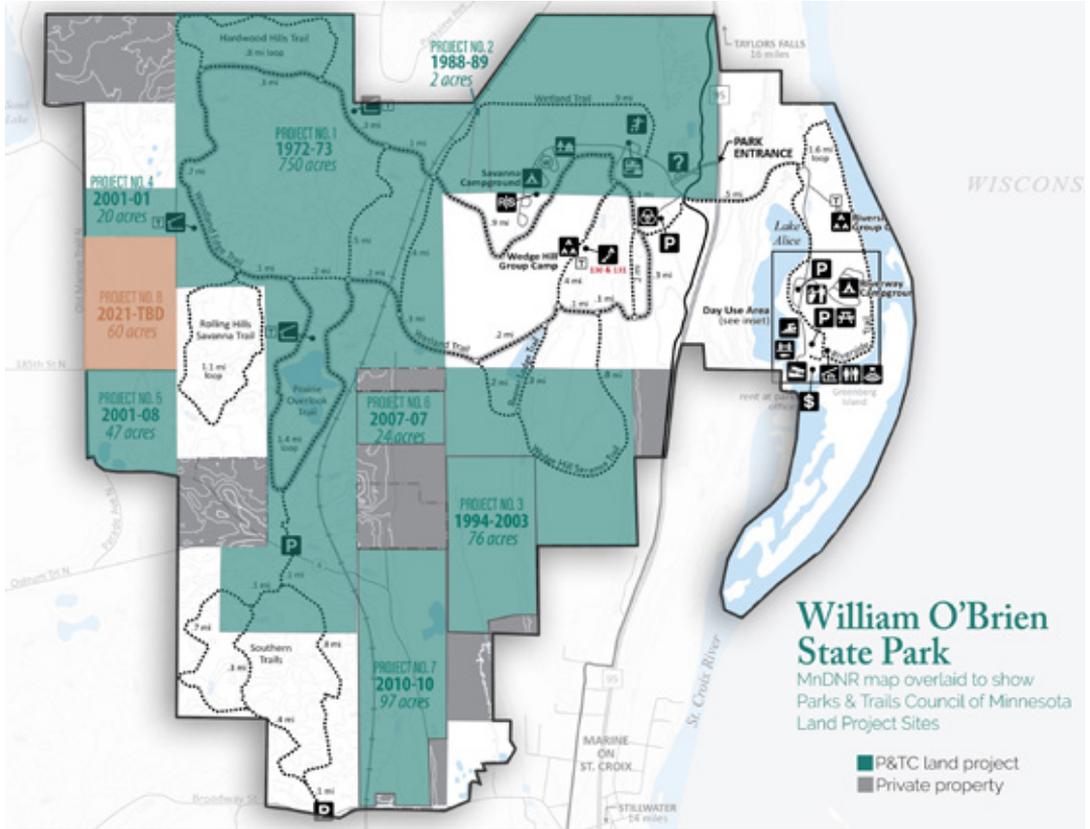
LAND VALUE (capitalized cost)

\$4.58



PERCENT OF PARK ACREAGE

58%



1) Major expansion of park

1972-73 | 750 acres | \$510,000 value at time of purchase

In 1971, the MnDNR began a major expansion effort for William O'Brien, with the intent to add a rolling grasslands and partly wooded area. However, as the DNR waited in limbo for the Legislature to authorize the expansion, a housing developer began purchasing portions. P&TC responded by launching a major fundraising campaign and securing buyer agreements within the proposed expansion area. At the same time, we lobbied the Legislature to pass the bill. Thanks to generous support from individuals and foundations, we acquired nearly all the land in this area in seven separate land deals. By 1973 the Legislature authorized the expansion and P&TC conveyed the land to the state.



2) *A small parcel*

1988-89 | 2 acres | \$57,000

A small parcel along the railroad and near the campground that was notched out of the first project P&TC added to the park, was later acquired.



3) *Farmland added*

1994-2003 | 76 acres | \$340,000

This property was owned by a farmer who wanted to see the land become part of the park. Part of the land was an in-holding within the park and the other was outside the statutory boundaries and required legislative action to be incorporated. In December of 1994 P&TC purchased the full 80 acres but eventually, after easement and other issues were worked out, four acres were sold back to the landowners.



4, 5 & 8) *More farmland added*

2001-01 | 20 acres | \$175,000

2001-2008 | 47 acres | \$340,000

2021-TBD | 60 acres | \$845,000

Over the years, starting in 2001 a farm located on the western border was parceled off in separate land sales with the middle section, where the house was located being sold last. Housing developers were eyeing this area, so P&TC acted quickly each time, to secure it for the park. A cell tower that was on the property continues to be leased by owner.



6) *Farm inside park*

2007-07 | 24 acres | \$800,000

More farmland was acquired. This land is located in the middle of the park with much of the surrounding land already within park ownership. This acquisition began to close that gap.



7) *Historic 17 Springs Farm*

2010-10 | 97 acres | \$1.26 M

This property was owned by Joan Grant, who acquired it from her father-in-law. He purchased it in 1940, when it was known as the “17 Springs Farm” and was used as a trout farm. The upper springs and the stream are a natural spawning area for native brook trout. A home on the property was built in 1850 and qualifies for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. An arrangement allows the owner to retain control of the home until her death, at which point it may be retained by the park of historic interpretation or transferred.