



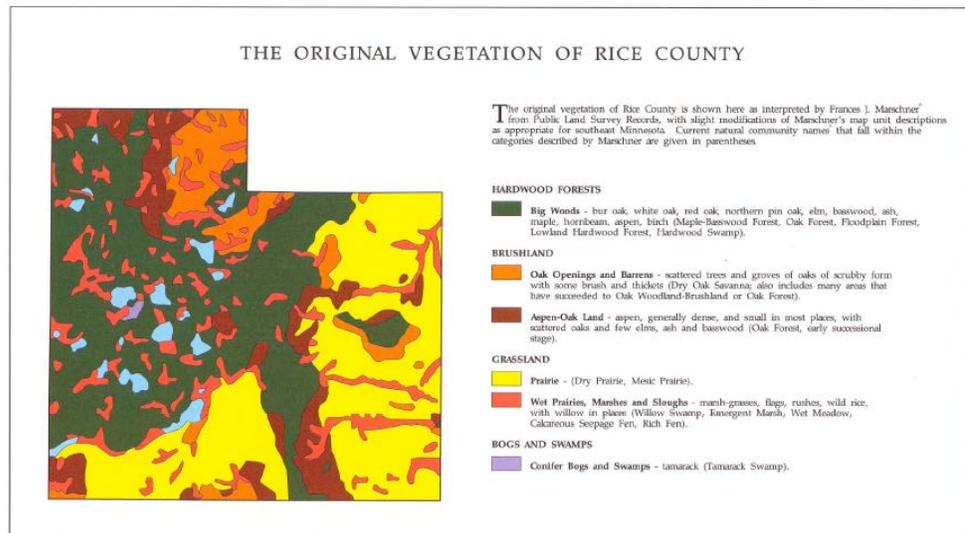
# Natural Resources

## Vegetation

Rice County is a truly unique region within the State of Minnesota, straddling the line between prairie and forest.

Prairie and forests dominated much of the land in the county until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The balance between forests and prairie was largely due to fire. For hunting and other purposes, Native Americans lit frequent fires. The presence of firebreaks, such as the Cannon and Straight Rivers, and the many hills and lakes in western Rice County ensured that not all of the area burned with the same frequency and in parts explains why forests came to dominate the western half of the county. Around the turn of the century, French settlers began to settle the land, pushing Native Americans out. As a result, the frequency of fires crossing Rice County diminished and the trees that were sensitive to fires were able to establish in the prairies. Large and small wetlands were also present throughout the county.

The type of forest, prairie or wetland depended upon the amount of moisture and soil quality, and the steepness and direction of the slope. These different factors interacted with one another in various complex



ways. Often, the plants and animals themselves had an effect on the soils. The original vegetation types in Rice County were prairie and deciduous forest. Approximately 30 percent of the County's original vegetation was prairie and about 37percent was Big Woods.

In pre-settlement times, the Big Woods covered much of the western part of the county and a small pocket around Nerstrand. In the vast oak savanna prairie, islands of woods containing hardwood trees were found. Tree species including oak, maple and basswood covered the land. Over 50 wildflower varieties and countless ferns and mushrooms grew in these areas. By the 1850s European settlers started to clear and farm the Big Woods. The forest was cut for fuel and building material. The decline of the Big Woods in the 1800s and early 1900s was led by agricultural pressures. The remaining land was overwhelmingly agrarian. To preserve a small fraction of the Big Woods natural community, Nerstrand Big Woods State Park was established in 1945.

European settlers also plowed and planted the majority of prairie lands in Rice County. Intact prairies are virtually non-existent in Rice County today. The remaining prairies in the county are no larger than forty acres each. Small prairies are found throughout the county.

According to the 1990-1992 Biological Survey of Rice County, 66 sites in the county were classified as natural areas, or "groups of native plants and animals that interact with each other and their abiotic environment in ways not greatly altered by modern human activity or introduced organisms." Vegetation, hydrology, landforms, soils, and natural disturbance regimes classify natural communities.

DNR Rice County Natural Communities and Pre-settlement Vegetation map:

<http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/maps/rice.pdf>

DNR Statewide Vegetation History and Statewide Vegetation map:

[http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/natural\\_vegetation\\_of\\_mn.pdf](http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/eco/mcbs/natural_vegetation_of_mn.pdf)