

How Freedom Park Got its Name

The three acres atop the bluff overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers was named Prescott Tourist Park when it opened to the public in 1928. The establishment of the park had been the undertaking of several enterprising city residents who thought Prescott should offer something to the tourists who, even then, flocked to the scenic views along the Mississippi River for picnics and over-night camping.

In 1981, Prescott's Tourist Park was chosen to be the release site of an eagle rehabilitated at the University of Minnesota's Raptor Recovery Center. This eagle wasn't just any eagle, but had become famous as a symbol of conservation efforts to revitalize the declining population of the American bald eagle and a symbol of American spirit and courage in the face of captivity.

In 1980, while in Minneapolis for a show, entertainer Fred Travalena had taken a tour of the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center with Nancy Nelson, a WCCO-TV personality at the time. They were impressed both with the rehabilitation efforts and by a 13-pound female eagle who was recovering from a gunshot wound. Travalena and Nelson persuaded the Raptor Center that this impressive eagle should appear in Washington D.C. at a commemorative event for United States citizens who were missing-in-action or prisoners-of-war. The United States citizens who just had been released from a three-year captivity in Iran were also expected to attend. For the program, the eagle was named "Freedom."

The ceremony was emotional for all who attended and the eagle became a true symbol of the American spirit in the face of adversity. To attend her release became an important follow up for many at the ceremony. On February 27, 1981 hundreds of people from Prescott and the region joined the celebrities who had arrived from around the country. WCCO filmed the event. Fred Travalena's production company made a video, Flight of Freedom, of the entire story including the Washington D.C. event. After the speeches, the Raptor Center staff released "Freedom," from the bluff of Tourist Park, and flew off across the Mississippi to cries of "Go, girl; you're free! You're free!"

The Prescott City Council renamed Tourist Park in memory of this eagle and her release back into the wild. The recovery of the American bald eagle is a true environmental success story and eagles can be seen throughout the year from the bluffs at Freedom Park. Perhaps "Freedom's" descendants are among them.

The Great River Road Learning Center has on exhibit an original oil painting by Edward J. Bierly which captures the magnificence of "Freedom" on her release day from the bluffs of what is now Freedom Park.