

**Moving Wheels, Shifting Times:
Implement Row, 1888 – 2015**



Figure 1. Machinery Row in 2013¹

Machinery Row is arguably one of the most handsome buildings in Madison, Wisconsin. Designed in a Romanesque Revival style, its beige brick structure occupies an impressive 27 lots on Williamson Street. With a tower at one end and a cone roof at the other, the building looks like a carefully extracted section of a castle. Striking black-and-white paint in a modernist typeface announces *MACHINERY ROW* to the thousands of motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians who pass it every day. It is a hard building to miss – if you approach from the west, following the gentle curves of Lake Monona, you will see its façade long before you are near it, for few structures exist to obstruct your view.

¹ Jason Tish, *Commercial, Machinery Row – 601-627 Williamson St., Madison, Wisconsin*, 2013, <https://flic.kr/p/kp9yer>

What a majestic building, yet what a curious name. Machinery Row? A cursory glance at its storefronts reveals that most of the tenants are professional services – interior design, film distribution, and brand marketing, to name a few. These, surely, are not the work of machines.

The reality is that the machines have left. By the end of the Second World War, Machinery Row—and the larger area of Implement Row—ceased to be the thriving marketplace for farm implements that it once was. Empowered by new trucking technologies, farmers, dealers, and manufacturers no longer needed to congregate in a central location to conduct their transactions. Implement distributors relocated to the outskirts of the city and new enterprises took their place in Implement Row, most of them united around their dependence on the automobile. The automobile had swept the nation starting in the early twentieth century, capturing the hearts and wallets of Madison residents, who built a system of physical infrastructure and codified practices around it.

Yet the shifting tides of transportation technologies, for the most part, did not lead to wholesale reconstruction of the environment. Instead, city planners, residents, and businesses variously remodeled and refitted the land, imprinting layers upon layers of their priorities on the environment. The result is a land that is rich in history, bearing all the sense of order and disorder that comes with it.

Implements come to Madison

Implement Row was an L-shaped district in what was then East Madison.² It was so christened by the locals for its concentration of farm implement wholesalers and dealers in the

² "Construction and Contract News," *Improvement Bulletin*, June 3, 1899, Industry circular, <https://books.google.com/books?id=uD5FAQAAMAJ&pg=PA18>

late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.³ No clear record exists for the term's first use, but it surfaces as early as 1898 in a farm machinery newsletter.⁴ The newsletter describes the anticipated construction of a "fine new brick block" on Implement Row. The block, completed a year later, would be named *Machinery Row* after an alternatively used name for the area.⁵

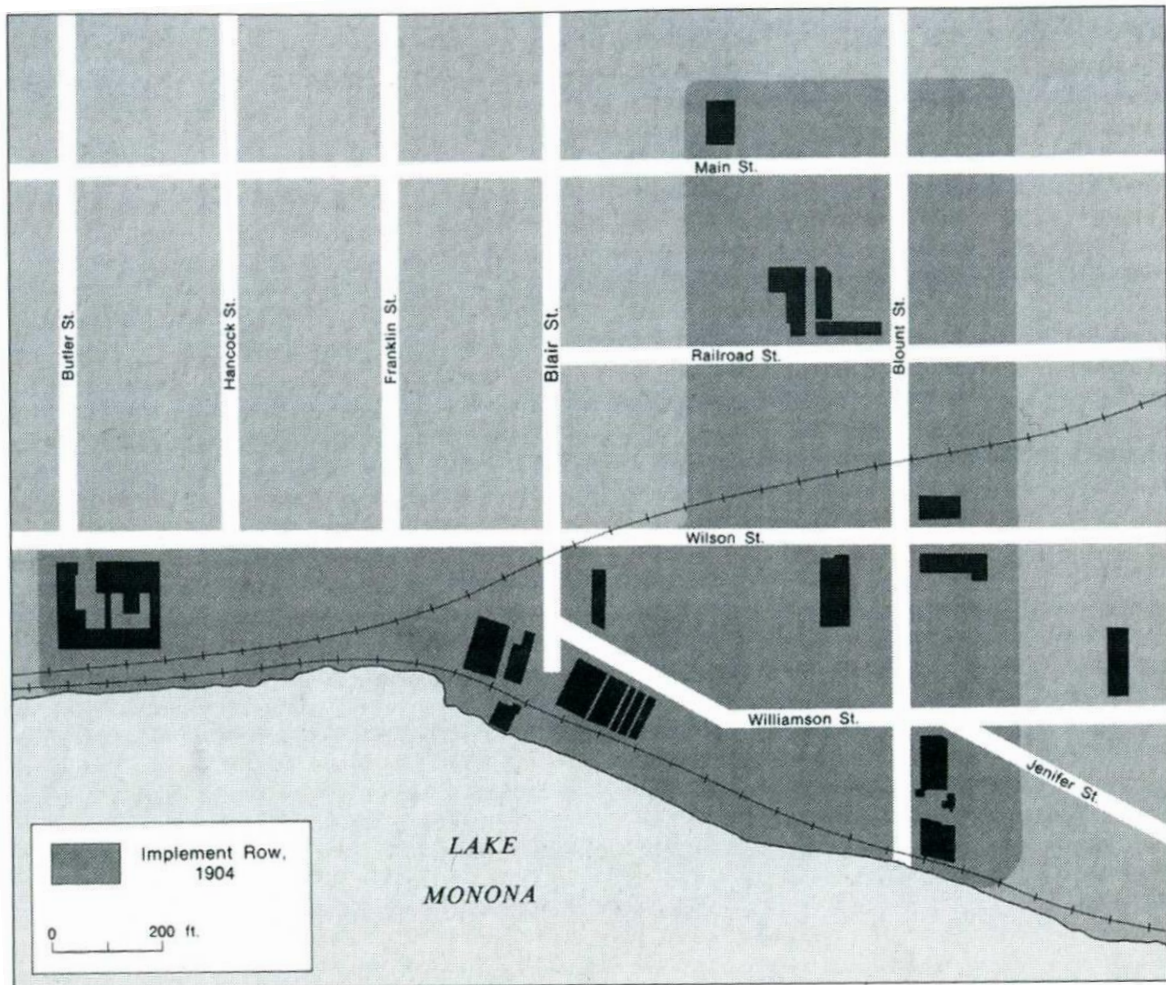


Figure 2. Implement Row in 1904⁶

³ David V. Mollenhoff, *Madison, a History of the Formative Years*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 174.

⁴ "Wisconsin," *Eli Farm Machinery*, May 18, 1898, sec. Observations, Industry circular, <https://books.google.com/books?id=fSFHAQAAMAAJ&pg=PT227>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mollenhoff, *Implement Row*, 2003, 174.

The key arteries running through Implement Row are Blount Street, Williamson Street, and Wilson Street, all named in 1836 after signers of the U.S. Constitution.⁷ Figure 2 depicts one historian's conception of the area as it was in 1904, bounded by Lake Monona on the south and Main Street on the north. In reality, implement businesses spilt into neighboring blocks, with prominent structures erected at various times on Blair Street and East Washington Avenue.⁸ They proved to be more the exception than the rule, however, and for two decades either side of 1900 implement businesses clustered in the L-shaped region of Blount Street, Williamson Street, and Wilson Street.

To be sure, the prominence of farm implements in Madison commerce predates the emergence of Implement Row. In 1864, farm implements were already the leading product of manufacture in Madison.⁹ About a mile north-east of Implement Row, Fuller & Johnson Company owned the most notable implement factory in Madison. Exporting machines to the Midwest, the Great Plains, and the Pacific Coast, the factory helped the company achieve growth every year in the 1880s and made it Madison's most successful industrial growth story in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Its success failed to be replicated by other implement manufacturers, however, and the sector as a whole weathered patchy growth throughout the late nineteenth century, never quite imposing its presence in the city.¹¹

⁷ "Madison's Streets," *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison), December 18, 1888, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N%3A4294963828-4294963788&dsRecordDetails=R%3ABA15174>

⁸ One example is the Wisconsin Wagon Company Factory building, which was constructed in 1903 on South Blair Street, just outside the imagined boundaries of Implement Row, and stands to this day.

⁹ Daniel S. Durrie, *A History of Madison, the Capital of Wisconsin; Including the Four Lake Country* (Madison, WI: Atwood and Culver, 1874), 299.

¹⁰ Mollenhoff, 175-179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170-182.

A more remarkable story can be told about the distribution of farm implements. The sector began with a small base of only two firms in 1883 but grew quickly to six in 1888 and nineteen in 1899.¹² It is only in 1919 that the trend reverses, with the number of firms falling by half.¹³ Two reasons probably explain this change: First, implement manufacturers merged with or acquired one another and consolidated their branch houses.¹⁴ Second, these manufacturers acquired independent dealers or squeezed them out of the market with their own branch houses, sometimes using deceptive or anti-competitive methods.¹⁵ It is striking that, throughout the decades, all of the distributors—bar a few—were located in Implement Row. Maps created by a fire insurer from 1885 to 1908 illustrate this trend in vivid detail, depicting the clear L-shaped region of Implement Row where they congregated.¹⁶

The preponderance and activity of these implement businesses were celebrated by contemporary writers. Writing in 1908, a journalist noted: “There is no other city in the state that has so many branch houses.”¹⁷ A city guidebook estimated the value of Madison’s implement sales at over \$3.5 million in 1899, placing it as second only to Minneapolis among northwestern cities.¹⁸ More accurate estimates would likely place regional titans such as

¹² *Madison City Directory* (Madison, WI: Donnellon & Kain, 1884), 19; *Madison City Directory* (Madison, WI: Angell & Hastreiter, 1888), 232; *Madison, Wis. City Directory, 1898-99* (Madison, WI: Angell & Hastreiter, n.p.), 389.

¹³ *Madison City Directory* (Milwaukee, WI: Wright Directory Co., 1919), 976.

¹⁴ The branch houses of Deering Harvester Company and Milwaukee Harvester Company were closed shortly after the 1902 merger between them, McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, and two smaller companies. Gaar-Scott & Company and Advance Thresher Company were also acquired by M. Rumely Company in 1911, leading to the closure of the Garr-Scott branch house.

¹⁵ International Harvester Company was often the subject of investigations into such practices. See U.S. Bureau of Corporations, Department of Commerce and Labor, *The International Harvester Co.* by Luther Conant Jr. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1913), 290-326, <https://books.google.com/books?id=m8YxQAAMAAJ&pg=PA290>

¹⁶ Sanborn Map Company, *Madison, Wisconsin*, Scale: 50 ft. to 1 in., “Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1885 – Madison,” Wisconsin Historical Society; Sanborn Map Company, “Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1908 – Madison.”

¹⁷ “Implement Row has fair year,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 10, 1905, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://newspaperarchive.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/us/wisconsin/madison/madison-wisconsin-state-journal/1905/10-10/page-8>

¹⁸ *Madison, Wis. and Its Points of Interest* (Madison, WI: Commercial Publishing Co., 1899), 2-3.

Chicago higher on the list as well. Nonetheless, the local fanfare reveals that civic pride in Madison could be found in its implement distribution sector.

The machines had arrived. But why Implement Row? What confluence of forces made its location *the* site for farm implement distribution?

The age of railroads



Figure 3. McCormick Harvesting Machine Company Building in 1899¹⁹

¹⁹ McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, *Madison McCormick Dealership*, 1899 ca., Image ID: 9707, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM9707>

A case study of one building offer clues. The McCormick Harvesting Machine Company Building was erected in 1898 (see Figure 3). Like other branch houses the McCormick Company built, it was used as a way to bring implements closer to where farmers and dealers would be.²⁰ More specifically, it served the multiple purposes of sales, promotion, instruction, delivery, and repair.²¹ The interior structure of the building reflected its function: tall ceilings accommodated machines, office spaces housed workers.²²

Because the machines were exorbitant in cost, such branch houses also extended credit to farmers and dealers, who paid back in installments from the profits of improved yields and resultant sales.²³ Branch houses were part of a broader business strategy that proved highly profitable for the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, which merged with competitors in 1902 to form the International Harvester Company, immediately becoming the largest farm implement company in the country.²⁴ The building's attractive exterior along with the success of the company, led journalists to dub it the "King of Implement Row."²⁵

A closer observation of the building's façade reveals how it was configured into its physical landscape. On the north side of the building, a loading dock, served by an industrial elevator, faced the Madison & Watertown railroad tracks. On the south side, another freight dock and elevator was added during a 1909 expansion of the building (pictured in the

²⁰ David Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 152-187.

²¹ National Bureau of Economic Research, *Agricultural Equipment Financing* by Howard G. Diesslin (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1955), 22-35, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c0751.pdf>

²² *McCormick-International Harvester Co. Branch House, 301 S. Blount Street* by Gary Tipler (Madison, n.p., 2009), <http://legistar.cityofmadison.com/attachments/0f8fe5c6-10f7-415f-ad5d-3f9e9d3b21b1.pdf>

²³ Indiana University, *The Production and Marketing of Farm Machinery* by William Earl Carmichael (n.p., 1920), Undergraduate thesis, 32-35, <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=IHMyAQAAMAAJ>; Stewart H. Holbrook, *Machines of Plenty: Pioneering in American Agriculture* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1955), 196-202.

²⁴ Conant Jr., 182.

²⁵ David Atwood, ed., *Madison, Past & Present*, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin State Journal, 1902), 223.

foreground of Figure 4).²⁶ The expansion program brought the building up to date with the company's latest building standards, which required branch houses to face two railroad tracks, and enabled it to serve six rail cars concurrently.²⁷



Figure 4. International Harvester Company Building in 1919²⁸

In situating itself between two railroad tracks, the McCormick-International Harvester Building seems like an extreme example of a distributor exploiting geography for efficiency. But a broader view of Implement Row suggests that other implement distributors followed the

²⁶ Tipler.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ International Harvester Company, *International Harvester Branch House — Madison*, 1919, Image ID: 10928, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM10928>

same geographic logic. From the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, every implement distribution establishment in Implement Row lay either beside or at the end of a railroad track. The only part of Implement Row not adjacent to a railroad track—a strip consisting the 616 to 654 lots of Williamson Street—was never occupied by implement businesses. The increase in number of railroad tracks, from about 13 in 1885 to almost 20 in 1908, only cemented this trend.²⁹ Without a doubt, the railroad tracks were why farm implement distributors nested in Implement Row.

The railroad tracks commanded such powerful economic wield because of where they linked to and what possibilities they enabled. From Madison, six railroad lines stretched out to dozens of locations. As railroad companies competed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to increase their list of destinations, so too did Madison's access to the world increase. Located between Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis–St. Paul, Madison was especially well-positioned as a center for shipping.³⁰

Then, less than fifty years after implement distributors established themselves in Implement Row, they disappeared. A 1947 business directory reveals the International Harvester Company to be among only three left standing.³¹ But even that iconic institution, the King of Implement Row, departed eight years later.³² An entire industry's vanishing indicates this was not the usual ebb-and-flow of business cycles. Where did they go?

²⁹ Sanborn Map Company, "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1885 – Madison,"; Sanborn Map Company, "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1908 – Madison."

³⁰ Mollenhoff, 123.

³¹ *Madison City Directory* (Milwaukee, WI.: Wright Directory Co., 1947), 1066.

³² Tipler.

A different set of wheels



Figure 5: A Reynolds flatbed truck transporting industrial equipment.³³

To be sure, the farm implement business did not die out in Madison. For the rest of the twentieth century, the remaining implement distributors either relocated out of Implement Row to farther east or left Madison altogether.³⁴ Those that stayed in the city hardly congregated in any particular area, and certainly many were no longer adjacent to railroads. Several trends may explain this shift: the increasing corporatization of farms likely meant fewer farmers patronized branch houses and of those remaining, they likely had enough capital to not

³³ Arthur M. Vinje, *Reynolds Transfer Flatbed Truck*, 1947, Image ID: 48866, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,Ro:0,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM48866>

³⁴ This trend of a fall in number of implement businesses in Madison and those remaining moving eastward persists until 1959 at least. See *Madison City Directory* (Milwaukee, WI: Wright Directory Co., 1959), 106.

need the credit-extending services of branch houses.³⁵ The rise of interstate highways in the mid-twentieth century also enabled long-distance hauling to become an economical and nimble alternative to railroads (see Figure 5).³⁶ Farmers may have even driven the increasingly mechanized implements back to their farms by themselves.³⁷

The departure of implement businesses meant the arrival of new tenants; a comparison of 1954 and 1908 maps of the area reveals significant changes. In the heart of Implement Row, where tractor distributors, hotels, and residential properties used to stand, now a huge post office occupies that area instead. The only machines in Machinery Row are run by a departmental store, a paper supplier, and a glass construction company. A hauling firm has ousted the King of Implement Row and is now neighbors with a public library.³⁸

These new tenants initially seem an eclectic mix, but they are in fact united by a common characteristic: they serve the urban residents. In offering goods and services that cater for those living in Madison, these businesses stand in contrast to the implement distributors, whose goods were always intended for regional farmers.

The shift from region-oriented to city-oriented businesses in Implement Row was enabled by the rise of the automobile and the improvement of roads (see Figure 6). Certainly the emergence of both phenomena were not natural in any sense: from 1866 to 1916, automobiles in Madison faced competition from streetcars and horse-drawn vehicles, road

³⁵ John Fraser Hart, *The Changing Scale of American Agriculture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Fitzgerald, Deborah, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁶ Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

³⁷ For an ethnographic account of such practices, see Richard Rhodes, *Farm: A Year in the Life of an American Farmer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 95.

³⁸ Sanborn Map Company, "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1908 – Madison," Sanborn Map Company, "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1954 – Madison."

improvement was hampered by challenges in material choice and cost, and the combination of both drew consternation from city residents, attacked by dust and taxes.³⁹ A census in 1903 recorded only ten automobiles owned in the entire city.⁴⁰ By 1918, however, sufficient progress seems to have been made that an asphalt supplier felt confident enough to pay for a full-page advertisement in several publications, proclaiming the streets of Madison were “without dust, without mud, without noise, and without big maintenance expense.”⁴¹



Figure 6. A library minibus brings books directly to readers.⁴²

³⁹ Mollenhoff, 264-269,

⁴⁰ “A Ride on a Locomobile,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 19, 1903, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://newspaperarchive.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/us/wisconsin/madison/madison-wisconsin-state-journal/1903/05-19/page-7>

⁴¹ “Let Us Introduce You to a Town that Believes in Good Roads,” *The Literary Digest*, May 4, 1918, pp 4, accessed April 18, 2015 <https://books.google.com/books?id=bAk8AQAAAMAJ>

⁴² Arthur M. Vinje, *Madison Public Library Bookmobile*, 1957, Image ID: 96098, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,Ro:0,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM96098>

Photographs and records of Implement Row in the twentieth century shed light on the ways users and managers of automobiles worked with their physical environments. Drivers typically parked in an improvised if still orderly fashion, typically on the roadside or on empty plots of land (see Figure 7). Streets were paved with varying materials; Williamson Street was paved with expensive brick in 1904 while Blount Street received the same treatment only in 1911, probably because Williamson Street was more heavily used by motorists.⁴³



Figure 7. Fauerbach Brewery in 1939. Automobiles line Blount and Williamson Streets.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Municipal Journal and Engineer*, January-June 1911, 658, accessed April 18, 2015, Industry circular, <https://books.google.com/books?id=EpMMAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA658>; *Industrial Development and Manufacturers' Record*, January 21, 1904, Industry circular, 383, accessed April 18, 2015, <https://books.google.com/books?id=F3I9AQAAAMAJ&pg=PA383>

⁴⁴ Harold N. Hone, *Fauerbach Brewery*, 1939 ca., Image ID: 37006, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,Ro:0,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM37006>

Today, of course, the roads of Madison—at least in the areas surrounding the university and the Capitol building—are equally well-paved. Perhaps that is no real surprise, but what is truly astonishing is the shift in parking culture. In Implement Row, an meticulously detailed system of regulations exists to govern specific use and nonuse of parking spaces (see pictures in Figure 8). What's more, where huge chunks of the area used to be designated for businesses and residences, today they are parking spaces for automobiles. The central trapezoid of Implement Row bounded by Blount Street, Williamson Street, and Wilson Street is the perfect example: in 1908 the area housed twenty-five lots with room to spare; today it houses four establishments, the space split evenly between parking space and the businesses themselves. One business in Implement Row—the Madison Gas & Electric Company—has so much parking space that its managers now offer some to nearby businesses as a sign of courtesy. This offer is, of course, codified in its own set of rules, etched on one of many signboards erected on the compound (see Figure 9).





Figure 8. An array of parking regulations in Implement Row today.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Elliot Poh, *Parking Signs in Implement Row*, 2015.



Figure 9. MG&E offers parking to its neighbors during limited hours.⁴⁶

Peaceful coexistence?

The rise of the automobile did not mean that railroads and trains went away. In fact, railroad facilities were actually improved over the decades, with one depot on Wilson Street gaining a shed to shelter its trains.⁴⁷ The result of two transportation technologies operating on the same landscape meant their physical infrastructure inevitably overlap, possibly leading to

⁴⁶ Elliot Poh, *MG&E “Good Neighbor” Parking Sign*, 2015.

⁴⁷ Sanborn Map Company, “Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1954 – Madison.”

situations of tensions. Figure 10 demonstrates how minimally the two were separated in 1939, with no physical barriers between them.



Figure 10. A close encounter between car and train in 1939⁴⁸

The scene is strikingly similar today, except a new technology is in town: the bicycle. Having beat a hasty retreat in the early twentieth century after decades of popularity, its resurgence in the late twentieth century now means it competes with the automobile and the train in its use of the land.⁴⁹ Implement Row, oddly enough, is again the center of this

⁴⁸ Harold N. Hone, *Train and Automobile at Intersection*, 1939 ca., Image ID: 4898, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=Ny:True,Ro:0,N:4294963828-4294955414&dsRecordDetails=R:IM4898>

⁴⁹ For a detailed account of the bicycle's nineteenth century run in Wisconsin, see Jesse. J Gant and Nicholas J. Hoffman, *Wheel Fever: How Wisconsin Became a Great Bicycling State* (n.p.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2013).

competition: the familiar intersection of Blount Street, Williamson Street, and Wilson Street now contains automobile roads, bicycle lanes, pedestrian crossings, and railroad tracks. Where it once founded its reputation on the power of one technology, it now finds itself at the intersection of four (see Figure 11). On Implement Row, imbricated layers of history form a rich, occasionally chaotic environment.⁵⁰



Figure 11. An intersection of pedestrians, automobiles, bicycles, and trains⁵¹

⁵⁰ A concerned citizen highlights the dangers of cyclists endangering themselves, motorists, and pedestrians as they speed down an intersection: "Intersection of Blount and Willy Streets in Madison, WI", YouTube video, 6:02, posted by "Erin Shannon," Sep 23, 2012, accessed April 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqKstbtaMxA>

⁵¹ Elliot Poh, *Implement Row Intersection*, 2015.

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