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Environmental History of Downers Grove, Illinois

Twenty-five miles distant from Chicago's Loop lies the village where I spent my childhood, Downers Grove. Nestled within a conglomerate of towns and small cities known as Chicago's western suburbs, Downers Grove and its nearly 50,000 inhabitants looks much different than it did when its namesake, Pierce Downer, first set up camp in the grove in 1832. At that time, Downers Grove was no more than an island of deciduous trees upland of a tallgrass prairie sea. There were several other groves in the area that is now Dupage county, but Pierce decided that the grove where he camped was worthy of his settlement. Within several years, Easterners and immigrants alike progressed outward of Chicago like spokes from a wheel, settling amidst the groves and prairies. They contributed to the growth of established settlements, like Pierce's, eventually leading such places as Downers Grove to the position that they are in today, suburbs to a metropolis. What I want to figure out is, why was Downers Grove worthy of settling? What made its position in the landscape preferable to surrounding areas? And what can I uncover, analyzing the village landscape in 1998, that will lead me to these answers?

Downers Grove's downtown area, maintained in the same place for over 150 years, is an adequate place to begin looking for subtleties. Approaching the downtown via Main Street from the south, I intersect Maple Avenue. Along Maple Avenue rests some of the oldest houses in the village, some dating back to the late 19th century. Also

along Maple Avenue stand some of the oldest maples in the village, most dating back over 150 years. These maples did not grow parallel up and down Maple Avenue by chance, they were planted here. Thus I have uncovered one of the early, perhaps the earliest besides Main Street, thoroughways of the village. What is the significance of this finding? The direction in which the road traverses leads both east and west. In other words, it leads from Chicago at its eastern terminus to Naperville, which was founded in 1831, at its western terminus. In fact, Maple Avenue becomes Chicago Avenue east and west of Downers Grove, signifying a name change only along the maple paralleled corridor within Downers Grove's boundaries. This road was probably made by early residents, intent on having a pathway to facilitate traffic from Chicago. It seems unlikely that the road was made through the dense upland forest, when prairie grasses were much easier to flatten in road-making. Thus the land beneath Maple Avenue was probably once prairie, signifying that it is most likely the southern extent of the grove. And what about the dwellings that lined Maple Avenue when the maples were yet saplings? Why would such a position in the landscape be advantageous? Residing at the woodland-prairie interface allowed settlers to usurp two distinct benefits: one being timber and the other being agricultural land. The grove provided highly coveted timber in a generally treeless prairie while the tallgrass prairie provided extremely fertile soil, given that the deeply rooted prairie plants could be pried from the substrate. The advantages are obvious, and so settlements sprung up and down this newly created pathway.

Having seen enough of Maple Avenue, I continue down Main Street into the central business district. Flanked by comic book shops, banks, restaurants and the Main Street cemetery, I attempt to imagine what attributes of the surrounding landscape led this

street to becoming Downers Grove's main thoroughway? Continuing northward I stop to realize that St. Joseph's Creek, a small waterway that flows east-west through Downers Grove, does not make an appearance in the downtown area. Just west of the downtown area, St. Joseph's creek runs through the Denburn woods residential area and the Maple Grove Forest Preserve, eventually exiting into the east branch of the Dupage river, which empties into the Des Plaines river to the south. To the east the creek meanders its way through residential areas and eventually into the larger Salt creek, near the Cook county border, which also leads to the Des Plaines River. Why is the creek not in the downtown area? After some investigating, I come to the conclusion that it is in fact running through downtown Downers Grove, albeit underground. The creek was diverted sometime in the 20th century into concrete tunnels as a means of flood control, for spring melt often swelled the creek up over its banks. Knowing now that Main Street used to intersect St. Joseph's creek enables me to put some pieces together. Water is the molecule of life, as much in the 1800's as it is today. Settlers seeking land in the prairies not only looked for a place with adequate timber, but also an adequate water source. St. Joseph's creek is the only substantial waterway in the northern two thirds of Downers Grove and thus became the water source of the settlement. Main Street provided a linkage to this creek from the old Geneva Road (now Route 34) which lay a couple of miles to the north. Today, Main Street remains the heart of the village, much as it was when St. Joseph's creek overflowed its banks onto the muddy thoroughway during the spring thaws of settlement times.

I continue down Main Street across Curtiss Street, home to the public library and the post office, and end up at the northern terminus of the downtown area. At this point

Main Street intersects the railroad: three separate tracks leading east toward Chicago and west towards the setting sun. I wonder how these tracks contributed to shaping the Downers Grove of today? Immediately I realize that the railroad must have had a profound impact on the settlement, for the grove was but the residence of a few hundred persons prior to the railroad expansion out of Chicago in the 1850's. The railroad provided speedy access to the great Chicago market, allowing the Downers Grove farmers to take their surplus to the city to sell in a couple of hours instead of the couple of days that a horse and wagon took. Also, it provided easier access to the latest farming inventions like John Deere's steel plow and Cyrus McCormick's reaper thus increasing agricultural production. Most importantly, the railroad changed Downers Grove's status from frontier settlement to settled agricultural community, thus closing the first chapter in Downers Grove's 156 year history.

I have only begun to brush the surface of Downers Grove's environmental history. There are many more stories nestled within the old Main Street cemetery, Lyman Woods Forest Preserve, historical brick street area, and among the early 20th century buildings still standing in the central business district. As the village continues to age and expand, these stories can be checked out of the vast library that the landscape maintains, a library that grows as steadily as the village that created it.