

To: Dr. Bill Cronon
From: Jeff Dillen, Graduate IES
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RE: History 460: Place Paper

Introduction

For several weeks I troubled over the perfect spot to write about. I was searching for a unique landscape which just oozed history. At some point, however, I realized that every place has a history of sorts; perhaps even the most common landscape of today had a colorful beginning. Upon this realization, I resolved to pick an easily accessible spot where I could spend some time exploring: What better choice than my home?

At first glance this may seem an unlikely place on which to base a history paper. I live in an apartment complex adjacent to a quiet neighborhood of single family homes. What the area gains in functionality it sacrifices in character. It is the kind of place you can drive by a hundred times and never remember seeing. My address is 1325 Temkin Avenue, located on the far west side of town near the corner of University Avenue and Norman Way. I am a stones throw away from the Middleton border, but still am considered a Madison resident.

Although my surroundings seem painfully ordinary, there is one feature that aided in my historical research. I live near a hill--a rather dramatic hill, at least by midwestern standards (I am a native of the Appalachian belt in Pennsylvania, and the bumps people call hills out here are hard to get used to). The hill behind my apartment is big enough to be marked on almost every map as a distinct land feature, usually as a set of topographic circles. This single distinctive characteristic proved invaluable as

I examined maps 150 years old with no other landmarks in common with today...but I am getting ahead of myself.

I spent several days walking around my neighborhood just observing. It was easy for me to look at the area with a strangers eyes; I only moved here two months ago, so I remain an alien of sorts. I took notes on the vegetation (I have a forestry background and an undying love for trees), and on the roads and buildings I observed. My goal was to explain what I saw, and how the land had evolved to this state through time. My problem was that I did not have a "before" picture from which to work.

My search for this "before" picture led me into some unfamiliar territory. Before two weeks ago, I had never entered a Historical Library (do not tell my mother this; she is a public librarian). I was amazed at the pleasant, personal service I received. My first task was to discover the proper legal coordinates for my home: the southwest quarter of Section 18, Township 7, Range 9 east. For a description of the region I read through the notes of the initial land survey of the area in 1834. I am lucky to live west of Ohio, because by the time the Surveyor General M. L. Williams reached this part of the country the grid markings, surveying, and note taking were well established and standardized. Using these handwritten notes, I gained insight into the vegetation and the topography of the region in December of 1834. Subsequently, I looked at Plat maps of Dane County for the years 1861, 1899, and 1940. Although these maps dealt mainly with civic boundaries, they did show my hill, the roads, the railroads, and some major buildings.

Armed with these partial snapshots over the last 150 years, I tried to develop an understanding of the process through which my area developed into what it is today. For my explanation of this evolution, I would like to

look more closely at three aspects: the vegetation, the buildings, and the roads.

The vegetation

The surveyor walking the transects in 1834 did not speak highly of the vegetation on my hill. His words, however, give away his motivation. He was not out to do an exhaustive vegetative inventory; rather, he was performing a quick-and-dirty review of what timber species were present. Although his resource-oriented approach most likely caused him to overlook non-timber species, his report still provides me with a general picture of the dominant players in the overstory: namely, Bur Oak, Black Oak, and White Oak, ranging in diameter from 9 to 18 inches. The surveyor describes the area as "thinly timbered and second rate." The understory contained a number of oak seedlings and some grass.

Despite the general nature of the description, I think several conclusions can be made about the area at the time. The largest tree observed was a Bur oak 18 inches in diameter. That is not large by Bur Oak standards, as the tree can easily grow to 2 - 4 feet in diameter (One such tree is located along Observatory Drive behind the effigy mound). Bur Oaks are long-lived trees (200-300 years+) and are often found in upland, mixed-oak forests (Barnes and Wagner, 1981). So although my hill seemed to be typical Bur Oak habitat in 1834, the trees were only half grown. I can think of several reasons why: (1) Being on a ridge top, the trees could be more likely to face damage due to windfall, (2) the raised land might be drought stressed at dry months of the year limiting growth, (3) the soil may be limited in some nutrient, (4) or a disturbance such as cutting or fire may have occurred 80 or 90 years before the

survey. The fire theory seems somewhat unlikely as Bur Oaks are extremely fire-resistant, with thick bark and deep roots. There almost certainly were habitual ground fires in the area, since prairie fragments surrounded the hill, but I doubt the oaks were affected on such occasions. Since my hill is not near a major river, the timbering theory does not hold much water either. I am putting my money on the windfall theory, since tornadoes seem to be a fairly common in the area (this is another big adjustment I have had to make coming from Pennsylvania).

The plat maps I examined do not describe flora, so the next time for which I have an idea of the vegetation on my hill is the present. Interestingly, Bur Oaks are still prevalent, as are Black and White Oaks. However, they now share the crowded overstory with a number of other species including Norway Maple, Hickory, Black Walnut, and Honey locust. The understory contains a jumble of edge-related species such as Buckthorn, Mapleleaf Viburnum, and Sumac. I searched but found no oak seedlings. Maple seedlings, however, were prevalent. Beyond the small forest patches, the hill has a development of very nice homes on it, which are surrounded by large lots and ornamental trees. As I walked by well-tailored lawns, I saw Crabapple, Mulberry, Apple, Cherry, Norway Spruce, Blue Spruce, Willow, Honey locust, and many others that I could not identify without trespassing.

The vegetative picture of 1994 shares only a mild resemblance to that of 1834. What has changed? The obvious answer is a change in land use and species composition brought about by human settlement. With the clues I compiled from the plat maps, I will try to recreate the series of vegetative changes my hill underwent.

In 1861, one man owned the whole area—that is, the entire southwest corner of Section 18, Township 7, Range 9E. His name was A. Graham. On his

property he built at least one major structure and I assume that was his home. The building was located to the east side of my hill on the flat stretch of land which is now a tiny development of small homes. I cannot be sure what he did on this property, but I am reasonably certain he did not cultivate crops. With the rugged topography, the tillage possibilities were marginal at best. I tend to think he was a land speculator, buying up a patch of property adjacent to a budding capital city and waiting for property values to increase.

Thirty-three years later, A. Graham had cashed in. His property has been subdivided and sold to ten separate individuals. Before he left, however, he took advantage of the "second rate" timber on his property. How can I assume this? Well, the subdivision on his former property was called Lakeview. If the name is at all descriptive, it helps support my theory. Today, it is impossible to see Lake Mendota from my hill because of all the trees. The Bur Oaks described at the time of the original survey on the property probably stood about 40-60' high. I assume, therefore, that the visibility was not that much greater in 1834. Sometime between 1834 and 1899, the timber was cut, or burned, or blown over. I believe the most likely option was cutting, as oak has some value for building and firewood. Regardless, the turn of the century saw ten lucky owners on my hill with impressively sized lots AND a view of the lake. At this same time, a quarter mile to the north along the shores of Lake Mendota, a small number of estates were appearing. Although the city still had not expanded to the west for any considerable distance (the University did not extend beyond Bascom Hill), a certain element of the population chose to live three miles away in relative seclusion, on comfortable estates overlooking the lake.

I believe this cutting in the late 1800's led to the first major vegetative change. The understory saplings were subsequently released, many of which

were oaks. The Bur Oaks and Black Oaks I see today may be part of this second growth. The trees I examined are 60-70' tall and at least 18" in diameter. It would require coring to make sure, but these trees could easily be 100 years old. The vegetation manipulation did not stop with timbering. The residents of the hill built homes and cleared lawns. The trees that graced these lawns were not native oaks, but rather walnut and cherry and willow and apple; trees useful for their fruit and pleasant shade. More than just the introduction of the ornamentals, however, the entire ecology of the region was changing. The intermittent fires that maintained the prairie and oak habitats through the early nineteenth century were no longer allowed to burn as people now inhabited the space. Oak seedlings were out-competed by less fire-tolerant species. The maples appeared.

By 1940 the hilltop subdivision had changed its name to Dale Heights (the trees now blocked the view of the lake; so "Lakeview" was no longer appropriate). Also, several new roads (Norman Way and University Avenue) had appeared on the landscape. Their construction and maintenance certainly favored the development of edge-related plant species such as Buckthorn and Viburnum. Buckthorn, among the most common species now present in the understory, has a European lineage, but has long since been naturalized in eastern North America. This shrub is tough and durable and well adapted to urban environments (Barnes and Wagner, 1981). Surely, the increasing urbanization of my hill has contributed to the propagation of the species.

In the mid-twentieth century, Honey locust started becoming a popular ornamental species in this area. I say this because all the Honey locust around my apartment and the hill behind it are about the same age (approximately 50 years). These are not the wild Honey locust with the nasty

thorns; rather, they are a friendly thornless cultivar. These trees are hardy and attractive, with wide drooping branches providing a pleasant filtered shade. It is no wonder they are a preferred tree for lawn and courtyard.

My hill is in an interesting transition phase in its vegetative history. The oaks, which have undoubtedly been the dominant species for several centuries, are now witnessing their final cycle of growth. Although the giant Bur Oaks still present will most likely survive for another 100 years or more, when they fall, they will be replaced with species foreign to the region just 150 years ago. The serenity of the wooded hillside I see out my window betrays this dynamic floral invasion. As the oak era ends, the maple/hickory era begins.

The Roads and the Buildings

Although my original plan was to tackle these two aspects of the landscape separately, I realized their respective evolutions were so intermingled that I could not talk about one without mentioning the other. Consequently, I decided to handle both as a unit.

I do not claim to be an odologist; nor did I even know the word existed before I stumbled across (thanks to my diligent TA, Joe Cullen) a copy of J.B. Jackson's book, A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time (1994). His discussion of the importance of roads to society was so compelling that it forced me to take a closer look at the streets surrounding my home. Jackson stated:

Roads no longer merely lead to places, they *are* places. And as always they serve two important roles: as promoters of growth and dispersion, and magnets around which new kinds of development can cluster. In the modern landscape, no other space has been so versatile.

Studying the development of roads in my area helps to explain the patterns of human settlement.

In 1834, as the surveyor walked the transects around my hill, he took note of more than just the vegetation. On several occasions he mentioned crossing Indian trails and took note of the direction which they ran. Before I began reading the survey notes, I had made a quick sketch of my area in order to help me follow the surveyor's rather circuitous walk about the region. Each time there was a mention of an Indian trail, I made an X on the transect where it was crossed and an arrow in the direction it traveled (north/south, northeast/southwest, etc.). Afterwards, I was able to connect the dots and roughly envision a network of Indian pathways. When compared to the plat map from 1861, it becomes apparent that one of the earliest roads in the area, Old Middleton Road, traces one of these trails. It seems only logical that a well established trail would become one of the first major roads in the area. I find it interesting, however, that the mere existence of this trail may have shaped the human settlement I walk by each day to get to the bus stop.

Old Middleton Road remained the dominant road in the region, indeed one of the only roads, through 1899. This road, which extended all the way to downtown Madison, allowed the people who lived in the Lakeview estates to have easy access to the city. The road was the predecessor to the exclusive dwellings that started cropping up along the shore of lake Mendota at the turn of the century. I would go as far as to say it was the *reason* that people chose this area to inhabit as opposed to areas a bit farther west or farther east that the road did not cross.

By 1940 Madison was expanding and so was its infrastructure. University Avenue had been built just to the north of Old Middleton Road, splitting my area (which I consider extending from Old Middleton to Lake

Mendota) right down the middle. The estates of the former Lakeview (now Dale Heights) were separated from the large shoreline estates by a major highway. The demographic complexion of the region changed with the introduction of a new thoroughfare. Apartment buildings (my own included) and single family subdivisions sprang up along both sides of University Avenue, a major artery to the heart of the city and the university.

Norman Way had also appeared by 1940. Serving as a connection between Old Middleton and University Avenue. It ran right through the middle of Dale Heights. Although you might imagine this would become a well-traveled road, to this day it remains a quiet wooded lane. Whereas earlier I focused on situations where the roads determined the course of human settlement, I believe this is an example of where the settlement determined the prominence of the road. Dale Heights consists of a number of beautiful homes surrounded by well-tended gardens and lawns. I can imagine the population expansion in the area was of some concern to the residents. Although I love my apartment, I realize its existence is decreasing the property values of my upper-middle class neighbors. Residents of Dale Heights probably wanted to hold onto some of their pleasant seclusion. As a result Norman Way is a one-way street, running in the direction of the well-traveled University Avenue. This virtually eliminates "through" traffic. Consequently, it takes me five minutes to drive to Old Middleton Road, but I can walk there in three minutes. As annoying as this is, I realize that by limiting the access and the growth of Norman Way the residents have preserved a lifestyle and a landscape which could easily have been swept away in a flood of commuter traffic.

Perhaps the most vivid example of the evolution of roads and homes in the area can be seen directly across University Avenue from where I live.

In 1899 this area consisted of large, lakeshore estates, which I assume housed some of Madison's elite. At least one of these homes still exists; a beautiful three-story domicile with servants quarters and various other outbuildings, located at 1775 Norman Way. Even before I began my research for this paper, I puzzled over the location of this home. It sticks out as a strange anachronism in today's landscape. What must have once been a beautifully tailored private lawn sloping gently down to the lake, is now a school yard, complete with playground equipment and a soccer field. Nestled uncomfortably close to the back door of the mansion is a series of row homes (High Woods Condominiums). These buildings, like my own, must have sprung up in response to the rising population and expanding urban area of Madison (which is now less than 1.5 miles to the east) and the construction of University Avenue which made my area increasingly accessible to daily commuters. In 1899 the only road running through this area was Old Middleton, located over my hill, out of sight and earshot from the original inhabitants of this impressive estate. University Avenue, an endless stream of traffic, now runs less than 100 yards from their rear balcony. Unfortunately, I believe the days of this home, at least as a private residence, are numbered. Just like the Burr Oaks on my hill, when this stately abode disappears, it will not be replaced with a similar dwelling; rather, as it continues to be engulfed by suburbia, it will give way to a form of settlement completely foreign to the area a century ago.

Notes

What began as a desperate search for something to talk about has ended in a concerted effort to be concise. Truly, it is impossible to explore all

the aspects of environmental history that have resulted in today's landscape. Just the process of exploring, however, has given me some insight into the processes which have culminated in the rather complex picture I see out my window.

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