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Crossroads: Land and its Value on Madison's West Side

High Point Church, located at the intersection of Old Sauk and High Point Roads, is emblematic of current land use patterns on Madison's far west side. The building's layout resembles that of nearby West Towne Mall, and the more recently constructed Prairie Town Center (a.k.a. Target), for its grandeur resides not in its height — it has only two functional stories — but rather in the size of its parking lot, which sprawls over enough land to accommodate several thousand Sunday morning visitors and their several hundred cars.

A view to the west announces that development in the area is ongoing: the jutting steel arm of a crane dominates the skyline. Yet the story is hardly a new one; one hundred and thirty years ago, a church steeple still visible today just above the treetops told much the same story. Development was then, as now, ongoing.

The steeple belongs to First Lutheran Church, which lies perhaps two and a half miles to the west of High Point Church, at the crest of the hill where Old Sauk meets Pleasant View Road. The building betrays its antiquity well before one gets close enough to see the dates on its adjacent tombstones or read the plaque next to its door: its parking lot, a bit of gravel on the roadside, can accommodate only one car. This is clearly a place out of its time.

The meeting of two competing schemes of land use, already suggested by a car parked at a church without a parking lot, is dramatized in the landscape divided by the crossroads at which the church lies. The southwest quadrant contains farmland that extends to the horizon; the flat, square fields are interrupted by the occasional barn, silo, and farmhouse, but more significantly by the Madison Power and Light Pleasant View Substation, a web of wires and poles rising out of the ground about half a mile due north.

The power station appears almost isolated, but the sweeping change of which it is the harbinger lies in the northwest quadrant. Directly across from the church (which rests in the northeast quadrant) a stone wall, high enough to be noticeable but small enough to be quaint, bears the word "Blackhawk." Placed at a 45° angle, so as to be visible to traffic coming from two directions, the sign advertises the residential subdivision that has sprung from the land behind it over the past two years. This is not, of course, a story about the 'burbs encroaching on a pristine landscape. Both the fields in the southwest and the residential lots inscribed to the northwest are geographies imposed on the land by its human inhabitants, and both reflect what lying on the outskirts of Madison has meant to successive generations. The crossroads is a nexus of time and thought as well as space.

The European story of the land here began, according to the plaque next to the church door, when German immigrants came to the area in the 1840s and 1850s. Their arrival in the Great Lakes area in general was part of the same chain of events that led to Chicago's rise: The final defeat of the Great Lakes Indian tribes in the 1832 Black Hawk War opened up the region to European settlers. Their arrival in this particular area, however, must have been a direct response to the naming of the Mendota/Monona isthmus as the site of the state capital in 1836. Yet why farm here, nearly seven miles from the isthmus, when land was available nearer the city? Perhaps lots closer to the downtown area had already been bought up when these settlers arrived, or perhaps they were simply less affordable. However, the elevation of the land around First Lutheran gives it a distinct advantage over its surroundings. The path from the capitol building to the church is straight to the west and almost entirely uphill; to settlers looking at the land in terms of its agricultural value, higher fields mean drier fields, not prone to the spring swamping that made development on and near the isthmus so difficult. Conversely, the journey east, to downtown markets, is entirely downhill. This combination of relatively dry land and easy access to the isthmus might have made the area a prime candidate for early settlement.

Whatever the area's merits relative to its surroundings, its earliest settlers seem to have prospered. The plaque's details corroborate the story of a church and, implicitly, its surrounding agricultural community, growing along with the city on whose outskirts it lay. The 1867 building is in fact the second First Lutheran Church; it was built to replace an 1855 log church, whose site is still marked half a mile to the north by a tiny abandoned cemetery. The log building became inadequate after just twelve short years, and the area must have continued to thrive, for the 1867 structure was expanded in 1884.

The Blackhawk subdivision is today attracting new residents for essentially the same reason as did the fields to its south a century before: it is close to Madison. Yet this similarity masks a crucial difference that is revealed in the way the subdivision has shaped the land. Its residents also value it because it is far away from Madison. The stonewall sign that marks the subdivision's southeast corner sits on a mound of earth, built up several feet above the level of the road, that extends along the neighborhood's boundaries. The raised earth serves to separate the area, both physically and aesthetically, from the traffic of the long, straight country roads that form its boundaries. These roads, Old Sauk and Pleasant View, were designed for transportation; they seem quite old, and their paths along the land reflect the pragmatism of the 1785 Land Ordinance that imposed a grid over the entire Northwest Territory. The roads that run within Blackhawk follow an entirely different logic. They are, for the most part, winding and circular, designed to go nowhere fast, and therefore to reduce roadspeeds and eliminate unnecessary traffic. The design of the Blackhawk subdivision reflects a relationship to the suburban sprawl of which it is a part that is both highly self-conscious and highly ambivalent. Located where it is because of its nearness to the city, it is designed in the way that it is to create a sense of separation.

The Blackhawk subdivision seems to place an essentially aesthetic value on the land, as opposed to the more material concerns that attracted its earlier agricultural inhabitants. The fences to either side of the neighborhood's stone wall sign provide a perfect symbol for this valuation. The fences are painted a deep rust color, and extend

about twenty yards to either side of the stone wall, at which point they end abruptly. The fences are entirely ornamental, and stand in rich counterpoint to the drab but functional wire-and-post fences that frame the surrounding fields. The name "Pleasant View" road plainly states that aesthetic concerns are not new to the area either. Pleasant View golf course, a mile and a half to the north, sits on the highest ground in the area, and overlooks all of Madison to the east. Its presence there indicates that someone decades ago decided that the view commanded by the site could pay the rents on the land better than its agricultural yield.

This aesthetic valuation of the land resonates with the history of the entire Madison area. The site of the capital was, after all, chosen primarily for its natural beauty, and aesthetic concerns have played an important role in the way that the downtown area has been developed. It is crucial to understand that this is true not only of the physical landscape, but of the names given that landscape on maps and tourist brochures as well. It is at this point — a brief look at place names — that the story of the crossroads comes full circle, for the names of the places around First Lutheran Church hark back to the land's Indian origins.

Or do they? Madison's history — or, more to the point, its use of history — can inform that of the new development on its outskirts. The Indian place names at hand are, of course, Blackhawk itself, and Old Sauk Road, named for Black Hawk's own tribe. Yet the only connection Black Hawk or the Sauk seem to have to the Madison area is that they were pursued through it on their path to defeat at the Bad Axe River. Old Sauk Road could conceivably follow an old Indian trail, but its almost perfectly straight East-West course from Old Middleton Road to Timber Lane, where it ends several miles outside of Madison, mark it as a European creation. It does not even lead towards Sauk City to Madison's northwest, an area which has closer ties to the tribe's history.

There is a more immediate explanation for these seemingly rootless names: they sound good. "Blackhawk" in particular lends itself to this explanation; it has just the right

touch of quasi-rustic *je ne sais quoi* to sell suburban real estate — it is, in the end, simply an advertisement. This is not the first time this has been done in Madison: the names of Lake Mendota and Lake Monona were chosen by one of the town's early European settlers because they sounded good, and because they sounded Indian. They have no ties to the lakes themselves, which were blandly designated Lake 1 and Lake 2 on the original survey of the site. What they do have is a certain air that represents — to European eyes and ears — the vaguely Indian history of the area.

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