

The Howard M. Temin Lakeshore Path: A History of Human Intervention

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Want to find my favorite place on the UW-Madison campus? Walk to the northern extremity of Park Street, just past the throngs of people often found at the end of State Street, the vibrant Memorial Union, and Helen C. White Library. You may stop and take a look at the famous terrace and its chairs behind the Union, but our journey takes us to the left instead of the right as we reach the lakefront. Journey alongside the library and past the Water Science and Engineering Building and the Hoofers' docks and you will find a place in stark contrast with the environment you just exited. Like a causeway of wilderness in a sea of urbanization, you look out onto a path cut below a forested hillside, beyond which you can see the city extending in the background.

This is the Howard M. Temin Lakeshore Path, an important component of UW-Madison's Lakeshore Nature Preserve. The path runs from the end of Park Street to the base of Picnic Point, a distance of approximately 1.6 miles. (7) Students and Madison residents enjoy it as a place to "return to nature" and temporarily remove themselves from their often hectic urban lives. Biking, jogging, and walking are all popular here, and many science classes use the area to conduct tests that require natural ecosystems. I have myself used the path many times almost daily as a jogging and hiking route, and I have always considered it a place of unblemished natural beauty, a rare urban locale that humanity had failed to tame and pour concrete over.

For the sake of my place paper, I decide to venture the path again, but this time to attempt to track changes in the land, modifications over the centuries that my training in American Environmental History has allowed me to identify. As I make a conscious effort to be observant, I notice elements of the path and nature areas that I hadn't at higher speeds on my jogs. As I pass by the Limnology Building, it comes to my attention

that perhaps this area isn't really "natural," or unaltered by human hands. There is a row of benches dedicated by the UW-Madison Class of 1928 to my right, and to the left stands an embankment of rocks built to fight erosion on a wooded hillside that has obviously been cut into to create the flat path that stands today. I look at the shore and realize that the shoreline rocks that are so ubiquitous on the edges of lakes across the country as to seem natural are not so; they were placed there long ago by humans to prevent erosion and flooding. As I continue down the path, the marks left by the human hand are even more apparent. A hemp-like netting is employed on the hillside, also as an erosion-preventative tool. The signs of a human presence are all around me as I walk down the path.

The areas surrounding the Temin Lakeshore Path, I realize, are not preserved, pristine nature. Rather, the path and the rustic "wilderness" surrounding it are very much human creations of an idealized natural recreation area for the citizens of Madison. The path's history is full of human intervention, and fits very tightly with the concept of "second nature" that Professor William Cronon introduced in his landmark publication, Nature's Metropolis. In this essay, I will attempt to prove that the Temin Path and the areas surrounding it have been profoundly affected by human enterprise in their history and are perhaps as much human creations as the concrete city of Madison that envelops them.

The history of humankind's presence in the lakeshore path is as ancient as nearly anywhere else in the state and perhaps the Midwest. (3) I had been ignorant of this history previous to my recent intensive investigation of the path, when I came across a small, peculiarly shaped hill beside Willow Creek. A fence had been built around it to

ward off trespassers, and I figured that it was some sort of construction area. Not until I read the engraved placard by the fence did I realize the significance of this landform. It was, in fact, a two millennia old American Indian effigy mound.

Via further research I discovered that the mound I had encountered was only one of approximately 1,000 mounds in the Madison area that were constructed circa the third century B.C., part of an American Indian presence that likely extends as far back as the end of the Second Ice Age.(6) George Christensen, an archaeologist from the Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center, argues that natives found the area, especially Picnic Point, an enticing locale to settle because of its “eminently defensible position” and because it “was a good place to be in the event of a prairie fire, a not uncommon occurrence in pre-Columbian America.”(6)

Many mounds have since been destroyed by urban development, but they can still be found largely intact at four locations near the path; the Willow Drive group (the one that I stumbled upon next to Willow Creek), at Observatory Hill, Eagle Heights (west of Picnic Point), and Picnic Point itself. (6) The mounds were part of complex religious traditions for burials and renewal practiced by early Woodland Indians. The creation of mounds supposedly united “three realms of the natural world-air, earth, and water,” (6) The mounds come in animal shapes that signify these realms-birds represent the air, and others, most commonly bears, but also panthers, lizards and turtles, jointly represent the lower world of earth and water. The mound I encountered that was part of the Willow Drive group was shaped much like a cross and was likely a bird mound. The mounds were built to help preserve equilibrium among the different spirits and worlds, and seem to map out the belief systems of these ancient peoples. The mounds are perhaps the most

fascinating examples of human transformation to the path area, but they have become a sort of secondary nature to some path-goers.

My research then skips over two thousand years to the time of the earliest white settlers in Madison. An 1855 Plat map of a nascent Madison area shows that the path is not yet present (at least up to University Bay, the map doesn't extend further north or west), but a development sharing the philosophy of today's path is present. (4) The map denotes a large park-like area extending from University Avenue to Lake Mendota and from Park Street to the currently nonexistent Mary Street, between today's Henry Mall and Charter Street. The park's system of walkways is presented on the map, and it does extend to the lakeshore, creating a sort of early, small lakeshore path. Most of the path's current land, however, is parceled off into private lots owned by men such as J.P. Faulkner, L. Guilds and A.G. Darwyn. The firm of Tibbits and Gordon occupies a very large group of plots along the area near the present day lakeshore dorms and Willow Creek. The map makes no mention of the effigy mounds or forested areas, but it does mention quantities pertinent to commerce. Both Lakes Mendota and Monona are described as being "well stocked with fish" and a drastic change in population (and with it, workforce and customers) from 146 in 1840 to 8658 in 1855. A growing populace such as this was consumed with accumulating wealth and capital, the foundations of any successful city. Their goal, as it seems from this map, was to exploit the land's resources, not to preserve its beauty. Although a Platt map is intended to show property rights, the inclusion of the fish count and population growth suggest that this was a community with the goal of economic growth. Without the necessary excess capital present in the

community to build a large publicly funded recreation area, the lakeshore path would have to wait a while longer to see the light of day.

By 1890, the Plat Book of Dane County, Wisconsin clearly shows a lakeshore path in a map of a sparse UW-Madison that only includes the Observatory, Gymnasium, Main (now Bascom) Hall, North and South Halls, Ladies' (Chadbourne) Hall, Science Hall, Engine House, Machine Shop, and Chemical Laboratory. (1) This path is shown to run at least as far west as the observatory before the map ends. Soon after the publication of this atlas, a group of men, most notably John Olin, encouraged the University of Wisconsin's Board of Regents to build the bridge across Willow Creek that stands to this day. This project was deemed a great success, and this group went on to become the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association. This organization later hired Ossian Simmonds, a renowned Chicago landscape artist. (8) He, among other things, ordered the planting of several willow trees, so as to create "an attractive shaded canopy." I found a remnant of this planting on my walk, where a willow offered shade to people resting on a lookout deck near Elizabeth Waters Hall.

This conjecture cannot be verified, but it is likely that the creation of the path in 1890 was influenced by the urban nature center movement led by Frederick Law Olmstead in places such as New York's Central Park. (9) The idea of this movement was that creating public natural spaces would allow the urban citizen to reconnect with their spiritual selves. This was part of the romantic and transcendental belief that humans could connect with their God on a very personal level in nature. In fact, Emerson's famous comparison of himself to a "transparent eyeball," was written while he was in a similar urban nature center, the Boston Commons. For a historical perspective, similar

green spaces were implemented in the same time period in Boston (9) (the “Emerald Necklace” system of parks, 1880-1900”), Stanford University (1887) and Chicago (World’s Fair, 1893). It is somewhat ironic that one of the Madison area’s preeminent “natural” areas, the path, was likely created by a city planning fad of the late 19th century.

The University of Wisconsin, urged by John Nolen and his book, Madison: A Model City, purchased land in the University Bay Area and Picnic Point. (8) Nolen thought that it was important for the University and the State of Wisconsin to increase holdings of forested areas as well as maintain the parts of the path already present. Putting the path in University control was a very important step in its preservation. From its conception until 1937, the lakeshore path was opened by the University for the use of automobiles, to the dismay of the Park and Pleasure Drive Committee. However, cars were not numerous in this time period, and they did little damage to the drive (however, once they did become harmful they were prohibited from the trail).

A collection of photographs from the early 20th century maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society offers further insights on the early history of the lakeshore path areas.(10) Some photographs bear witness to a large-scale tree planting in that era. Many now-giant oak trees are merely saplings, and the shade provided for the path today is absent. Certain stretches of land near Elizabeth Waters Hall have trees sparsely spread as is common in a park, unlike the dense foliage found in that location today. The simple, dark brown dirt path has already seemingly seen its share of wear and tear; hooves look to have beaten it down considerably, and large puddles lay in low spots on the uneven path. Today’s sections of the path that are dirt are made of a different, lighter-colored composition than those of the past, and they seem to hold their shape very

well. The rocks on the lakeshore, which I mentioned earlier, are already in place. Even in a collection of 1948 photographs of the lakeshore there still appears to be less dense foliage surrounding the path. This suggests that extensive further planting has since been done to create the forested areas found today.

The debate over whether the path should be open to use by automobiles continued into the 1950's and 60's, as the Madison Board of Visitors claimed that such a measure would increase visitation to the lakeshore and Madison in general.(8) Opposition sprang up among university faculty and students, who argued that the proposed road would be used more often by Madison residents seeking to escape the traffic of major thoroughfares such as University Avenue, and that the natural beauty of the area would be greatly compromised. The Campus Planning Committee sided with the latter, permanently answering (or so it seems) the question as to whether cars would be allowed on the path. This decision was certainly a watershed moment in the path's existence, as the lakeshore would look very different today if a four-lane road ran alongside it.

The University's transformations to the path from this time period onward can be best understood by firsthand observation. Massive clearings have taken place, especially in the Muir Woods area near the Park Street entrance to the path, to preserve a stable ecosystem. There is an extensive sewage and runoff system along the path, likely necessitated by the cutting into the hillside many years ago to create the path. The runoff system also keeps the path dry and free from the damaging puddles I witnessed in photographs of the area from almost one hundred years ago. Fire hydrants can be found at different locations alongside the path, perhaps remnants of the road proposal or a measure to prevent damage caused by forest fires. Woodchips have been placed around

young trees for protection. One very interesting alteration involves the trees near Adams Hall, which seem to have been manually curved over the path to provide optimal shade. This is not at all an exhaustive list of the work done on the lakeshore path, but it gives one a sense of the immense work that has been done in that area. It is work that I often took for granted as I jogged along the path, but it is essential for the preservation and survival of the area.

Today, the lakeshore path is governed by the University's Lakeshore Nature Preserve Committee, chaired by our very own Professor Bill Cronon.⁽⁸⁾ It was named the Howard M. Temin Lakeshore Path in 1998 in honor of the late Nobel Prize-winning oncologist who traversed the path daily, no matter the weather. Much of the work done on the path is done by a volunteer organization, the Friends of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve. Currently, both the committee and the Friends are involved in a project to have the Preserve only inhabited by plant species native to the area. It is again interesting to note the role humans play in rehabilitating nature; to return the area's ecosystem to historical authenticity requires an extensive and unnatural removal of foreign plants. The Committee and Friends, with the singular desire to ensure that the Preserve is well-maintained in the future, are no doubt able caretakers for this special place and path.

It is important to note in concluding my paper that my intention was not to present the path area in a less positive light or to suggest that the intervention of humans somehow bastardized its natural beauty. With human population burgeoning, there are few, if any places in this world that are free from human influence, and I would argue that our treatment of the Temin Lakeshore Path area, at least in the past century, has been wholly constructive. It is nonetheless amazing, however, that an area considered natural

has been so profoundly impacted by humankind for such a long time. From post-Ice Age settlements at Picnic Point to the native species project of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve Committee, the presence of humans in the area where the Temin Path now lies has been critical, and it is only through their creation of an idealized urban wilderness that the path is a “naturally” beautiful place today.