

Winona's Watchtower

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The eyes of travelers along U.S. Highway 61 are invariably attracted to the jagged rock formation towering above them as they pass through the outskirts of Winona, Minnesota. Presenting the appearance of a tortured church bell resting atop the elm-shrouded limestone cliffs lining the Mississippi River, Sugar Loaf presents itself as an instant visual marker for travelers, historians, and local residents. After sunset, a pair of spotlights at its base cast their luminance upon the rough limestone front. The resulting intersection of shadows vaguely reminds the beholder of a human face, one whose deep black eyes keep a constant surveillance over the town situated in the river valley below.

Under those watchful eyes, I explored Winona intermittently throughout my childhood. My family made frequent excursions from my home in the St. Paul in order to visit my mother's half of the family in Winona. While other landmarks and features of Winona have gradually faded from my memory, the image of Sugar Loaf still remains astonishingly distinct. Sugar Loaf is a wonderful curiosity, tempting any observer to speculate on its origins. Exploration of its history tantalizes the researcher with images and visions of a time long passed, when American expansion was at its peak, and towns like Winona materialized erratically all along the Mississippi River.

Two hundred years ago, the face of Sugar Loaf had yet to emerge from a massive limestone outcropping hewed by the extensive Laurentian ice sheet millennia earlier. Local Indian tribes referred to the smooth conical formation as Wapasha's Cap, as it bore a resemblance to a hat presented to Dakota chief Wapasha III by British explorers. The subsequent influx of white settlers into the area generated an increasing demand for roads from the port to the surrounding countryside and waterfront railroad lines. These

demands were direct causes of the transformation of Wapasha's Cap into the formation known as Sugar Loaf.

In the early half of the 19th century, the low-lying area between the limestone cliffs and the Mississippi River was fertile grassland known as Wapasha's Prairie. In the early 1850's, after treaties with the local Indians opened up the west bank of the Mississippi to white settlement, steamer crews conceived Wapasha's Prairie as a river port and established the small port of Winona. The settlement was named for the Dakota princess Weh-no-nah, who according to legend leapt from the limestone cliffs overlooking the river rather than marry a man she did not love.

Subsequent settlers brought the tools and seeds of agriculture to populate the surrounding land. European crops and livestock flourished in the fertile soil of Wapasha's Prairie. By the onset of the Civil War, Winona was already a bustling port town surrounded by wheat and berry fields. Farmers in the surrounding countryside brought their produce to the Winona port in horse-drawn wagons to be milled, packaged, and shipped up or down river on steamers and barges. With the advent of the railroad in the Midwest, which promised faster delivery of goods to the eastern states market, Winonan investors put up money for a section of track running from the edges of town to the waterfront. Eventually, this section of track extended outwards to the surrounding farm communities of Goodview and Lewiston, and ultimately connected with the Chicago rail lines.

Quarrying of Wapasha's Cap began in the 1870's under the direction of the Biesanz Company of nearby Stockton. Using drills and horse-powered hoists imported from factories in Minneapolis, workers quarried bricks and slabs from the face of

Wapasha's Cap. This limestone was first used in the construction of sidewalks and basements. Later, the quarried limestone was crushed into smaller pieces called ruffraff that were used to lay road and railroad beds throughout Winona County. The railroad beds crisscrossing Winona County today are still the characteristic ivory color of the limestone that originally formed Wapasha's Cap.

In the latter quarter of the 19th century, residents of the Winona port town watched Wapasha's Cap wear away under the drills of two generations quarry workers. By the early 1900's, all that remained of Wapasha's Cap was a two hundred-foot stub of limestone. Biesanz Company ceased quarrying the hillside around this time for several reasons. Firstly, most of the major railroad lines through Winona County were already complete. Secondly, more accessible and profitable quarries were opening up in the surrounding area. Thirdly, local residents began to find the automobile an attractive and convenient alternative to local railroad travel, decreasing the demand for local rail lines.

The beheaded pyramid of rock left behind by the quarry workers was affectionately dubbed "Sugar Loaf" by Winona residents, in allusion to the nodule form in which their cane sugar arrived from the southern states, and the name has endured into the present. Sugar Loaf continues to maintain its peaceful vigil over the modern and yet rustically flavored city of Winona. More than a dozen Winona-based companies have utilized Sugar Loaf in their advertising efforts, either by integrating Sugar Loaf into their company names or featuring Sugar Loaf in their logos. Sugar Loaf's rough, steep face has challenged dozens of rock climbers over the decades. Several generations of Winonans, including those of this author's mother and grandparents, have grown and flourished under Sugar Loaf's watchful eyes.

Convergence of 19th century commerce upon this point in space produced enduring effects on the visual landscape. For the purpose of enhancing Winona's economic growth, quarry workers decomposed Wapasha's Cap into cartloads of limestone slabs and rubble, enabling railroad and road travel all through Winona County, and a new landmark, Sugar Loaf, was inadvertently formed in the process. Sugar Loaf symbolizes a bygone age of imperial-style interactions between city and country, port and railroad, and human and nature that extensively transformed the landscape.



Figure 1. Wapasha's Cap, circa 1820, before it was quarried. (*Winona County Historical Society Archives*)



Figure 2. Sugar Loaf as it appears today, overlooking Lake Winona. (*Winona County Historical Society Archives*)

Works Consulted

Bilder, Elizabeth. Personal interview. 7 February 2000.

Winona Country Historical Society. Scenes & Sites: Views from Winona County.
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