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Environmental History 460
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11/24/08

Mineral Point Road: Two Eras of Change

As I coast along the aptly named Pleasant View Road in Middleton, Wisconsin I feel that I have found the real Midwest. Having spent my childhood living only on the coasts of this country, my notions of this region are as limited as the view out my car window during our first cross-country move. The landscape on this road has all the attributes I need to compose a perfect quaint rural scene; corn and soybeans extend in seemingly infinite rows, modest pairs of farmhouses and barns sit among clusters of trees, white church steeples poke up every few miles, two men start up a tractor nearby, and I hear birds chirping. Today though, I am no longer restricted to the static frame of my car window, and the eight miles that I biked west from Madison into Middleton along Mineral Point Road to get to this scene tells a far more complicated story than my bucolic rural fantasy.

The landscape of the western edge of Madison along Mineral Point Road is full of familiar sights of the American suburbs**:** rows of houses, office parks, strip malls, and traffic lights. Parts of the road feel very residential, others very commercial, but all of it feels highly developed. As I bike further I notice the suburban landscape is beginning to erode. The fences in front of the large glass office buildings are simple white post fences, which look like they were built to contain horses or corn rather than sleek modern buildings. The name of one of the strip malls I pass is "Homestead Shopping Center", with "Homestead Salon". As I travel further I begin to catch glimpses of large green fields extending behind the office parks and it is apparent that this landscape has not

always been composed of the cement and glass that dominates it today. But before the urban fades from this landscape there is the dramatic industrial commercial crescendo of West Towne Mall and the Beltline highway. The mall is a sprawling maze of stores on the south of the road. As you travel by it there is a sudden influx of traffic, winding exit ramps and complicated traffic lights, but as you pass under the Beltline a few blocks later a sense of open space descends upon you almost immediately. The dominant feature of the landscape is now fields, but the transformation into a rural countryside is not complete. There are housing developments sitting in the middle of cornfields, large office parks interspersed between farms, a huge multistory modern church building sits in a large parking lot, and the frame of a large building under construction sits in the middle of a cleared field. One side of the road is a view of rural agriculture, the other an office park.

I can only gaze at a picturesque rural view if I am careful to turn my head to block out other elements of this landscape nearby. There is a story of suburban development encroaching on my fine Midwestern countryside narrative. Yet even just observing the history of these farm fields is enough to undermine the assumption that a rural narrative, regardless of commercial development, would be remotely simple. No matter whether you are looking at a field or a shopping mall, the landscape along Mineral Point Road is significantly humanized, and shows the intensive changes that Euro-American settlers have created since the early 1800s.

The moment that Euro-Americans arrived in this area they began to make significant changes in the landscape, with agriculture as their main tool. The first Euro-Americans to settle in this area of land now known as Middleton were Indian traders.

The exact dates of their arrivals are not clear but sometime around the 1830s Wallace Rowan and his wife, the first white woman in the area, came to live and trade here, building the first permanent structure in the four lakes area[i].   Soon after, Michael St. Cyr came to trade here as well. His trade consisted of whiskey and tobacco, but was not sufficient for his subsistence, so right away St. Cyr cultivated 8 acres of potatoes, corn and oats[ii]. While it is obvious that St. Cyr needed to subsist off something, it is important to note that cultivating agricultural crops is not the only way to live off the Wisconsin land. St. Cyr's choice to plot fields right away suggests that he brought a long established lifestyle with him to Wisconsin. While St. Cyr's first 8 acres may not have made a very noticeable effect on the land at the time, they marked the beginning of the massive changes the Euro-Americans would bring to this landscape with their subsistence tradition of agriculture.

Those changes began in earnest during the second half of the 19th century when a steady stream of settlers flowed from the eastern parts of the country to Wisconsin. Although emigration west continued for decades, the flow into Middleton was quite sudden; the population grew almost 500 percent between 1850 and 1860, from 233 to 1,315 residents, and growth was nearly stagnant for the rest of the 1800s[iii]. The immediate arrival of this population may explain why Middleton quickly became one of the highest agricultural producers in Dane County. Nearly all the residents of Middleton were farmers and, just like St. Cyr, they grew wheat, corn, oats, and potatoes, but, unlike St. Cyr, they transformed the landscape with their scale[iv]. By the end of the 19th century 16,000 acres of the 23,000-acre township were cultivated[v]. Besides the acres of crops, most farms also had pigs, cattle, milk cows and sheep[vi]. Middleton was one of the top

three producers of almost every single good recorded in the Dane County censuses between 1885 and 1905[vii]. This high level of production may also have related to the town's close proximity to the large population and urban markets of Madison. Yet it was not inevitable that Middleton would be the smaller, more rural neighbor to the capitol city.

Before the capitol was designated, Middleton was a location under consideration. Colonel Wm. B. Slaughter saw great promise in the area and created the City of Four Lakes (now the area call Pheasant Branch) and submitted a proposal to the legislature to make it the state capitol. Slaughter was not the only person with a location for the capitol in mind though, and James Doty had plotted out Madison for capitol. Doty worked hard to make Madison the capitol, using tactics that many thought were controversial; he gave prime real estate and buffalo robes to the legislators. On the day of the vote Slaughter was on vacation and Middleton and the other proposed locations lost to Madison by one vote[viii]. Whether Madison had a truly preferable geography, or if legislators just loved their new robes, we will never know. What it does tell is that Middleton's course as a small town was not charted from the start, but came out of choices that people made during the settlement of this area.

As the activities of the first decades of Middleton show, it is not appropriate to say the landscape was undeveloped before suburban development arrived on Mineral Point Road. as approximately 70% percent of the town was cultivated for agriculture by 1905, but, despite being highly humanized, Mineral Point Road was not a landscape of suburban commercial or residential use yet[ix]. This changed dramatically in 1968, with the building of West Towne Mall. Despite mostly consisting of farm fields, the area was

seen to be full of commercial potential, or, as the Wisconsin State Journal wrote in a special issue commemorating the opening of the mall, "Obviously, if there wasn't a potential to make money, you wouldn't see 60 or so stores putting good money into a corn field."[x] The Journal goes on to predict that, "Cars and customers will fill the multi-million dollar facilities of West Towne. Houses with $30,000 to $70,000 price tags will rise in the pastures, apartments will line the major streets, and satellite shopping centers will all but wipe out the rolling grasslands."[xi] While it was not pristine grasslands that were being developed, much of the development the Journal predicted came true.

Aerial photos of the area from 1950 to 2001 show a smooth patchwork of green squares gradually become carved up into curls of residential streets and vast clutter of parking lots, offices and stores[xii]. The change was not instant, but it was constant, and most of it began with the construction of the mall. Developers carefully divided up the area, setting aside certain sections for residential development and others to be "developed as satellite shopping centers. The hub of this non-residential area will of course be West Towne. All the other commercial facilities in the area will be service businesses designed to supplement."[xiii] A new traffic interchange was added to the Beltline Highway just for West Towne allowing the customers and their cars to fill the 45 acres of parking built for it[xiv]. Developers even manipulated the town line to build the Mall. Until then, the border between Middleton and Madison was east of the beltline, but a series of annexations, beginning when the mall was built and continuing through the 70's, gradually brought the border west, so today, one does not enter Middleton on Mineral Point Road until after the Beltline[xv]. While the town or city that a piece of land belongs to may only be an arbitrary human choice, in this case the annexations were for

the commercial development of the area making the human designations strikingly important[xvi].

Just like most suburban malls, West Towne Mall does not merely constitute a building full of stores, but is the center of a whole commercial landscape; acres of parking, additional strip malls, a major roadway, and residential developments surround it. The development that has sprung up around West Towne certainly make its placement less puzzling today than in 1968, but even if the mall is economically viable, the contrast of fields nearby by still exists. The historical context of this community's development makes that contrast less curious, but the story of Middleton is more than its economics.

What cannot be overlooked is that fundamentally this is a story of a human community. While past census records and planning department documents have been crucial to piecing this history together, ultimately the story of Middleton is more than the number of tons of wheat grown within it or square miles annexed from it each year. There is a cemetery that still stands today, 158 years after it was built, on Mineral Point Road that shows something that cannot be found in archived records. The small cemetery is scattered with stands of trees, a few paved paths and graves marking the deaths of residents since Middleton's beginning. The census of 1850 tells that people died in Middleton that year, while this cemetery shows that those recorded numbers were human beings, with names, stories and a community that set aside a space in the town to remember them. While the surrounding landscape has changed dramatically the cemetery has been preserved entirely. In the 1800s there were two churches on the grounds of the cemetery and a few town buildings nearby, but for more than a century agriculture fields were mostly all that surrounded the it[xvii]. Today the churches are long

gone and only two fields border the cemetery, a housing development and liquor store crowd it on the northeast borders, the Beltline looms nearby and West Towne traffic can be heard. Yet what remains unchanged within the cemetery forms a connection between what is unrecognizable from decade to decade, and century to century.

The cemetery provides a critical link between the two eras of change in the town showing that throughout Middleton's history there has been a human community seeking life and subsistence on this land. The scale of their endeavors, and the technologies employed in them are drastically different, but their activities are not. Where horses once traveled on a dirt road[xviii], cars now whiz by on asphalt. Where people once worshipped in a small, one-story wooden church[xix] they now go to a multi-story cement and glass church complex. Where there were once four small buildings clustered together to form the shopping center in the area[xx] there is now a complex that sprawls over acres. People have traveled, lived, worked, worshipped and shopped in Middleton since it began. Euro-Americans created the town through environmental change and continued to do so with a succession of technologies and modes of production throughout its history.

This is not to say that all change here is relative. Paving acres of land and constructing large buildings on it creates a very different kind of environment than a large field of corn. What this history can do is rephrase the questions that arise. The tension between rural agriculture and suburban commercialism that I initially observed still exists on this landscape, but now I can see it as part of a greater history of human effect here. In the second half of the 20th century huge sections of Mineral Point Road were transformed into a completely new landscape, but the same could be said of the second half of the 19th century. The resulting landscapes are different, but much of the process is

the same. Mineral Point Road has seen a succession of lifestyles and modes of production. Today the landscape tells a story of the intersection of farmland and suburbia, but written underneath that story is one of the intersection of farmland with a mostly undeveloped landscape. On the south side of Mineral Point Road a few blocks west of the Beltline a large cement building frame is being constructed in the middle of a bare leveled plot that was once a farm field; the current story of this landscape is the suburbanization of farmland. This story began in 150 years ago though, when that plot was first developed into farmland. The history of Mineral Point Road is layered with environmental change.

Just two blocks west of this site, though, sits an important reminder of what remains constant through the history of Middleton. Middleton cemetery stands preserved for over a century and a half as a symbol of the human community that is at the core of this narrative.

[i] Levitan, *Madison, The Illustrated Sesquicentennial History*, 3-5.

[ii] *Atlas of Dane County, Wisconsin*, 101.

[iii] This can be seen through a survey of population statistics in the census records between 1850 and 1905.

United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*. United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1885*, 6-7. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1895*, 9. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905*, "Enumeration of the Inhabintants",15.

[iv] The occupation of all male residents and the main agricultural crops grown in Middleton were recorded in the censuses taken during these years.

Dane County Census 1850, 85-92. Dane County Census 1860, Vol. I, 5-37. Dane County Census 1870, Vol. I, 795 – 826. Dane County Census 1870, Vol. II, 663 – 672. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1885*, 155-173, 760-788. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1895,* 144-159, 986-1013. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905*, "Agricultural Statistics", 37-39, 136-137187-188, 284-286, 328.

[v] Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905,* "Agricultural Statistics", 6.

[vi] The livestock owned in Middleton were recorded in the censuses during these years.

Dane County Census 1870, Vol. II, 663 – 672. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1885*, 155-173, 760-788. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1895,* 144-159, 986-1013. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905,* "Agricultural Statistics", 37-39, 136-137187-188, 284-286, 328.

[vii] The agricultural information from the 1885-1905 censuses was compiled by county, listing the total output of each good by each town.

Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1885*, 155-173, 760-788. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1895,* 144-159, 986-1013. Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905*, 37-39, 136-137187-188, 284-286, 328.

[viii] Levitan, *Madison, The Illustrated Sesquicentennial History*, 8-9, provides a full account of the proceedings of these events within Madison. *Atlas of Dane County, Wisconsin*, 101, and Lorena Gordon, interview by author, provided more information about the events within Middleton.

[ix] Wisconsin Secretary of State Office, *Wisconsin Census Report 1905,* "Agricultural Statistics", 6.

[x] *Capitol Times*, "Shopping Has Become Recreation; Why Build Another Shopping Center?" 18.

[xi] *Capitol Times*, "West Towne Expands Appeal of Madison's Far West Side," 13.

[xii] As shown in a survey of aerial photographs during those decades.

United States Department of Agriculture. Dane County 1968 [aerial photograph]. Dane County Regional Planning Commission. Dane County 1980, [aerial photograph]. Dane County Land Information Office, Dane County 2000, [aerial photograph].

[xiii] *Capitol Times*, "West Towne Expands Appeal of Madison's Far West Side," 13.

[xiv] *Capitol Times*, "Shopping Has Become Recreation; Why Build Another Shopping Center?" 18.

[xv] The planning profiles from these years contain maps of the land around Mineral Point Rd. that was annexed by Madison from Middleton.

Madison City Planning Department, *Planning Profile*, 4. Madison City Planning Department, *Planning Profile 21*, 3. Madison City Planning Department, *Planning Profile*, 3. Madison City Planning Department, *Dimensions and Dividends 1968-1970*, 5. Madison Department of Planning and Development, *City Development 1979*, 10.

[xvi] Jim Bredeson, interview by author.

[xvii] Friends of the Middleton Cemetery, plaque erected in the Middleton Cemetery.

[xviii] *Atlas of Dane County, Wisconsin*, 101.

[xix] "Middleton Junction Methodist Church", photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society.

[xx] A. Sigowsky, *Map of Dane County Wisconsin*.