

Phoenix Park:
A hopeful metaphor for the forgotten heart of a city

By Andrea Ward
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It seemed like a simple enough task: pick a place in the world that interests you and interpret the changes that have happened there. I began thinking about the rivers I've known: calm rivers I've paddled; malevolent rivers that have nearly drowned me in their depths; peaceful rivers that have lulled me to sleep at night; the river in my neighborhood that I visit to remind myself that before there was anything, there were rivers.

The rivers I could not banish from my mind, however, were two that I barely knew at all. These two rivers meet at a spot in my hometown that meant nothing to me in all the years I lived there. I had never thought about them in that precise location, never visited them there, never considered how their confluence had shaped life in the city or what was communicated by the way the city had shaped the landscape around it.

Just north of the neighborhood considered "downtown Eau Claire" (if it is considered anything at all), the narrow Eau Claire River rushes in from the east, cutting a steep bank through the city until it meets the wide, flat Chippewa rolling down from the north. The two rivers, now one, push on through the flatlands south and west of the city until their waters spill into the Mississippi just below Lake Pepin at Wabasha, Minnesota. To understand my city's complicated relationship with these rivers from which it sprung, I did something I'd never done before: I went looking for the confluence.

Before I went there with purpose, the images of the confluence I could find in my memory were dim. I had a vague sense of marginal open land, blighted commercial and residential buildings, skeletal remains of heavy industry hulking under a sky that always seemed gray. It was my own unfamiliarity with what is arguably the most significant feature of my hometown landscape that began to raise the most interesting questions. How did this place, which must have once been the locus of economic and civic life in Eau Claire, become so tangential to the experience of being a citizen here in recent decades? What had driven the land-use decisions made about this place? And most importantly, what clues could I find in today's landscape about the past, present, and future of the city's relationship with the confluence?

I've been away from my hometown and removed from its issues for almost ten years now, but I knew that the general area around the confluence had been the focus of "urban renewal" conversations, and I knew that some redevelopment had already happened there. I had been there to buy vegetables at the new farmers' market on Saturday mornings, but I had never read the landscape with a critical eye, and I hadn't even been sure that the place where the rivers ran together was exactly the same place where redevelopment was happening. When I found my way to the confluence on a warm day earlier this fall, I was completely unprepared by the boldness of the message conveyed by the landscape: "This place matters to our community," it seemed to say. Not exactly a groundbreaking statement, but to someone who grew up here watching life being sucked out of the city center as if by a vacuum, it was something.

Immediately I learn that the narrow wedge of land hugging the riverbank at the northeast corner of the confluence now belongs to the city. New signage proclaims that this place is called Phoenix Park. Implicit in the name is a cursory nod to the land's previous owner and occupier: Phoenix Manufacturing, later Phoenix Steel, which stood on these grounds doing a booming business in logging equipment and machine tools to supply the sawmills that once dominated this landscape. But the metaphor of the Phoenix is almost too convenient, and park planners seem to have been eager to let its connotations dominate over those of industry in their work here. The mythic bird appears as a motif again and again, in stylized silhouette adorning the streetlamps along the walking paths and in a giant brick mosaic embedded in the parkway that parallels the riverbank. It all seems a bit gratuitous, but my curiosity is piqued: will Phoenix Park symbolize the rising of the confluence to the place of prominence that it held in the city's first decades? Already I was skeptical that such a goal could be accomplished with a little fieldstone and burnished metal. But I maintain a stubborn, sometimes irrational faith in the potential of my hometown, so today I set aside the competing cynicism that comes from hearing years of talk while seeing only complacency, inaction, and the sprawl that seems the default form of urban growth in the absence of proactive planning.

My instinct upon arriving is to run straight out to the tip of the land at the exact place where the rivers meet, to stand in the spot where once stood men of outsized imagination, optimism, and perhaps no small amount of greed, envisioning their future fortunes floating toward them down the Chippewa in the form of pine logs, and who then conjured a town here seemingly overnight. But it seems wiser to read the landscape systematically, so I decide to read it like a book, from left to right.

I begin my walk beneath the bridge over the Eau Claire at North Barstow Street. The walking path continues up the river on the other side of the bridge, but it is littered and unkempt, which I read as “unofficial.” Landscaping communicates that my “natural” experience of the confluence should begin here and proceed in a rightward direction. It is not my usual instinct to obey these sorts of normative cues once I spot them, but I want to experience the landscape in the way planners have intended, so today I do.

On the city side of the path, a carefully mown lawn is interspersed with orderly plantings, comprised of species that speak vaguely of the prairie. Stone terracing here and there discourages visitors from walking transgressive paths of their own making. On my left, toward the river, the land slopes sharply downward until it meets the water. Tall grass and flowering prairie plants cover the riverbank entirely, creating something of a physical barrier between walkers and the water, but also lending a heightened sense of “wildness” to the spaces closest to the river. A visitor unaware of the industrial history of this particular patch of ground might easily imagine that this section of riverbank is a remnant, by some great good fortune left undisturbed while the downtown grew up around it.

Just a few yards up the path, I am startled by an unexpected segment of sidewalk. Into the pavement are etched the words *Sawdust City*. Squinting into the distance, I see other etchings accompanied by interpretive signage, and it occurs to me: Phoenix Park is intended not just as a place for visitors to interact with the rivers in an aesthetically pleasing, “natural” setting where history lurks subtly below the surface. The park is in itself an overt (if somewhat glossy and

abbreviated) lesson in community history as it occurred in direct relationship with this spot where the rivers meet. Eau Claire is not lacking in parks, and the city owns other land where they might have placed this kind of interpretive walk through time. But with each step I take, it seems clearer that a Phoenix Park could not have been installed anywhere else.

Just upriver from the *Sawdust City* brick is the spot where prospective lumbermen attempted to dam the Eau Claire and build the city's first sawmill in 1847—before there was a bank, a store, or even a saloon; when the city was little more than a few guys and a land claims office.¹ Their attempt and failure (the dam was washed out by a flood that very same year) is symbolic of two patterns that would quickly develop in this spot. The economic potential of the rivers—first as a driver of industry and much later as an amplified aesthetic feature of a city trying to keep up with the times—would characterize land use around the confluence. But the equally great potential of the river's fluctuations to thwart dependent industry and economic development would never be far from people's minds.

The Sawdust City moniker carved into the walkway bespeaks Eau Claire's early self-identification as the place where Wisconsin's northern pine forests came to be milled and transported to market. The city's situation between the confluence of two watersheds containing valuable timber resources and the markets accessible by the Mississippi River seemed to make Eau Claire perfectly suited to the project of denuding the north woods and converting the timber into capital. In 1884, the peak year of the timber harvest, there were more than 20 sawmills and lumber companies operating within the city, many of which were located at or near the confluence. That year was also one of prodigious flooding: the Chippewa rose 28 feet, overtopping its banks and washing out all six bridges in the city, and doing massive damage to all the mills. This came just four years after a flood of nearly equal proportions had wreaked similar havoc on mills and lowland homes. But dealing with the constant, unavoidable threat posed by the river must have seemed a small price to pay in the face of the financial upside. The dedication of nearly all of Eau Claire's waterfront to lumbering pursuits must have seemed at the time the

only reasonable use of the land, given the potential wealth they believed would come their way: though there was at least a vague awareness among lumbermen that the boom times couldn't last forever, one optimist estimated that the timber resource in the Chippewa watershed would last 250 years—a “slight miscalculation,” one local historian noted.²

Although the logging bonanza was short-lived, the scramble to reap its profits led to dramatic physical changes in the land and water near the confluence. Both rivers were dammed within sight of the place where they run together, harnessing energy to run sawmills (and later to provide municipal electricity) and creating holding ponds for the billions of board feet of lumber that passed through the city via its waterways. The dam on the Chippewa is still in operation, leased from the city by Xcel Energy (formerly Northern States Power), whose physical plant continues to dominate the east bank upriver from the confluence. The holding pond behind the dam also remains; today it is called Dells Pond and is ringed by city parkland and a smattering of homes, but until the early 20th century it went by a more descriptive name: “Log Reservoir.”³

One especially curious alteration made by lumbermen to the landscape would have been visible from where I stand in Phoenix Park, though it is long gone now. The log flume, built in 1880, was a wooden structure constructed along the west bank of the Chippewa with the purpose of propelling logs from above the dam downriver past the confluence to a tunnel that traveled for several blocks underneath the city to an oxbow lake, whose primary virtue for the city in its early years was its capacity for log storage. One lone archival photo depicting a family leisurely strolling the planks atop the log flume provides the only evidence that the public had any recreational access to riverfront land near the confluence during the logging years, and suggests that the access they had was made possible only inadvertently by structures whose primary intent was the furthering of the city's economic gain.⁴

A deterministic historical view might interpret the evolution of the landscape around the confluence as a strict, inevitable outgrowth of its origins as a lumbering town. But the next etched brick I encounter along the path hearkens to a phase of development that, though born out

of logging, gained its independence and later followed its own arc of decline, leaving its own distinct impact on the landscape here. *Manufacturing Center*, the sidewalk declares. Indeed, just up the Eau Claire from this spot on the walkway I can see a looming brick industrial structure, stretching to the horizon on the steep bank high above the water. Now called Banbury Place, the complex houses apartments, offices, and a few odd specialty retail stores, but much of its 1,900,000 square feet of interior space appears unused. Before 1992, Banbury was the home of Uniroyal Rubber Co., the city's largest employer until it shut down its operations and moved production to Alabama, where wages were lower, or so it was said with no small amount of derision at the time. Previously occupied by U.S. Rubber Co., and Gillette Rubber Co. before that, this complex has given the Eau Claire's north bank its industrial character since the first tire rolled off the line in 1917. In 1870, the railroads began building lines directly behind where the buildings now stand, connecting at the railroad yard and station which stood next door, though it too is gone now. Railroad bridges over the rivers remain, and most have been retrofitted as pedestrian walkways. The bridge leading to the front of the Banbury complex winds in an absurdly picturesque S-curve to the opposite bank of the Eau Claire, where it connects with another riverfront walkway and open space of sorts—once a vast parking lot where rubber workers left their vehicles, no longer needed in that capacity.⁵

Other industrial ghosts now haunting the confluence sprang up and flourished here in a temporary symbiosis with the logging trade. International Harvester manufactured a revolutionary log-cutter that could negotiate cutover stumps; McDonough Manufacturing and Phoenix Manufacturing supplied machinery to run the mills; A.J. Cutter Shoe across the river made boots designed to withstand the demands a logger placed on his feet. The rivers served these and other industries in ways other than the proximity with their lumber-mill customers: one city booster extolled the virtues of building at the waterfront because of the superior convenience of the rivers as industrial waste disposal sites—eerily foreshadowing the serious contamination that would be revealed at the site of the Phoenix plant in the latter part of the 20th century.⁶

One farsighted lumberman forecasted the quick life cycle of logging and its dependent industries at the confluence as early as 1885: “Gentlemen, you had better get something while you can, because we’ve seen the last sawmill built in Eau Claire.” Industry weathered the logging bust in spite of such dire predictions, but the confluence would never again be seen as the wellspring of economic activity that it had been between 1847 and 1924, when the last load of lumber was milled and sent out of the city.⁷

Many stories are told of the rise of industry at the confluence; understandably fewer can be found documenting its decline, particularly in the boosterish genre of local history. One otherwise comprehensive volume moves swiftly from World War Two, with Gillette Rubber heroically altering production to boost the war effort, then glosses quickly (and somewhat glibly) over the 1960s—“a period that seemed to have only a minimal effect on the Chippewa Valley”—and lands squarely in the 1980s, all within the space of a one-page spread.⁸ The author maintains that “economic progress and development continued,” but offers no allusion to the obvious fact that the city’s economic and civic center of gravity, once so concentrated at the confluence, had diffused so completely as to be nearly unlocatable.

It seems most commentators prefer to focus on growth elsewhere rather than contemplating neglect at the source. But I’ll hazard to speculate based on a visual inventory of industry that remains near the confluence: the energy company at the dam, and the paper mill just above it, now a subsidiary of Cascade Tissue but operated as early as the 1870s as the Dells Pulp and Paper Mill. Both clearly depend on the river for their production. It seems reasonable to surmise that those industries that didn’t need the river gradually shifted production elsewhere as increasing transportation options made other locations more convenient. Whatever the reasons for their flight, as more industries vacated the shells of their infrastructure, they left a crumbling monument to their past heyday at the confluence that other interests within the city have been reluctant to colonize. Perhaps because residents had never had much access to the riverfront

there, and were so unused to considering it a human space, they were disinclined to reclaim it from its ghosts.

Phoenix Park seems to have begun to change that, not only encouraging people to enter into the space at the confluence and find new reasons to value it, but also directing attention to the significance of events and developments that took place there. Farther along the path, I see another imprinted brick: *City of Bridges*. Looking up from where I now stand I can see seven bridges, and from my mental map I know there are at least four more just out of view. The first of these was completed across the Eau Claire River at Dewey Street—now perhaps the most little-used automobile bridge in the city—connecting the villages north and south of the Eau Claire for the first time. These villages would not be connected with the third village of West Eau Claire until another bridge was built across the Chippewa at Grand Avenue in 1872, when the three municipalities were finally incorporated as one. A long look across the Chippewa at the Grand Avenue bridge reveals still more about the character of the neighborhoods around the confluence. The Chippewa's west bank at Grand Avenue is steep and high; the lumber barons built their stately homes in the surrounding blocks, well above high water in a typical flood year. Working-class German, Norwegian, and Irish families, by contrast, occupied the houses in the blocks behind Phoenix Park: these houses, in various stages of disrepair, are still occasionally vulnerable to the whims of the river, and perhaps not coincidentally still house many of the city's more recent immigrants.⁹

The final declaration offered by the sidewalk etchings is the most puzzling yet, though perhaps after my interpretive walk, it shouldn't be. It reads: *The Phoenix, Born Again and Again*. Bold and unsubtle, it doesn't just seem to be claiming that the immediate space around the confluence, Phoenix Park, matters again. Embedded in the message is a hope that 21st-century understandings of valuable urban landscapes will spark a period of new, enlightened growth in the surrounding neighborhood on par with that experienced here in the days of the city's

founding. From right here where I'm standing, I see powerful reasons to justify that hope, and equally powerful reasons to doubt that it will ever be fulfilled.

Off to my left stands a new pavilion, completed just last year as a permanent home for the farmers' market, which had previously wandered from one mall parking lot to another throughout recent memory. The farmers' market pavilion is a physical symbol of a commitment to that most elemental of exchanges: the selling and buying of food between the individuals who produced it and the individuals who will consume it, a transaction of rare simplicity in the modern economy. Even more to the point, it anchors that humanistic exchange in this precise location, which until recently was hardly seen as a human space at all.

But the exchange of food is also central to my lingering doubt that Phoenix Park is the harbinger of major changes yet to come on the landscape here at the confluence. Turning away from the rivers toward the city, I look up at the sign looming over me. "Phoenix Park Neighborhood" advertises a new, urban-style, mixed-use development of the sort Eau Claire currently lacks, with commercial space below and modern residential units in the upper stories. An artist's rendering depicts a tree-lined boulevard with a distinctly "new urban" flair; the promotional text boasts that a popular coffeehouse based in the suburban outskirts has signed on as a commercial tenant. The corresponding promotional website proclaims a grand opening in 2008, but on this November day in 2007, the hopeful sign still presides over a desolate expanse of barren, bulldozed ground. A newly paved road slices incongruously through two blocks of nothingness. The Minneapolis developer is said to have missed a deadline, dragged his feet, or maybe even pulled out entirely. It seems nobody will invest in a grocery store, and the last conventional grocer in the river valley closed its doors last year.

And so it remains to be seen whether the metaphor of the Phoenix can be used to describe this place where two rivers become one in my hometown. With my cynicism losing out to a native's stubborn pride, I find hope in the crowds flocking to the farmers' market and to riverfront concerts in the amphitheater carved into the landscape at Phoenix Park. I see them as

evidence that the community is capable of finding new reasons to value this space, whether those reasons are aesthetic or economic. I hope that by their mere presence here they may glean from the landscape, as I have, some understanding of the value systems that drove our predecessors to use and alter the space in such profoundly different ways, and from those gleanings apply wisdom to future decisions about the way we use this small spot on the earth.

¹ Heib, Jane.

² *Ibid.*

³ Multiple sources, including Bissell's Atlas (complete citation in detailed bibliography), and Pfaff, Tim. *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925.*

⁴ Multiple sources, including Heib, Jane and Pfaff, Tim.

⁵ Barland, Lois. *Sawdust City.*

⁶ *Ibid.* and Eau Claire Leader. *Eau Claire Illustrated.*

⁷ Various sources including the sidewalk at Phoenix Park attribute this quote to George Buffington, in 1885 a city alderman. Other information in Heib, Jane.

⁸ Heib, Jane.

⁹ Owen, Ralph. *Ralph Owen's Eau Claire.*