

The Village of Shorewood

Story Sandy

History 469

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November 2016

Shorewood is a small village sandwiched between the Milwaukee River and Lake Michigan immediately north of the city limits of Milwaukee. At just over 1000 acres, but with more than 13,000 residents, it is one of the smallest communities, and the single most densely populated community, in the state.<sup>1</sup> The peninsula on which Shorewood, the northeastern reaches of Milwaukee, and the other North Shore villages sit is often referred to as the Shorewood plateau, as it is a relatively high finger of land bordered by steep drops on either side (Figure 1). As you walk through Shorewood down Capitol Drive, which bisects the village running west from the lakeshore, you experience only about thirty feet of elevation change as you make your way to a ridgeline until your path abruptly drops into the Milwaukee River below. These steep riverbanks have long limited mobility, in essence severing Shorewood from the rest of Milwaukee County to the west. In fact today there is still only one westward bridge that connects the village to Milwaukee. The top of the bank is a high wall of land that snakes northward on the eastern shore of the river, and this geological feature was instrumental in the development of the area.

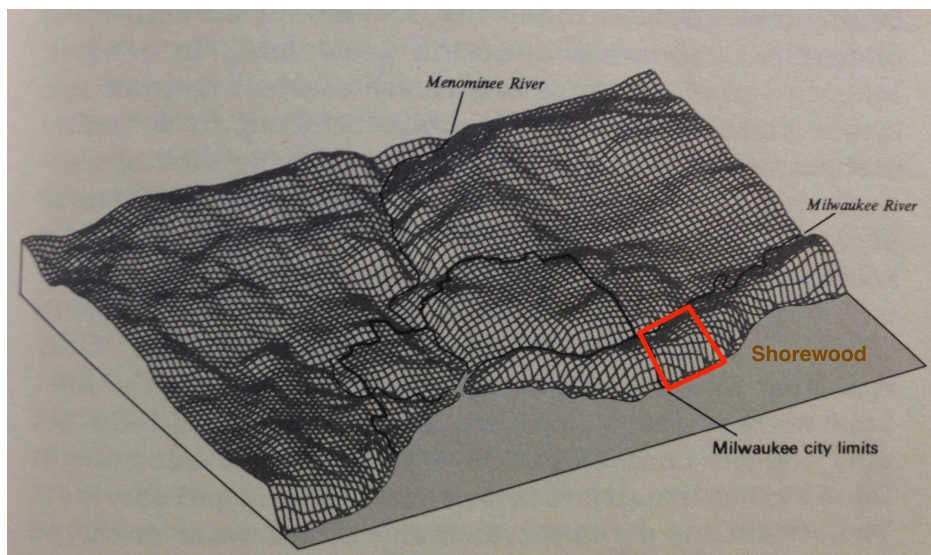


Figure 1: Physical relief map of Milwaukee County with my edits shown in red.<sup>2</sup>

## Transportation Systems Shaped the Village Layout

Prior to about 1870 the land now known as Shorewood was sparsely occupied by settlers of European origin. Lueddemann's-on-the-River, built in 1872 on the site of present-day Hubbard Park as a resort for urban elites, was the first major development project in the area, and the next year the Northwestern Union Railway laid down tracks northward along the river's eastern ridgeline into Whitefish Bay.<sup>3</sup> A number of different enterprises took hold along the river, including Lueddemann's and, in 1876, the Milwaukee Cement Company. In 1886 the Whitefish Bay Railway Company was created to make the Shorewood Plateau more accessible to citizens of Milwaukee, and the company laid tracks for two different lines. By 1891 the US Investment Association had constructed a subdivision in Whitefish Bay (Figure 2), and the increased housing availability, multiple transportation options, and burgeoning industries began to pull people into Shorewood at an increasing rate.

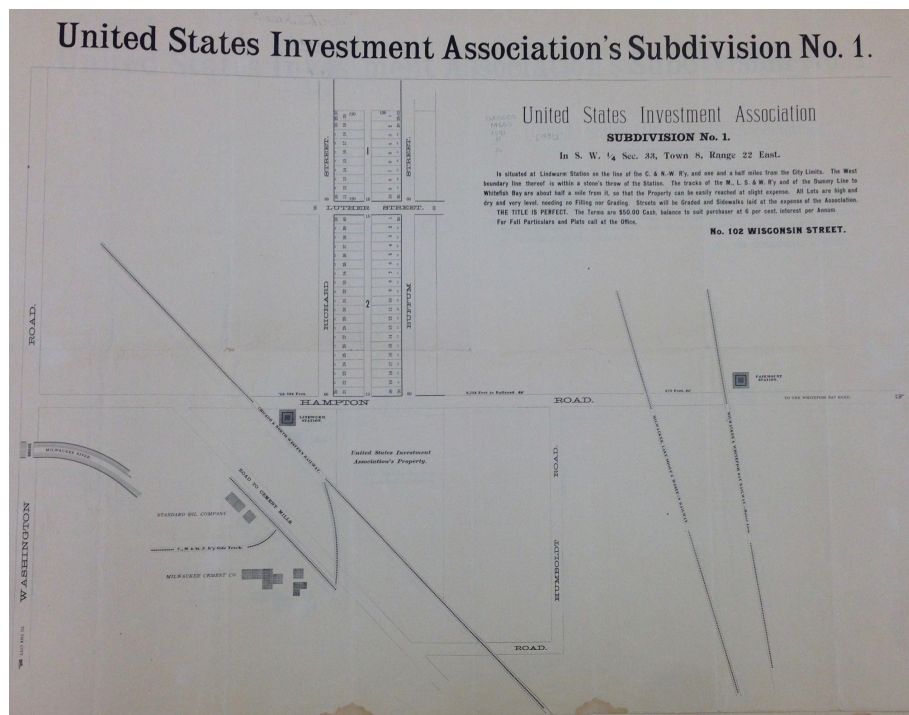


Figure 2: Map showing the first subdivision built in present-day Whitefish bay. Also shown are the Milwaukee Cement Company, colloquially known as Cementville; the Chicago and Northwestern Union Railway, which ran along the Milwaukee River; and two more railways both of which came directly through Shorewood.<sup>4</sup>

In its earliest days, the unincorporated area known as East Milwaukee was simply the no man's land between the rich Milwaukee mansions and the country club along the lakeshore, Whitefish Bay to the north, and the various incarnations of the Milwaukee River resort to the west. It existed as the undeveloped land that trains rolled through on their way to the factories along the river, and as the empty lots behind houses that were being built along its southern border. As Milwaukee grew throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the city's elites built splendid houses along the lakefront, eventually extending northward into present-day Shorewood. This legacy is still visible on the landscape today in the abrupt transition from expensive, grand houses, mansions even, on the lakefront, to the more modest single-family homes and duplexes only a block or two westward.

Limited or complicated transportation into the village was a defining characteristic of Shorewood's development. Oakland Avenue was one of the early streets into the village, but for most of its existence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a muddy mess that was difficult to navigate. The Whitefish Bay Toll Road along the lakefront was another option, but it wasn't that convenient unless you had a horse and carriage, and the road itself was of course not free. Today, as then, the Capitol Drive Bridge remains the only means of ingress from the west, and until 1983 it was only two cars wide. I don't know exactly when the first bridge was built, but it appears on maps as far back as 1894.<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1927 the bridge wasn't made of concrete, but instead was a narrow wood and iron spit perched between the two riverbanks (Figure 3). Until an underpass was built in 1925 (Figure 4) the railroad crossed Capitol Drive at street level, meaning that traffic had to stop for as many as 40 trains per day (Figure 5) and a police car had to be stationed at the crossing at all times to control traffic.<sup>6,7</sup> All of these features taken together meant that in the early days of the village the Capitol Drive Bridge wasn't an expedient route for those trying to



get to Shorewood from Milwaukee. When the bridge was reconstructed using concrete in the mid 1920s it was cause for great excitement, yet even as members of the village celebrated with parades, “band music, street dancing, and general merry-making,” there was an almost immediate pushback against the new traffic the bridge was capable of bringing into the village.<sup>8</sup> The Shorewood Herald, the local paper at the time, chronicled the contention that surrounded a ninety-day bus trial in the first few months in 1936, which at one point brought more than 450 residents to a hearing to complain about the prospect of increased traffic.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3: A photo from 1926 showing the Capitol Drive bridge, then called the Atwater Bridge, from the west bank of the Milwaukee river.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 4: The completed Capitol Drive underpass with the “400” train flying by.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 5: This 1924 photo shows the railroad crossing at Capitol Drive. Notably, there is already a car waiting.<sup>12</sup>

Because none of these transportation options was easily accessible for the average person, the development of public transit was an important and necessary step for the growth of the village population. As mentioned, the Whitefish Bay Railway Company was established in 1886 and created a route along Downer Avenue called the Dummy Line, as shown in an 1894 map of the village (Figure 6). However, it was The Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company's (TMER&L Co.) electric line on Oakland, created in 1898, which really connected Shorewood to its southern neighbors (Figure 7). These two railway systems explain why Downer and Oakland Avenues are two of three widest streets that run north in Shorewood – the third is Lake Drive, which is wide because it was a toll road meant to serve the rich mansions on the lakefront. Furthermore, the fact that today almost the entire village business district is located on Oakland while Downer is a residential street in Shorewood can be traced to the stunning success of TMER&L Co.'s electric line and the unremarkable performance of the Dummy Line. This history also suggests an answer as to why Oakland is one of the few original streets in the village that has never undergone a name change, while others, including Capitol Drive and Downer

Avenue, have.<sup>13</sup> The success of TMER&L Co.'s electric line led to a sudden population rise that gave Shorewood a sufficiently great number of citizens to vote to incorporate the village less than two years after the electric line on Oakland was installed. The village was incorporated in 1900 as East Milwaukee, and then changed its name to Shorewood in 1917. Within a couple of decades the population had ballooned, from 1,255 in 1913<sup>14</sup> to 15,000 by the end of the 1930s,<sup>15</sup> even greater than its modern size of approximately 14,000, and so the question became not how to become an incorporated village with citizens, but how to sustain and advance that village. As the local historical society recently said, "Shorewood is a lot of Village packed into a small geographical area."<sup>16</sup>

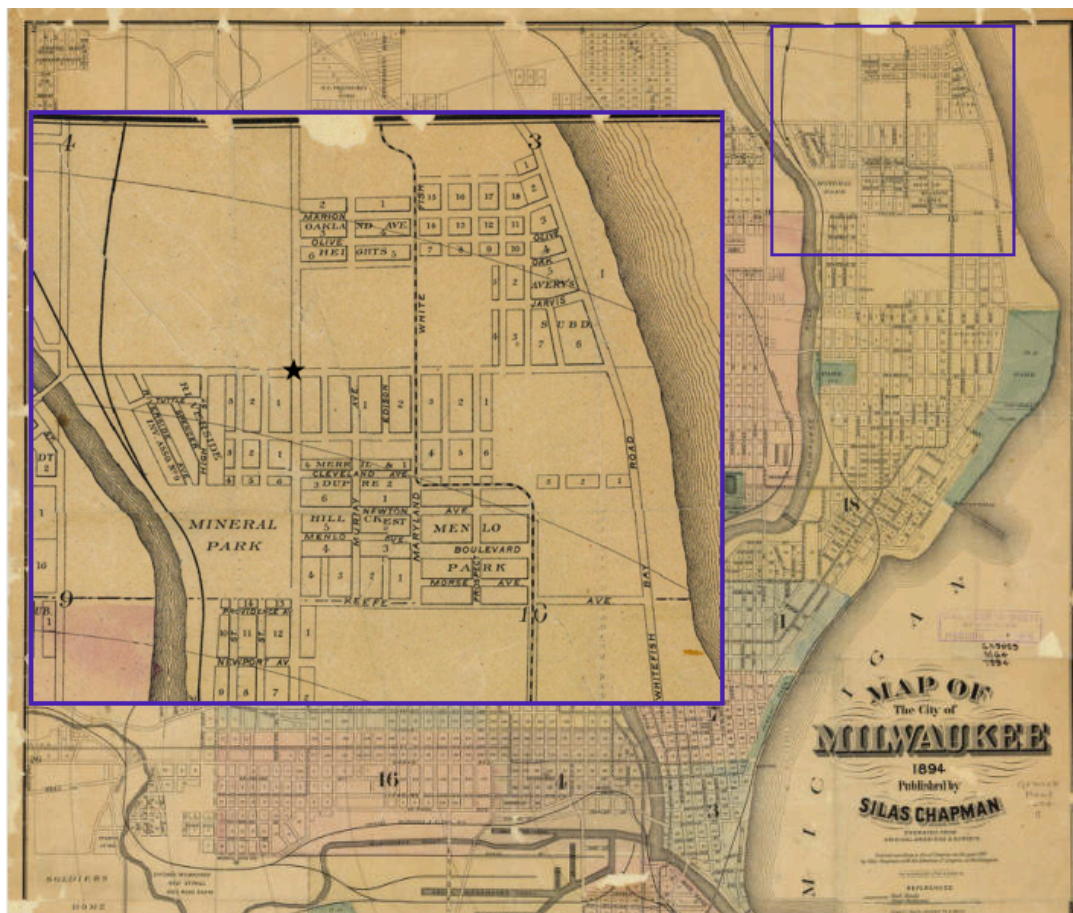


Figure 6: A map of Milwaukee from 1894 with the area that later became Shorewood cut out and expanded. The black star marks the intersection of present-day Oakland Ave. and Capitol Dr.<sup>17</sup>





Figure 7: A 1900 picture showing Oakland Avenue with streetcar tracks.<sup>18</sup>

### **Finding a Village Identity**

The same drive that led East Milwaukee residents to incorporate the village and later to change the name of the community to Shorewood also created a hunger for a separate and distinct identity from the city of Milwaukee beyond that of simply a different name. Less than a decade after renaming the village Shorewood, members of the community had already come to an agreement that education, and shared communal learning more broadly, were to be a top priority.

As a relatively isolated neighborhood both geographically and by choice, Shorewood has long valued community institutions and programs, and this remains apparent today in the layout of the village. The two oldest schools, Atwater Elementary and Shorewood High, are located on Capitol Drive, the latter at the intersection with Oakland at the exact center of the village. Both schools are multistory and have grand entrances flanked by ionic columns, manicured campuses

with attractive lawns, and carefully placed trees and gardens (Figure 8). The high school administration building also has a distinguishable copper dome. Lake Bluff Elementary, although not situated quite as centrally as the other two schools, is architecturally similar and places an even greater emphasis on green space (Figure 9). The importance of these three schools on the landscape is easily visible when looking at an aerial view of the village – they are some of the most prominent irregularities in the pattern of houses and have some of the largest open green spaces (Figure 10).

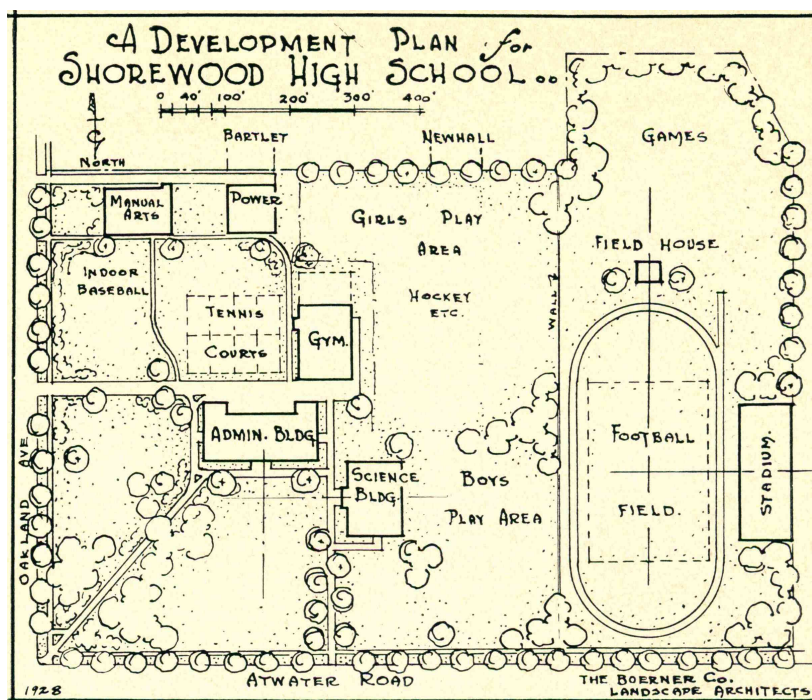


Figure 8: The development plan for the high school. Notably, much of the twenty-acre campus is partitioned as recreation and green spaces.<sup>19</sup>



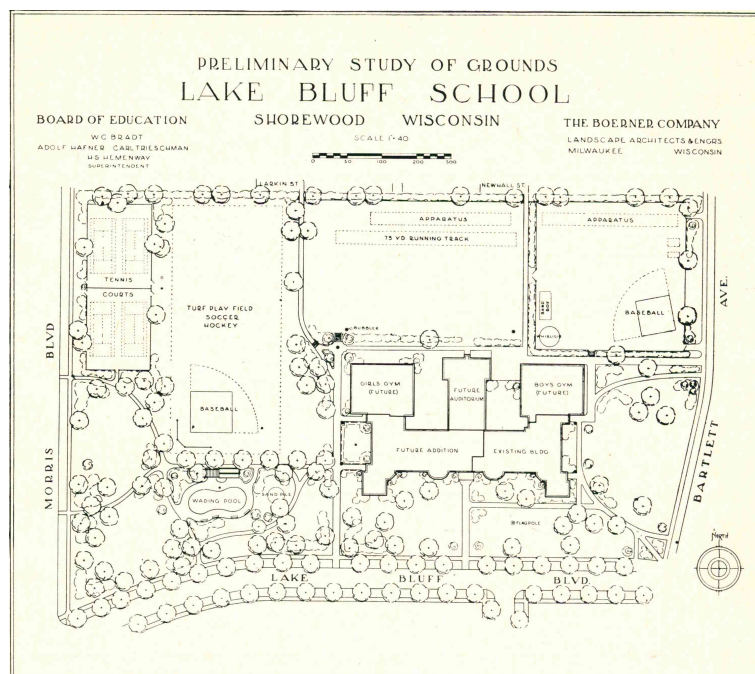


Figure 9: The proposed plan of development for the Lake Bluff Campus in the 1920s. Similarly to the high school, the eleven-acre grounds have large areas set aside for recreation.<sup>20</sup>

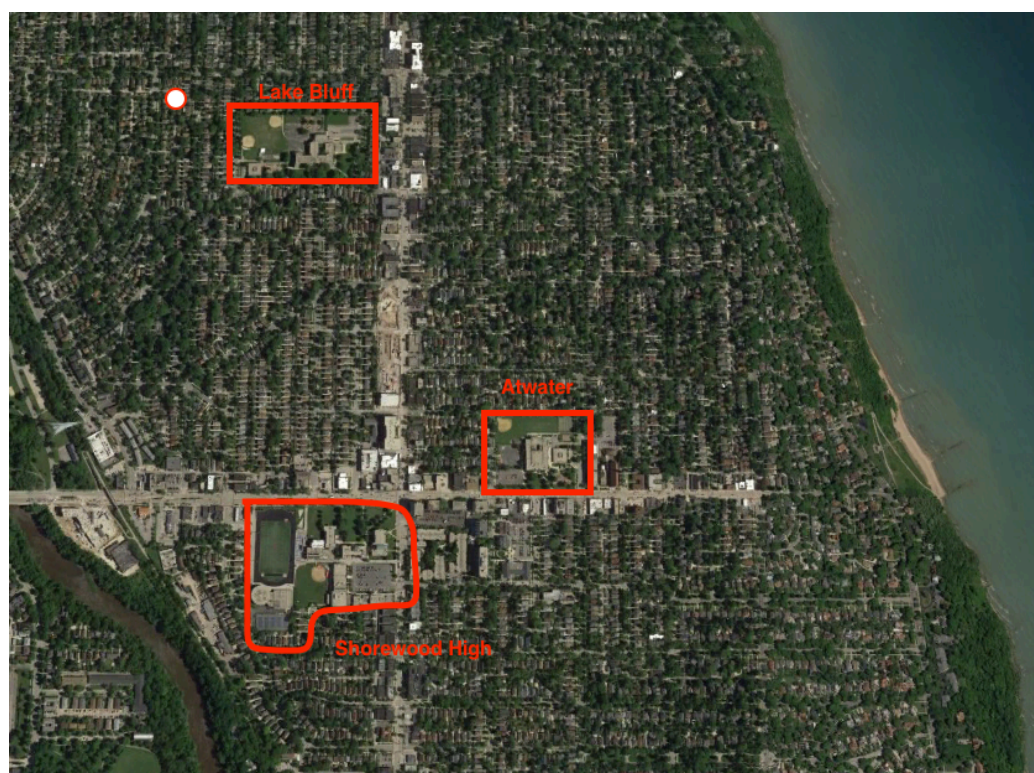


Figure 10: A Google Earth view of Shorewood, WI, with the three public school campuses highlighted. The house my mom lives in today is marked with a white dot.



I spent my early years in Shorewood living east of Oakland Avenue, where all the streets conform to the rectangular grid. However, when I was twelve my mother moved to our current house in the northwest quadrant of the village (Figure 10). This area was one of the last places in the village to be developed, as evidenced by the empty plots on historical planning maps (Figures 6, 11), and by the younger houses present in those areas today.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, architects and developers had to contend with the irregular path of the river, resulting in the obvious frontier line where the rectangular grid meets a system of streets arranged in concentric curves. When we first moved, I regularly got lost as a result of these irregular street layouts. At that time I still primarily navigated using visible cues, such as houses that I recognized, as opposed to looking at street signs and making connections that way. I wasn't yet used to using maps, physical or digital, so I wandered around a lot until I made sense of this new environment.

These same irregularities that confounded me when I was twelve had also made it difficult for planners organizing the village more than 50 years before I was born. Approximately rectangular plots organized in a regular rectangular pattern on a street system that didn't use a rectangular grid had resulted in small slivers of land that were too small or too oddly shaped to build houses on. Therefore, planners turned them into miniature parks, a feature which today is obvious on the village landscape. There are two isosceles-shaped parks in close proximity to my house, both located at nodes where the different road systems clashed. These mini parks are not found east of Oakland Avenue because the grid is standard throughout. Interestingly, they also aren't found in the southwestern quadrant either, even though the grid falls apart in certain places, and I suspect there are two reasons for this. First, the river follows a more rectilinear path in this quadrant, and second, many of the oddly shaped lots were incorporated into Hubbard Park (the site of the old resort and fairground) or never existed at all due to the park. Shorewood has

constantly faced a challenge between creating enough public, communal spaces and creating enough housing to address its high population density. However, these mini parks are a perfect example of how the village has capitalized on every available piece of land to better serve its populace. This pattern I've described isn't quite as clear-cut as I've made it out to be. A modern map of Shorewood (Figure 12) shows that there are other regions where the grid is bent or stretched, but to the best of my knowledge the only mini parks officially recognized by the village are indeed in the northwest quadrant.



Figure 11: A 1901 map of the Village of East Milwaukee, the year after it was incorporated.<sup>22</sup>

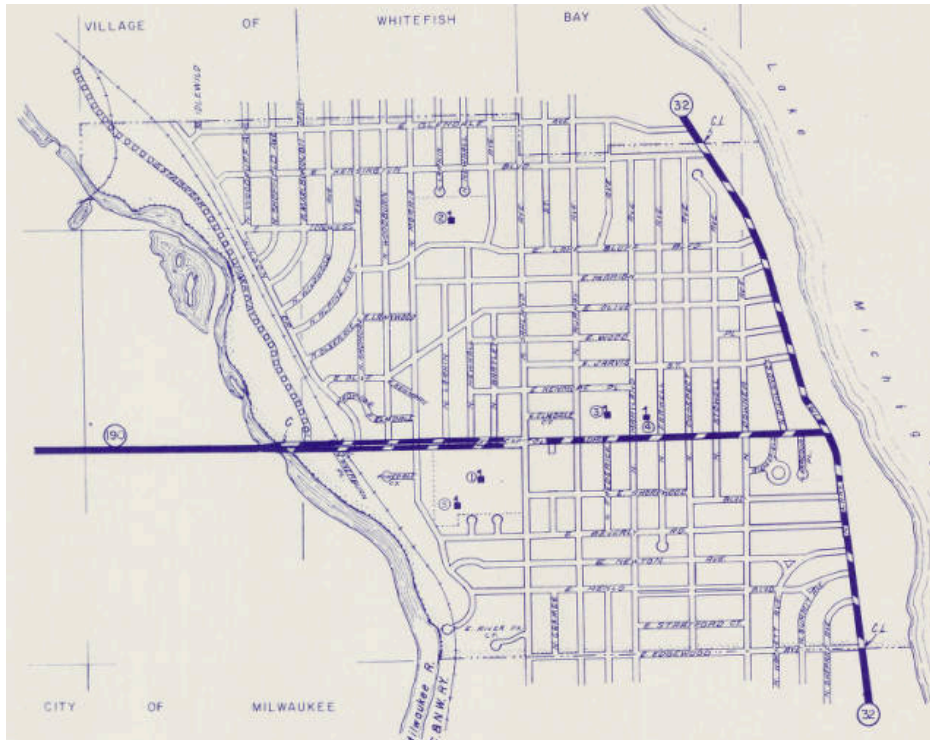


Figure 12: A relatively modern map of the village with all street names current.<sup>23</sup>

A key part of the village ethos has always centered on the physical accessibility of community places. For instance, the schools celebrate the fact that students can walk from home every day, and that you can travel by foot to the stores, to any of the village parks, and to the library. This emphasis on “walkability” is a point of pride for Shorewood, but also a necessity since the narrow streets, tightly packed houses, and high population density mean that economization of space is paramount and parking in lots and on streets is limited. This was not inevitable, but instead was at least in part the result of conscious prioritization of public spaces, especially school grounds. As early as 1929 the Superintendent remarked in his yearly report,

*“Shorewood, years ago, adopted the separate building idea, or the so called, ‘Campus’ development plan. Surrounded as each building is by green lawns and shrubbery, and with and [sic] abundance of light and air for each room, an observer will testify to the*

*beauty of the plan. There are no dark corridors in the Shorewood High School. When all the proposed buildings have been completed, a visitor may see an architecturally harmonious group surrounded by stately trees and bordered by a beautiful boulevard.*"<sup>24</sup>

The village could have made the decision to construct the school buildings closer together or to abandon the campus model altogether. It could have kept the buildings where they were and used some of the open spaces for private housing or expansion of the business district. Instead citizens chose to keep the campus intact, the only exception being the field behind the administration building that was converted into a school parking lot (Figure 13) as car ownership in the village became more widespread.<sup>25</sup> People still gripe about the lack of parking spots at the high school to this day, and in fact the school has prohibited student parking altogether in attempt to appease village members who want to use community facilities at the high school like the gym and swimming pool. Even though parking is a constant source of conflict, the village has decided that these open green spaces won't be compromised, and that the village is "walkable" enough to force students to get to and from school using transportation that isn't a private car.



Figure 13: An aerial view of the high school campus. This image was published as the cover of the 1939 Budget Report. The star on the image indicates the field that later became the parking lot.<sup>26</sup>

A pamphlet produced by the Shorewood Historical Society in 2014 celebrating its 30-year anniversary contains an interview with Virginia Palmer, a lifelong Shorewood resident and former president of the society. In it, she recalls the train passing through Shorewood, saying,

*I have not forgotten the sound of the whistle of the Northwestern Railroad train as it followed tracks along the west border of the Village. The tracks have long given way to a bike path, so I was surprised to hear the other day what I thought was a train approaching the crossing at Capitol Dr. Upon reflection, I realized that it must have been the sounds of a freight train in the City of Milwaukee.<sup>27</sup>*

This year the village commissioned a local artist to create an art installation on the Oak Leaf Trail Bridge that straddles Capitol Drive. The exhibit, “The Ghost Train,” commemorates the Twin Cities 400 operated by the Chicago and Northwestern Union Railway, so named because it traversed the 400 miles between Milwaukee and the Twin Cities in about 400 minutes, a remarkable feat of speed at the time. The installation features a dynamic light and audio system giving the impression of a train whizzing across the bridge, timed to coincide with the historic railway schedule (Figure 14). This exhibit perfectly encapsulates the relationship between historical transportation systems that shaped the village and the communal identity that arose as a result of those early features. Even though the trains and tracks are long since gone, and the whistle at the principal grade crossing has been gone longer still, every night you can now hear the Twin Cities 400 steaming through Shorewood, carrying with it the entire history of the village.





Figure 14: The Ghost Train installation on Capitol Drive.<sup>28</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Information from <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

<sup>2</sup> Clay McShane, "Technology and Reform" (master's thesis, Dept. of History, U of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin* (Chicago, IL: Arcadia, 2000) 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> United States Investment Association, *United States Investment Association's Subdivision No. 1: in S.W. 1/4 Sec. 33, Town 8, Range 22 East* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: United States Investment Association, 1891).

<sup>5</sup> Silas Chapman, *Map of the City of Milwaukee*, 1894 (Wisconsin Historical Society) <http://cdm15932.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/maps/id/13678>

<sup>6</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *A Shorewood Sampler* (Shorewood, WI: Shorewood Historical Society, 2014), 27.

<sup>8</sup> "Annual Review," *Shorewood Herald*, December 26, 1935, Microform P96-454, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>9</sup> "Overflow Crowd Jams Bus Hearing on Monday," *Shorewood Herald*, March 9, 1939, Microform P96-455, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sheldon, *Iron bridge Crossing Milwaukee River*, February 28, 1926 (Charles Sheldon Collection, Shorewood Historical Society, Wisconsin) <http://content.mpl.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/SWH/id/19/rec/16>

<sup>11</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *A Shorewood Sampler*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Sheldon, *Chicago & North Western Rail Road passenger train crossing Capitol Drive in Shorewood*, 1924 (Charles Sheldon Collection, Shorewood Historical Society, Wisconsin) <http://content.mpl.org/cdm/ref/collection/SWH/id/15>

<sup>13</sup> Village of Shorewood, *The General Ordinances of the Village of Shorewood as Revised, Consolidated and Amended, Together with an Appendix, and a Complete List of the Officers of the Village from Its Incorporation to 1921 Inclusive* (Shorewood, Wisconsin: Village Board, 1921), 24-26.

<sup>14</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Historic Milwaukee Incorporated, *Spaces & Traces Open House Tour: Village of Shorewood* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Historic Milwaukee, Inc., 2013), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *A Shorewood Sampler*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Chapman, *Map of the City of Milwaukee*, 1894.

<sup>18</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Shorewood Board of Education, *The Shorewood School Situation: "Facts and Possibilities"* (Village of Shorewood, Milwaukee, Wisconsin: School District Number Four, 1928), 12.

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- <sup>20</sup> Shorewood Superintendent of Schools, *Report of the Superintendent of Schools to the Shorewood Board of Education for the School Year 1928-1929* (Shorewood, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin: Board of Education, 1929), 18.
- <sup>21</sup> Gordon Birr (revised text and photos), *The Shorewood Historical Society Presents a Guide to Shorewood's Architecture: Six Walking Tours of Shorewood's Neighborhoods with a Glossary of Architectural Styles* (Shorewood, Wisconsin: The Shorewood Historical Society, 2001) 52-59.
- <sup>22</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin*, 10.
- <sup>23</sup> Wisconsin Department of Transportation, *DOT Maps of Wisconsin Cities and Villages: Showing City Limits and Roads – Shorewood*, 1983-1990 (Wisconsin Historical Society) <http://cdm15932.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/maps/id/15305>
- <sup>24</sup> Shorewood Superintendent of Schools, *Report of the Superintendent*, 9.
- <sup>25</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *Shorewood, Wisconsin*, 59.
- <sup>26</sup> Shorewood Board of Education, *Annual Budget Report* (Shorewood, Wisconsin: Board of Education, 1939), cover page.
- <sup>27</sup> Shorewood Historical Society, *A Shorewood Sampler*, 27.
- <sup>28</sup> John O'Hara, Ghost Train (North Shore Now, November 1, 2016) <http://www.mynorthshorenw.com/story/news/local/shorewood/2016/11/01/awe-inspiring-ghost-train-lights-up-capitol-drive/93100244/>

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