

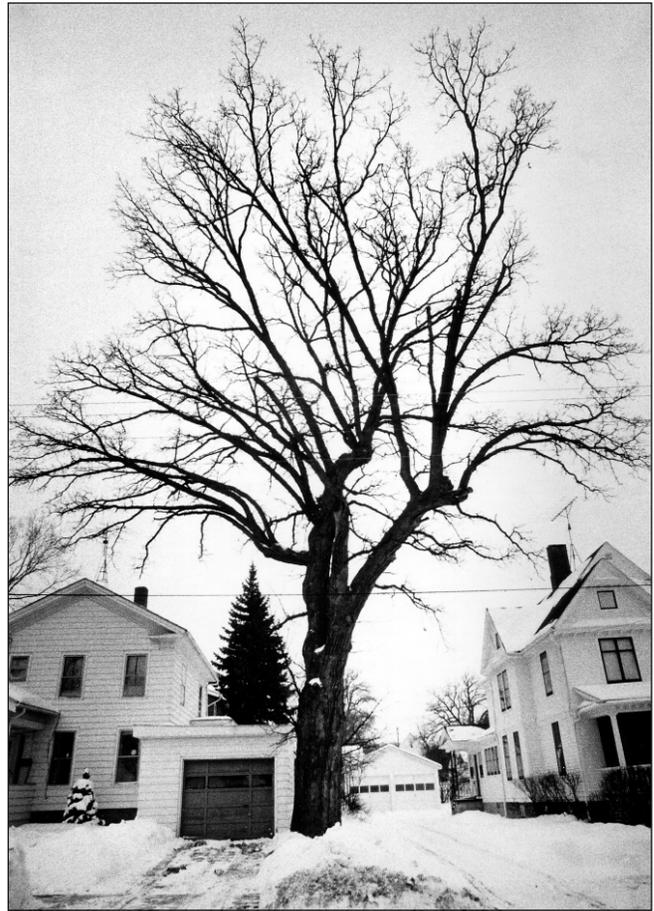
Ripon's Signal Oak

The Signal Oak, standing at the northwest corner of Ransom and Thorne Streets in downtown Ripon, was one of Wisconsin's native bur oaks lucky enough to be growing at a hub of history. A huge tree, measuring more than 12 feet in circumference, and well over 200 years old, the oak was blown down during a tornado in the early 1990s. Along with another oak now gone, this tree served as a signal or marker tree along the famous Butte des Morts Trail from Green Bay to Oshkosh. Before soldiers from Fort Howard slashed the Military Road through the wilderness, Native Americans, fur trappers and traders, soldiers and very early settlers used the Butte des Morts trail in the winter when they could not traverse the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. Highway 44 between Ripon and Oshkosh follows part of this original route.

In the realm of social innovation, Warren Chase, in 1844, attracted devotees of the French philosopher Charles Fourier to a community called Ceresco, a short distance to the west of the tree. Some 200 followers—the Wisconsin Phalanx—built a long house there, pursuing their socialistic or communal lifestyle for seven years before disbanding.

The Signal Oak witnessed the founding of Ripon by Captain David P. Mapes in 1849, and a year later, the establishment of Ripon College on a nearby hill.

The birthplace of the Grand Old Party, a small, white frame schoolhouse within walking distance of the Signal Oak, made political history about the same time the Fourierites were disbanding. In 1852, Alvan Earle Bovay, who had been drawn to Ripon by the Fourierite communitarian experiment, had met with Horace Greeley in New York to talk about a new political party. When a bill permitting the expansion of slavery beyond the limits set in the Missouri Compromise passed the U.S. Senate in 1854, Bovay called a meeting and 53 voters gathered in the schoolhouse and organized a new party. They advocated the barring of slavery from the territories and adopted the name Bovay suggested: Republican.



Ripon Signal Oak

Eric Weston (1982)

Military history, too, was played out just a short distance north of the Signal Oak when the First Wisconsin Cavalry mustered the men who would help preserve the Union during the Civil War.

Richard Dart, an early resident of the Ripon area and the son of the founder of Dartford (Green Lake), researched the historical facts about the Signal Oak. Lyle Cors wrote a tribute to the tree in 1956, and the first in a series of Ripon historical prints, an idea conceived by the Community Art Center, commemorated the city's oldest landmark with a handsome, limited-edition silkscreen print.

Sources: Esther Bent, Ripon
Doug Lyke, Ripon
Allan Mortenson, Ripon
Donald Redman, Ripon
Tracy Salisbury, DNR