

The Edgewood Oaks

Madison

Until the early 1990s, a venerable bur oak leaned out from a fringe of woods, arching its strong, heavy limbs across Edgewood Drive, the tree-shaded lane that leads from Woodrow Street into Madison's Vilas Park. It was one of the oldest trees in the capital city, with a circumference of 10 feet 10 inches. Early Madison historian A. O. Barton estimated the tree's age at 400 years. Walter E. Scott, noted big tree recorder, says Increase Lapham, Wisconsin's first scientist, may have tethered his horse Adelaide under this tree. Certainly Lapham spent time on that very ridge, surveying the Indian mounds and preparing a map of them to be published by the Smithsonian Institution in *Antiquities of Wisconsin* in 1855.

According to Prof. Robert S. Ellarson of the University of Wisconsin, the most widespread and abundant plant associations the first European explorers

and surveyors found in the Four Lakes area were oak openings with the bur, white and sometimes black oak the dominant members. Other surveyors, working during December 1834 where the state capitol now stands, wrote in their field notes: "timber, black, white and burr O. Undergrowth same."

In 1976, Walter Scott, whose interest in trees had raised everyone's natural heritage consciousness, proposed as a Bicentennial project to identify all the 200-year-old oaks within an eight-mile radius of the capitol. A total of more than 400 oaks met or exceeded this size requirement and were recorded and marked. Seven of them, including the Lapham tree, were on the Edgewood campus.

As the historian Barton wrote of the oldest Edgewood oak in the 1930s, "It has seen the coming and going of waterfowl on Lake Wingra, sheltered genera-



Edgewood Drive Oaks

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)



Edgewood Drive Shagbark Hickory

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

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tions of Indians, and watched the deer and buffalo feeding in the present Edgewood pasture. It was an old tree when Madison was settled a century ago.”

All the Edgewood campus oaks presided over ages of Native American encampments, as the Ho-Chunk made their annual migrations to Lake Wingra, one of their favorite hunting and fishing grounds. While the Ho-Chunk presence diminished after the Black Hawk War of 1832, small numbers continued to come back each spring, well into the 1900s, their temporary summer shelters suddenly appearing along the shoreline.

In the 1840s pioneer governor Leonard Farwell bought up hundreds of acres of the wooded lands around the lake. In 1855 he sold 55 acres of the higher ground to John Ashmead, a Philadelphia lawyer. Ashmead called the beautiful villa he built there for his family “Edgewood.” When his wife died only a year later, he sold the place to Samuel Marshall, who had founded the Marshall and Ilsley Bank of Milwaukee and wanted to start a bank in Madison.

Marshall, an amateur horticulturist, planted the stately row of trees on each side of the driveway from Monroe Street to the house. In 1873 Governor-elect Cadwallader Washburn became owner of the estate. Unfortunately he failed to win a second term, and he decided to move to Minneapolis. In a most generous gesture, he gave the property to the Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, who at that time operated St. Regina’s Academy on Henry Street. After the details of the turnover had been settled, Governor Washburn, proud of the landscaped grounds, escorted the sisters on a tour, pointing out the many beautiful trees: a shell bark hickory, many pines and a huge silver maple. He asked that they be saved and protected. Of course they were. Many of the lovely and historic old trees continue to add immeasurably to the tranquil learning environment of Edgewood’s modern-day educational complex.

Sources: Claire Geesaman, Madison
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