

Rescued from Oblivion

Indian mounds have a unique place in downtown history

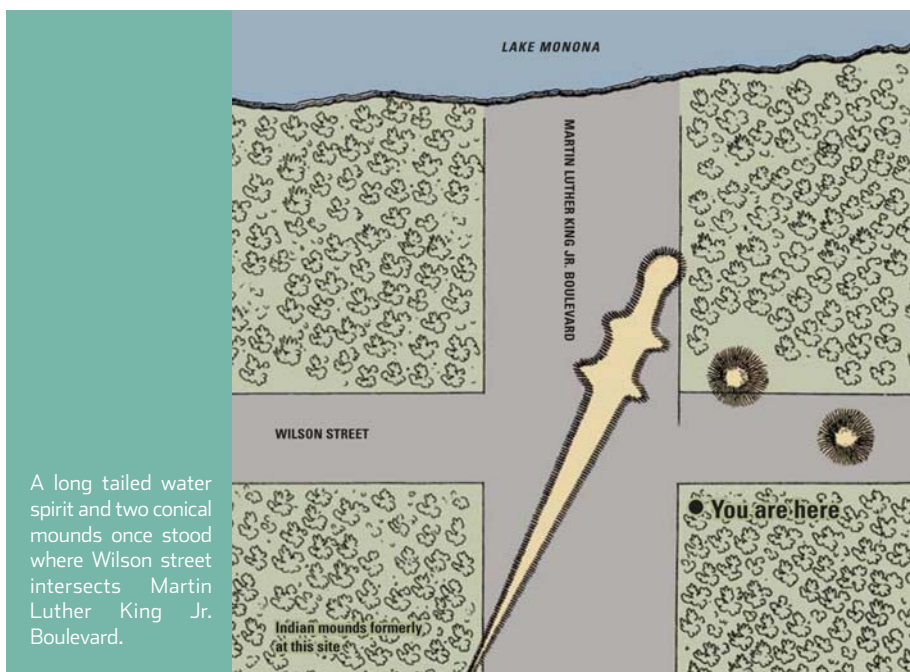
By Nadine Goff

Small symbols depicting Indian effigy mounds “float” in the opened netted dome atop “Forum of Origin,” the pavilion-like structure that resides near the top of State Street, close to three of downtown Madison’s museums. These symbols are reminders that Indian mounds are an important part of the Wisconsin landscape.

The land in downtown Madison near the Monona Terrace Convention Center was once home to several Indian mounds, which archaeologists refer to as the Monona Park Mounds. Today, they are only memories, “rescued from oblivion” by Frank Hudson, a young surveyor from Philadelphia, hired in 1840 by Madison pioneer Simeon Mills to survey and plat the university grounds.

In 1842, Hudson, who had become interested in the customs of the Winnebago Indians camping along the shores of Lake Monona, made “a very accurate drawing” of a large effigy mound and two conical mounds located near the intersection of Wilson Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (then called Wisconsin Street). The effigy mound was in the shape of a long-tailed water spirit. It was 318 feet long, had two sets of legs, and its head pointed toward Lake Monona. Each of the conical mounds was forty-two feet in diameter.

By the 1855 publication of Increase A. Lapham’s *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, a book reflecting his interest in the Indian mounds found in the state’s landscape, the three mounds had vanished. Only Hudson’s drawing of the mounds, a copy of which he had presented to the State Historical



A long tailed water spirit and two conical mounds once stood where Wilson street intersects Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Society in 1847, remained.

Rapid urbanization also destroyed many hundreds of other Indian mounds that once existed in Madison. In 1894, pioneer newspaper editor Major Horace A. Tenney recalled how he destroyed an Indian mound on State Street and used the material from the mound to fill in the street during the territorial days when he served as the city’s village president and street superintendent.

“But later, when I began to appreciate archaeology, I felt like a vandal,” he told a reporter from the *Madison Democrat*.

Thanks to Charles E. Brown (1872–1946),

curator of the Museum of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and secretary of the Wisconsin Archaeological Society, many of Madison’s Indian mounds did not fall victim to developers. The city is still home to some magnificent ancient Native American sacred sites and graves, such as the enormous bird that still “flies” across the grounds of Mendota State Hospital.

Madison native Nadine Goff is a freelance writer and photographer. She’s writing a history of Madison Central High School and blogs about it at madisonchistory.blogspot.com

Tight Squeeze



By Dick Wagner

Enjoy those lake views on the isthmus but remember: the land available for transportation options is limited

Blame it on **James Doty** and the nineteenth-century legislature. After all, the developer-politician and our elected officials were the ones who placed our state capitol and the university on a beautiful but narrow isthmus. This challenge has always been a cause for local inventiveness. The railroads figured out ways to build causeways across the lake giving us the only X rail crossing over water. And they figured out how to build tracks over the great central marsh.

During those days, when Madison was small and horses were the main mode of transportation, our city ancestors probably worried more about the muck in the streets than the limits of our land mass. But then came the auto, and everything changed. The need for greater street capacity called for innovative solutions like one-way paired streets, which remain with us today.

Over the years, traffic debates included the construction of a freeway between Gorham and Johnson to the east with a major interchange at Regent. Then there was talk of tunneling under

University Heights to create Campus Drive. Another proposal was the lakefront freeway along Monona’s north shore to Olbrich. Thankfully, none of these ideas were realized, and Madison, unlike most cities, avoided ripping up its urban fabric and restored its valuable isthmus neighborhoods.

Now, in the twenty-first century, it’s imperative that Madisonians remain inventive about moving people to and through the isthmus, for the core of our region boasts the seat of government and education, as well as the vibrancy of cultural, sporting and major civic events in the same narrow land. It’s time to realize that our choices for the future must now include rail.

With the late twentieth-century rebuilding of University Avenue and the present rebuilding of E. Washington Avenue, we have maximized our isthmus street capacity. If we continue to grow, the only choice we have for isthmus corridor capacity is the rail corridors. Thanks to rail preservation programs, we have a strong regional network of rail corridors that reach most population centers in the county. They can serve us well.

A project called Transport 2020, which studies transportation improvement options in Madison and Dane County, looks to that future of a booming core in a growing region with the first phase of a regional commuter rail system. Now in its second phase, Transport 2020 is taking a look at a combination bus/rail system that would run from Sun Prairie to Middleton. The system offers a sustainable regional choice to balance our transportation options. Let’s keep our thinking caps on as we contemplate the transportation choices Doty’s site has given us.

A member Transport 2020 (transport2020.net), Dick Wagner spent fourteen years on the Dane County Board, four of them as Chair, and six years on the Madison Plan Commission.