

Historical Perspective on Planning for the Yahara River Parkway

The Yahara River, originally called the Catfish River, connects the four Yahara Lakes. The Catfish existed in an undisturbed, indigenous ecosystem, flowing through marsh, swamp, and forested bottomland in a natural meandering route from Lake Mendota to Lake Monona.

Madison's earliest European-American settlers straightened the Catfish River by 1905. When the river was straightened, it was renamed the Yahara River. Since the turn of the century, Madison's citizens and civic organizations have recognized the Yahara River Parkway as a unique City asset – a natural cross-isthmus link between Lakes Mendota and Monona – and as an opportunity to establish a continuous open space corridor accessible to all. The words of a 1903 report of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association remain compelling today: "One of the unique features of Madison and one possessing great possibilities for the beautifying of the City is the Yahara River. This river and its banks should be reclaimed for the people of this City [in order to] secure to the public, for all time, free and uninterrupted use and enjoyment of this river and its banks."

True to these words, the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association introduced the Yahara River Parkway, Madison's first and only river parkway, as a concept in 1903. The initial planning and development for Madison's first great public park, Tenney Park, was completed in 1911, which used the design proposals of O. C. Simonds. The establishment of Tenney Park changed the association's direction and started the golden age of park formation in Madison.



"There is hardly one man in this community but what will rejoice when he walks along the banks of the Yahara River after it is beautified as it is to be, to feel that he himself was one of its proprietors, a participator of the cost of that work."

*Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association
Report of the Officers
April 1903*

Considered by many to be the father of the Prairie School of Landscape Design, Simonds took as his model his native Midwestern Prairie and sought to utilize native plant species such as Viburnum, Hawthorne, Dogwood, and Elms, a novel concept at that time. As he did in Tenney Park, Simonds utilized curving narrow paths and irregular masses of mostly native species on the banks of the Yahara River. Simonds' plan also envisioned continuous, uninterrupted, and accessible public paths on each side of the river.

The Parkway was built almost entirely with private subscriptions; of the 482 subscribers, one-half gave \$10 or less. Along with land being donated by prominent citizens, 56 teamsters agreed to donate two loads each of crushed stones for fill. In the spirit of civic pride, the railroad companies raised/built new bridges; and in 1904, Norwegian Consul Halle Steensland offered \$10,000 to build a stone bridge over the Yahara River at East Washington Avenue.

“Other than the state capitol grounds, Tenney Park served as Madison's first designed public space. In addition to its physical design attributes, provided by landscape architect O. C. Simonds, Tenney Park fulfilled an important social role in Madison at the turn of the century: situated on the eastern side of Madison, the park was readily accessible to the City's working class population. When considering its position as the City's first public park, along with its design excellence and social significance, Tenney Park is Madison's version of New York City's Central Park.”

*Prof. Arnold R. Alanen
University of Wisconsin-Madison*

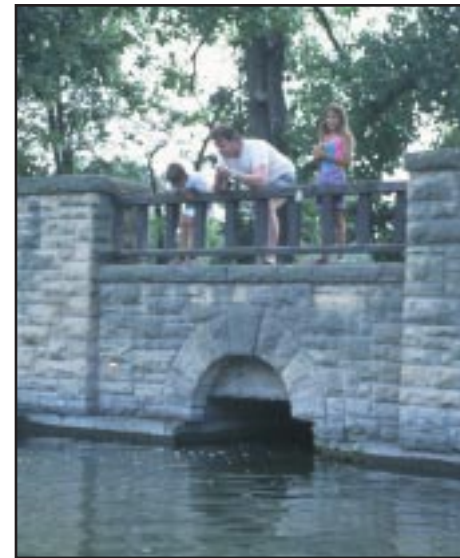
Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway – City Landmarks.

The Tenney Park and Yahara River Parkway were designated Madison Landmarks in 1995. Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway triggered an era of incredible park philanthropy in Madison. During the 19th century, Orton Park was the only developed parkland in the City. In 1894, a private group was founded to address the need for increased parkland: the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association (MPPDA). In the first years of its existence, the group focused its activities on the development of “pleasure drives” – landscaped roads that made their way through the countryside, and which were used primarily by the one-fourth of the population who had sufficient means to own horses or the occasional horse-less carriage. Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway were the first parks developed by the Association that were intended to provide a place of recreation and beauty for the majority of the population. The success of these efforts encouraged the MPPDA to develop additional parks, including Brittingham, Vilas, Olin, Hoyt, Law, and Nakoma, as well as the Glenway Golf Course. In 1938, the MPPDA was dissolved and handed over all of its lands to the City, along with a

legacy of commitment to parks and open space that continues to this day.

The Madison Parks and Pleasure Drive Association was formed by John Olin and some of his associates as a volunteer organization devoted to the development of Madison's parks, scenic drives, and sports facilities. As Madison's first designed park, its land and lagoons formerly were marshland. The park was developed in four sections. O.C. Simonds, a landscape designer, is credited as one of the founders of the Prairie School of Landscape Design, which was an outgrowth of earlier English precedents that included the romantic, picturesque, and undulating terrain of a natural landscape. The Prairie School is characterized by the use of native plants, local building materials, and natural regional topography to capture the essence of the local region. Simonds believed in employing certain rules to govern design: unity, one picture in a view, and the use of all the senses (smell, sight, etc.). Simonds manipulated the landscape to look like the natural world. O.C. Simonds' design for Tenney Park, done between 1898 and 1906, reflects the qualities of a prairie landscape (see pages 14 and 15).

In 1911, John Nolen revised the master plan for Tenney Park and the Yahara Parkway to accommodate the public desire for active recreation. John Nolen is known as one of the founders of city planning in



Thornton Avenue spillway built in 1916 is an historical element on the Yahara River used for fishing.

America. He believed in beautiful entries to a city, a unified park system, an orderly street system, and housing for all people. Nolen felt that the Yahara Parkway was the most important connection in the Madison park system.

The YRP Committee's concept plan retains Simonds' vision for the Yahara River Parkway while adding modifications required by increases in automobile and bicycle use that have occurred since the turn of the century. While he envisioned two pedestrian paths – one on each side of the river (see photographs, pages 1 and 11) – the YRP Committee recommends a low-impact pedestrian path on one side of the river and a bike/pedestrian path on the other side. In addition, the YRP Committee recommends a Parkway feature that was probably not necessary ninety years ago but which is crucial today: pedestrian underpasses where the Parkway intersects East Johnson Street and East Washington Avenue, two arterial streets that carry tens of thousands of vehicles per day across the Yahara River.

In his introduction to the report, *Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway* (1997), Lance M. Neckar, ASLA, states the document creates a framework for planning, future maintenance, and planting, and construction both in the park and along the parkway in a manner that will preserve and enhance their historic integrity. The report details the historical significance and general principles of the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Parkway and Tenney Park. Neckar states that “Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway are distinguished by the combined significance of their design in the ‘prairie spirit’ and their importance in the progressive period as nationally-recognized works of civic improvement. This dual significance also represents the nexus between civic improvement and landscape architecture in the late nineteenth century and the progressive period prior to the First World War.” He articulates three general principles to guide the renewal of the park-owned lands: Curvilinear Connective Paths,

Native Plant Masses, and Replanting Guides. The specific principles relating to the Yahara River Parkway are: 1) Modal (vehicle and bike-pedestrian) and grade separation for paths, 2) prairie spirit plantings defining water edge and continuity, and 3) plantings for personal safety. His ground rule for park land improvements replicates the Committee's recommendations for the development of a path system, restoration of pathways under bridges, adaptive redesign of spaces for recreational uses, the creation of an ecological corridor, the aesthetic idea of the “long view” as a space framed by shrub masses and, most importantly, restoring the original quality of Tenney Park and the Yahara River Parkway design by O.C. Simonds.

Bridges. The bridges over the Yahara River and Tenney Park are a prominent design element in creating the sense of history, character, and aesthetics of the river Parkway. Special attention has been given to the bridge from the beginning of Madison history.



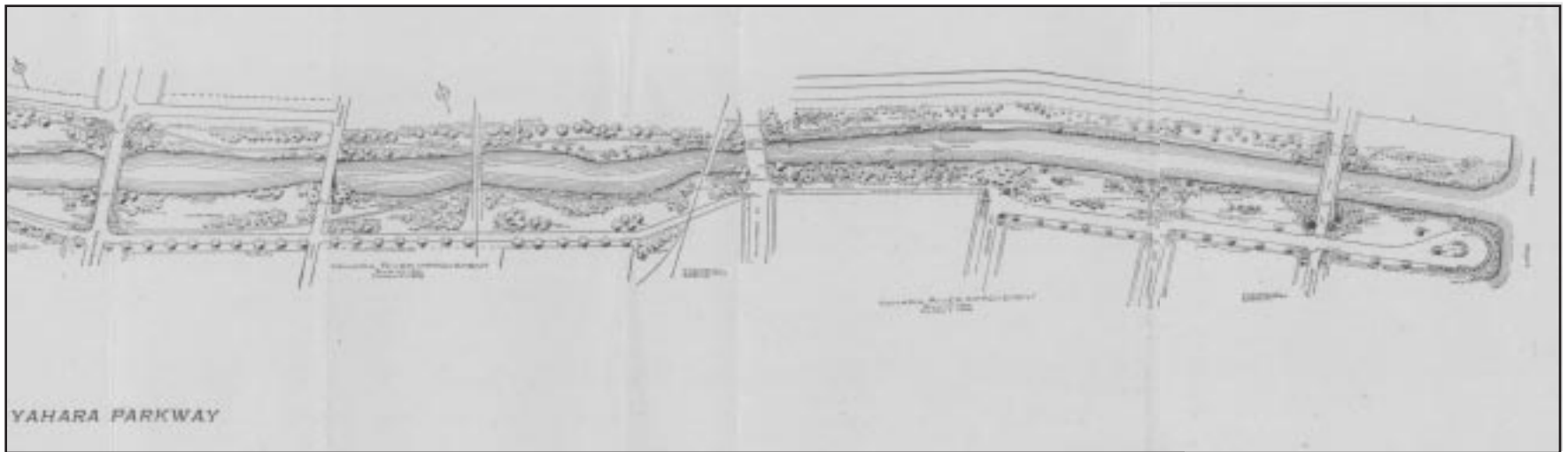
Rutledge Street Bridge looking northwest

Our civic leaders clearly stated that consideration be given to artistic quality rather than utilitarian bridge structures, "...so that it behooves us to demand not merely strength but dignity and civic splendor in their construction. Every City bridge is an opportunity. It cannot be too often stated that nothing pays so well as beauty, and that this constitutes a large part of the capital of Madison."

*Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association Report
May 1904*



Tenney Park and Yahara Parkway
Original plans designed and drawn by O.C. Simonds, 1906



*Boating on the Yahara River was a popular activity
at the turn of the century*

*Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association
1911*



People enjoying the Tenney Park Lagoon

*Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association
1908*

In November 1904, Norwegian Consul Halle Steensland offered to pay for the Rutledge Street Bridge as a present to the City of Madison in commemoration of his 50 years residency in the City. The East Main Street Bridge appears identical to the Rutledge Street Bridge. Although the East Main Street span was built in 1926, ten years after the Rutledge Street Bridge, it appears to have been constructed according to the same plan. The bridge is a classically detailed concrete arch bridge and an excellent local example of a structure designed along certain aesthetic principles. The bridge is scheduled to be reconstructed in a manner similar to the recently completed Rutledge Street Bridge. The bridges are a major part of the Landmark designation and careful attention should be paid to future decisions that relate to them.



Main Street Bridge (scheduled for reconstruction in the Summer of 1998) in the foreground with East Washington Avenue Steensland Bridge in background

Study Area Description

The Yahara River Parkway. The primary study area is the Yahara River Parkway itself, a corridor running parallel to the Yahara River as it flows across the isthmus from Lake Mendota to Lake Monona. With a 50-foot wide strip of green space on each side of the river that is about a mile in length, the Parkway includes some 16.5 acres of land. The secondary study area consists of land parcels directly adjacent to the Parkway that represent opportunities for increasing open space, implementing Parkway amenities, and encouraging future redevelopment (including residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional functions)

that complements the Parkway and meets the needs of neighborhood and City residents. Lying approximately one mile east of the state capitol, the Parkway crosses two primary arterial streets (East Johnson Street and East Washington Avenue) and connects four City parks (Tenney, Filene, Yahara Place, and Burr Jones Field).

The Yahara River and Four Lakes.

The Yahara River and its lakes – Mendota, Monona, Waubesa and Kegonsa – are important in providing scenic beauty and swimming, boating, and fishing opportunities for area residents and visitors. As a result, the lakes are highly valued physical resources and are an integral part of the quality of life that Dane County residents enjoy.

Geological History. The lakes were formed about 10,000 years ago when the last glacier deposited a thick layer of glacial till (unsorted sediment) over the landscape and dammed up the large preglacial Yahara River Valley. The Yahara watershed (land area draining to the lakes) covers 359 square miles (over one quarter of Dane County). The Yahara River begins just north of Dane County in Columbia County and flows southward to connect the four lakes, finally joining the Rock River in Rock County. Much of the watershed is farmed; however, the watershed also contains most of the urban land in the Madison metropolitan area. In addition, the Yahara watershed includes some of the largest wetlands left in Dane County.

The Yahara lakes are classified as eutrophic lakes. Eutrophic lakes have an overabundant supply of nutrients and excessive weeds and algae. Lake Mendota includes 9,842 acres of water with 21.9 miles of shoreline. It takes about 6.3 years for the lake to flush through its 135 billion gallons of water. Lake Monona includes 3,274 acres of water with 13.2 miles of shoreline. The Yahara River is