

SIMONDS' PLAT FOR THE HIGHLANDS, 1911
Orient the map by the railroad track and the Middleton Road.
Note that the roads are almost exactly as they are today.
With meticulous care, Simonds specified every planting.
Some of the trees he asked for are still there today.

MADISON'S HIGHLANDS

A Community With a Land Ethic

by Norman K. Risjord





*W. H. Lighty and his sons, Russell and Paul,
ca., 1918.*



*View of the Highlands from the back of the Lighty house, ca. 1920.
Lake Mendota can be seen in the distance.*

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*A Community
With a Land Ethic*

by
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South Highlands Ave.
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MADISON'S HIGHLANDS

Where others saw a hillside farm planted in corn and oats, a few Madison men envisioned a community of people with a special relationship to the land. They named it the Highlands and formed a company to develop it. The year was 1911.

The hillside farm rested on one of a series of hills that formed the western slope of the great basin that houses Madison's lakes. There was little to distinguish the Highlands from the rolling farmland that stretched northward toward the village of Middleton and south toward the road to Mineral Point. Years past, the oak-dotted prairie known to the Indians had been converted to cropland and pasture. The Miner family farmed this particular hillside. Their house, built in 1860, sat near the crest of the hill facing south toward the winter sun as it stands today at 6010 South Highlands Avenue (the Meads').

The men who formed the Highlands Company were quite familiar with the area. Ernest N. Warner, president of the company, was a Madison lawyer who owned a farm to the northwest of the Miner property (now the Skyline

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development). Edward T. Owen, the company's vice-president, was a university professor who owned a farm to the south of the Miners' across Old Sauk Road (present-day Owen Park). On the board of directors was Andrew R. Whitson, a state geologist, who lived on Old Sauk Road just downhill from the one-room schoolhouse (now Crestwood School) where the neighboring farm children learned their ABCs. A single teacher held sway over all eight grades, a total of 28 to 30 children. She took recitation from one grade at a time, while the others studied. Older girls helped with the youngest children. The school had neither water nor electricity. Each day a pair of boys carried two pails down to the Whitsons', or across the road to the Owens', to fetch drinking water. The teacher, lacking accommodations of her own, boarded two weeks at a time with the farm families.

What did these men see in the Highlands that held more promise for development than the lands they already held? Most likely, it was the convenience of road and rail access. At the base of the Highlands the dirt road that wound northwesterly from Madison to Middleton crossed the tracks of the Milwaukee Railroad, whose trains commuted daily between Madison and the farm marketing centers of the West. The Highlands was some five miles west of the city limit, which was then the University of Wisconsin campus. The Highlands investors knew that if their residential experiment was to be a success, its people must have easy access to the city. The Middleton Road was a convenient carriage route; it could even be navigated by the new-fangled automobiles. But the key was the railroad, which provided a faster, cheaper, and smoother ride into the city. Stopping

the train at the road crossing required only a handwave by day or a burning paper torch signal by night.

The first brochure put out by the Highlands investors revealed their concern for transportation. It stressed the convenience of the Milwaukee Road stop, and it noted that a proposed "Interurban Railway," which was then being surveyed, would "pass about two blocks from the entrance to the Highlands." The brochure also promised that "the lots are so large that those desiring to do so can keep horses or automobiles thus providing a number of methods of transportation." Expanding on this theme, the investors pointed out that it was "only a short walk" from the Highlands to Mendota Beach, where in summertime one could catch a "steamer" across the lake to the city. Finally, the investors reminded potential buyers that the university was then in the process of acquiring the Raymer and Olin farms at Picnic Point and Eagle Heights. Since these were, in the view of the investors, natural sites for future classroom buildings, the university itself would soon be "but a short distance" from the Highlands.

The Highlands Company, formed in 1911, hired Chicago landscape architect Ossian Cole Simonds to lay out the plat. This was a significant move, for it meant that the Highlands from the beginning was to be something other than the ordinary. Simonds was one of the best-known landscape architects in the country. He had designed parks and cemeteries in a dozen mid-western cities, including Tenney Park and Vilas Park in the city of Madison. Just two years before the Highlands Company retained him, Simonds had founded at the University of Michigan the first four-year landscape architecture program in the midwest. Thus the

Highlands would become the visual embodiment of the landscape philosophy of Ossian C. Simonds.

Born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1855, Simonds graduated from the University of Michigan in 1878 with a degree in civil engineering. His first job was with a Chicago engineering firm that had a contract to install a lagoon in Chicago's Graceland Cemetery. When Simonds finished the lagoon, he became interested in landscaping the remainder of the cemetery. The Cemetery Association obliged and made him its director in 1881. He held the post until 1898 when he left to go into business for himself.

The profession of landscape architecture (or landscape gardening as it was more commonly known) was then in its infancy. The handbooks and models were nearly all of English origin. Through the nineteenth century the designers of landed estates for the wealthy merchants of New York and Philadelphia followed English patterns. They installed neatly trimmed hedges in geometrical patterns, and they laid out square or oval plots for evenly spaced rows of flowers, selected for a harmonious blend of colors. The first American to break from this tradition was Frederick Law Olmsted, a traveler/journalist of the Civil War era. (His *Journey through the Cotton Kingdom*, 1861, is one of the classics of travel literature.) His travels convinced Olmsted that the natural landscape was far more beautiful than anything that could be devised by man. He got an opportunity to apply this principle when he won a competition to design New York's Central Park in 1872. Olmsted's plan involved retaining the natural features of the landscape, including most of the vegetation. When planting was necessary, he used native species, rather than exotic imports. A purist to the

soul, Olmsted even built a wall around the park to limit access by people.

The success of Central Park earned Olmsted commissions to design parks in other eastern cities, and he went on to write numerous books and articles on the preservation of nature in landscape design. Simonds absorbed Olmsted's writings and adapted his principles to the prairie lands of the American midwest. Graceland Cemetery was his laboratory. Since the prairie that was once there had long since been destroyed, Simonds sought to restore the past by planting native species, not just of prairie grasses and flowers, but native shrubs and trees, such as hawthorne, wild plum, oaks, and sugar maples.

Less a purist than Olmsted, Simonds sought to make the landscape work for people. In this he retained some of the elements of the English picturesque tradition. Simonds felt that the virgin prairie was a drab, even forbidding landscape, a flat vista that stretched dutifully toward an unattainable horizon. He humanized his landscapes by imposing splashes of vertical greenery, soothing in summer and colorful in autumn. His favorite design form he called "the long view," which was in fact a confined—and therefore comfortable—vista created by a narrow opening between vegetation yet blocked by a terminal vista. His "long views" were the most famous feature of the Graceland Cemetery, and he experimented with them again in the design of the Highlands. (The effect he sought can best be experienced today by walking down South Highlands Avenue under the canopy of oak trees. The road bends just enough to block a view of its terminus at Old Middleton Road until one is almost upon the intersection.)

There was yet another possible influence on Simonds, which may have shaped his thinking when he took up his pen to plat the Highlands—the concept of the City Beautiful. The principal promoter of this approach to the urban environment was another Chicago-based architect, Daniel Hudson Burnham. Burnham had risen to national prominence by designing a “Great White City” on Chicago’s lakefront to house the Columbian Exposition in 1893 (celebrating the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America). Burnham’s vision was that architecture could influence human behavior—that a well-planned city with spacious avenues, pure-white buildings, and monuments as reminders of a glorious past would inspire virtuous behavior and public spirit among its inhabitants. The idea appealed to Progressives (a political reform movement led nationally by President Theodore Roosevelt and in Wisconsin by Governor/Senator Robert M. LaFollette), who were deeply concerned about crime and disorder in the nation’s cities.

Simonds was almost certainly acquainted with Burnham’s idea of the influence of environment on behavior. Both men were members of Chicago’s numerous clubs devoted to art and design. And Simonds could hardly have escaped an acquaintance with the City Beautiful movement since it permeated the field of urban planning in the years prior to World War I. The federal government even gave it its blessing when it retained Burnham in 1905 to plan the city of Manila in the Philippines.

Whether or not they were aware of Burnham’s views on city planning, the Highlands investors were almost certainly familiar with the main currents of Progressive thought. On the Board of Directors of the Highlands Company (which only contained five men) was University of Wis-

consin sociology Professor Edward A. Ross, whose book *Sin and Society*, published just four years earlier, was a scathing indictment of the ethics of American business corporations. The book, for which President Theodore Roosevelt himself wrote an introduction, had earned Ross instant national prominence. His aphorism “there is nothing like distance to disinfect dividends” became one of the slogans of the Progressive movement. More important, for the purposes of the Highlands story, was Ross’s sociology. Like Daniel Burnham, he believed that people were influenced by their surroundings. He called for a sociology of “pure environmentalism,” “methods of analyzing society which recognize that relationships to property have something to do with what men think.”

Given this view of behavior and his national reputation, Ross was a logical candidate for the Highlands’ Board of Directors. Those familiar with his ideas would find depth and meaning in the enterprise. The proposed community would be more than a tawdry real estate speculation. Ross himself bought a parcel in the Highlands although he later sold it without ever building.

In laying out the Highlands plat, Ossian Simonds applied his design principles as best he could, given the lack of vegetation. The roads he marked out curved gracefully and followed the natural contours of the landscape. The principal road formed a rough horseshoe that began near the railroad crossing and climbed gently to the West before curving to the top of the hill and then returning steeply to the Middleton Road. A sort of back entryway (a public right-of-way since the 1880s) allowed access to Old Sauk Road from the top of the hill. On the northward slope of the hill a triangular plot of several acres was preserved as a

public park. Simonds' plan called for the planting of sugar maple trees on the southern and western edges of the park. They can still be seen today, and in the springtime yield their sap to a few of the more enterprising members of the Highlands community. With meticulous care Simonds specified the plantings for every roadside, choosing wild roses, wild plums, hawthorns, barberry, "Indian currents," red maples, white oaks, and elms.

A Highlands Association was formed in 1912 to preserve the development as Simonds had planned it. The Association was particularly concerned that the sizable estates envisioned by the developers were not carved into smaller parcels. It also continued the job of landscaping the roadways, obtaining shrubs from the university's botanical garden that would provide food and cover for birds.

It was some years before the Highlands lost its pastoral character. The first resident of the new subdivision was Professor W. H. Lighty, who purchased the Miner homestead and was living there when the Highlands was platted. Lighty had been a social settlement worker in St. Louis before coming to Madison in 1906 to develop correspondence courses for the University Extension. Later, in 1922, when the university radio station WHA began broadcasting, Lighty was made its first program director. An escapee from the city, Lighty kept his Highlands environment determinedly pastoral. He kept a small flock of sheep in his yard, and he tethered a cow in the community park. He also planted an apple orchard up the hill from his house, the first of many intrusions on Ossian Simonds' plans for a natural landscape. Lighty used the railroad for transportation into Madison, but he rode his horse to the trainstop. A story, firmly embedded in Highlands lore, is that the horse

would return home alone in the morning and then go back to meet the train in the afternoon, receiving a nosebag of oats as its reward. To keep the horse happy in the interim Lighty invented an automatic feeder, paced by an alarm clock that dropped oats into a bin automatically at 12:00 noon.

The brochure of the Highlands Company specified that the "Highlands has been planned as a place in which to make your permanent home, not as a place for summer cottages. Each home may properly be called a small estate." The brochure went on to provide pictures of the sort of houses the developers had in mind—stately, multi-storied dwellings that required means but not necessarily vast wealth. Initially, they had only one taker. Walter Hart, a university mathematics professor, purchased a multi-acre tract along the Middleton Road at the base of the hill. The house he built in 1915, which he placed on the upper end of his tract for maximum view, corresponded closely to the samples in the Highlands brochure. But otherwise construction must have seemed discouragingly slow. In 1916 John Icke began purchasing from the Highlands Company a thirteen acre tract on the northern edge of the plat and put it to the plow. For more than two decades the Icke property remained a truck farm, as Icke grew fruits and vegetables for the Madison market. Icke was a building contractor who lived in Madison; his children, three sons and a daughter, worked the garden patch. One of the sons, George, who presently resides on a portion of the original farm, remembers raising 5,000 quarts of strawberries in 1929 and being put through college on the proceeds from the asparagus patch.

Not only was construction slow in coming, but the

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developers' vision of year-around homes was not always met. In ¹⁹¹⁴1915 Professor ^{James} Julius Francis ^{Augustine} Pyre (who for understandable reasons preferred the nickname "Sonny") began construction of a summer cottage a short distance up the hill from Hart's establishment. As summer cottages went, however, it almost certainly suited the requirements of the developers. Built in the style of a Swiss chalet, it was commodious enough so that Professor Pyre, a Shakespearian scholar in the university's English Department, later moved in with his family on a permanent basis.

By the time the Pyre house was completed, two others were under construction. The sharp increase in the pace of building may well have been due to the increased availability of automobiles (Henry Ford introduced the moving assembly line in 1913), which made the Highlands more accessible. Both of the new homes were magnificent structures that did justice to their spacious settings. Thomas Brittingham, who had made his fortune in the lumber business, built his house on a ten-acre estate on the southern edge of the Highlands plat, with private access to the Old Sauk Road. Brittingham's son, Thomas Jr., became in the 1930s the manager of investment funds for the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation. The Brittingham family left large endowments to the University of Wisconsin, including, in the end, their Highlands estate, which is now the home of the university's president.

Even more grandiose was the house built in 1916 by Dr. Frederick Davis and his wife Edith. Dr. Davis was a world renowned eye surgeon, and his wife was the daughter of Magnus Swenson, the Norwegian-American who invented the modern method of sugar refining. The mansion, named Edenfred (a contraction of the couples' names) can

only be described as unique. Built of red brick in the Georgian style, Edenfred's principal feature is a dramatic entry portico graced with great white Corinthian columns. The house is 180 feet wide and only one room (26 feet) deep. The purpose of this odd shape was evidently two fold: to allow for maximum ventilation and to give every room access to the view. And the view is memorable. Situated at the crest of the hill, the house commands a twenty-mile vista stretching to the far shores of Lake Mendota. The Davises counted among their friends president Herbert Hoover and the prince/president of Norway. Personages from around the world have stayed in Edenfred's guest rooms.

The Brittingham house and Edenfred set the tone for the Highlands and fulfilled the developers' vision of a community of landed estates. When construction resumed in the 1920s the tradition was firmly established. But tradition also clashed with modernization because more people meant more automobiles. Because the noisy contraptions spooked horses, the Highlands Association tried to reserve the roadways around the community park for horses only. When the Association finally yielded to technology, it limited automobile usage to certain hours only.

¹⁹²⁴In 1925 Dr. William A. Beecroft began construction of one of the Highlands most distinctive residences. It was a copy of a chalet that the Beecrofts had seen in Normandy, France, complete with stone walls, turrets, and slate roof. The slate was brought from the East by rail and then hauled by horse and wagon from the Middleton station. Dr. Beecroft, known in Madison as the founder of three of the city's motion picture theaters, lived in the house until his wife died in the mid-1950s. He then sold the chalet, divided

the property, and built on the downhill side a trim, modern house of brick and redwood. Such eclecticism has characterized Highlands building since the 1920s. The Mattox house (1934) is modeled on a French farmhouse, even to the point of having a preplanned sag in the roofline. The Eckert house, designed by the same Chicago architect, is Georgian. The more recent ones, built in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, are varieties of "modern."

Although house design has varied with time and taste, the cohesive feature of the Highlands community is respect for the integrity of the land. Many of those who built when the vegetation was still sparse have maintained the land as they found it. The Mattox house, situated like Edenfred on the crest of the hill, overlooks acres of wildflowers as well as the distant shoreline of Lake Mendota. The Cheneys, whose parcel on North Highlands bordered on the old Icke farm, have carefully nourished a plot of prairie grasses.

Those who arrived in the Highlands after World War II found the remaining land overgrown with natural vegetation—oaks, elms, maples, buckthorn, and box elder—planted for the most part in the way Ossian Simonds would have approved, by birds and squirrels, and by the wind. Most of the newcomers nestled their homes amidst the trees, disturbing as little of the landscape as possible. The result is a community of tree-lined streets, kept in as primitive a condition as safety will allow, curving gracefully through a patchwork of woodlands and clearings, revealing a new facet of nature at every step.

Ossian Simonds could have wished for no finer monument.