

Eagle Heights

Thomas D. Brock

Eagle Heights,¹ a high promontory on the south shore of Lake Mendota, is a unique natural area of great charm and value. It is also of considerable historic interest.² Commanding one of the best views on the south shore of the lake, Eagle Heights was visited often by Native Americans, as witnessed by the extensive effigy mounds on the property. Despite its distance from the city, in the 19th century, sailors, swimmers, hikers, anglers, skiers, and skaters were all attracted to the Picnic Point area, of which Eagle Heights is a natural extension.³

According to the recollection of one early resident:

*Mendota was a lonely, fascinating waste little used. There was not even the University Drive to enliven its shores. Above Eagle Heights the bald eagles still screamed, and one never passed that way without one of the family swooping down from the hill and circling round the boat in graceful curves.*⁴

During the present century, extensive changes in the university and the city have affected the Eagle Heights/Picnic Point area, and some portions have been changed drastically. Fortunately, the vagaries of history have left the Eagle Heights promontory virtually unscathed, and since the area is now firmly under university ownership, its continued protection can be assumed well into the 21st century.

The George Raymer Farm and Drives

The Eagle Heights area and nearby lakeshore frontage was acquired in 1887 by George Raymer, publisher of the *Madison Democrat* newspaper and a prominent citizen.⁵ Raymer lived in a large house on Langdon Street at approximately the location of the present University of Wisconsin Memorial Union, but also ran a substantial farm at Eagle Heights. Raymer was a member of the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin and served two years as its President.⁶

Early in his ownership of the property, Raymer developed a system of dirt roads, including one leading up to the high point of Eagle Heights (sometimes called the "Eagle's Nest"). The north/south road that Raymer built from University Bay Drive along the east side of his property was the first part of what the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association would later call "Lake Mendota Drive". Although Raymer's roads were private, he willingly opened them to the public. Thus, for many years, the commanding location of Eagle Heights could be reached by carriages, and later also by automobiles. The remnants of some of the roads winding up to the promontory are still visible.

Years later, when the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association had become very successful, and its president, John Olin, was much lauded for his vigorous and astute leadership, George Raymer wrote a short letter to the local newspaper reminding people of his role:

"Well, Jud," said Mr. Raymer to the Gleaner [a newspaper columnist], "I see that the Journal has published another inspired account of the origin of the Park and Pleasure Drive association. There has existed in my mind for a long time a sort of dreamy impression that many years ago I built, at a cost of five or six hundred dollars, some two or three miles of drive upon Eagle Heights farm, and it was used by several hundred carriages each summer for at least five years before the Park and Pleasure Drive association had an existence; that it was almost wholly due to this drive that the public subscribed the funds needed to build a drive across the bay to connect it with the University drive, and out of this grew the present system of drives of the Park and Pleasure Drive association. This impression exists to the extent that for a number of years this was called the Raymer Drive, and even now it is infrequently so called, despite the many very painful efforts of Park and Pleasure Drive publications and the inspired newspaper articles to disabuse the public mind of early habits. This belief of mine would seem to be all wrong, judged by all the written history, but there remains the fact that the greater part of that original drive, winding around through the woods up to the top of Eagle Heights is not now and never was any part of the system of the Park and



Portion of the 1890 plat map for the Town of Madison, showing the location of the George Raymer property. University Avenue (then called Sauk Road) is in the lower part of the picture, south of the railroad tracks. University Bay Drive passes north through the Isom and Breitendach properties.

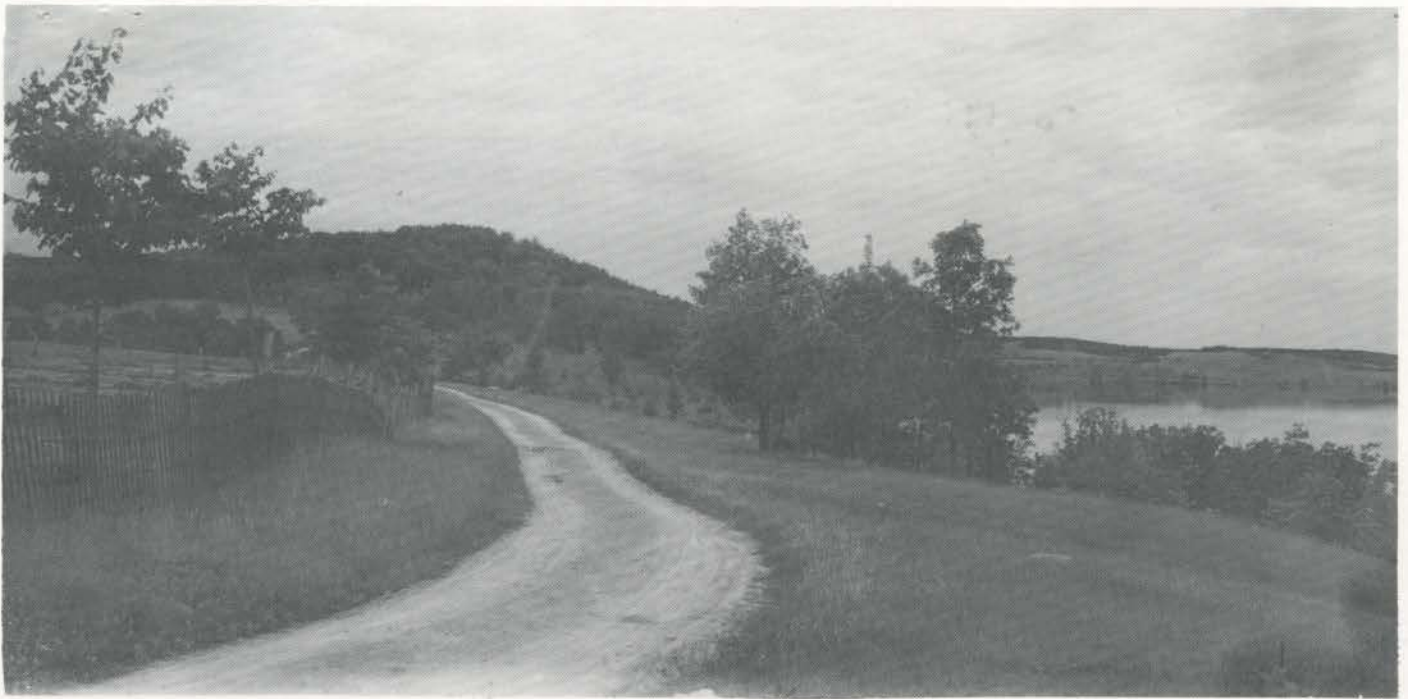


The George Raymer farm, about 1910, looking southwest. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, WHi (D486) 134.

*Pleasure Drive association, although still used quite as much as any of the drives about the city. But, Jud, what was the name of that man who said, with more truth than elegance, that all written history is one big lie!" Well does the Gleaner remember of passing over and writing up the "Raymer Drive," long before the Park and Pleasure Drive association was in existence.*⁷

George Raymer's largess was quite significant in the early years of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association. He also donated as a park a narrow ravine about half way along Raymer Drive that descended to a small beach:

We are all familiar with the beautiful ravine on Mr. Raymer's farm east of the Raymer woods, through which Lake Mendota Drive passes. Mr. Raymer has generously offered to



Lake Mendota Drive through the Raymer farm. The ravine that George Raymer donated as a park is just out of sight down the hill. The Eagle Heights woods and effigy mounds are at the highest point in the distance. The road today follows essentially the same contours. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Anonymous, early 1900's.

convey to the association for a park a diamond-shaped piece of ground which comprises most of this ravine. It contains many native trees and shrubs, and many other trees have been planted upon it. Mr. Raymer, in a recent letter concerning this gift, says: "My purpose in doing this is to secure for the future this grove as one of the beautiful points on the drive."⁸

Remnants of this park remain as an unkempt parking area used by ice anglers and nature enthusiasts. There is an overlook which provides an attractive view across Lake Mendota.

University Acquisitions

Partly due to the recommendation of John Nolen in his famous report,⁹ and partly at the behest of the College of Agriculture, which was interested in experimenting with wetland farming,¹⁰ the University of Wisconsin, in the early part of the 20th century, began to acquire property in the University Bay/Eagle Heights/Picnic Point area.

One major acquisition that the university made at this time was the Eagle Heights farm of George Raymer, purchased from him in 1911 when he retired and moved to California.¹¹ For many years, the College of Agriculture

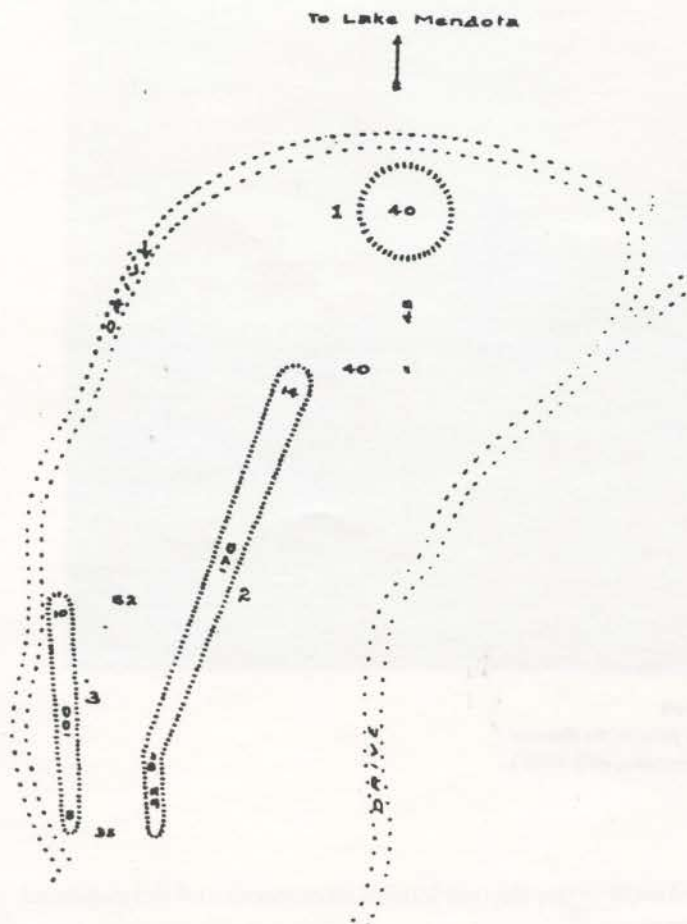
used most of the Raymer land in its research and development operations.¹²

The Eagle Heights Effigy Mounds

The Eagle Heights promontory is the highest point on the south shore of Lake Mendota, 150 feet above the water level. On the very crest of the hill are three mounds, a large conical mound 40 feet in diameter and two tapering linear earthworks 175 and 100 feet long and from 8 to 14 feet wide.¹³ A map of these mounds was published by archaeologist Charles E. Brown in 1912.¹⁴

According to Brown, the Winnebago name for Eagle Heights was Sh-heta-ka (horse hill). The Winnebago believed that this highest hill on the shore was inhabited by a spirit horse, which could be heard neighing and stamping its feet at times. On cloudy or misty days the Indians believed the horse could sometimes be seen on top of the hill. Indians were said to climb this sacred hill to fast and dream and to gain inspiration and power from this spirit horse.¹⁵

In the early 1920's, at a period when Brown was publishing extensively on the effigy mounds of the Madison area, the university placed a plaque on a large glacial boulder adjacent to the three mounds at the high point of Eagle Heights. At that



A map of the Eagle Heights effigy mounds published by Charles E. Brown in 1912. The present footpath to the summit follows the same route as the drive shown, which at that times was open to carriages (and later, automobiles).

time the mounds were said to be “in the care” of the Madison Boy Scouts.¹⁶ At this time the area could be reached by cars, and there are still remnants of asphalt paving and a concrete/log retaining wall in certain places. “The view from Eagle Heights, especially by moonlight, is exquisitely lovely, and the road leading to the view is interesting and mysterious.”¹⁷ (At present the vegetation is so dense that a lake view can only be obtained in the winter.)

The Tent Colony and Black Hawk Cabin

Beginning about 1912, and extending through the end of the 1950’s, the university operated a “Tent Colony”, sometimes called “Camp Gallistella” (after its overseer, A.F. Gallistel), on 25.2 acres of the wooded area below Eagle Heights, on land that was between Lake Mendota Drive and the lake.¹⁸ Students were able to live inexpensively here

during the summer months. Gallistel himself lived in a house near the east end of the colony.¹⁹

Another university-related facility in this area was the cottage operated by the Women’s Athletic Association, which was built near the west end of the university property. The association was granted a ninety-nine year lease by the Regents and raised \$3,500 to build the cottage, which was completed by February 1, 1924. It was used for a number of years as a destination for hikers from the campus, but by the late 1930’s, with the coming of the automobile, it was no longer serving a useful function, since the students now preferred to go farther afield for amusement. Because it could not be adequately protected from vandalism at such a remote location, the cabin was turned over to the Memorial Union, which changed its name to Black Hawk Lodge. The Union extensively remodeled the cottage, installing electricity, telephone, and a kitchen, and a graduate couple was contracted to live there as chaperones. Black Hawk Lodge was promoted as a “drop-in” shelter for students hiking, skiing, biking, and canoeing, but fell into disuse after World War II.²⁰ The land on which the lodge stood later fell into private ownership (see below) and the cabin was demolished sometime in the 1960’s.

From the time of the Raymer purchase in 1911, until the late 1930’s, the university controlled an extensive shoreline of over about 3500 feet that ran from the Gallistel house west to the corporate limits of the Village of Shorewood Hills. However, the university’s ownership of all this land was not to last, since some of it was traded as part of the acquisition of Picnic Point.

Picnic Point

The Picnic Point Farm, just east of the Raymer farm, had been developed in the late 19th century by Breese Stevens and his partner Morris E. Fuller. By the 1920’s it was owned by Stevens’ descendents, and in 1925 Edward J. Young, a wealthy lumberman, purchased the Picnic Point Farm from the Stevens heirs²¹ as a wedding present for his second wife, Alice Martens. Although the previous owners had been absentee farmers, Young and his wife settled there, extensively remodeled the farm house, and raised several children on the property.

On September 4, 1935, a huge fire destroyed the Edward J. Young house on Picnic Point.²² With their house gone, the Young’s decided to sell Picnic Point.²³ Although the university was an eager buyer, Young drove a hard bargain, insisting on receiving not only substantial cash but also land around Eagle Heights, on which Young intended to build a new house. In the real estate transaction (the deeds are dated 1939 and 1941), Young was paid \$205,000, in addition to receiving the



Aerial view of the Eagle Heights area in 1941. Part of the burgeoning Village of Shorewood Hills is shown in the foreground. The white rectangle in the lower left is the tennis court on the grounds of the Shorewood Hills School, at the corner of Amherst, Bowdoin, and Shorewood Boulevard. The University of Wisconsin farm house and orchard can be seen in the middle distance. To the left is the Eagle Heights woods, at that time owned by Edward Young. State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi (D482) 12639.

28 acre Eagle Heights promontory (including the mounds with the university plaque). Young also received that part of the woods north of Lake Mendota Drive that was not being used by the Tent Colony, including the land upon which Black Hawk Cabin stood.

Of the 146 acres that the university had first acquired in the Raymer purchase in 1911, approximately 40 acres were deeded to Young as part of the Picnic Point transaction.

By this time, the College of Agriculture had made extensive developments on the old Raymer farm, including an orchard and many crop fields. The roads that had been built initially by Raymer were now used by the university agriculture workers, and Lake Mendota Drive itself, which had been built by Raymer and the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association, had become a major public thoroughfare for traffic west to Shorewood Hills, and on to Spring Harbor and the Mendota Beach area.

Further Developments on Eagle Heights

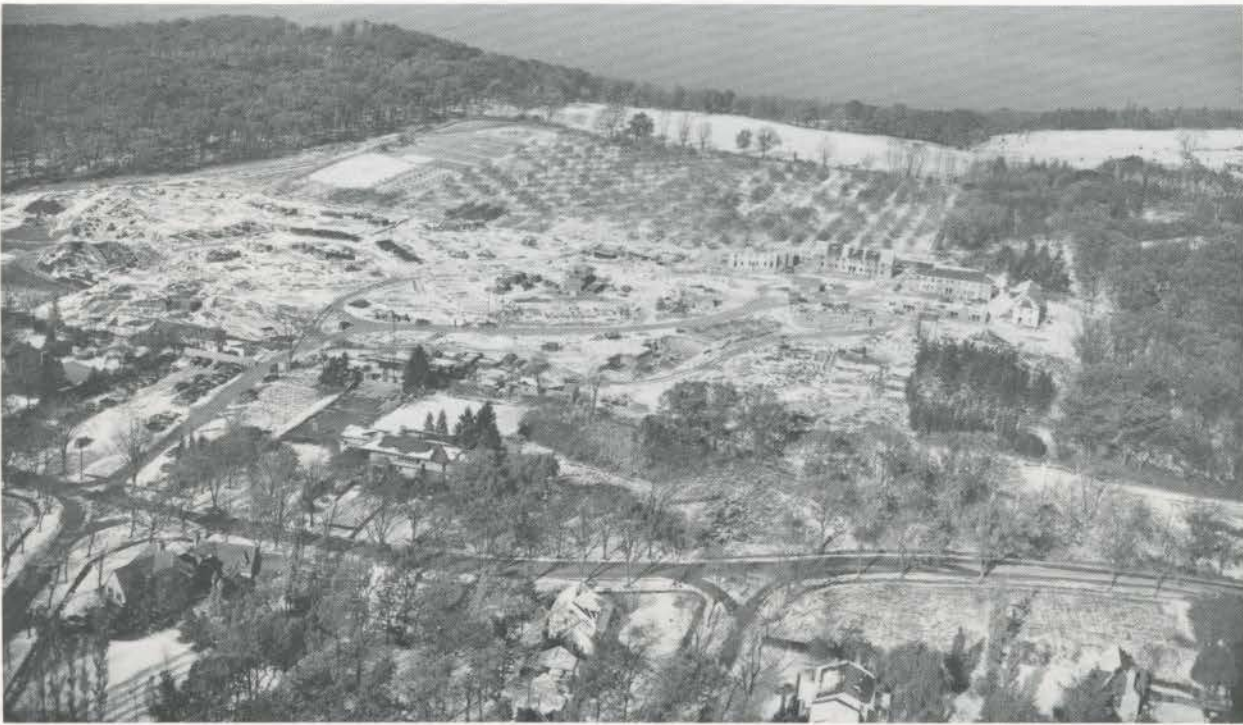
When Edward Young acquired Eagle Heights from the University of Wisconsin, he intended to build a house at the very top of the hill, near the effigy mounds, where it would have had a commanding view of the whole Lake Mendota region. He immediately started landscaping and laying out bridle paths. At this time, streetcars had been phased out in Madison, and Young bought from the city granite blocks that had been used between the rails. Although a blacktop road had been built to the top of the promontory in 1924-

26, it was presumably no longer suitable, since Young began to construct a new road from the base of Wood Lane in the Village of Shorewood Hills (a small street called Shady Lane marks the spot today). Although there are no remnants of this granite-blocked road, many of the blocks themselves can be found in the woods, as well as in walls along Edgehill Drive near the Youngs Shorewood Hills house.

In 1948, Young began to plan for his house. A large area of woods was cleared and Young requested permission from the Village of Shorewood Hills for water and sewer connection.²⁴ Then, in September 1948, before any construction was begun,²⁵ Young died. His widow continued to own the Eagle Heights woods and the shoreline area, holding it as undeveloped land. There was a preliminary proposal in 1950 to develop about 100 homesites on the land, but fortunately this proposal was never completed.²⁶

In 1951, university benefactor Thomas Brittingham, Jr. purchased from Alice Young the 28.2 acres that constituted the Eagle Heights promontory and donated it to the University of Wisconsin. This included the natural area, the effigy mounds, and all of the land that Alice Young owned that was south of Lake Mendota Drive. As far as can be learned from the numerous photographs taken between 1890 and 1950, the woods on the Eagle Heights hill was never disturbed except for the small clearing which Young had made in 1948.²⁷

The land north of Lake Mendota Drive was eventually sold by Alice Young and in the late 1950's and early 1960's, part of this land was developed as a large apartment building, and in the early 1980's a small condominium building was built, the intent being to build further units east until the University of Wisconsin boundary was reached. After one unit was built, a group of public spirited individuals raised money by soliciting



Air photo of the Eagle Heights area in 1948, during the construction of the University Houses apartment complex. At this time, the Eagle Heights woods (upper left) was still in private ownership, and most of the original George Raymer farm was still operated by the College of Agriculture. The road across the bottom of the photograph is Oxford Road in the Village of Shorewood Hills. State Historical Society of Wisconsin WHi (N48) 5419

contributions and in 1984 purchased the remaining land (which they called “Lower Eagle Heights Woods”) for \$398,000. This citizen group, which evolved into the Dane County Natural Heritage Foundation, in 1984 named the land “Wally Bauman Woods”, after Walter R. Bauman, a Dane County Supervisor active in conservation.²⁸ The Dane County Natural Heritage Foundation subsequently donated this land to the University of Wisconsin. It has been maintained in a natural state and is physically contiguous with the former tent colony tract.

Faculty and Married Student Housing in the Eagle Heights Area

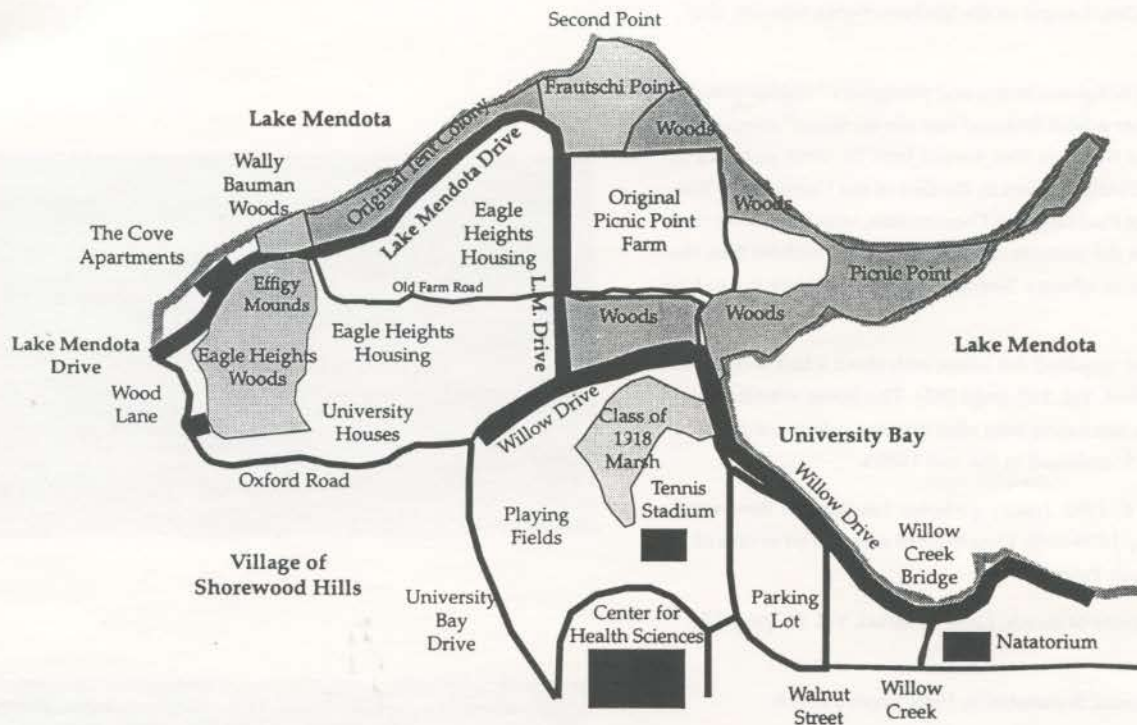
After World War II, the university itself began developing the land it owned along Lake Mendota Drive.²⁹ University Houses, a facility for newly arriving faculty, was built in 1946 and 1947 on land just south of the Eagle Heights promontory. This development was quite successful, and soon afterward, the university made plans to build apartments for married students as well. The first Eagle Heights married student apartments were built near University Bay Drive in

1957. Over the period 1958-1963, further units were built farther up the slope on the old Raymer farm. The final units were built in a university orchard area adjacent to the Eagle Heights woods. Fortunately, the high promontory, with the native woods, effigy mounds, and stunning view, remained undeveloped.

The Eagle Heights Natural Area is now under the management the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, and the remaining natural areas Lake Mendota Drive can look forward to a future of intelligent protection and soft development.

References

1. The name “Eagle Heights” is often used today to refer to the apartment complex managed by the University of Wisconsin. However, the name originally referred solely to the high wooded hill, and it is this usage which is followed in the present article.
2. Although the following is based on original research, it has benefitted greatly from information and literature developed by the University Bay Research Project, a major effort of the early 1970’s, most of which has not



been published. The University Bay Project files can be accessed through the University of Wisconsin Archives. The assistance and encouragement of Richard McCabe, project leader, and Stephanie Brouwer, project assistant, are gratefully acknowledged.

3. According to an article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* for Aug., 2, 1865, a Mr. Boeringer had "built a comfortable refreshment and dancing hall" on Picnic Point where "pleasure parties can be completely accommodated. The invalid can here procure the genuine red wine of Missouri and other wholesome stimulants necessary to invigorate and impart tone to the jaded frame." I have never seen any indication of where this structure might have been, but it presumably was in the nature of a tent-covered open-air pavilion rather than a real building.

4. From "The University of Wisconsin Soon After the Civil War" by Mrs. W.F. Allan. *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 7: 1923-1924, pp. 20-29. [Bald eagles have been seen again at Eagle Heights in recent winters.]

5. Dane County Register of Deeds, Warranty Deed, Volume 136, p. 460 of Deeds (from Timothy Purcell, September 10, 1887); Warranty Deed, Volume 135, page 251 (from David Stephens, September 10, 1887).

6. George Raymer's life and background are given in his obituary published in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 18, 1921. There are also George Raymer papers in the Archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

7. *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 1, 1907

8. Annual Report of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association for 1902, page 28.

9. Nolen, John. 1911. *Madison. A Model City*.

10. The agriculture developments apparently began soon after Harry Russell became Dean of the College of Agriculture in 1907.

11. Dane County Register of Deeds, Warranty Deed, Volume 223, page 162 of Deeds (July 12, 1911). According to the real estate records, the university paid Raymer \$175,000 for his 146 acre property. The university also acquired in 1911 Raymer's home at the northeast corner of Langdon and Park Streets and used it as a student union until the Memorial Union was constructed (*Wisconsin State Journal*, June 18, 1921).

12. Details of these acquisitions are given in McCabe, R.E. and Heggland, Timothy. 1974. *Acquisitional History of the University Bay Area of Lake Mendota*. Unpublished manuscript, University Bay Project files in the archives of the University of Wisconsin. There is also a map of the university land acquisitions in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin archives (GX 9029 M18 UP).

13. For an overview of effigy mounds in the Lake Mendota area, see Brown, Charles E. 1936. History of the Lake Mendota region. pp. 13-16 in *Lake Mendota. Origin and History*. The Technical Club of Madison.

14. Brown, Charles E. 1912. Undescribed groups of Lake Mendota mounds. *Wisconsin Archeologist* 11: 15-17. Either Brown's measurements are incorrect or the mounds have been altered. I have paced off the linear ones at about 200 feet in length.

15. Brown, Charles E. 1927. *Lake Mendota Indian Legends*. Booklet prepared for the use of students, University of Wisconsin, summer session. (In Rare Book Collection of State Historical Society of Wisconsin.)

16. Brown, Charles E. Pamphlet on mounds in the Madison area. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

17. Madison. Junior Civic League of the Madison Public Schools, 1927, page 92.

18. "Camp Gallistella delights scholars and youngsters." *Capital Times*, July 11, 1959. "Summer school featured tent city on shore." *Rhythm Section, Capital Times and Wisconsin State Journal*, June 25, 1993, page 2. The acreage of Camp Gallistella is given in the files of the University of Wisconsin Department of Planning and Construction, which also state that it was discontinued in the summer of 1963. According to these files, the area was to be the site of a future "Scenic Park," which seems not to have been developed.

19. The university had acquired this house with about a half acre of land in 1914 (Warranty Deed, Vol. 242, page 333). The house remained in use as a lake-research laboratory long after the tent colony was abandoned, finally being demolished in the mid 1980's.

20. Trilling, Blanche E. 1952. *History of Physical Education for Women at the University of Wisconsin, 1898-1946*. Unpublished manuscript in files of University Bay Research Project.

21. Dane County Register of Deeds, Land Contract, Vol. 93, page 134, January 31, 1925.

22. *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 5, 1935, pages 1 and 8.

23. Information on the Young family is from a personal interview with Mrs. Edward J. Young conducted by Stephanie Carpenter on July 26, 1973. The original transcript is in the files of the University Bay Project in the archives of the University of Wisconsin. The Young family lived for many years at 3402 Viburnum Drive in the Village of Shorewood Hills, about one block from the entrance to Eagle Heights.

24. Village of Shorewood Hills Board Minutes for April 12, 1948.

25. The large clearing that Young created near the Effigy Mounds can be seen in the 1949 air photo of this area (University of Wisconsin Department of Geography Map Library).

26. The board minutes of the Village of Shorewood Hills of Sept. 12, 1949 have the following item: "Recommending that the Board act favorably on any annexation petition with respect to Eagle Heights land now owned by the Young estate." A search through later board minutes did not reveal that any such petition was presented. In the *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 19, 1950, page 1, there is only an oblique mention to 100 homesites on the "Young estate".

27. According to a Madison Park and Pleasure Drive report, there was a fire in this woods around the beginning of the 20th century, but it was put out by George Raymer's employees after burning only one acre.

28. *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 26, 1984.

29. Information in this paragraph was obtained from the files of the Department of Planning and Construction of the University of Wisconsin.

