

The Isthmus

One strip of land
that defines us
and guides us

By SCOTT MILFRED

A 1,600-foot-tall glacier carved the Madison Isthmus 20,000 years ago, geologists tell us.

Since then, the narrow land between lakes Mendota and Monona has been a favorite spot for American Indians, fur traders, early settlers and eventually the leaders of Wisconsin government.

The Ho-Chunk found the Isthmus an ideal place to grow corn between two abundant fishing holes. After the U.S. government forced the Ho-Chunk to

leave, James Duane Doty bought about 1,200 acres of the Isthmus in 1836 for \$1,500.

That amount might get you one month in a Downtown condo today. The Isthmus remains so popular that the average lakefront home is assessed at about \$700,000.

Yet blue-collar workers built plenty of smaller homes on the Isthmus over the years, and UW-Madison students spread into parts. The hippies invaded in the 1960s and '70s, and later yuppies



* PLACES OF NOTE

caught the vibe. To this day, you can still occasionally see the words “Yuppie Scum” spray painted onto a sidewalk with a circle around it and a line through it.

But the Isthmus is decidedly welcoming, no matter who you are, where you’re from, your worth, color, appearance, faith, age, sexuality or interests.

Just don’t display a President Bush bumper sticker on your car. It’s likely to be discreetly scraped off. Left-wing politics dominate here.

Some fret over the gentrification of the Isthmus. Yet for every lakefront mansion, there remain plenty of reasonably priced apartments. For every restaurant with white tablecloths, there remains a bevy of cheap eats. For every fancy wine bar, there remains a dive bar around the corner, another one up the block, and another one down the street.

The Isthmus is Madison’s undisputed entertainment center. Live music blasts, pulses and soothes every night of the week. During the day, the Isthmus is wonderfully walkable. And the heavily used bike path should someday cut through a giant, 17-acre swath destined to become Madison’s Central Park.

The Isthmus also is about natural beauty — the canopy of trees, the plentiful parks, the lake breeze and beaches.

Lately, the Isthmus has been condo crazy, with tall, dense, stylish structures changing the skyline and streetscape each year. One developer proposed a 27-story tower. But it instantly drew criticism for violating height limits that protect views of the Capitol.

You can spot the Capitol dome from so many directions near Downtown and from miles away. Until the late 1940s, when a radio beacon was installed, pilots looked for the Isthmus and its dome to navigate to the airport.

The Isthmus is Madison. It’s where the action is. It’s where decisions are made. It’s where so many of us, at one time or another — or to this day — have lived and still long for.

It is the living room of our home. ■



Michael Forster Rothbart / UW-Madison Communications

Bascom Hill

When the first University of Wisconsin building went up in 1851, it was on a glacial drumlin covered by blackberry brambles and surrounded by marshland. Bascom Hill would become the face of the university, an image captured on postcards and in works of art. Parallel lines of elm trees were planted from the bottom of the hill to the top, forming an arboreal arch that shaded the 850-foot path that led to the bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln.

When the university received the statue as a gift in 1909, speakers expressed the hope that Lincoln’s “calm, sagacious, determined, and rugged face” would inspire generations of scholars. Ever since, students have stood near the statue to be photographed with Abe, and study at his feet in warm weather, and in 1979 surrounded him with plastic pink flamingos. Lincoln is seated squarely in front of the university’s most famous building, Bascom Hall, which opened in 1859 as the first university building used exclusively for teaching. It was known previously as the “Main Edifice” and “University Hall,” with additions built in 1899, 1905 and 1927. In 1916, its dome was lost in a fire.

Other major university buildings have joined Bascom Hall on its imposing hill, and North Hall, the university’s first building, is still used by the Department of Political Science. It was in Music Hall on the hill that the university’s anthem “On, Wisconsin!” was performed in 1909 for the first time. Seventeen elm trees between 100 and 150 years old still stand on Bascom Hill, and those that were lost to Dutch Elm Disease have been replaced with red oaks and other species.



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