

Our Eastside Hill Heritage | Part 1: Location, Location, Location

Submitted on April 7, 2010

by *Roxanne K. Owens*



The history of every urban community is closely tied to its own unique location and Eau Claire's story and the story of the East Hill are consistent with that fact. The first settlement was established in the mid 1840's at the confluence of the Eau Claire and Chippewa rivers, one of which is a major tributary of the Mississippi. The transportation system provided by the rivers and the large stands of white pine in the area created a nearly perfect place for a village. By the mid to late 1850's there were actually several villages: Half Moon, located on the west side of the Chippewa River, which later became Eau Claire City and then West Eau Claire; North Eau Claire, which was north of the Eau Claire River; and the Village of Eau Claire, which included the east side of the Chippewa River. These all merged and incorporated in March of 1872, becoming what we now know as the City of Eau Claire.

The rivers proved to be a wonderful transportation system for the hauling of goods and the driving of logs, but they were also a major source of aggravation during the early years. Ferry service allowed for the east, west and north parts of the community to communicate, but bridges were needed over the Chippewa River. A bridge had united the east and north cities during the 1860's and probably contributed to the fact that most German-speaking people concentrated in those areas.

The rivalry among the different "Eau Claires" that marked the very early years continued even after the merger. The incorporation included the establishment of the Wards, and the east side of the Chippewa River included the Third Ward, at the southernmost end of the east side; and the Second Ward, which included the East Hill. The Third Ward included many of the wealthiest of Eau Claire's society and, not

surprisingly, contained the smallest percentage of foreign-born people. The Second Ward included more working-class families and a higher percentage of foreign-borns.

The immigration boom years during the latter part of the nineteenth century brought many German, Scandinavian and other Europeans to the region. The German settlement included many Catholics who settled on the north side of the Eau Claire River, and Lutherans who chose the south side. Eventually Sacred Heart parish was established as a German speaking Catholic church and St. John's as a German-speaking Lutheran church. Most of the Scandinavian immigrants chose to settle on the west side of the Chippewa River and established their own Norwegian Lutheran parish there.

The major challenge facing people who chose to live in the Second Ward was "The Hill." Initial grading of the East Hill was done on Eau Claire Street, and by 1880, East Grand Avenue, formerly known as Kelsey Street, also provided a route from downtown to our neighborhood. The 1862 Business Directory showed only one business on the hill — that of John W. French, a blacksmith. His business was located either on the corner of Doty and Main Streets, or Doty and Kelsey Streets, depending on the source consulted. The 400 block of Doty Street was also the location of the first city jail, built in 1859.

The steep grade of the hill was not the only problem. Sometimes horses could not pull an empty wagon up the hill because of the sand. Improvements were made to Barstow Street, and in 1871 the long sand hill now known as Harding Avenue hill was graded and planked. This became a part of the "Sparta Road," a stage run from Sparta to Hudson. People who have lived in Eau Claire for years still refer to that portion of the East Hill as "Plank Hill."

In January 1874, it was noted in a local newspaper that Eau Claire held the title of "Fastest growing city in Wisconsin" for 1873. Unfortunately, the difficulty in conquering and grading the East Hill contributed to a much slower growth rate here than in other Wards of the city. An article published on July 10, 1873, stated that "University Square is becoming one of our most beautiful and important suburbs," but a survey of the addition beyond University Square did not even begin until May 6, 1875.

Dodge and Talmadge streets had been graded by 1891 and provided the only access to Forest Hill Cemetery at that time. Additional grading of the hill included Main Street in 1907 and the upper part of Doty Street in 1939. There was a mention of grading behind the old Second Ward School (Bartlett School) on Farwell Street where the steps are located, and the remnants of that may be the drainage run, which still runs perpendicular to the steps.