The Seminary’s Mequon Site Before 1928

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This presentation deals with the history of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s eighty acres up to 1928, when the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States purchased the property. It is largely an adaptation of a 1985 Seminary senior church history paper entitled, “A Brief Pre-Seminary History of the Western Half of the Northeastern Quarter of Section 22, Town of Mequon.” Some bits of information gleaned at the State Historical Society in Madison and from recent correspondence with Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Wille have supplemented that 1985 paper. This presentation, as did the 1985 effort, claims only tangential connection with serious church history, but it is hoped that tonight’s presentation will be of interest to those who now, or once did, study here, teach here, live here, work here, visit here, and who love these eighty-acres.

I. Indians

The history of the Seminary land before Columbus would be but common-sense speculation based on general accounts of Indian life in Wisconsin if it had not been for an archeological dig conducted within three stones’ throw of the campus. The March, 1958 dig revealed history that is not only before Columbus, but also before Christ.¹

The preliminary digging was done by three children, Lois, Bonnie, and Peter Blume, as they played in a sand pit behind their grandfather, Carl Blume’s, house at 401 Main Street, just north of the former A&W restaurant, now a Chinese restaurant. The children discovered skeletal remains and drew immediate newspaper attention. The Milwaukee Public Museum commissioned a dig under the direction of Robert E. Ritzenthaler. Ritzenthaler described his project in the June, 1958 issue of The Wisconsin Archeologist.²

He found the site much disturbed by the activity of the children. Nevertheless, the work, done just east of the interurban right of way, provided insight into the lives of people who lived in the Seminary area so long ago. Three graves were uncovered along with numerous artifacts. Only one of the three was not already opened by the time the museum crew arrived. They lay three feet down in a sandy ridge, which had been trimmed some four feet by earlier bulldozing. Original burial depth then had been about seven feet. Understandably, there was no evidence that a mound had been there.

What made the Thiensville dig particularly interesting to the archeologists was the use of red ocher, an oxide of iron called hematite in the burial process. The bones and artifacts of the site were covered with the red ocher, though much of it had been washed off before the museum crew began its work. The ocher had stained the bones deep red. At the time red ocher burials had been reported at fewer than a dozen sites in Wisconsin. Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Ontario have also known examples of Red Ocher culture, but these aborigines seem to have operated mainly in the area of southern Lake Michigan from southeastern Wisconsin to southwestern Michigan. Historians and archeologists place the period of the Red Ocher culture between 1500 B.C. and 100 B.C. Radiocarbon dating of the Thiensville material put those artifacts into a time frame between 1000 B.C. and 100 B.C.³

The two disturbed graves were those of two males about whom little could be learned, because only partial skeletons were recovered. The third, however, was that of a woman about eighteen years old (her wisdom teeth had nearly erupted). Her skull was especially interesting because it was extremely wide with a cephalic index of eighty-eight.⁴ (Cephalic index is the ratio of the greatest width of a skull to the greatest length multiplied by 100.) All the bones were excellently preserved both by the good drainage of the sand ridge and by the preservative action of the red ocher.

The Thiensville artifacts, along with evidence from elsewhere, offer some in sight into the lifestyle of these people who walked and worked more than 2000 years ago. Ritzenthaler’s crew discovered many stone
points, scraper knives, five distinctive “turkey-tail” blades, copper awls and beads, and flat marine shell beads and enough tubular shell beads for two or three necklaces. Scholars piece together a picture of the Red Ocher Indians as people who lived in small groups maintaining an economy based on hunting. Apparently they traveled or at least traded widely, for their arrowheads and blades were generally made of harnstone from southern Indiana, they used shell beads from either the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean, and they obtained copper from the Lake Superior region. Some speculate that these first known residents of the Seminary area were part of a transitional group between the Late Archaic and Early Woodland eras in Wisconsin history. This speculation is based on the presumed relative primitiveness of a culture from which no pottery has been found, whose burials were usually in sand (easier digging for People without a lot of tools), and whose highest form of craftsmanship was the turkey-tail blade, so called because of its resemblance at the haft end of a dressed domestic fowl.6

Indians lived in this area from the time of the Red Ocher people until the first whites moved into the area. All were of Algonquin stock—the Sac and Fox, the Chippewa, and the Ottawa. Apparently the Menomonees dominated the region between Lake Michigan and the Milwaukee River and the Potawatomi used the territory west of the river.7 Solomon Juneau, often credited with founding Milwaukee, seems to have moved among and traded with the Indians of this vicinity. His activity from 1818 into the 1830’s did much to foster good relations between the Indians and the whites who began to encroach in the 1830’s.8

In Juneau’s era the Potawatomi occupied the land on which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary now stands. Among the Mequon-Thiensville archives at the Weyenberg Library are notes for a history of the area which record the Potawatomi as living along the banks of Pigeon Creek, the Mequonsippi, amid a dense hardwood forest, especially in the area where the gravel pits presently are, north of Freistadt Road.9 Removing the unnatural boundary of Freistadt Road one can easily extend the Potowatomi habitation onto Seminary land. The northern, low end of campus is similar in terrain to the gravel pits area and is barely one hundred yards from the southern edge of the pits.

Various topographical features afford the opportunity to speculate as to why the locale was advantageous to a Potawatomi settlement, perhaps also for the Red Ocher people. The ridge that crosses the Sem campus from east to west and which then veers north just west of the property, continues for more than a mile before declining north of Highland Road. It still provides shelter from the southerly and westerly winds. There is occasionally a noticeable difference in weather between the top of Sem hill and the lagoon area. The ridge’s slopes are still home to much wildlife. Pigeon Creek hugs the base of the ridge on Sem land and for a third of a mile upstream from Sem. Ample water was available, supplemented by numerous springs which still flow. The modern annual runs of sucker and northern pike which still occur in Pigeon Creek each spring are apparently only a vague hint of the spawning migrations that used to happen in the Milwaukee River system. Early settlers along the Milwaukee used to catch fish by the wagonload.10 The Indian village nestled in the crook of the L-shaped ridge was very close to the trail that ran between Chicago and Green Bay and later became the present Green Bay Road. Swifter transportation was readily available on the river.

That Indians used the present Seminary lands is beyond doubt. Edgar Wille, who was born and raised on these eighty acres, in 1985 recalled finding occasional arrowheads and the like as a boy. (He also remembered his father, Charles, first on the land in 1871, reminiscing about Indians in the area.) In the fall of 1981 Seminary maintenance workers dug up a water-smoothed igneous rock which had been partially chipped into what appears to have been an attempt at an ax or hatchet head. The discovery was incidental to drain tile work being done along Seminary Drive on the eastern side of the hill about thirty yards uphill from the lagoon and about ten yards below the present elm tree. In late summer 1984 Sem workers came across what appears to have been a scraping tool while “picking rock” on the Seminary’s southeastern corner across Buntrock Avenue, occasional filling and grading on the hill and much plowing and planting in the field may have moved the artifacts from their original resting places.

East of the river the Menomonees gave up their lands by treaty on February 8, 1831. The Potowatomi ceded their region in a treaty made September 26, 1833, reserving occupancy for three more years. The
agreement was not ratified, however, until February 21, 1835 and Potowatomi rights continued until February 21, 1838. The tribal units moved west then, though individuals continued to live in the area for many years.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{II. Willet Ownership}

The early 1830’s saw the first survey of roads in the area. In 1839 the Chicago-Green Bay Indian trail was hacked wider into a thoroughfare two rods wide. By 1836 settlers had put up shanties where the Green Bay Trail crossed the Mequonsippi, close to the present stoplights in downtown Thiensville.\textsuperscript{12} A historian of Mequon’s early history describes the region this way:

This whole territory, particularly from the high hills to our west to Lake Michigan, was covered with a heavy growth of timber. This was particularly true of the Town of Mequon. On the high ground the timber consisted of oak, maple, birch, beechs, elm, basswood, and butternut, with occasional clusters of poplar, ironwood, ash and sumac, and bordering the streams and ponds there were alders, willows and creeping water vines. Many of the swamps contained tamarack and cedar. Wild grapes grew profusely, and in sections that had been invaded by fire or severe winds blackberries and raspberries abounded.

This territory had much game, and the rivers and streams were full of fish. The game consisted of deer, bear, gray squirrels, occasionally a black squirrel, foxes, wildcats, raccoon, partridges, ducks, and other wild fowl, and pigeons. At certain seasons of the year the pigeons were so thick that they darkened the sun, and their numbers were such that in some instances they broke down the limbs of trees. There were also wild bees, mink, muskrats, and beaver.

... This whole country was said to have been honeycombed with underground water courses which gushed out of the ground in the never failing springs on every hand.\textsuperscript{13}

This was the wilderness that greeted the first white man to own the land now occupied by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. His name was John Willet (Willett or Willit). He was thirty-four years old, married to Margaret, age thirty-two, and they had a daughter, Mary, age three. Willet came from New York and appears to have been part of the Yankee immigration to Wisconsin. Margaret had been born in Nova Scotia; Mary in New York. In the Register of Deeds office at Port Washington is the August 14, 1839 record of Willet’s early land transactions in this area. On March 13, 1839 he bought the northwestern corner of section 26, Town of Mequon, 146 20/100 acres. This is the area bounded to the north by modern day Mequon Road and to the west (roughly) by present-day Cedarburg Road. Presumably the river’s bisecting the property kept it from being a pure quarter section. He paid $182.75 at the government’s standard rate of $1.25 per acre. Within a few months he had sold it to William Ferdinand Opitz for $750. Also recorded on August 14, 1839 was that Willet had bought from the government eighty acres, the eastern half of the northeastern quarter of section 22, the eighty acres directly east of the Seminary campus encompassing the present Orchard Street subdivision, St. Cecilia’s property, the Williamsburg apartments, and the area between and including the railroad tracks and Main Street. He quickly sold this land to Separts F. Weber for $145.

Apparently Willet had his eye on the eighty acres immediately west of the Weber land. On May 13, 1840, the Register of Deeds recorded that John Willet had purchased the western half of the northeastern quarter of section 22, the present Seminary land. It seems he paid the standard government price. Judging from the previous description of Mequon at that time, Willet had his work cut out for him, as he turned forest into farm.

Willet seems to have taken part in community affairs. He attended the first organizational meeting of Washington County on August 13, 1840. At that time Washington county included all of present-day Washington and Ozaukee Counties, but was populated by only 343 inhabitants. In March, 1842 Willet was sending Mary to school and was himself a trustee of school district number 3.\textsuperscript{14}
It was very much a frontier existence at this time. October 3, 1842 a $3 bounty was paid to a local resident for a wolf scalp. A history of early Mequon quotes the autobiography of Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice William H. Timlin who was born to an Irish family one half mile west of the Willet farm in 1852, and describes life in the area this way:

There was plenty to eat, plenty of fuel and shelter, but wearing apparel, books, tools, ornaments and weapons were difficult to get. People made their own clothes and shoes. One twentieth or more of the settlers had looms. The women made the clothing. A surprising number of settlers could make shoes for themselves and family. The provision market was always glutted. Forest products were almost unsalable. Everyone made maple sugar. Wages were about $6 to $12 a month, and board was ordinary compensation for labor. Beer did not make its appearance until about 1857. Settlers were very expert in the use of the axe. They could build a house, put on a roof, put in windows and make furniture with an axe and an augur.15

While John and Margaret Willet lived on the future Seminary property, a son, Aaron, was born to them in 1844 and a daughter, Margaret, on May 12, 1850. Aaron Willet apparently served with the 1st Cavalry from the Town of Grafton in the Civil War.16 It appears that Willet had made something of his land by the time he sold it in 1855. Provisions for the sale make mention of buildings, pasture, and fields for planting. He had carved a farm out of the wilderness.

III. Mooney Ownership

On October 26, 1855 Lawrence Mooney bought the Willet farm for $3000. Written into the deed were the following provisions: that the Willets retain full possession of the buildings on the premises until April 1 of the next year, that the Willets be permitted to pasture their cattle on the land wherever there had not been fall planting, that until April 1 the Willets be permitted to gather necessary firewood from fallen timber, and that the part of the land leased to Frederick van Alten by the Willets be leased to him by the Mooneys.

Lawrence Mooney was 57 when he came to Town of Mequon. He was born in Ireland in 1799, apparently emigrated to Canada where he married Bridget Roddy and entered the United States at Detroit in October, (probably) 1855. (The brief notecard of his immigration in Port Washington lists the year as 185__.) The 1860 federal census listed these residents of the future Sem hill: Lawrence, age 60; Canadian-born Bridget, age 60; their Canadian-born children, Michael, 19, Lawrence, 17, and Elise, 21; Irish-born, Ellen Barns, age 110 (sic); and also Wisconsin-born Ann Timlin, age 12, the sister of the future judge. Their fathers Edward Timlin, had apparently deserted the family17 and it’s not improbable that the Mooneys took her in as help.

Also in 1855 (January 24) Lawrence Mooney purchased land adjacent to the present Sem land, forty acres in a narrow strip running from the north end of the western lotline west along modern Freistadt Road to modern Wauwautosa Road. This marked the only time when the Seminary parcel was part of a larger piece of land owned by one man. This 120 acre unit remained one piece until 1868.

Another son Richard Mooney, age 26, and his young family lived, worked, and paid taxes on the forty-acre strip from 1857 to 1864. (Lawrence, Sr. paid them from 1865 to 68.) Many of the Richard Mooney clan are buried in St. Francis Cemetery on Pioneer Road just west of Wauwautosa Road. Edward Mooney, probably another son of Lawrence, Sr., bought the forty acre strip on October 22, 1868 for only $800 (Lawrence Sr. had paid $1800 in 1856) and sold it in less than a year for $2800.

The 1860 census offers a glimpse into the lives of the people who lived on Sem hill at that time. At the time seventy acres were listed as improved, ten as unimproved. Very likely these portions correspond to seventy acres of crop and pastureland south of the stream and ten acres of swampy, perhaps wooded, land on the north side of the creek. On his land Lawrence Mooney raised 450 bushels of wheat, 100 of Indian corn, 360 of oats, 100 of Irish potatoes, and eight tons of hay. The Mooneys also made 100 pounds of maple sugar. (One huge
maple in the northwestern corner of the Seminary property may be a remnant of the maples the Mooneys tapped.) They reported also ten gallons of molasses that year. The Mooney farm was a typical general farm. There were four horses, six milk cows, two working oxen, two “other cattle”, five sheep, eight swine, and, one assumes, chickens and perhaps other fowl. In addition to their muscle powers the animals produced twelve pounds of wool and 450 of butter, as well as $75 worth of meat.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students are not the first residents of their hill to be affected by events in New Ulm, Minnesota. In September, 1862 a panic seized southeastern Wisconsin, an Indian scare prompted by massacres in Sleepy Eye and New Ulm. Riders dashed from farmhouse to farmhouse warning residents to flee. As a history of Mequon describes it:

A scout on horseback traveled north from Milwaukee giving warning. When he reached the neighborhood of Thiensville and was told that Cedarburg had been set on fire by the Indians, and he turned about and fled. Women and children were thrown into wagons and dashed to Milwaukee. A scene near Brown Deer is described: ‘As far as the eye could see north and south there was a string of galloping horses drawing wagons so close that the heads of one team almost touched the rear of the wagon ahead. There were maimed horses and broken wagons. Milwaukee hotels were filled to overflowing, and hundreds slept on the sidewalks.’

One wonders whether the Mooneys joined the flight to Milwaukee or assisted the few who remained in Thiensville and organized a defense anchored by an old cannon stuffed with gunpowder and large spikes. The scare blew over in a day or so.

In any case, 1862 had its share of excitement for area residents. Besides events of the Civil War the river flooded, taking out every bridge from here to Milwaukee and inundating Thiensville. Earlier in the year, January 1, there was an extraordinary cold snap. Many people froze to death. Many cattle also died and the ones who survived were known by short tails and cropped ears for half a dozen years after. On that terrible day the stage came into Thiensville with the driver frozen dead in his seat.

On May 31, 1869 Lawrence Mooney Jr. bought his father’s farm for $4000. He and his wife, Dorothea, did not stay long as operators of this farm. March 9, 1871, they sold it for $2700 and the assumption of the mortgage ($2500) by the new owner.

### V. Wille Ownership

Wilhelm Wille (also know as William Will) was the new owner. The 1850 census had listed him as a Prussian-born laborer living in Milwaukee with his wife, 30 year old Fredericke and infant son Charles (Carl). His tombstone in Trinity-Freistadt’s cemetery gives his birthdate as June 1, 1820. When he purchased the Mequon farm, he was fifty years old. His second wife, also named Fredericke, was thirty. His son Carl was 21. Two other sons, August and William, were fifteen and ten. He had a daughter, Johanna, age three. The name Wille or Will pops up in accounts of Trinity’s early history and Captain Heinrich von Rohr’s Saxon emigration, but Edgar Willa says his people are not related to those Wills or Willes.

On Christmas Eve, 1879 Carl Wille took over the farm, paying his father $3300. On October 3 of the next year he married German-born Caroline Koepp at Trinity-Freistadt. Their marriage was blessed with six children, five girls and one boy. Magdalene, the eldest, was born in 1881. Edgar, the youngest was born in 1902. In between were Emma, Margaretha, Hermine, and Dorothea. Their grandfather Wilhelm died February 19, 1890.

To cope with his growing family, Carl Wille built a new farmhouse. It had a living room, parlor, kitchen, and two bedrooms downstairs, and four bedrooms upstairs. At first it was heated by the kitchen stove; later a pipeless furnace was added. It had no plumbing and electricity wasn’t installed until 1927. Edgar Wille stated in 1985 that the barn and outbuildings were there when his family took over the farm. It’s not unlikely
that the buildings dated back to the Willet occupation of the farm. Tax records show no change in land use and production over the Willet-Mooney years, nor does there seem to have been increased need for wagon or carriage space. But the Mooney-Willet house did become too old and small for the Carl Wille family.

The old farmhouse was located east of Present Seminary Drive perhaps forty or so yards north of the present Schuetze residence. It is faintly visible on the slide amid an old orchard. Edgar Wille, who is 86, has no memory of the older house, though it apparently stood in disuse for some time. He does recall that his family used the foundation as a place to dump garbage. The house may have stood on an unnaturally smooth plot of ground just where the hill really begins to pitch. This is just uphill from a cluster of young spruce trees. The new farmhouse stood across from and a little north of the present Schuetze residence. The 38 by 86 foot barn stood southwest of the new farmhouse between Schuetzes’ and the chapel.

Carl Wille seems to have begun the transition from general farming to dairy-only farming. By 1886 the pigs were gone almost for good. The last sheep grazed Sem land in 1905. Dairy herd figures show a steady increase during those years. By Carl Wille’s death in 1924, the land supported 20 cows. (The barn had 18 stalls.)

Carl Wille was buried in Trinity-Freistadt’s cemetery. His wife survived him until 1943 and was buried at his side. His wills dated June 27, 1919 and filed in Port Washington on May 23, 1924, left everything he had to his children and thus Edgar Wille took over the farm. One assumes that Edgar Wille was already handling many responsibilities, given his father’s age (in his mid-60’s when Edgar reached his teens). When asked in 1985 to describe the things that occupied him in childhood, he responded by speaking of chores.

Edgar Wille recalls that there were fish in Pigeon Creek, though he wasn’t much interested in catching the bass, bullheads, or carp. Suckers ran annually then as now. The driveway up the hill was subject to periodic washouts, including a big one in August 1924. Then as now there were wet spots on the hill, one so wet that the Willes turned it into a cow tank, perhaps the present Jacob’s well. Apparently, the well at the top of the hill did not always provide sufficient water for the cows, as Wille recalls driving the cows out of the barn in the cold of winter down the hill to a hole he had cut in Pigeon Creek’s ice. Then as now the hill afforded opportunity for sledding. In Wille’s boyhood there was no woods with which to break one’s speed, toboggan or neck; the present Sem woods was all pasture, except for a few trees lining the stream banks and some maples on the property’s northwestern corner.

The Wille farm continued to prosper under his direction. Horses provided muscle and transportation, until in 1918 the Willes bought a Dodge of the same year. With the help of his sisters Edgar Wille raised corn, hay, and oats to feed his growing herd of Holstein and Gurnsey cows. He sold milk to Luick dairy of Thiensville. Such as Willet and Mooney apparently did Wille planted the level southern three-fourths of his land with crops and used the hill as pasture supplemented by whatever could be foraged from the wetter northern extreme across the creek. In 1924, Wille bought a tractor and in 1927, the last full year the Willes were on their farms the herd reached its peak at 24 cows.

The farm was not up for sale in 1927. Edgar Wille was single, twenty-five years old, and the owner-operator of a good dairy farm. In the same year a committee for a new building from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Wauwatosa was scouting the neighborhood. John Brenner, G. J. Sengbusch, and Ernst von Briessen liked what they saw in the Wille farm. They made contact with Edgar Wille to whom it had not occurred to sell the land on which his family had been for 56 years. The committee explained why they wanted to purchase it. Edgar Wille says that after hearing why they wanted to buy, he was thrilled to sell it. And so a young man, about the age of an average Seminarian, made a very important decision for his family and enabled generations of theological students to benefit from the marvelous land and facilities which are now Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

In the Ozaukee County Register of Deeds office entry was made March 9, 1928 that the Wille farm had been sold to John Brenner, O. J. Sengbusch, and Ernst von Briessen for $25,000. On December 18, 1930 the three sold the parcel to the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States for one dollar.
Subcontracted from the eighty acres was land appropriated by local government for roadway (present Buntrock Avenue). The purchase arrangements seem to have involved trusteeship.

Edgar Wille moved his farming operation to a slightly smaller parcel on the western side of Wauwautosa Road, about a half mile north of Freistadt Road. He married in 1941. He and his wife retired to Thiensville in 1972 where they still live.

V. Vestiges of Former Occupants

A few vestiges of former occupations remain on Seminary land. In the spring of 1985 drain tile work turned up several heavy pottery shards, a couple pieces of table china, two iron rings perhaps from a harness, an old glass bottle neck, and an old, obviously used, whetstone. This was just east of Seminary Drive below the elm. The two old horsechestnut trees west of the drive at the top of the hill seem to have stood next to the Willa farmhouse. Just west of them are two pear trees that may have been part of the orchard that stood there west of the Wille farmhouse, though Edgar Wille recalled four varieties of apple in the orchard, and cherries, but no pears. A Sem maintenance crew installing a light post near the chapel walk turned up what appeared to be foundation stones near where the barn once stood. A few decaying fence posts are still present along the west lotline in the woods and old fence lines are marked by rocks cleared from the field. A few ancient maples still stand in the northwestern corner of the property and one almost surely saw John Willet’s arrival. But the most visible remnant of the old farm is Seminary Drive. Edgar Wille still refers to it as the driveway, for that’s what it was. The old driveway ended at sheds near the present Schuetze yard. The Seminary incorporated it into its road plans. Underneath the bridge over Pigeon Creek is visible what seems to be the sides of the farm bridge. The Seminary apparently widened it to accommodate the Seminary Drive. In a sense the Seminary still uses John Willet’s 149-year-old drive-way. Thank you.

3 Mohr, op. cit., pp. 117-118.
6 Ritzenthaler and Niehoff, op. cit., pp. 119-120.
7 Walter D. Corrigan, Sr., History of the Town of Mequon, Mequon Club, 1951, pp. 5, 7-8.
9 Weyenberg Library Vertical File, Folder entitled “Mequon-Thiensville History.”
10 Wells, op. cit., p. 5.
11 Corrigan, op. cit., p. 7.
12 Ibid., p. 8.
13 Ibid., p. 7.
14 Weyenberg Library Vertical File, Folder entitled “Mequon-Thiensville History.”
15 Corrigan, op. cit., p. 19.
16 History of Washington and Ozaukee Counties, Western History Company, Chicago 1881, passim.
17 Corrigan, op. cit., p. 19.
18 Ibid., p. 21.
20 Corrigan, op. cit., p. 22.
21 Leroy Boehlke, By the Grace of God (A publication by Trinity, Freistadt on their 125th anniversary), Vol. 2, 1964, p. 51.