

Oak savannas once covered this area

▲ Oaks on a Donald County Park hillside above Mt. Vernon Creek. The 1833 land surveys showed most of today's parklands as rolling oak savanna, with the exception of some marshy flood plains around the creeks.

▼ An 1852 sketch by Adolf Hoeffler shows bur oaks in a Dane County savanna.

WHAT IS AN OAK SAVANNA?

A UNIQUE ECOSYSTEM: An oak savanna is a grassland community with scattered trees. Our knowledge of the oak savanna is limited. We do know that it is a unique ecosystem, not simply prairie with a few trees. It shares some plant species with both prairies and woodlands.

Early accounts described certain savannas as having a park-like character. In these, trees with full rounded crowns and branches stretching wide and low grew in sunny openings filled with grasses, shrubs and flowers. In other savannas, however, tree forms were stunted, possibly from harsh windy conditions.

As you stand here, notice the oaks arrayed across Pop's Knoll. Their forms suggest how some savanna oaks appeared long ago, although the undergrowth is quite different.



“The Burr Oak Openings are... the most beautiful portions of the varied and picturesque surface of the country. Grouped here and there, like so many old orchards... there is nothing in the whole catalogue of American sylvia that equals these Burr Oaks for the charming, homestead-like expressions they give to the landscape.”

— J.W. Hoyt, 1860

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OAK SAVANNAS?

After settlement in the 1800s, complex factors caused the oak savannas' demise or degradation. Today, the oak savanna has largely disappeared. It is now Wisconsin's rarest native plant community.

FIRE SUPPRESSION: For thousands of years, Native Americans set fires in the Midwest's open grasslands, to aid in hunting, warfare and travel. In the original savannas, mature trees protected by thick, corky bark withstood the fires' intense but brief heat. Smaller trees died back, then resprouted. After settlement, without regular fires to stunt their growth, many smaller trees grew to maturity, forming forests to replace the savannas.



Today, Friends of Donald Park volunteers and Dane County Parks staff do controlled burning to help return some areas to a more savanna-like feeling. The use of fire recalls the historic relationship that once existed between people and oak savannas.

AGRICULTURE AND HUMAN USE: Settlers frequently pastured cows on rougher hillside savannas, where intensive grazing destroyed native plants while encouraging Kentucky bluegrass and other invasive non-native species. Savannas with level or rolling topography were plowed and planted to crops. Mature trees were sought after for lumber and fuel. Some shady groves beckoned as attractive building sites.

CLIMATE CHANGES: Thousands of years ago, a hotter, drier climate favored grassland development (prairies and savannas). More recent cooler, wetter conditions have encouraged the growth of trees.

☞ Please visit the Friends website at donaldpark.org for more about presettlement vegetation.

IMAGE CREDITS Oaks: Jeff Durbin. 1852 sketch: Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS-31186. Savanna burn: Phil Johnson.