

INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S WOODLAND CAMPUS



INDIANA UNIVERSITY WAS ALREADY sixty-two years old when it moved from its original location in Bloomington in 1884, after fire devastated its previous facilities. The heart of the new campus was a twenty-acre beech and maple forest, Dunn's Woods, then on the city's eastern edge. A popular spot for local children to explore and a gathering place for Fourth of July celebrations, the bucolic landscape inspired the name for the new campus: University Park.

The woodland parcel proved challenging for construction, however. Pocked with sinkholes and cut by ravines, the terrain is shaped by the underlying karst. The meandering Jordan River, then known as Spanker's Branch, also courses above and below ground and divides the land north to south, occasionally flooding its banks. From the southern to the northern boundary the land drops more than fifty feet in elevation, and another sharp grade change of sixty-five feet occurs from east to west. Even so, the board of trustees thought that the

property, which embodied the ideal of naturalism, was especially suitable to the institution's new liberal arts program, with its emphasis on independent thinking instead of rote learning. (David Starr Jordan, the university's president from 1884 to 1891, initiated and championed this change in curriculum.) Equally progressive university leaders brought a strong conservation ethic to the new setting, where they set a goal to preserve the natural sylvan beauty. The value placed on the inherent qualities of this land, as well as the Picturesque aesthetic promulgated by the leading landscape architects of the day, guided the design for the new campus. The rigid, angular forms of the past suited neither the rugged terrain nor the institutional philosophy.

Around 1884, Chicago Parks superintendent Olaf Benson submitted a ten-page proposal for a campus design, perhaps alerted to the opportunity by a news story in the *Chicago Tribune* in April of that year. Benson's report referred to details probably depicted in

Dunn's Woods, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1891. Photograph courtesy Indiana University Archives.

BY ANITA BRACALENTE



Eastern edge of Dunn's Woods, well house in background, Class of 1926 commemorative tree in foreground, 2010. Photograph by Anita Bracalente.

an accompanying plan, but no plan or further correspondence has surfaced. Nor is it known whether the university acted on his suggestions, although photographs of the campus taken around 1890, which show a naturalistic road along the edge of the woods and tall trees, match the treatment Benson recommended. His proposal featured a campus buffered from the street west of the ten-acre woodland. Buildings were to be constructed at the highest elevations along the eastern and northern boundaries, enveloping ten of the parcel's twenty acres, with the woods remaining at the front and center of the campus. "Care should be taken not to sacrifice trees of any value," Benson wrote. "The walks are necessarily wide to extract the fullest measure of sylvan loveliness and picturesqueness."

Between 1884 and 1896, six buildings rose on the highest point of the Dunn's Woods tract, partially encircling the woods. Local artisans carved the intricate details of the collegiate Gothic/Romanesque buildings in native limestone. By 1896 the university had acquired another ten acres of forested land from the Dunn farm. That year Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot submitted a report proposing building sites and land use for the entire thirty-acre campus. "The treatment of the ground should be that of a landscaped park and the buildings should

take on an asymmetrical plan within groves of trees," the report stated. "Native trees should be preferred to foreign trees, both because they are better adapted to the climate and soil, and also because they look more appropriate."

Nothing in the Olmsted firm's report suggested building in Dunn's Woods proper, although this area made up a third of the university's land holdings at that time. The proposal also strongly recommended that the university acquire as many of the adjoining properties as possible, to develop if necessary and to control the surrounding land use and views. In particular, the firm suggested purchasing property north of the existing campus—the remainder of the Dunn farm—for the purpose of developing athletic fields. (The owner, Moses Dunn, refused to sell; after his death the university bought the land and built a stadium there.)

Between 1897 and 1902, the German-born landscape architect Rudolph Ulrich (1841–1906), who had served as landscape superintendent for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, created planting plans and lists of native plants for the ten undeveloped acres of Dunn's Woods. Following Ulrich's recommendations, David M. Mottier, a professor of botany at the university from 1898 to 1937, led a project to collect seeds and

transplant native saplings from the local countryside to Dunn's Woods, supplementing the abundant native dogwood (*Cornus florida*) and redbud (*Cercis canadensis*). Writing to the administration in 1902, Mottier summed up his activities: "Within the past two years quite a number of trees, chiefly, though not exclusively, hard maple [*Acer saccharum*] have been transplanted upon the grounds. . . . These young maple trees together with the older ones will preserve the original primitive forest." Mottier planted other native species, including beech (*Fagus americana*), shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), linden (*Tilia americana*), and oaks (*Quercus alba* and *Quercus bicolor*).

The Olmsted firm returned to the campus between 1929 and 1936. Its topographical plans detailed the existing trees in Dunn's Woods, which matched the tree lists Mottier had drawn up three decades earlier. The undeveloped woodland known as Forest Place and East Campus, acquired in 1896, lay directly east of Dunn's Woods and behind the first line of buildings. The plan for proposed building sites on this parcel was similar to the one the firm had outlined thirty-three years before: building only on the perimeter of the woodland, preserving the center as a second large green space. With new buildings following the natural contours of the hilly landscape, Forest Place and East Campus flowed in an unbroken green line from Dunn's Woods. The newer Olmsted plan envisioned broad sweeps of lawn with specimen trees, even though the traditional aesthetic had favored forested land in a naturalistic setting. Over time, the Hoosier vision won out. In the following decades, the lawn gave way to heavily shaded woodlands, and the university staff added native woodland plants.

For sixty-three years Herman B. Wells (acting president, 1937; president, 1938–1962; chancellor, 1962–

2000) was the guiding voice for forest conservation and the preservation of the historic campus landscape, extending the legacy established by his predecessor, William Lowe Bryan. In 1961 Wells prompted Paul Weatherwax, professor emeritus of botany, to produce a booklet, *The Woodland Campus of Indiana University*, to enlighten incoming freshman about the design history of their campus and to promote this legacy to visitors and alumni. The booklet, which remained in print for twenty years, focused on history, preservation, and conservation. It also served as a guidebook for tree identification and outlined a walking tour.

In 1982 the university developed a ten-acre arboretum on the grounds of the original stadium built on the last parcel of the Dunn farm, as recommended by the Olmsted firm in 1896. With the stadium torn down, this open space continued the flow of green northeast from Dunn's Woods through Forest Place and East Campus, realizing one of Wells's long-cherished goals. Wells died in 2000, but his legacy continues. In 2008, for example, the university planted a native wet meadow where the easternmost edge of the woodland opens to flat meadows and the Jordan River flood plain, eliminating mowing while also preventing soil erosion. The Office of Sustainability now works in collaboration with university planners, concerned faculty members, students, and outside consultants to devise comprehensive preservation programs and incorporate the campus green spaces in place-based learning. Through such programs, Indiana University Bloomington is striving to fulfill the campus founders' vision for a university in a park.

Anita Bracalente is a visual artist, landscape designer, and freelance garden writer and lecturer. She has been researching and lecturing on the history of the Indiana University landscape design since 2008.



Dunn's Woods, 1900. Photograph courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.