

The Spring Tavern/ Hotel Walnut

Madison

It's hard to remember that well-established Madison neighborhoods were once considered suburban or even way out in the country. Nakoma is one of them, and the old Spring Tavern/Hotel at 3706 Nakoma Road, once well outside city limits, is famed as the first hostelry between Madison and Monroe.

An old black walnut growing beside it since Indian times shades the front lawn in summer and stands stalwart and imposing during winter storms.

Native Americans constructed burial mounds on the property. Archeologists found skeletons in a sitting position, along with pots that had contained food, grinding stones, battle axes and copper knives. These items were transferred to the Wisconsin Historical Society, then located in the basement of the first capitol, and were unfortunately lost when the building burned in 1904.

Nakoma Road wasn't there, of course, when the Spring Hotel had its heyday. The road that did lead out of Madison along the route of Monroe Street has been variously called, depending on your source, the Wiota Road, the Military Road, the Pioneer Road or the Black Hawk Trail. Whatever its designation, it was heavily traveled by the wagoners and haulers serving the lead mines of southwestern Wisconsin. The stagecoach made regular stops at the Spring Hotel, while mail carriers rendezvoused there.

The free-flowing spring (now known as the Arboretum's duck pond), which gave rise to the name, attracted dusty travelers, served as water supply and hosted wild fowl year round. Because the land sloped down to the spring, the 15-room structure was two stories in front and three stories in back. Later a handsome Georgian Colonial porch with square wood piers and a latticed balustrade was added on the Nakoma Road side.

Charles Morgan, who came from New Haven, Connecticut, built the spacious home in 1854. Morgan made the small, vermillion-colored brick from clay found on the slope with the help of his neighbor, a man named Gorham. The oaks that undoubtedly stood on the property were probably cut down to make the beams and planks for the house as well as others farther up the hill. There are no oaks left.

James Gorham bought the house and 60 acres in 1860 for \$9,000 in gold when Morgan became a dry goods merchant in Madison. The Gorhams owned it for some 60 years.

The hotel became, besides a haven for travelers, the last overnight before Madison, a social center famous for its dances, to which soldiers stationed at Camp Randall escorted female students from the University. Supposedly three presidents and quite probably Robert M. La Follette visited the place, and it became famous for its cookies—not Toll House cookies as the city inscription in front of the house alleges (Toll House cookies were invented in 1930 by Ruth Wakefield, who ran the Toll House Inn in Whitman, Mass.), but probably a large sugar and butter cookie studded with raisins.

Professor James Dickson bought the house in 1923, greatly improving and restoring it, and in 1939, William and Florence Stephens took over the charge. They maintained the home in mint condition, adding greatly to the beauty of the landscaping and gardens, and were instrumental in having the home listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1972, the John Bell Chapter of the DAR put up a plaque on the Frank Lloyd Wright–designed stone wall along the Nakoma Road side of the house.

Sources: Edward Hasselkus
Mr. and Mrs. William Stephens



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