

Essay I: Geology and Prehistoric Peoples

Jim Barnes – 16 March 2009 (minor revisions: 12th April 2017)

Actually I want to leave these two topics to experts. This introductory essay merely tries to record a few particular details I have observed about the William Myers Section.

Geology:

The geology of the William Myers Section is typical of Dallas County. Surface rock is exposed naturally at only a very few places. Where excavated, it displays a series of horizontal layers. These are the ruins of a series of vast coral reefs that flourished in a shallow ocean that covered central Texas for millions of years during the Cretaceous period.

There are numerous minor fossils in the chalk and shale, but to my knowledge there have been no large or significant fossil discoveries in the William Myers Section. Except where excavated, the rock deposits typically remain covered by black topsoil. Many thousands of years ago such soil accumulated in a deep deposit along the floor of the valley of Coombes Creek.

Two aspects of the landscape of the William Myers Section seem to have substantially changed since the arrival of Euro-American civilization in the mid-1840s. First, I believe the early settlers would have seen far fewer trees than we have today. The wide-angle photograph of the Stevens' farmhouse taken around 1882 -- presumably at the site of modern Middlebrook Place -- shows not a single tree standing in its vicinity. Similarly, a photograph of the 1928 construction of the Spurgin/Gossard house at the western end of Olympic Circle shows only smallish young trees on that hilltop. Numerous land survey descriptions and an 1874 letter from Dr. John Stevens refer to the land as "prairie". Today, the disposition of surviving ancient trees is limited to drainage-ways where water has constantly flowed. There is some indication in some of the oldest deeds that the northeast corner of the William Myers Section was forested; otherwise I believe it would be appropriate to imagine most of the Section being covered with prairie grasses, grasses long ago obliterated by invasive species. I know of no map showing an outline of the timbered areas prior to the County-wide aerial photographic survey of 1930.

The second aspect of the landscape that has changed during the last century is the Coombes Creek stream-bed itself, which (I believe) is now significantly deeper than it was at the time of Euro-American settlement in the 1840s. Though the Coombes Creek flows today at the bottom of a narrow gully approximately 10 to 15 feet deep, I have concluded that the stream was, at the time of the arrival of the first Euro-American pioneers, relatively shallow, scarcely lower than the surrounding valley floor. The plowing of the prairie and the clearing of debris from the creek channel (I theorize) quickly accelerated erosion of the soil-lined stream-bed.

Coombes Creek has been substantially altered by engineered straightening. This can be traced in old aerial photos and deed descriptions. Large segments were "streamlined" during the building of the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike, which opened in 1957. Low terraces along the old meanders of creek have almost all been filled. Along the north side of modern Plymouth Road, in the City park at a point North Oak Cliff Boulevard arrives from the south, a short segment of the old creek channel was bypassed during mid 1920s construction of the new Kessler Memorial Parkway (modern Plymouth Road). It looks today like that the modern streambed on the south side of Plymouth Road is roughly ten feet deeper than the bypassed creek-bed could have been; though this short segment of abandoned stream-bed may have been filled when the creek was rerouted.

Native Peoples

As far as I am now aware nothing is known about any occupation of the William Myers Section by any aboriginals (native pre-historic “Indians”). I know of no arrowheads, pottery shards, or any evidence or artifact of pre-historic presence. I know of no pioneer stories relating to Indians at any location on this particular square mile. George Santerre, in his history *The White Cliffs of Dallas* relates that the La Reunion colonists of the mid to late 1850s traded and dealt with several nearby Indian villages. He reports that La Reunion colonist Emile Remond excavated two ancient “Indian mounds” which were located at the summit of the escarpment mountaintop on the north side of modern Remond Avenue, on his own acreage west of Hampton Road. Unfortunately that unique archeological site was long ago blasted away by limestone quarry excavations feeding the cement factory nearby. Remond’s artifacts and excavation notes (if there were any) I am unable to find at the Dallas Historical Society. I have heard a report of a 1940s archeological excavation at Kidd Springs, a water source which would have obviously held appeal to nomadic Indian groups; but no one I know has seen that archaeological report. There certainly must have been thousands of years when Native Americans hunted and lived on the William Myers Section, but of them today I have no evidence.

For that matter, other than by documentary records I have virtually no physical evidence of any 19th century pioneer occupation. The cabins, the fences, old wooden bridges (if there were any), the early frame farmhouses, are all gone. Except for the square-cut steel nails that Jane Singleton McDaniels picked from the aftermath of the 1972 fire that destroyed the Stevens-Duncan-Middelbrook mansion, I know of no evidence (other than paper documents), of any occupation on the William Myers Section prior to about 1910.

There has been no known human burial in the William Myers Section.

At this time I have found one claim, proposed by others, of a possible Indian artifact, a dubious bowl discovered in a backyard on Mayflower Drive. A brief report will be attached.

Considering my present lack of pre-historic information, it is surprising to learn that a not-too-distant past held a quite different view. Miss Lurlyn January, who grew up in the Kessler Park neighborhoods, in her late 1930s S.M.U. college history class paper titled “Ecological Succession in North Oak Cliff” (copied in my *History of the William Myers Section—“Volume 9: Hugh January: Kesslers’ Salesman”*, pp. 169-172) cites tales of Indians being remembered in numerous accounts by old settlers and abundant stone Indian arrow heads being found around the neighborhood. She also cites the presence of an “Old Spanish Trail” through the district. Today, I find no such evidence -- neither verbal nor tangible. To me seventy years later, it is only remotely possible that the William Myers Section was ever traversed by any Spanish or French exploration party; and I know of no historian who connects any specific Spanish, French, or Mexican activity to any site in, or close to, the William Myers Section. Lurlyn January’s reports appears as little are nothing more romantic gossip—perhaps garbled recollections of the old Ridge Route.

To me now, the oldest surviving documents making mention of any place that might reasonably be considered as being a specific site in the William Myers Section are reports from the years of the Republic of Texas (1836-1845). As I conclude this essay, the oldest surviving document undeniably citing specifics about this square mile of the planet is dated 1846.

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