

HISTORY OF THE GLACIAL DRUMLIN STATE TRAIL

A visitor to the Glacial Drumlin State Trail, many years ago, would need to have been aboard a submarine (had they existed then), because the area was under a vast ocean. The ocean was tropical, with plenty of fish and other aquatic wildlife. When they died, some of their bones sank to the bottom and became limestone. As you travel the Trail today, you can see limestone buildings and walls, quarried from under areas near the trail, and think of the original owners swimming beside where you are traveling.

Later the land rose, and was no longer ocean. The climate became much colder, especially just north of here, so much so that winter snows never melted, but accumulated from year to year, and became immense glaciers. The heart of these glaciers was in Canada, where the great piles of snow became ice more than a mile thick. Ice flows, albeit slowly, so the piles of ice from Canada flowed south pushing everything on the ground with it. Plants and dirt continued much further, in melt-water rivers, such as to New Orleans.

Heavier rocks were left here in great piles, which are all around you as you travel the Trail. Drumlins are long, whale-shaped piles of rock formed under glaciers, so as you travel the trail you can imagine the glaciers towering high above you.

These rocks are of various types. Some are very fine, actually sand, which you can see being mined along the Trail. Some are larger, and were pushed by the glacier along bedrock; if you look at piles of glacial rock for somewhat flattish ones, soccer ball size, you may find some with flat sides with parallel lines, showing where they rubbed the bedrock as they traveled. Some smaller rocks are gemstones, including diamonds, some of which have been found near the trail. So, as you travel, keep your eyes open!

As the climate warmed, the minerals and water from the glaciers produced fertile conditions for a wide variety of plants and animals. These plants and animals also provided happy hunting grounds for Indians, whose trails through valleys and along lakes and streams became parts of the Trail on which you travel. Many of the plants and animals, on the ground, in the steams, and above, as you travel the Trail today, share the trail and its surroundings with you. Others, such as the gigantic mastodons, which roamed the hills and valleys of the trail area, live only in your imagination.

As Wisconsin was settled by immigrants from Europe (such as from Wales, the name of a Trail village), they needed railroads (since cars and trucks didn't exist) to travel. In the 1880 era, Milwaukee and Madison were Wisconsin's two main cities, but there was no way to travel directly between them. So the Chicago and North Western Railroad built a new railroad, the Milwaukee and

Madison Air Line. That line formed the flat path, and bridges, over which you now travel the Trail.

This was top-quality line with fancy new equipment. A newspaper report of the first train, February 1, 1882, reports that “the train was greeted at every station by crowds of enthusiastic people”, understandable because they now could visit the outside world without being limited to horse travel. Some writers of the time speculated that the railroad’s real reason for building the line was to carry politicians between the governmental centers of Madison and Milwaukee, and thus influence them to vote for Chicago and North Western, to pass laws favorable to the railroad. In any case, as you travel the trail, you can think of the many previous travelers visiting friends, making business/political connections, or going to other rendezvous of all types imaginable.

Later, as automobiles, trucks, and highways became more popular, transporting heavy material became the railroad’s key role. One special function of this line was carrying malt, which was produced at Jefferson Junction from grain grown in surrounding fields, then shipped in great quantities to Milwaukee, as the main ingredient in the beers produced by its world-famous breweries. As beer making moved elsewhere, the rail line became less used and ultimately was abandoned. However, the Jefferson Junction facility was converted to making ethanol, again from grain grown in surrounding fields. 100 million gallons of ethanol is produced here yearly, probably powering the car you use when not on the Trail. Although most rails have been removed, those at Jefferson Junction remain in use, resulting in a Trail gap where users travel public roads.

The roadbed was purchased by the State of Wisconsin, and opened as the Glacial Drumlin State Trail in 1986.

Recently, internet/electronic communication is replacing physical travel, as business meetings are replaced by video conferencing, and mail train cars are replaced by email and texting. The trail has similarly evolved, with the eastern end being paved to protect the fiber paths for internet communications. As you travel the trail today, you can think of the vast amounts of information flowing beneath your feet, more in a few minutes than all the information carried by mail during the 100 years that railroads carried mail.

The web site is <http://www.glacialdrumlin.com/Home.html>

Jim White

Enjoy your Trail trips!