



Trees at Yerkes Observatory

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHI(X3)38159 (1935)

The Trees at Yerkes Observatory

Williams Bay

At one time in the 1980s, there were at least seven state record trees on the splendid park-like grounds of Yerkes Observatory on the shores of Lake Geneva in Williams Bay. This imposing site is still the resident observing facility of the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at the University of Chicago.

It was the dream of George Ellery Hale, who owned a small private observatory, to establish a larger one accessible from Chicago, but far enough away to benefit from clear night skies. With the active cooperation of William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, Hale prepared the plans and enlisted the financial backing of Charles T. Yerkes, a wealthy Chicago businessman. Construction in Williams Bay began in 1895, and when finished, the observatory was the most modern and complete one

of its day. Still important, its great refractor telescope is the largest one in the United States.

During the period from 1912 to 1915, the landscape architect firm of Frederick Law Olmsted drew up a landscaping plan for the grounds. Olmsted, pioneer landscape architect in the nation, was famous for his design of Central Park in New York City. The Yerkes plan was a grandiose one, and its implementation was somewhat scaled down. But Edwin Frost, director of the Observatory at that time, who loved trees almost as much as he loved stars, was enthusiastic about carrying it out.

Besides the state record trees, which were a white fir, yellowwood, goldenraintree, European and fernleaf beech, Japanese pagodatree and a European littleleaf linden, the grounds boasted other interesting trees such as Kentucky coffee trees, ginkgos, cut-leaf beeches and chestnuts.

Sources: Judy Lola, Williams Bay
Dr. W. W. Morgan, Williams Bay

Excerpted from *Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin's Famous and Historic Trees* by R. Bruce Allison
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