



Dunbar Oak

Waukesha County Museum Collections

The Dunbar Oak

Waukesha

Desperately ill and convinced his death was imminent, Col. Richard Dunbar sank down to rest under a strong white oak in Waukesha County one August day in 1868. A diabetic suffering from insatiable thirst, he had just drunk six tumblersful of water from a spring beside the tree. He began to feel better. He continued to drink freely from the spring waters, and soon the man doctors said would die within months felt completely cured. Dunbar lived ten more years without a recurrence of his diabetes, and during this decade he made Waukesha, the spring waters and the “guardian angel” oak tree world-famous.

His faith in his own cure inspired him to offer the waters to others; his sharp business ability made it financially rewarding. The former engineer bought the spring, which he named “Bethesda,” and the land around it and actively began to promote the community. Waukesha soon became a haven for those seeking not only restoration of their health but also relaxation. Soon Dunbar was selling the spring waters all over the globe.

Other promoters entered the picture and several more springs were developed, among them Hygeia, Arcadian and White Rock. To quote from an account of those times by Libbie Nolan, of the Waukesha County Historical Society:

Fancy ornate pavilions enclosed each bubbling spring ... Great hotels sprang up... Guests came from far and wide to drink from the springs, to relax, and to be amused. Among them were Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, President Grant, Vice President Adlai Stevenson, Supreme Court Justice Salmon P. Chase, Horace Greeley as well as governors, generals, statesmen and many many more.

White Rock water became a fashionable beverage all over the world after it was carbonated in 1890, even making its way to the coronation of the King of England ... When Col. Dunbar died in 1878 (of a heart attack), the village was notified by the passing out of black-edged handbills.

The fame and excitement of our Western Saratoga lasted nearly forty years. Then it faded away as the century turned.

Dubbed the Dunbar Oak, it was a focal point of the large park at Bethesda Spring and is marked by a plaque put up by the Waukesha County Historical Society in 1959. After noting Dunbar’s first introduction to the waters, it ends with the words: “The names ‘Dunbar,’ ‘Bethesda,’ and ‘Waukesha’ became household words. Thus began the glamorous and exciting summer resort era of Waukesha as the ‘Saratoga of the West’ 1870–1905.”

The Dunbar Oak went down during a severe thunderstorm in 1991. Prior to that, the oak had been cabled because it had developed a pocket of decay that made it vulnerable. But with winds clocked at close to 100 miles per hour at the Waukesha airport, the trunk of the Dunbar Oak snapped at about 10 feet above ground. A count of the annual rings revealed the tree was over 320 years old. The loss of the tree affected many locals, as evidenced by the long lines of cars that paraded past the site where it fell, as if people wanted to pay their last respects. Waukesha City Forester David Liska, planning for the future, took cuttings from trunk sprouts to Johnson’s Nursery. There they grew in secret for 12 years. In May 2004, in celebration of Waukesha’s 25th anniversary as a Tree City USA and Wisconsin Forestry’s centen-

nial year, a “reborn” Dunbar Oak was planted at the site of the original and watered with 15 gallons of donated Bethesda Springs water.

Sources: Pat Buckley, Waukesha
Jean Penn Loerke, Waukesha
David Liska, Waukesha