

The Middle Yard

by

Omar Poler

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Professor Bill Cronon

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Place Paper

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When darkness falls and the din of the workday recedes, there are sounds that characterize the night in La Crosse, Wisconsin. They are sounds that are familiar to me. After moving from a northeastern Wisconsin Ojibwe community, Mole Lake, my family rented a small one-story pink house on the city's northside. Only blocks from the Burlington Northern and Soo Line's railroad freight yards, we would hear the sounds of countless trains passing through our neighborhood every night. Couplers clanking, bells clanging, horns blowing, and the thunderous crash of empty boxcars and grain hoppers being shunted together into new trains, were all commonplace. Indeed, so commonplace I began to no longer hear them. Like the din of the workday, for me, they faded into the night.

Many of La Crosse's railroads have faded into history. But in the century and a half since freight trains began to clank through the city, railroads have dramatically shaped the history, economy, and landscape of this southwestern Wisconsin town. La Crosse's landscape reads like a historical document of the railroads that have served the city. Buildings constructed along now torn up railroad tracks are senselessly askew. Abandoned rights-of-way and raised railroad beds bisect neighborhoods and fragment the La Crosse River marsh—a 1,077-acre riparian wetland in the Mississippi River floodplain (La Crosse Library). Railroads, many now defunct, left countless marks on the city and its environs.

Perhaps the most fascinating of La Crosse's railroad vestiges is the Middle Yard. At the confluence of the Mississippi, Black, and La Crosse Rivers, the abandoned Middle Yard is central to La Crosse's early transportation history. It is also, quite literally, at the geographic center of La Crosse. The Middle Yard, however, is a conundrum. At the city's most premiere riverfront location, adjacent to a recently refurbished historic redbrick downtown, with a stellar

view of three rivers merging, there is an abandoned railroad yard. Instead of condominiums, there is rusted rail and ballast. Instead of well-kept city parklands, like Riverside Park to the Middle Yard's south, there is a tangle of common weeds and a nearly wild riverfront bower of cottonwoods, silver maples, and river birch. Why is a city's seemingly most valuable land vacant? Why is the location that best defines La Crosse—the confluence of the three rivers—undeveloped? What led to this? As so often is the case, the answer is historically complicated. The story of the Middle Yard is an example of the complex, and sometimes confounding, way human views about land have changed and how land itself can structure human activity.

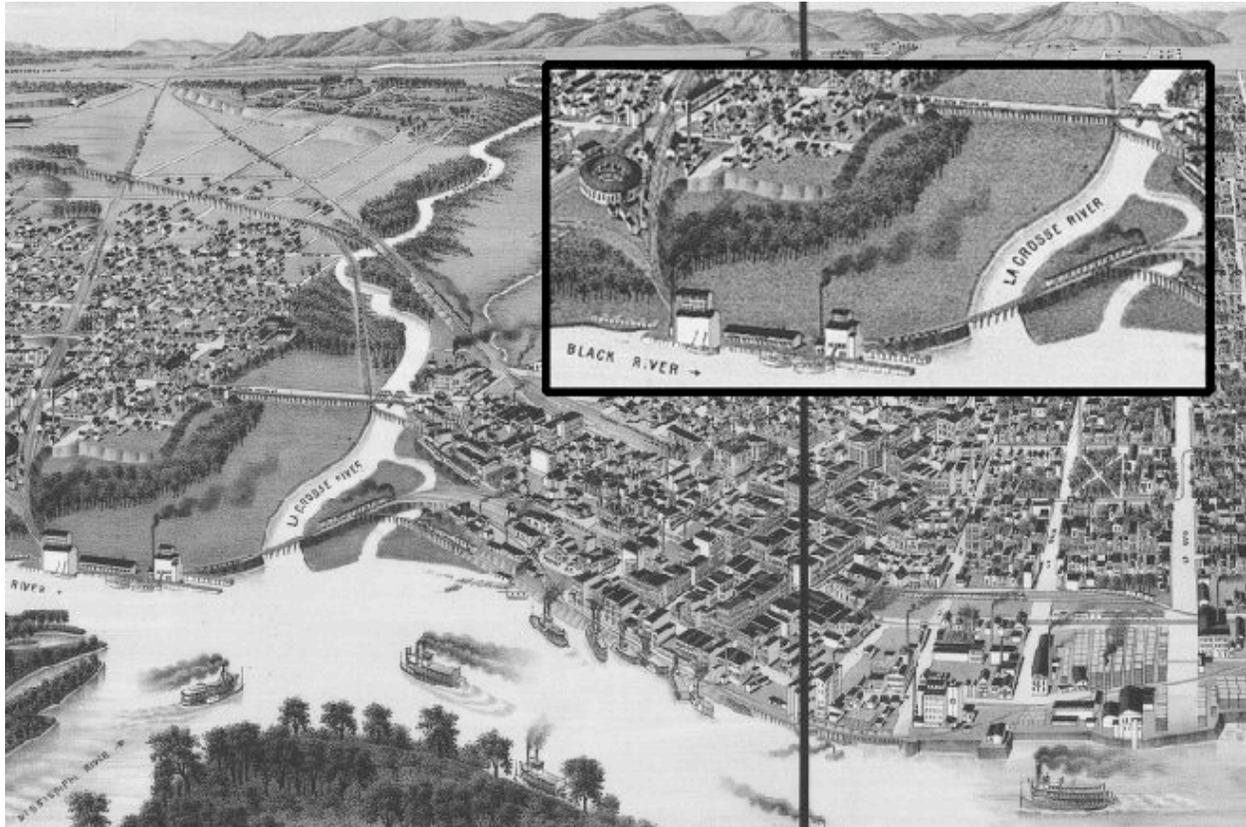


The three rivers, as well as an open prairie with few topographical hindrances, were the original *raison d'être* of the city of La Crosse and the Middle Yard. Rivers were the paramount means of transportation before the advent of railroads. The Mississippi, of course, was the most important. For much of the nineteenth century, it was La Crosse's most significant link to the outside world. Early river travel consisted of canoes and keelboats, small river craft powered by a sail or oars. But as early as 1823 when the steamboat *Virginia* puffed past La Crosse, side- and stern-wheeled steamboats became important means of river transport (Stanford, 129). In 1858, the year the first railroad arrived in La Crosse, 1,312 riverboats were recorded as reaching the river city (Stanford, 133). Steamboats were one feature that defined the early Middle Yard. But not until a railroad chugged into the city did steamboats take on their full importance at the site. It was the intersection of river and rail that defined the now-abandoned freight yard on the Black River's east bank.

The La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad, La Crosse's first, arrived at the three rivers in October 1858 (Stanford, 145). A special act of the Wisconsin Legislature chartered the company in 1852. Although its history was brief—less than twenty years—the railroad in its corporate lifetime was guilty of spectacular corruption and financial malfeasance. The LC&M was a well-worn railroad story of graft and swindle. The La Crosse and Milwaukee received a federal land grant in 1856 of over a million acres between south-central Wisconsin and the Bayfield Peninsula (Cary, 10; Stanford, 149). Later, it was revealed that the LC&M's president, Byron Kilbourn, bribed state lawmakers with company stocks and bonds. Legislators—even the Governor—were embroiled in one of Wisconsin's first far-reaching political scandals. The Panic of 1857, however, bankrupted the company. The lucre lavished on corrupt politicians was worthless. Others, unfortunately, lost more than a chance at quick cash. Many farmers mortgaged their farms to buy La Crosse and Milwaukee stock. When the panic hit and the company went bankrupt, the farmers were foreclosed upon. Before the railroad had even reached its terminus at the Middle Yard, it had changed Wisconsin's political and economic landscape.

Physical landscape is what guided the LC&M's railhead to the three rivers. Mostly, it was the geography of the La Crosse River. The city of La Crosse is positioned in a hilly, bluff-filled, unglaciated region of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa known as the Driftless Area. The most convenient route through the area's irregular topography, with a gradient slight enough to accommodate a freight train, was the La Crosse River valley. This may have determined the route to La Crosse proper, but not the final position of the Middle Yard. The La Crosse River marsh did this. When the railroad reached the city, river access, cheap land, and close proximity to paying passengers and commerce were desired. The most obvious choice was the vacant land

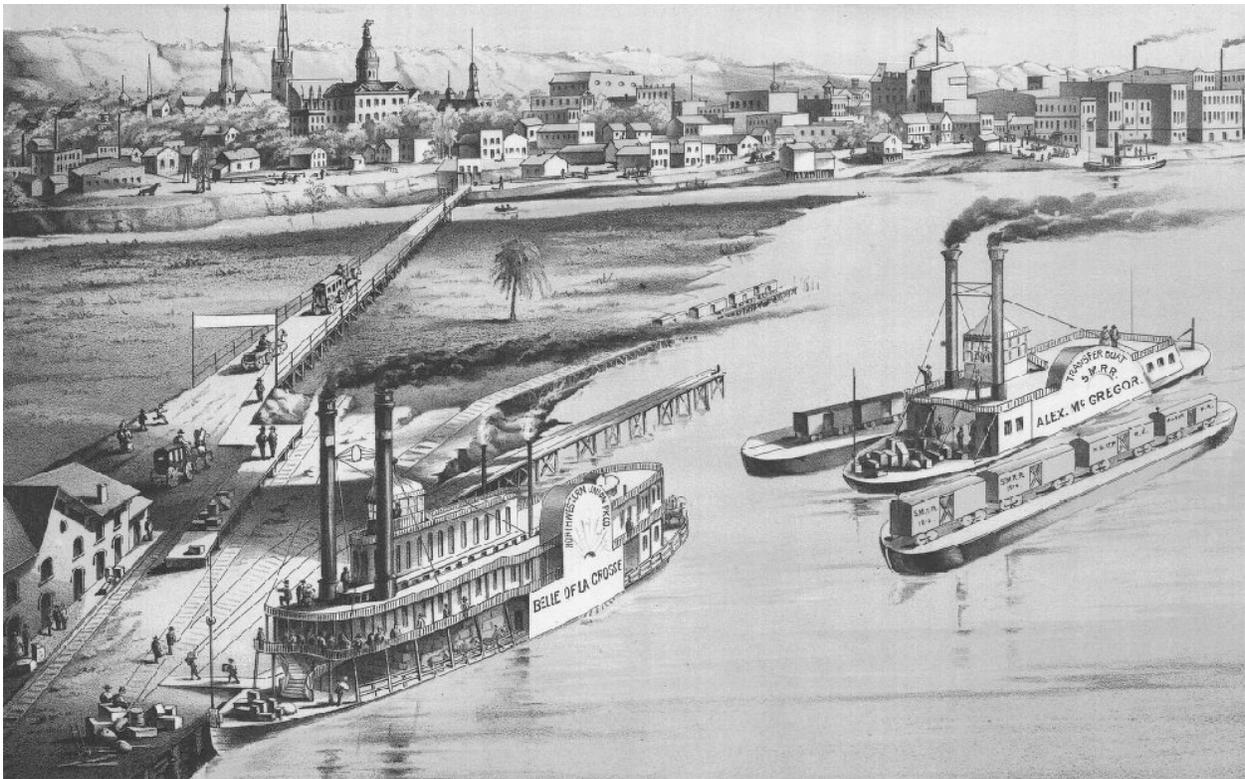
north of downtown—the wetlands between the mouths of the La Crosse River. The land was exasperatingly empty, viewed more as a bothersome obstruction to development than a natural asset worth preserving.



A section of an 1887 bird's eye view. Inset: A close-up of the Middle Yard.

Early maps, bird's eye views, and photographs show a very different landscape, with markedly different natural characteristics, than are there at present. An early 1846 federal land survey map of La Crosse shows two well-defined mouths of the La Crosse River. The southern mouth was near—although not quite at—where the present-day river flows into the Mississippi. What is different is the second, more northern mouth. It no longer exists. Soon after railroads arrived it disappeared. By an 1887 bird's eye view, the northern channel had been cut off by city and railroad encroachment into the wetlands. According to Alfred Godfrey in "A Historical Analysis of the Lower La Crosse River Marsh 1841-Present," when the Chicago, Milwaukee, St.

Paul and Pacific Railway built a roundhouse on the city's northside, the fill disturbed the area drainage so much that the northern channel was blocked. The bird's eye views provide an idea of other natural characteristics. They show a flat, treeless, empty space. Photographs show the same. Tellingly, the Middle Yard is invariably in the background of shots featuring something else, like La Crosse's downtown or riverfront. Similar to the rusted rail and forgotten cottonwoods and silver maples of the present, the Middle Yard was, in some very subtle way, on the border of daily awareness.



A section of an 1873 bird's eye view with the Middle Yard in the foreground

Bird's eye views and photographs show the physical structures and operations of the Middle Yard as well. During the years of the La Crosse and Milwaukee Railroad and, subsequently, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railway, the Middle Yard was an important intermodal transportation hub, based on the intersection of river and rail. It was a trans-shipment point for passengers, freight, and bulk commodities between steamboats lines and

the railroad. The first structure built was the LC&M passenger depot and “eating house.” The depot and “eating house” had dual purposes, serving also as a steamboat landing (Follmar, 34). In the years before the Milwaukee Road completed a series of bridges across the Black and Mississippi Rivers, if a passenger wished to continue upriver to St. Paul, Minnesota, it was necessary to travel the last leg by steamboat. The crucial final riverboat link, however, was initially weak. The monopolistic Galena Line refused to offer the city and the LC&M adequate packet service. As a result, the railroad financed a locally-owned line, the La Crosse and St. Paul Packet Company—known later as the White Collar Line (Stanford 138; Corp of Engineers).

Before bridges spanned the Mississippi and Black Rivers, railcar ferries were another prominent feature of the Middle Yard. In an early enigmatic photo, a pier lined with track and

boxcars ends abruptly at the river (Pryor). An 1873 bird’s eye view provides some detail for the scene. It shows the transport riverboat, the *Alex McGregor*, with barges lashed to either side. On each barge is loaded four boxcars,



likely making connections to the Southern Minnesota Railroad, which ran westward along the Root River. In the winters, river ice closed the navigation season. When this happened the railroads built a “winter bridge” over the icy river from the Middle Yard, across islands and river bottoms, to nearby La Crescent, Minnesota.

Grain elevators were arguably the Middle Yard’s most important structures. They can be seen in nearly every early bird’s eye view. Soon after the LC&M reached La Crosse, the financially troubled company was forced into a court-appointed receivership for defaulting on the interest payments for a land grant mortgage. Among the receiver’s first actions was to

request funding to build a grain elevator at the Middle Yard along the Black River (Cary, 32). Before the LC&M elevator, the mode which grain passed through La Crosse was vexingly inefficient; it was moved by individual sack. After the elevator was constructed, however, sacks of grain were brought in by wagon or riverboat, ripped open, and loaded into the elevator for temporary storage and, ultimately, bulk shipment elsewhere (Sanford 134). In 1869, according to Albert Stanford's A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin 1841-1900, the railroad elevator "handled 3,487,173 bushels of wheat, of which 1,339,239 were in sacks" (134). The grain trade was big business for La Crosse and the Middle Yard.

The most persuasive proof of La Crosse's success in the grain business was the relocation of the W.W. Cargill and Brothers to the city in 1875. Today one of the world's largest agricultural corporations, Cargill moved its headquarter from Albert Lea, Minnesota in order to, as business historian Wayne G. Groehl, Jr. posits in Cargill: Trading the World's Grain, take advantage of the city's natural position as "a geographic node for regional commerce" (39). In 1880, W.W. Cargill and Brothers began to erect the company's first terminal elevator alongside the Milwaukee Road's freight house and elevator in the Middle Yard. It was steam-powered with a 60-horsepower engine and a 50,000-bushel capacity (Groehl, 50; Sanborn Fire Maps). The company's location on the Black River was used for other purposes as well. W.W. Cargill and Brothers built riverboats there. An early photo shows a low-draft riverboat hull being built behind the Black River elevator (Groehl, 51).

By the first decades of the twentieth century, the industrial heyday of the Middle Yard had passed. An expanding rail network replaced steamboats. The railroad yard physically remained, but many of its most important functions had disappeared. The Milwaukee Road passenger depot and warehouse, along with its first grain elevator, burned to the ground on May

14, 1870, when a cooper fixing a leaking kerosene barrel set the steamboat *War Eagle* on fire. The depot, freight house, and elevator were rebuilt, but shortly afterward the railroad extended the tracks into downtown and built a new passenger depot there. A 1906 Sanborn Fire Insurance map labeled the Milwaukee Road's freight house as "destroyed by fire" and the elevator as "dismantled." While it remains uncertain when the Cargill elevator was razed, it likely survived at least until 1906.

When the depot, warehouse, and elevators faded away, the Middle Yard probably began to acquire some of its present qualities as an abandoned, overlooked space. It was certainly no longer what it once had been. It was no longer the treeless wetland that it had been when the LC&M first arrived. It had become instead an industrial wasteland in a new, uncertain, post-industrial stage of its natural succession. The treeless area that had once been between the mouths of the La Crosse River began to grow cottonwoods, silver maple, and river birch amid the rail. This period shapes the uses of Middle Yard today. Instead of corporations hoping to capitalize on a unique set of geographical attributes, the area is used as an unregulated space, a borderland beyond the restricting gaze of business and authority.

Today the Middle Yard is a homeless camp and private fishing spot. For a brief period in 2002, it was a large hobo jungle, full of black-clad, road-weary tramps. But no trains clank here



anymore. Instead, what is heard is the incessant whine of the nearby municipal incinerator, diesel-powered towboats, and, in the distance, the Canadian Pacific Railway crossing a new Black River bridge. Early city maps show a street grid prematurely laid out over the Middle Yard by a hopeful city planner

(Stanford, 150). The dream for a “Railroad Addition” went unfulfilled. Now the city of La Crosse has new plans to develop the site; this time, however, according to a more twenty-first century logic. There is talk of an office park (La Crosse Tribune).

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