

Settlement

Donald County Park is comprised of land that was either donated or sold to the Dane County Parks department. The following is a brief history of the people who settled and worked the land before it was parkland.

THE SWEET FAMILY

In 1853 William Sweet bought up land in Sec. 29, Springdale, and in 1855 brought his wife, Sally Clark Sweet, and family, from Chautauqua Co., New York, to live in Wisconsin. There were seven children: James, John, George, Betsy Ann, Sarah Jane, Ellen and Adelaide.

They came by boat from Buffalo to Milwaukee, and from Milwaukee by ox team with all their worldly goods in a wagon, to this log cabin where they cheerfully took up the life of a sturdy, self-sustaining pioneering family.

Before reaching Sugar River there was much speculation about this stream with sweet water flowing between its banks. When the ox team drew up beside it the two little girls Sarah and Ellen, piled out of the wagon, ran to the stream with their cups, dipped them in, lifted them to eager lips-and drank the bitterest water they had ever tasted. Bitter because of their disappointment that, after all, it was only ordinary, tasteless, creek water, a disappointment, they never forgot.

Like other early pioneer families, they raised not only their food but their own clothes and shoes. It took long hours to clean, card, spin and dye the yarns to be knit on long winter evenings into mittens and socks or to be sent away to be woven into cloth. It took time and skill to tan leather and cobble the boots for nine pairs of feet, to make soap and candles, to sew calico dresser, hand tuck yards and yards of muslin for petticoats for four daughters, and make up the pieces into quilts.

Mr. Sweet had a special skill. Where he got the formulas or how he learned to make them is not known, but he made up some excellent and effective medicines which, during the Civil War, were very useful and probably saved some lives. He made a "yellow ball ointment" which healed all manner of skin eruptions, his "balsam" could break up stubborn colds, and his "uncle Wade's pills" checked dysentery. He made these up in large quantities and sent them to the soldiers in the South. Dysentery was one of the most serious ills of the army. Two or three does the size of a pea of "Uncle Wade's pills" checked dysentery, even in a severe case. He sent down pounds and pounds of it. Sally Sweet died in 1872, William Sweet in 1897. William Sweet's great grandfather, also William, was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. They came from a large family with many descendants still living in New York State. Of the Sweet children, the two older boys, John and James, quite early went away to work, married and settled elsewhere. George married Harriet A. Fuller of Mt. Vernon, lived and raised a family in Michigan. He died in 1915 at the age of seventy-nine.

Betsy Ann Sweet was born on January 1, 1840, and died in 1923 at the age of eighty-three. She married Doctor Parley Pierce, and they had five children who have all lived in Springdale. Frank Pierce homesteaded in Nebraska, raised seven children, Helen, Bessie, Florence, Arthur, Howard, Lillian, and Ronald. Now, at eighty-eight, he travels alone to visit his sisters and friends in Springdale.

Lillie, born Oct. 12, 1862, and Minnie Pierce, born Sept. 29, 1864, married the Way brothers Lincoln and Will. Lillie had no family, but raised a foster daughter, Merle, and was "Aunt" to everyone in Mt. Vernon. She died in March, 1945. Minnie and Will Way had seven children, all now living in or near Springdale; Lee; Lillie, wife of Harvey Jones; George, who married Mabel Beard; Frank, who married Mary Murphy Larkin; Dewey, who married Flora Marty; Margie, wife of George Webber; and Hulette who married Dell Mitchell. There are now 18 grandchildren and thirteen great-grandchildren for Grandma Way to knit for. She makes her home with her daughter Margie, and her son-in-law George Webber on the old Sweet farm.

Virginia Pierce, born April 19, 1869, married Charles Nelson and is living in Madison. She had five children: John, living near Mazomanie; Elizabeth, now Mrs. William Schnathorst, living in "River Forest, Illinois; the twins, Hugh and Harvey, and Florence, are deceased. There are eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Sarah Jane Sweet was born on August 17, 1847. She married Hugh Brainard and went to Iowa to make her home. She was left a widow with two children, Edith and Arthur. She later married John Keith. She died in 1926 at the age of seventy-nine.

Ellen Sweet was born on September 29, 1849. She was six years old when she came to Wisconsin. With her sister, Sarah, she attended the University at the time of the Civil War. They lived in South Hall, had classes in Bascom hall; they had chapel every morning and were required to respond to roll call by answering with a verse from the Bible. At sixteen she taught her first school, and lived with the George Martin's. After she was left a widow she taught school more terms. As little girls, she and Sarah would ride to church with their neighbors, the Donalds. Even then she used to think John a "fine young man". They were married in April of 1868, when she was nineteen years old. She was left a widow in October. On a cold winter day in January she hurried from her home on the Donald farm to her mother, and there in the old log cabin the son, John Sweet Donald, was born, on January 12, 1869, three months after his father had died. In 1882 she was married to John Jones. He died in 1897. She continued to live on the farm until 1914 when she went to Madison to live. She was a life-long member of the Summit Chapter of the Easter Star, Methodist Aid Society of Mt. Horeb, Baptist Aid Society at Mt. Vernon, and in Madison of the White Shrine, Wimodasis, Three Links Club, and W.C.T.U. and the Daughters of the American Revolution. After her son died in 1934 she went to Washington to be with her granddaughter and two great grandsons. She died in Spokeane on February 2, 1937, and was buried in the cemetery in Mt. Horeb between the graves of her parents, William and Sally Sweet, and her husband, John Strong Donald.

Adelaide Sweet was born August 29, 1854. She was one year old when her family came to Wisconsin. In 1870 she attended the University and in 1871 she married George Larkin. "Aunt Addie" had no children of her own, but adopted a nephew, Danford Larkin, and raised two girls, Mary, who married Frank Way, and Louise, who married George McKay. Until 1942 she lived on the Larkin farm west of Madison where she and "Uncle George" had lived the whole of their married life. Her nieces, Amy and Helen Larkin, cared for her in their home until she died in June 1946. The youngest of the family, she lived to be the oldest, ninety-two.

THE DONALD FAMILY

Rev. James Donald came to Springdale in the spring of 1855 with his wife, Margaret Strong Donald, and their three sons, William, Robert and John, then thirteen years old.

Rev. Donald was called to Wisconsin to take two charges, the Presbytery of Dane, in the town of Blue Mounds, which held services in the Methodist Episcopal Church at Mt. Horeb, and a little Scotch Presbyterian group which met in the homes of the members in the town of Verona. He was their first pastor. The church they built in 1861 served and outlived its purpose and in the early 1920's was moved and rebuilt into a barn. It stood on a hill (NW 1/4 Sec. 20) which is now, in 1946, covered with a thick stand of locust trees, at the intersection of County Trunk G and the road which runs past the old Zink farm, across the road from the old Goth farm at the head of what was called "Scotch Lane". James Donald was born in Scotland. Although he was a successful teacher and principal of his own private school in Glasgow he desired to become a minister and foreign missionary. In 1827 he sailed to New Brunswick, British America, where he spent three years preaching in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In 1830 he returned to Scotland to be ordained into the ministry. In 1831 he returned to

this country where he became pastor of a church at New Scotland, New York, near Albany. The annual stipend to these pioneer preachers was small. Even when the guarantee for the year was only \$350, they often did not receive all of it. Letters of recommendation written for Rev. Donald tell how regretfully they released him, because the congregation was unable to raise the guarantee, that he might accept a new pastorate in order to support his growing family. Out of these small salaries, prayer, thrift, a desire for a home for his family and security for his declining years, he managed to put up enough so that when he decided to move west to Wisconsin he was able to buy a small farm. This must have been considered an unusual achievement for a minister because it was often commented on in letters written by his fellow churchmen.

To be close to his two congregations he decided to locate in Springdale, midway between them. He bought two Forties from William Dryden who'd got them from the government, one by trading a yoke of oxen, a wagon, and ten dollars, and the other at \$1.25 an acre. We have no record of what Rev. Donald paid Mr. Dryden, but title to the Forty on which the family home was built was by patent (No. 360) from the State of Wisconsin to James Donald, dated November 14, 1855. The other Forty Mr. Dryden had title to but this Forty for some reason had not been transferred to him, and so came directly from the state.

The square part of the house was built about 1859, exactly as it stands, except for the metal roof which was put on over the original shingles. The earliest permanent houses were built of local limestone, but so far as we know this is the first frame house to be built in the neighborhood. By whom and how the house was built we do not know. Edward Sharp, a pioneer Madison contractor and plasterer, did the plastering, using sand which John hauled from the sand pit in Madison. There is still a hearth and fireplace in the cellar, but the chimney for it was taken down. The only barn until 1875 was a log stable which was finally taken down in 1907. In 1858 John dug the well which was used until 1889 when the one in use now was drilled. The dug well was used for years as a cooler for butter, milk, and cream.

Ten years after he came to Wisconsin Rev. Donald gave up preaching. On October 6, 1866, he died, and was buried in the cemetery in Mt. Horeb, the first of four generations to be buried there. The family always began and ended the day with family prayer. The Sabbath was a day of prayer and rest. Even the cooking was done the day before. It was gently commented on by the sons that their father reluctantly consented to allow them to care for the stock, and to harness the horses to drive to church on Sunday morning.

His Library of Classics, Bibles, and school texts, is almost intact in the old Donald house. In 1860 he had it insured for \$150, worth a good deal more then, no doubt, than now. The house was insured for \$400 and the other furnishings for \$50.

Dr. William J. Donald, the eldest son, was, I believe, the first regular doctor to practice and live in Mt. Vernon. He was twenty-two years old when he came with his father to Wisconsin in 1855. He was born in New York state, and had gone to school there. It seems for a few years that he taught school in Wisconsin, but we have no records of the schools he taught in. Finally he went to Union College in Schenectady, New York, and studied medicine. He graduated in 1863, and took up his practice in Mt. Vernon. Two events were outstanding. One was the tornado on May 23, 1878. He must have had a busy time taking care of the injured. The other was another storm. In this one he was the injured. His horse went through a bridge during a flood. As a result of this he used a crutch for the rest of his life. He invented a crutch attachment to keep crutches from slipping on the ice and built up quite a business manufacturing and selling them. His wife, Adeline Zink, died a few months after they were married. Not long afterward, about 1880, he moved to Tomah, Wisconsin, and later to Tunnel City. There he married Rilla Winship. He carried on his practice and she ran the village store there until they retired and moved to Riverside, California, where he died in 1919 at the age of eighty-four.

Robert Donald went East to school. For several years he was principal of the Peekskill Military Academy. He never returned to live in Wisconsin. When his father died, his mother went back with him to New York state where he made a home for her as long as she lived.

John Strong Donald, the third son, was born in New York state, July 5, 1842. He was thirteen when he came to Wisconsin. The responsibilities of the farm soon fell on his young shoulders. It was John who drove his father to church, who dug the well, split logs for fences, hauled sand and lumber for the new house, who stayed home so that his two older brothers might get their education, who had to say goodbye to his friends when they went off to join the Union soldiers and remain behind because by then his father was failing in health. Two years after his father died he was married to Ellen Sweet in April 1868. In October he was stricken with typhoid fever and died October 9th at the age of 26, three months before his son was born.

John Sweet Donald was born January 12, 1869 in the log cabin on the west bank of the stream running through the old Sweet farm. Though he was born after his father had died he was made heir to that part of the Donald farm which his grandfather had got from the Government. He grew up on the farm, went to the country school, graduated from the Northwestern Business College of Madison in 1887, from Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana, in 1894, and 1897 from Chicago Dental College with the degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery. He was never to practice dentistry, however. That spring his stepfather John Jones, died. Mr. Jones had bought the McCord farm from Ike Brader and the Sweet farm from Wm. Sweet, one on each side of the Donald farm. These farms were not paid for. His mother could not carry on with them alone. He did not want to give up the Donald farm so he decided to give up dentistry instead, come back to the farm and try to keep the three farms together.

In June 1898, he brought his bride, Vona De Crow of Valparaiso, Indiana, to Wisconsin to live in the Donald home. They had three children, Delma, born June 2, 1899; a son, Robert, born in August 1901. He lived only a few weeks. Another daughter, Dora, born June 3, 1903, died at the age of six months.

In 1892, when Johnny Donald was 23 years old, he served one term as assessor of Springdale. From 1899 to 1902 he was Town Chairman, on the board of Supervisors. He had no thought of entering political life, but he was interested in local politics and his friends urged him to "run" for the Assembly on the Republican ticket in the 1902 election. When he was elected, it was the beginning of twelve years of elective office. He was re-elected to the Assembly in 1904. In 1908 and 1910 he was returned to the Legislature, this time as State Senator from Dane Co. He served two terms as a Secretary of State from 1912 to 1916.

He was conscious always that his political career was due to the confidence the people who elected him placed in him to represent them. It was his great good fortune that this was at the beginning of the golden era of Progressive Legislation. He soon recognized the splendid things the La Follette administration was trying to do for the State of Wisconsin, they were things he believed in, things his neighbors and friends wanted for themselves, for their children, and for the future of the State. So he entered with enthusiasm into the work of the 1903 legislature. He was assigned to the committee on Dairy and Foods and to the Education committee. He was active in support of the railroad commission bill, workman's compensation, grain inspection bill, the primary election bill, to mention a few of the measures passed by the legislature during those years.

The first bill he introduced in the legislature was passed. It prohibited the big monopoly telephone companies cutting rates to put small independent companies, like the Mt. Vernon Telephone Co. of which he was then the secretary, out of business. He became chairman of the committee that drew up the Pure Food laws to protect the health of the consuming public, including the weights and measures laws to protect against fraud. He was chairman of the Education committee and served on the Public Welfare committee.

John Donald's most important contribution and the one for which he worked the hardest was the Good Roads Bill. It was the custom in those pre-1910 days for each farmer to "work out" his road tax by maintaining the public roads on his own place. To do this the best several neighbors would work together to build bridges, to grade, drag out the ruts and fill up the mud holes. It was about this time that Mr. Donald tried out the first "split log" drag. When the road was properly graded up with a crown in the center with the sides sloping away so that the water could run off, the idea was to get out with

the drag a few hours after a rain, go up one side of the road and back the other, filling the ruts, packing the dirt, leaving a smooth surface which would dry quickly. If this was done regularly after each rain it maintained with a minimum of effort a fairly smooth dirt road.

There was time riding the drag behind a team of horses for him to dream of a day when every farmer could have a hard surfaced road running past his farm to market. The opportunity to do something about it came in the 1911 session of the legislature. He introduced a bill to give state aid to highways, creating a highway commission to secure funds to build and maintain out of these funds the state highway system, it secured the distribution of funds so that the people living on the highways, who depended on them to get their produce to market should have the benefit of them. This was the first good roads bill passed in Wisconsin and it set up the system out of which the present laws grew. It was known as the "Donald Bill" and he was frequently called "the father of the good roads law in Wisconsin". Surely Springdale can claim to be its birthplace.

The years from 1900 to 1908 were progressive years on the farm too. The last evidences of the old pioneer life gave way to pioneering of a new kind. The log buildings and rail fences were replaced by modern barns, five bedroom houses and barbed wire fences. In 1900 the house and barn on the Big Rock farm were built, two or three years later the ones on the Sweet farm were put up. The Donald farm was stocked with purebred percheron horses, shorthorn cattle and Berkshire hogs. Many new farm practices were tried out, some of them were experimental and so successful they became standard practice. The Sweet farm was one of the first farms in Wisconsin to be rented on a fifty-fifty co-operative share basis. They planted one of the first fields of alfalfa in Springdale to yield three cuttings of hay in one year. Crushed lime spread on the soil was quite new in those days when they first began putting it on the fields. Since 1910 a new dairy barn has been built on each of the three Vernon Valley farms.

In 1917 and '18 Mr. Donald was chairman of the Dane County Council of Defense and a member of Exemption Board No. 1. When the Y.M.C.A. asked him to serve overseas as an A.E.F. Secretary, he said he had sent so many young men into service he felt he could not refuse. He had announced his candidacy for Congress, but he withdrew and went to France in July 1918. After the Armistice he served with the Army Educational Corps organizing classes in Agriculture for the boys in the Army of Occupation.

When he returned home he joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture as a Farm Management Expert to again pioneer a new field. Very little had ever been done to set up simple, adequate farm record forms or to help with the keeping of farm accounts. He worked out two sets of farm record books, one for the farmer to use and one to be used to teach farm accounting in the schools. He went wherever farmers would listen with the slogan "A Farm Without Records is Like a Clock Without Hands". Wherever they taught bookkeeping in rural high schools he introduced the use of farm record and account books. His farm account book, somewhat revised, is still being put out by the University.

It remains only to mention a number of organizations in which he was active to attest to his interest in matters of human welfare, in fields tilled and natural, in Wisconsin's general countryside, and to his spirit of service. He was a charter member of Madison's Rotary Club, a 32nd Degree Mason, belonged to the Knights Templar, the Shriners, and the Consistory. He was President of the State Livestock Breeders Assn., the State Conference of Social Work, Treasurer, the State Country Life Assn., and Friends of Our Native Landscape, Secretary of the Dane County Agricultural Society. Of his pride and interest in the Forest of Fame more need not be said here.

Mr. Donald died on January 10th, 1934, at his home in Madison and was buried in the Mt. Horeb Cemetery on Jan. 12th, his 65th birthday.

His wife, Mrs. Vona Donald, lives in Madison and is active in the present management of the farms. She was an Indiana girl who had taught school there and came to Wisconsin with progressive ideas about rural education which were still new to Wisconsin. When the Malone schoolhouse was built about 1907, it was considered an outstanding modern rural school. It was largely the result of her interest and patient effort that many of these new ideas went into the new school. She worked

hard for Woman's suffrage and was vitally interested, helpful, and stimulating to her husband in all the Progressive Legislation he supported.

During World War I she helped to organize and was the first Chairman of the Mt. Horeb Red Cross Chapter. She is a past matron of Summit Chapter No. 71 Order of the Eastern Star. For several years she served as a member of the Dane County Welfare Board, consisting of three women, acting in an advisory capacity to the Court handling juvenile delinquency and Mothers' Pension cases in Dane Co. This Board helped to establish a juvenile detention home, which kept delinquent children out of the jail, thus avoiding an adverse record in childhood. She served on the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters. She is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution on both the maternal and paternal side of her family, both families having come to this country in about 1635.

The daughter Delma, and her family live in Madison. Her husband, James G. Woodburn, is Professor of hydraulic Engineering at the University. They have two sons, the only Donald grandchildren. James Donald Woodburn, born October 30, 1925, graduated from the University September 1947, started his first engineering job with the United Light and Utility Co. at Davenport, Iowa. Robert Donald Woodburn, born Jan. 11, 1928, is a junior in Electrical Engineering at the University.

John S. Donald, after the death of his only son, became the last of the Donald family to carry the name. He was often very conscious of this fact and perhaps it stimulated him to plant trees in the soil and seeds of progress in his labors. In their Memorial Resolutions, the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin paid a tribute to the effect:

"Thus, Mr. Donald whose quiet and kindly nature seemed at times almost to obscure his initiative and force, will live not alone in the hearts of those who knew him personally, but also in the lives of those who, for years to come, will find their world a little better because of his loves and labors. He would ask no better reward than to be written as one who loves his fellow man."

When the late Mrs. Ellen Donald-Jones was buried in the Mt. Horeb cemetery a week ago she was laid to rest in the old Donald burial lot where sleep four generations of Donalds, and as Mrs. Donald-Jones' father, William Sweet, is also buried there it may be said to also contain four generations of Sweets. This fine large burial ground is now a village cemetery and Scandinavian names are beginning to dominate its nomenclature, but it was not always so, for the names on the stones of nearly all the first burials are American or English. Sentimentally the Donalds have the more valid moral claim on this cemetery, since it was the first of the Donalds, the Rev. James Donald, who built the original Presbyterian church there and thus fixed the site as consecrated ground.

On the Donald lot is a modest stone showing that the Rev. James Donald was born Aug. 15, 1790, and died Oct. 6, 1866. A similar stone to his son, John Strong Donald, records that the latter was born July 5, 1842, and died Oct. 9, 1868. The elder Donald was born in Scotland. As yet there is no stone for the late John S. Donald, legislator and secretary of state, 1913-1917, third in line of family burials there.

The Rev. James Donald was educated for the ministry in Scotland and made four trips to America as a missionary before remaining in this country. He finally married a woman of Schenectady, N.Y., and came to Wisconsin and Dane county in 1854.

He organized the Blue Mounds Presbyterian church at Mt. Horeb corners and the Verona Presbyterian church in the Sugar river valley. A church was built at each place. In order to have a home somewhere between them he bought from one of the Drydens the farm in Springdale which has since been known as the Donald farm on the road between Mt. Vernon and Mt. Horeb. There was then no home on the place His neighbor, William Sweet, had bought the Ashmore place just before. Near the creek on this farm was an old log cabin, and Mr. Donald had this moved to his farm and began pioneer life there. In a year or two, in 1856, he began the construction of the farmhouse which is still known as the Donald home and which has therefore done service for 80 years.

The late John S. Donald, former secretary of state, who died Jan. 10, was frequently styled the "father of the highway law." Mr. Donald was a member of the assembly in the sessions of 1903 and 1905 and of the senate in the sessions of 1909 and 1911. In all this time Mr. Donald was greatly interested in highway improvement legislation and introduced various bills on the subject. The bill which finally passed creating the present state highway system and set-up, with subsequent modifications, was

known as the "Donald bill."

It was the advent of the automobile that brought about the demand for better highways, says M.W. Torkelson, regional planning director of the state highway commission, in the Blue Book of 1931.

Prairie Oak Farm:

The first name to appear on the abstract for this portion of Donald Park was Christian Summerdale in 1841. Since then the farm changed hands on an average of every five years. It was hard to make a living on land that was two thirds woods with steep and stony small fields and woody pastures. Both social and environmental changes occurred over the years. A Farm House was built, cultivation on tillable pasture land. In the 1930's the C.C. C. planted a substantial Pine and in 1937 rural electrification was brought to the farm. But much of the acreage remained as it was before settlement due in part to its wildness.

In 1955 Peter Larson purchased it from Waldie and Mary Bahn. Peter's son, Harold, who was satisfied with the simple life and evenings that took him down to the creek with his fishing pole and a can of night crawlers, stayed on the farm for 12 years until he sold it to the Hitchcocks in 1967. The lay of the land reminded the Hitchcocks of their childhoods on farms in Connecticut and Vermont. They loved the hilly meadows cutting into the woods, the rocky cliffs, the stream that bordered the line to the north.

Since being purchased by the Hitchcock family There haven't been many changes to the farm. A low field, that was always too wet when it needed to be worked was turned into a pond for the pleasure of Bass fishing "grandpas and grandchildren". A Hard Maple Woods planted in 1973 which is being groomed for a sugar bush when the trees have reached the necessary age for tapping. Several more pine plantation have been added to the one planted in the 30's. Trails used by hikers and horses and cross country skiers when the snow falls were added and a cabin was built by young people and families who wanted to have a try at putting real "Lincoln Logs together the Finnish way. This has been used by friends who hunger for the silence and solace that only the natural world can provide. Since the land was added to Donald Park in 1996, 37 acres have been worked over in various successions to restore oats, alfalfa and corn land to its more native prairie. One hundred and twenty fine flower species have been planted by hand by faithful volunteers that come every Tuesday morning and on other days to burn , plant and weed this beautiful July Bouquet.