Mt. Vernon Forest of Fame Park

The village of Mt. Vernon, Wisconsin is situated the same direction and distance from the Wisconsin State Capitol as is the United States Federal Capitol from George Washington’s home of Mt. Vernon, Virginia. This coincidence is how the village of Mt. Vernon aquired its name in 1852, given by George G. Britts, one of the early settlers of this area, who was from Virginia. In 1915, as John S. Donald, Secretary of State of Wisconsin, was walking along the banks of the Potomac River, in the state of Virginia, the beauty of the area sparked an idea to create a park on the branch of the Sugar River in his native village of Mt. Vernon, Wisconsin. The park was to become the “Forest of Fame,” made up of trees from many parts of the world, planted here to honor famous persons who dedicated their lives to the service of mankind. Over a period of 25 years, a number of trees were planted and dedicated by the local church and other organizations. The Forest of Fame did bring a fair amount of fame to the village of Mt. Vernon as it was featured in many newspaper and magazine articles.

On Arbor Day, in 1916, a half dozen small elm and maple trees that were secured from George Washington’s Potomac Estate were planted in the village square of Mt. Vernon. The school children and residents of Mt. Vernon and surrounding towns were present at the dedication of the trees. One year later, the Lincoln elm, from Hodginsville, KY, Lincoln’s birthplace, was planted and dedicated. In 1919, five spruce trees were secured from General Pershing’s A.E.F. Headquarters in Chaumont, France. At the dedication ceremony a note from General Pershing was read, “Let us hope that to the school children of Wisconsin these trees will typify, by their strength and stature, the life, force and ideals of their fathers, the American soldiers who crossed the ocean and gained the victory in order that their children might be free.” In 1919 the Joan of Arc willow was also planted. In the following years many more “famous” trees were planted and dedicated in the Forest of Fame. Memorial plaques were placed next to the trees, marking their origins. The memorial placed on the Bob LaFollette tree stated his last words, “I am at peace with all of the world, but there is a lot of work I still could do. I do not know how the people will feel toward me, but I shall take to the grave my love for them, which has sustained me through life.” With time, Dutch Elm disease and other damage took a toll on the park’s trees. Gone but not forgotten, the Forest of Fame concept was a tribute to the pride and patriotism of the community of Mt. Vernon.

Right:
Aerial photo taken of Mt. Vernon circa 1946. The Forest of Fame Park is the square on the right, across from the Baptist Church.
-Courtesy of the Mt. Horeb Area Historical Society, Inc.
Other trees that were planted and dedicated in the Forest of Fame were:

1924 - Rutherford B. Hayes - elm from Freemont, Ohio
1925 - Robin Hood - oak from Sherwood Forest, England
1926 - Ulysses S. Grant - elm from Galena, Illinois
1926 - William McKinley - maple from Canton, Ohio
1926 - Gov. Lucius Fairchild - elm from Madison, Wisconsin
1926 - Gov. Jeremiah Rusk - maple from Viroqua, Wisconsin
1926 - Gov. William D. Hoard - elm from Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin
1927 - Theodore Roosevelt - dogwood from Sagamore Hill, Long Island, N.Y.
1927 - Gov. Farwell - elm from Madison, Wisconsin
1927 - Gov. Washburn - elm from Madison, Wisconsin
1927 - Gov. Taylor - maple from Cottage Grove, Wisconsin
1927 - Robert M. LaFollette - elm from Primrose township, Wisconsin
1927 - Thomas Jefferson - elm from Monticello, Virginia
1927 - Daniel Webster - maple from Salisbury, New Hampshire
1927 - Napoleon Bonaparte - willow from France
1928 - Henry Clay - ash from Lexington, Kentucky
1928 - Robert E. Lee - ash from Lexington, Virginia
1928 - Woodrow Wilson - spruce from Washington, D.C.
1928 - Luther Burbank - mountain ash from experimental farm, California
1928 - J. Sterling Morton - elm from Nebraska City, Nebraska
1928 - Frances Willard - elm from Janesville, Wisconsin
1931 - Eben Rexford - elm from Shiocton, Wisconsin
1931 - Ethan Allen - elm from Burlington, Vermont
1932 - Stephen M. Babcock - elm from Madison, Wisconsin
1933 - Buffalo Bill Cody - from Cody, Wyoming
1933 - Paul Harris - founder of Rotary International
1933 - Charles A. Lindbergh - from Little Falls, Minnesota
1937 - John S. Donald - oak from Springdale township, Wisconsin
1940 - William Tell - elm from Blue Mounds, Wisconsin, planted by the Dane County Cheese Makers Association

The Mt. Vernon Park was originally a public square named “Britts Park”, set aside by the town’s founders, and incorporated in 1920. The park served as the playground for children attending the Mt. Vernon Public School during the years that the school operated. Perhaps the greatest use over the years has been for baseball and softball games by both men and women. The park also serves as a home base for the local tug-of-war team, and in 1972, the tug-of-war organization built and donated the present shelter house. In the 1980’s, a new well was dug and a building for flush toilets was provided for those using the park. A flag pole was erected and dusk to dawn lighting was installed. In 1984, Eleanor Erb and her family planted a maple tree in the park in memory of her husband, Carl Erb, who had farmed on Kelly Hill for over forty years. Then, in 1989, a tree was planted and dedicated to the Zweiling Church. Arm wrestling was becoming a popular event at the park, and in 1994, a gazebo was built in honor of Bruce Legler, a local arm wrestler. Federal regulations determined that certain older playground equipment was accident prone, so new playground equipment was installed in 1995.

The Forest of Fame Park has continued to be a well used public park in Mt. Vernon. The park lies on the boundary of the townships of Primrose and Springdale, and it is used to a great extent by residents of each. Both townships contribute financially to support the park. At an annual meeting a park board and board of directors are elected. Those elected in 1995 were: Guy Austin, president; Ed Seis, vice-president; Richard Legler, treasurer; Vi Ryan, secretary; board of directors - Ben Goebel, Duane Garfoot and John Hoffman. The caretakers are Mr. and Mrs. William Ryan.