



WETLAND MATTERS

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AFTER FOUR GENERATIONS, HENNEPIN LAND RETURNS TO WETLANDS, PRAIRIES

BY ARTHUR MELVILLE PEARSON

"The land was ours before we were the land's."

—from *The Gift Outright* by Robert Frost

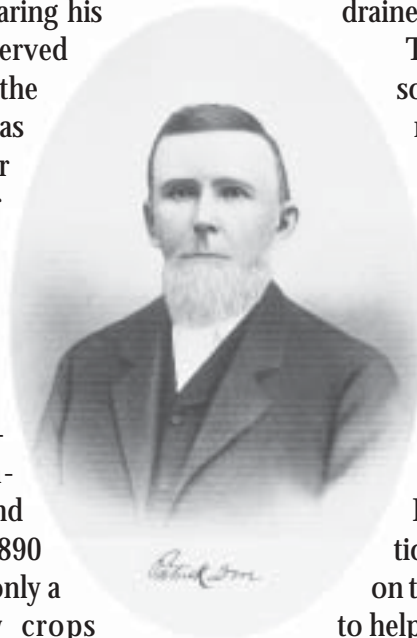
In the winter of 1680, Father Louis Hennepin paddled past an upland bump of land along the Illinois River, which almost 200 years later would sprout a town bearing his name. Perhaps he observed that just downstream of the future site of Hennepin was a pair of backwater finger lakes cleft by a giant spear point of prairie and oak savanna.

The floodplain surrounding Hennepin and Hopper lakes, as they came to be known, remained relatively unchanged through the end of the 19th century. An 1890 map of the area reveals only a small acreage of row crops

planted within the floodplain by a few property owners. One of these agricultural pioneers was an enterprising Irish immigrant named Patrick Dore.

Within 30 years, the lakes, wetlands and prairies, most of the trees, and much of the waterfowl that had made Hennepin the "duck capital of the world" were gone. In their place were more than 2,500 acres of corn. Similar transformations of lakes and wetlands were occurring up and down the entire Illinois River. Over 200,000 acres of the Illinois River floodplain—approximately one half of the presettlement floodplain—were leveed off from the river and drained.

Today, the great grandson of Patrick Dore, Thomas E. Dore, can look out over the Hennepin lands and marvel at a landscape that even Father Hennepin would recognize. The Dore family homestead is the cornerstone of The Wetlands Initiative's Hennepin & Hopper Lakes Restoration Project—the largest on the Illinois. TWI's goal is to help nature return the lands





Patrick Dore's dry good store in the town of Hennepin was acclaimed by one author in 1880 as "second to none in Putnam county. . . His stock of clothing is not excelled west of Chicago." (Burt, 1907)

to the rich mosaic of lakes, wetlands, prairies, fens, and woodlands of the presettlement era.

The story of four generations of Dores and their relationship to this land offers a window into the history of the past century's transformation of Illinois floodplains: from home to ducks and abundant wildlife to host for one of the nation's most abundant corn and soybean producers—and back again to native landscapes to sustain wildlife and people.

THE LAND WAS OURS

Patrick Dore lived the American

dream. He emigrated from County Kerry, Ireland, with lots of ambition but very little money. In 1850, he walked from Chicago to Hennepin on his way to find work in Peoria. When he stopped to rest in a Hennepin hotel, the owner offered him a job for \$8 a month. Before long he was earning \$15 a month, and soon thereafter, went into business for himself. He never made it to Peoria.

He married Margaret Rooney of Hennepin, who bore him six children, four of whom survived into adulthood. By 1880, his general store was "second to none in Putnam County." (Burt, 1907)

As his means increased, he did what almost any man of his time would do: he bought *land*—in Iowa, Colorado, Illinois, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota. In his own backyard he was one of the first investors in "swampland" around Hennepin and Hopper lakes. What today sounds like a real estate scam, back then was a calculated business decision by individuals and government: On June 22, 1852, the Illinois legislature passed an "Act to dispose of the swamp and overflowed lands and to pay the expenses of selecting and surveying the same." The act defined three classes of swampland: the best of the worst was priced at 80 cents an acre; those lands most prone to flooding were a mere 10 cents an acre. (By way of comparison, soon thereafter, Patrick Dore acquired prime upland acreage in Iowa for \$3.5 to \$10 per acre.)

Patrick Dore soon became the largest landowner around the Hennepin and Hopper lakes, purchasing 585 acres in the 2,552-acre floodplain. He managed to plant row crops in his riverside plots,

and to lease the spear point separating the two lakes—known as Dore’s Prairie—to the Hennepin Shooting Club, which owned adjacent acreage. He may have even sold timber rights to the sawmill that operated in the drainage. His long-term intention most certainly was to “improve” the land and generate a good return on his investment, a vision his four children—John, Thomas D., Michael and Cora Fay—would make a reality.

Patrick Dore was one of hundreds of men across the state reshaping the landscape. Between 1909 and 1924, 36 drainage and levee districts in 12 different counties were established along nearly the entire length of the Illinois River. Levees were constructed, pumps installed, and the river’s floodplains were isolated and drained to accommodate the appetite of a growing nation. These lands were arguably the state’s richest fish spawning and migrating waterfowl areas. In exchange, river towns gained protection from the vagaries of seasonal flood pulses—exacerbated in 1900 by the opening of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal that flushed Chicago’s sewage downstream. The towns also gained access to some of the the state’s richest soil.

The Hennepin Drainage and Levee District was among the first to come on line. On August 13, 1907, John, Thomas D., Michael, and Cora Fay Dore were

among those who filed a petition to build a levee “because of overflow from the river, heavy growth of weeds and noxious vegetation which produce stagnant water that cause malarial and typhoid conditions.” Such rationales were common at the time and betrayed a general misunderstanding of the nature and value of wetlands.

The district was not created without a legal challenge, however. The Hennepin Shooting Club, fearful of losing its prime hunting grounds, twice filed for dismissal of the petition. The club’s objections were overruled, however, and on November 6, 1908, the court ordered the establishment of the Hennepin Drainage and Levee District.

Estimated construction costs of the district’s levee, ditches and pumping plant were \$85,926. (This is equivalent to more than \$1.7 million in 2001 dollars—the year the lands were acquired by private conservation foundations.) Drainage ditches and tree stumps were excavated with dynamite and the displaced soils were used to construct the earthen berm levees. The “noxious vegetation” was burned or plowed under.

The first years of the new district were difficult and expensive. Floodwaters backed up a northern tributary, Coffee Creek, and did an end run around the northern terminus of the levee. This

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The site, circa 1890, east of the Illinois River was primarily used by the Hennepin Shooting Club and small landowners. Later the area would be drained by the Hennepin Drainage and Levee District for row crops. In 2001, The Wetlands Initiative began restoring the site to natural areas. Map drawn by Donna Tonelli, based on historical materials at the Hennepin Historical Society and in the author's private collection. Used by permission.

necessitated construction of yet another levee on the northern border of the district to reroute Coffee Creek directly into the Illinois. The Coffee Creek levee failed once; the main levee held throughout the century, although in the late 1970s floodwaters rose to within six inches of the top.

BEFORE WE WERE THE LAND'S

Two of Patrick's children, Michael and Cora Fay, moved away, leaving John and Thomas D. to inherit Patrick's store and manage the family farms, both of which eventually passed to Thomas W. when he was 16. Although the third generation Dore dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, he ran the family businesses. He never complained about his decision to forgo college and stay in Hennepin, according to his son, Thomas E. In fact, he actually added to the family acreage, both because it was good business and because he loved what he did.

Thomas W.'s tenant farmers in the drainage district grew corn and soybeans—the twin staples of Illinois agriculture to this day. In addition, he bought carloads of cattle out West, set them to graze on his other area lands, then trucked them to the Stockyards in Chicago. While other Dore family enterprises came and went, the land always remained the backbone of the family, at last passing to fourth generation Thomas E.

Although as a kid Tom helped his father, the farming bug never bit him.

"I appreciated and enjoyed the land, but from 'day one' when I started thinking about what I wanted to do with my life, I knew it was something other than farming," Tom said.

His thwarted-veterinarian father encouraged Tom to become a lawyer, a course he briefly pursued before settling on the study of business. He earned his MBA and Ph.D. in business and then taught for 15 years at Bradley University in Peoria—the town his great grandfather was on his way to before he found his fate in Hennepin.

When Tom's father, Thomas W., passed away in 1985, Tom and his mother debated what to do with the family lands. Most of the acreage by this time was cash leased or tenant farmed. Like his father before him, Tom answered the call and returned to Hennepin to manage the family lands. Tom soon discovered, however, that farmers in general and small farmers in particular were feeling a serious economic squeeze. Falling commodity prices, rising costs, and competition from developing countries conspired to make an already marginally profitable enterprise even less so.

The acreage within the drainage district had the additional financial burden of keeping nature at bay. It cost money to hire a man to check the pumping plant every day. The electric bill to run the pump an average of four hours a day, 365 days a year could run as high as \$50,000 annually. In 1997, the pump failed and a new one was installed at a cost of \$89,500. Replacement tile had to be laid to channel water to the district's six miles of drainage ditches, which had to be cleared of brush and mucked out on a regular basis. By 2001, approximately 25 percent of the total costs per acre to grow corn or soybeans in the district were special assessments related to keeping the land drained.

Because of these high costs—over and above the costs for seed, insurance, fertilizer, taxes, trucking and shared combining—the annual rate of return for the last 10 years the district was farmed was less than one percent. Money invested in a passbook savings account would have generated more income with zero expenditure of time and labor.

And then there were the public costs of maintaining the integrity of the levee. Unless properly maintained, an earthen levee is highly susceptible to erosion. Flood waters can weaken it and cause a breach. Consequently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers makes regular inspections of all levee districts. In 1998, the Corps issued a maintenance evaluation of “unacceptable” for the Hennepin Drainage and Levee District. One of the recommended maintenance items was the installation of riprap along sections of the river side of the levee. Tom estimates that this one project alone would have cost approximately \$1 million. Although the Corps does not mandate that drainage districts implement its recommendations, failure to do so could jeopardize a district’s right to federal repair assistance in the aftermath of a catastrophic flood and levee breach.

Photo inset: Thomas W. and Elizabeth Moews Dore, third generation Dores to own land in the Hennepin Drainage and Levee District. A rare seep on the property, now a designated Illinois Nature Preserve, is named in their honor.



Tom didn’t need his business degrees to understand that the economics of the district no longer worked in favor of farming. He and the majority of his fellow property owners filed to dissolve the district, although one owner did not agree with them and filed a suit to stop the dissolution.

Although the economics of the situation were crystal clear for Tom, he admitted that his four generations of family ownership made the decision to sell difficult. Already 1,000 acres of non-district Dore lands had been sold to LTV Steel. (The plant later closed, putting 600 people out of work—a major blow to the town of Hennepin, population 800.) When his mother passed away in 1998, Tom continued to live in his parents’ house in town, the very one that Patrick Dore built back in 1852.

THE GIFT OUTRIGHT

What seemed to make the decision easier for Tom was The Wetlands Initiative’s proposal to restore the district’s complex of lakes and wetlands.

“That made sense to me,” said Tom. “I felt it was just time to return the lands to the river. I never felt that I was losing anything, but rather returning something that was borrowed and was very good to my family for nearly 100 years. It was just time.”

The Dore family lands include a rare remnant of Putnam County’s original landscape: the largest seep and seep-related wetland in the region. Two rare and one state endangered plant species—

bog twayblade orchid, crested shield fern, and yellow monkey flower—are found in the seep. Last fall, 26 acres were dedicated as the Thomas W. and Elizabeth Moews Dore Seep Nature Preserve in honor of Tom’s parents. Part of the Illinois Nature Preserves system, the seep is now afforded the highest level of protection in the state.

In time, too, all district owners agreed to sell their land. Now, for the first time in almost 100 years, the clear, cold water from the seep drains into the adjacent floodplain without being immediately pumped into the river. Native plants have sprung from seed that lay dormant in the soil for nearly a century; this on land where only two years ago Tom saw nothing but waving tassels of corn. In addition, shimmering waters hold a rich stock of fish and, perhaps most impressive of all, waterfowl. In the fall of 2002, 4,000 migrating white pelicans rested and fed at the rebirthed Hennepin and Hopper lakes. More than 15,000 other migrant ducks and geese also have been tallied, and bald eagles have been returning in great numbers. Long-dormant native plant species, such as sago pondweed, also have returned to the site.

Scientists and bird watchers expect the number and diversity of waterfowl only to increase over time, especially if The Wetlands Initiative and other environmental groups are successful in restoring more drained floodplains along the Illinois River to their presettlement conditions. Such an effort would benefit not only waterfowl populations, but also the overall health of the river and all birds, animals, plants, insects and the entire food chain that depend on back-

water wetlands for their survival. The benefits would extend to people, too. In addition to the beauty such restoration creates, wetlands serve as filters, cleansing floodwaters of silt and pollutants.

“This is the way it should be. For kids, for townspeople, for future generations. I’m very happy with my decision,” Tom said.

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The Wetlands Initiative is a non-profit corporation dedicated to restoring the wetland resources of the Midwest to reduce flood damages, improve water quality, and increase wildlife habitat and biodiversity. TWI's mission is to promote restoration in ways that provide environmental and economic benefits to society and landowners. Through research, education, public policy analysis, and large-scale demonstration projects, TWI aims to restore one million acres by the year 2010. While this number may seem large, it represents only two percent of the wetlands lost in the Midwest.

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