The Heart of Michigan State University's Campus

Investigation of MSU’s Changing Landscape, Identity and Priorities
Sabrina Perlman and Katy Meyers, MSU Department of Anthropology

The Heart of Campus is more than a geographic middle point; it is a defining space for campus life, a monument for alumni remembrance and a major part of our collective university identity. As Michigan State University has grown and changed due to internal restructuring and greater external forces, the heart of campus also shifts.

By studying the shifts in the heart of campus, overall landscape change and the social forces that caused it, we can further understand what it meant to be a student during these periods and overall how our collective identity was constructed.

The MSU Campus Archaeology Program is dedicated to the protection and mitigation of archaeological resources on campus. Through our archaeological and archival work, we have divided the first hundred years of university history into four distinct thematic time periods. For each period, we have identified a focal point of campus based on archival research and archaeological evidence. Here we present the results of that research, as well as question where the heart is today.

**Foundation: 1870-1900**

During this time period the college began to make a name for itself and became rooted in the community. Campus buildings focused on the central green space, with their main doors leading out into it. At this time, the current president declared this green area “sacred” and deemed that it would not be built upon.

**Heart of Campus:** Sacred Space was the center of activity, cherished by students, and framed by the buildings. Within its boundaries is where the Rock was first placed in 1873, not to be moved until the 1980's.

**Archival evidence:** Scrapbooks and letters show an abundance of student life activities such as dances, receptions, barbecues, games, carnivals, and parades.

**Archaeology:** Excavations within this area have revealed original sidewalks and evidence of historic student activity throughout.

**Expansion: 1900-1925**

The Michigan Agricultural College identity continued to form as the curriculum and buildings expanded rapidly to accommodate an explosion in enrollment. Morrill Hall was built to accommodate women, expansion across the river occurred, and campus shifted in response to automobiles.

**Heart of Campus:** With expansion south, the Red Cedar River became a focal point of activity. Homecoming rafts were floated down the river.

**Archival evidence:** Enjoyment of the river is seen in scrapbooks and photographs, and river symbolism is seen in drawn pamphlets. Administrative memos and letters demonstrate the rush to respond to expansion.

**Archaeology:** Evidence is seen in a shift in landscape to serve cars and expedient buildings, like the Morrill Boiler Building which was only in use for five years to heat the women’s building prior to the integrated heating system.

**Beginning: 1855-1870**

The Agricultural College of Michigan State was established to create an opportunity for students to learn innovative techniques to bring back with them to their hometowns. As a new college distinctly independent from University of Michigan, it was a blank slate for the students and faculty to develop its identity.

**Heart of campus:** College Hall, the first building, and ‘Sacred Rock’, the first dormitory. These buildings became the symbols of our campus heritage and represented the intersection of living and learning.

**Archival evidence:** Personal investments they put into these spaces, displaying photos of the buildings and events in front of them.

**Archaeology:** excavations of these buildings have shown the pride in these early structures, and revealed information about early student life.

**Saints’ Rest circa 1856, students pose in front of them.**

**Excavation of a historic college in the Sacred Space, summer 2011.**

**Excavating Morrill Boiler Building, summer 2012.**

**Canoeing in the Red Cedar River circa 1920's.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, summer 2015.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, circa 1920.**

**Excavations within this area have revealed original sidewalks and evidence of historic student activity throughout.**

**Excavation of a historic college in the Sacred Space, summer 2011.**

**Excavating Morrill Boiler Building, summer 2012.**

**Canoeing in the Red Cedar River circa 1920's.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, summer 2015.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, circa 1920.**

**Excavations within this area have revealed original sidewalks and evidence of historic student activity throughout.**

**Excavation of a historic college in the Sacred Space, summer 2011.**

**Excavating Morrill Boiler Building, summer 2012.**

**Canoeing in the Red Cedar River circa 1920's.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, summer 2015.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, circa 1920.**

**Excavations within this area have revealed original sidewalks and evidence of historic student activity throughout.**

**Excavation of a historic college in the Sacred Space, summer 2011.**

**Excavating Morrill Boiler Building, summer 2012.**

**Canoeing in the Red Cedar River circa 1920's.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, summer 2015.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, circa 1920.**

**Excavations within this area have revealed original sidewalks and evidence of historic student activity throughout.**

**Excavation of a historic college in the Sacred Space, summer 2011.**

**Excavating Morrill Boiler Building, summer 2012.**

**Canoeing in the Red Cedar River circa 1920's.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, summer 2015.**

**Surveying Beaumont Tower, circa 1920.**