

Our UU on the Kame

Its Geological and Ownership Heritage

July 13, 2008 Sunday Service by UUFD member Kenneth Robertson

Our building may have the distinction of being the only UU church in the United States built on a mound left by the melting of a glacier that is technically called a kame. Perhaps, we are the only UU church in the world that is so situated.

I am not a geologist, but working with underground formations during a 40 year period has left me with an abiding interest in geology.

Most of us are aware that the flat landscape of Central Illinois is the result of past glacial action, but we may not be acquainted with some of the interesting details of that period.

Beginning about 1.6 million years ago during what geologists call the Pleistocene Epoch, continental glaciers flowed south from Canada in a broad front that extended from the Appalachian Mountains on the east to the Rocky Mountains on the west. The glaciers moved over Illinois at least four times and probably more. The geological evidence is clearer about the two most recent.

The Illinoian Glacier which covered most of Illinois from 300,000 to 125,000 years ago and the Wisconsinan Glacier from 75,000 to 12,500 years ago which traveled only as far as Shelbyville, covered most of Macon County, and about one-quarter of Illinois in its northeastern quadrant. At one time, researchers thought the glaciers were as much as a mile thick, but more recent testing of the compaction of the glacial till has led to the conclusion that the glaciers may have been only about 800 feet thick over land and as much as 2000-3000 feet over the Great Lakes.

As glaciers traveled southward driven by the continuing accumulation of snow and ice in the northern regions, they picked up a lot of rock debris, ground some of it into dust, some of it into sand, and some into gravel. Some of the large rock fragments survived as boulders. When the glaciers melted that debris was left in place, distributed by melted waters, or blown about in great dust storms in the plantless landscape that was left after each glacier melted.

No one really knows what caused the ice age. Theories vary from variations in the sun's intensity to variations in the tilting of the earth's axis. Recent scientific work seems to tie the Wisconsinan period of glaciation 75,000 years ago to the eruption of a mega volcano that spread enough ash worldwide to cool the earth and the oceans to extend a waning ice age for another 60,000 years.

Glacial debris in the form of clay, sand and gravel is left in several forms by the melting glaciers. Like a bulldozer, a glacier tends to push the earth in front of it cutting down hills and filling valleys. When the climate warms, causing the glacier to stop and then melt away, that frontal debris is left in what is called a terminal moraine. When you travel south on US51, after you leave Assumption and before you reach Pana, you may note a line of low rolling hills that extend towards Shelbyville to the southeast and continue to your right in a northwesterly direction. This is the terminal moraine left by the Wisconsinan glacier that marks the southern boundary of the most recent glacier to visit Illinois.

In the glacial grab bag of the receding glaciers, Macon County did not get the great prizes such as the scenic Finger Lakes in New York State, the spectacular hanging valleys of Yosemite National Park, or even the abundant recreational lakes of Lake County, Illinois. Instead Macon County received an assortment of mounds, accumulations of sand and gravel formed by local drainage systems developed during the static melting phase of the glacier. Geologists call these mounds kames because they were first studied, named and described in Sweden.

You may ask, "How do we know they are not Indian Mounds?"

First, we know this is the glaciated region where kames are likely to occur.

Second, there are no borrow pits adjacent to the mounds. If built by humans, the sand and gravel would have been excavated and carried to the top of the mound leaving borrow pits nearby similar to those we see adjacent to Monk's Mound at Cahokia.

Third, no Native American artifacts have been found buried in the mounds or other evidence of extensive usage by Native Americans.

John's Hill is Decatur's largest and tallest kame. According to Jack Banton's History of Macon County, before the John's family gave the land to Decatur for schools and the park, the hill was the site of their first home, a magnificent structure for the time and claimed to contain Decatur's first spiral staircase.

The mound to the east of us for which Mound Road was named is almost as high as John's Hill. When Jeanne and I bought our house on Skippy Drive in 1957, that mound was occupied by its own rather plain farmhouse, which was demolished about 1970 to be replaced by the apartment complex you see there today. This mound, the Montgomery mound, where our church sits, while not quite as high as the others, must have been just as desirable to the early settlers as a home site.

Before we leave the subject of geology, I should mention that below our rich topsoil that was formed from the glacial dust called loess that was blown about by the winds after the glaciers melted, lies 40-60 feet of glacial till, unconsolidated clay, sand and gravel. Below the glacial till lies bedrock, a layer of Pennsylvanian age limestone that is quarried north of Bloomington, near Tuscola and north of Nokomis. The limestone is quarried to be crushed for use as road rock or powdered for agricultural use. In the northern part of Macon County near Maroa and extending southeasterly to Argenta, the glacial drift thickens to as much as 300 feet in the buried ancient Mahomet Valley whose thick beds of sand provide an abundant source of drinkable water for some of the villages and cities in this area.

The only place I have seen bed rock exposed is the creek bed of Stevens Creek during periods of low flow upstream of the bridge on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.

Now let's consider the ownership history of our building site. Jack Banton's History of Macon County helps set the scene by recording that the first home in Decatur was a log cabin near the Sangamon River built in 1820. The pioneer family came overland from Vandalia not by the river – which was always a disappointment as a means of transportation.

The village of Decatur was first platted in 1829. The Lincoln family came to Macon County in March 1830 when public land was available for \$1.25 an acre. The family squatted for a year on the public land along the river and then moved to Coles County near Charleston. By May of 1838, 300 people lived in Decatur and the old log courthouse, the Lincoln Courthouse, stood on the southwest corner of the intersection of Main and Main, what is now called Lincoln Square.

In October of that same year, 1838, my abstract of ownership shows that Philo Hale acquired from the U.S. government the 80 acres of land bounded by what is now MacArthur Road on the east and lying between what is now Mound Road on the south and Ash Road on the north.

Nine years later in 1847, at Philo Hale's death, his estate inventory showed that he also owned the 160 acres south of Mound Road and west of MacArthur Road. Philo Hale's will passed the land to his son who lived in Ohio and apparently had no intention of moving to Illinois for the will anticipated the son would dispose of the property by sales to others.

In 1855, William F. Montgomery purchased most of the Hale property in this vicinity, for the will of William F. Montgomery, probated in 1886, describes the Montgomery "home place" as the 40 acres bounded by Mound and MacArthur on the north and east and the 160 acres bounded by Mound and MacArthur to the south and east.

It is interesting to note that William F. Montgomery and his wife had four daughters and three sons. In addition to the 200 acres of the home place, the Montgomery's had acquired additional land scattered about the area so as to bequeath 160 acres of land to each of their heirs.

The Montgomery "home place" with its distinctive home site at the peak of Montgomery Mound remained in the Montgomery family for nearly 100 years until Alberta Montgomery, who to her contemporaries may have been called "an old maid" began selling off pieces of the farm for real estate development in the 1950s after her bachelor brother Frank, who resided with her in the farmhouse atop the Montgomery Mound and may have spent a good part of his lifetime farming the acreage, passed away in 1945.

By the time of Alberta Montgomery's death, the home place" had been reduced to the Montgomery farm house on top of the mound and the adjacent acreage to the east that had been used as a small pasture for a pair of milk cows. Ownership then passed to two nieces, one of whom, Martha Montgomery took up residence in the old farmhouse on the mound. Martha had no real need or use for the adjacent acreage, but she was fearful that if she sold to a real estate developer, the land would become a site for apartments similar to the Olympic Apartments development to the east which had developed an early reputation in the neighborhood for unsavory activities.

Through her acquaintances with Jacquie Snoeyenbos and Jack Banton, two members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Decatur, Martha learned that the Fellowship was seeking land for a building. The widening of Mound Road in the 1950s had steepened her driveway

making that north facing exit extremely hazardous and virtually unusable during periods of ice and snow, so an alternative route to the street became highly desirable during her declining years.

Although some members preferred more of a central city location for the Fellowship's new building, a majority of the membership voted to acquire the Montgomery land for our new home and were willing to grant Miss Montgomery's request for a permanent right of egress and ingress to MacArthur Road through the Fellowship parking lot. The Fellowship had waited 20 years for the John Heil legacy to mature. After the money from the legacy was safely banked, the Fellowship closed the deal for the Montgomery property – the open land to the east of the historic Montgomery farmhouse – the site which is our church home here on the well known southwest corner of Mound and MacArthur.

In response to popular request, I have composed a song for this memorable occasion. And in response to even more insistent requests, I have agreed not to sing this song. The song is meant to be sung to the tune of "Home on the Range", and goes like this:

Our UU church on the kame

Where drummers come monthly to play,

Where seldom is heard

The three lettered word

And nobody asks you to pray.