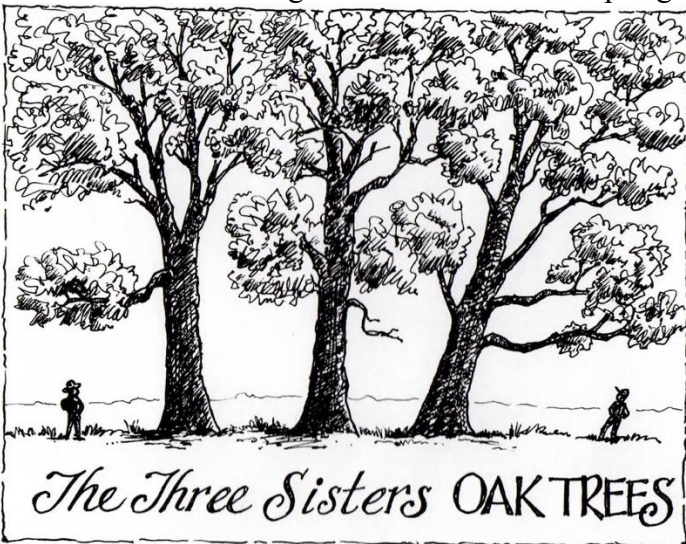


Do You Know the Three Sisters?

They are a prominent trio of large red oaks near the tennis court at the northwest corner of Mills Lawn school grounds, and some folks call them the Three Sisters. Their large trunks form a tight triangle and support an interlaced canopy spanning an area over 150 feet in diameter. One of them stands out, its trunk covered with prominent burls, a natural response to a virus. George Bieri, who helped his father record the diameters of the largest trees in Yellow Springs many years ago, estimates they are 350-400 years old. If so, then they are older than our village and are part of the 600 acres of old growth forest Elisha Mills deeded to his son William in 1842. That very land eventually became the village of Yellow Springs.



What might these three have witnessed in all those years? Did eagles circle above the forest and perhaps even nest in their branches? Did deer feast on their acorns? Did woodpeckers and squirrels collect and store acorns to sustain themselves over the winters? Or perhaps, did the Three Sisters witness members of Tecumseh's Shawnee community hunt the deer and collect those acorns? Have they been communicating with each other and the nearby shagbark hickory via their roots and associated fungal networks all these years? How long have children been playing under their spreading branches?

The Three Sisters must have watched the 1843 building of the William Mills new home just a short distance away. It was an "imposing mansion," the largest building in Yellow Springs for the next century (Jane Baker, 2007, William Mills: *The Yellow Springs Man*, Yellow Springs Historical Society). With the mansion in its center, Mills created a large park with gardens, pathways, and two small streams to drain the

swampy areas of the park. Much of the original forest was cleared and burned, but this was done carefully to preserve many old growth trees. The park was developed for the enjoyment of distinguished guests of the Mills family and for the pleasure of the residents of the growing village. The Three Sisters, possibly already 200 years old by then and considered "beyond price," were included in this lovely park known as Mills Lawn.

This park in the center of the expanding village inspired Miss Rebecca Scott, an Antioch College student in the 1850s, to write "The Lawn," a poem dedicated to Judge Mills. A portion of it reads

Delightful spot to mortal eyes!
(Akin, me thinks, to Paradise)
Where fruits and flowers and foliage rare
Allure the sight, and scent the air ---
.....
While to my view remembrance brings,
The pleasant Lawn at Yellow Springs.

In all the years they stood there, the Three Sisters must have observed tremendous changes -- the coming of the railroad, establishment of Antioch College, and development of the village of Yellow Springs as laid out by William Mills according to the Philadelphia Plan, whose key features are a gridiron street pattern and a central public square.

In 1866 the mansion and Lawn were sold to the Means family, and in 1921 they became the property of Antioch College. College president Arthur Morgan subdivided the land and built faculty housing along what is now Limestone Street. The mansion became a dormitory for prep schoolboys, while the former park became their playground. Finally, in 1949 the College donated the property to the Miami Township School Board (now the Yellow Springs School Board). In an exchange of letters, the College stated its wish that "the Lawn's facilities be available to the whole community ... and that the natural park area be reserved as such."

At least 7 of the old growth trees were destroyed in 1953 when the elementary school was built, but much of the Lawn was still forest-covered and left open for community activities, as requested by Antioch College. The mansion eventually fell into total disrepair and was razed. Today neighborhood children still use the park as their playground. Art on the Lawn, Arbor Day celebrations, performances of Shakespeare plays, and other community activities continue there.

Mills Lawn has also become an important site for YSTC Tribute Trees donated by villagers to honor friends or family members. Many are located on the Lawn west of the elementary school.

The Three Sisters and their companion trees on Mills Lawn add beauty and cooling shade, absorb rainwater, clear the air of pollutants, and give food and shelter to birds and small creatures as they have done for centuries. Their survival on Mills Lawn will continue to benefit the citizens of Yellow Springs for generations to come.

— Anna Bellisari