

~ The Ice Age & Mastodons Too ~



Docent Greg Trush

Approximately 400 to 500 million years ago, during the Ordovician and Silurian Periods of the Paleozoic (Ancient Life) Era, all of eastern Wisconsin was under a shallow tropical sea. During this early time, most plant and animal life were only present in watery environments.

These ancient seas contained numerous types of corals, brachiopods, crinoids, and cephalopods. Fossils of this period are frequently found in Williams Bay, and in many cases, are not that far from the surface.



Brachiopod fossil



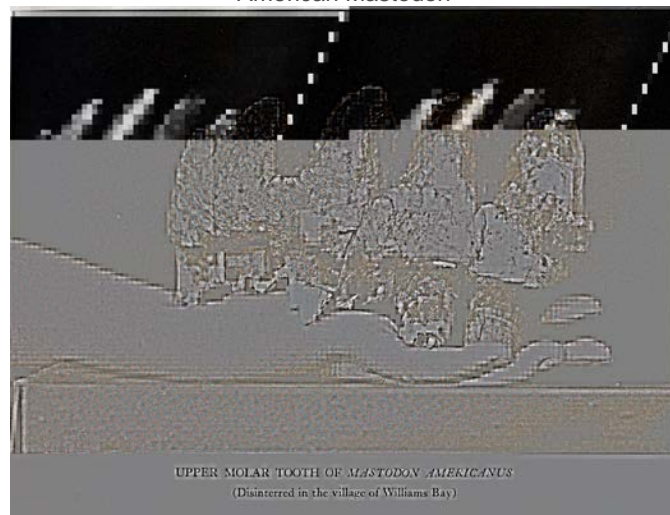
Cephalopod fossil

Starting about two to three million years ago, the northern half of North America experienced a series of Ice Ages. It is the final glacial event, the so-called Wisconsin Ice Age (150,000 to 11,000 years ago), that shaped the features that we see today in the Geneva Lake region.

Glaciers would move south, carrying mountains of earthly debris before them for hundreds of miles. Where the mountains of till and debris ended, hilly features called moraines were formed. The so-called "Cliffs of Fontana" at the western end of the lake, are the moraines created by the furthest advance of the glaciers in this area which occurred about 21,000 years ago. When you drive south on highway 67 into Walworth, you notice that once you drive under the railroad tracks, you are back in the "flat" Midwest. That is because the glaciers never got that far during the late Wisconsin Ice Age.



American Mastodon



Before the arrival of humans, this part of Wisconsin was home to animals whose habitat is now found elsewhere such as wolves, bison, and elk. There were also animals that are now extinct, like the woolly mammoths and mastodons (part of the elephant family) and a giant beaver with a longer and narrower tail. Mastodon remains were found in gravel pits around the northwest corner of Williams Bay. In 1907, Mr. Michael Johnson, while digging in his garden on Congress Street, excavated mastodon bones and teeth.

Poorly preserved the bones crumbled away while the enamel of the teeth preserved them.

Williams Bay may have been a marshy area after the last Ice Age, attracting elderly mastodons with its soft vegetation. Humans did not migrate to the Americas until about 20,000 years ago, and did not reach the Midwest until around 14,000 years ago when the glaciers had sufficiently retreated. Over hunting may well have been a major factor in the extinction of both the mastodons and woolly mammoths in North America. -- *by docent Greg Trush.*