

THE REEFS THAT MADE MILWAUKEE FAMOUS

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ABSTRACT

The Silurian reefs of the Milwaukee region (fig. 1) were the first recognized fossil reefs in North America and among the first Paleozoic reefs described in the world. Serving as a textbook example of ancient reefs, they have inspired the interest of some of the most eminent North American geologists and paleontologists. However, their discovery and subsequent scientific prominence were primarily due to the efforts of local naturalists, who attracted the initial interest of scientists and supplied them with the extensive fossil collections needed to make their studies possible. Also critical was

the economic importance of the reefs; without the quarrying of these structures, scientific study would have been impractical and their origin would have gone unrecognized. Study of these reefs began in the late 1830s when Increase A. Lapham discovered an abundance and diversity of fossils in a number of reef-controlled rock hills in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, area.

Attempting to correlate these strata with James Hall's recently described New York "groups," Lapham sent a large fossil collection to Hall in 1846. Hall's subsequent research in the area led to his recognition of the reefal nature of these hills in 1862. In addition, Hall began the systematic description of the reef biota, which was recognized as one of the most diverse Silurian biotas in North America. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, collecting by gentlemen naturalists, such as F.H. Day (Wauwatosa), P.R. Hoy (Racine), T.A. Greene, and E.E. Teller (Milwaukee), was critical in providing collections for Hall and other prominent paleontologists. In a classic work on paleoecology and sedimentology published in 1877, T.C. Chamberlin expanded on Hall's initial observations contrasting the sedimentological character and biotic content of the Milwaukee reefs with surrounding non-reef strata. Research by A.W. Grabau, W.C. Alden, R.R. Shrock, and others highlighted the Milwaukee reefs throughout much of the early part of the twentieth century. As quarrying in this area declined, however, research focus on Silurian reefs shifted to the Chicago area with the work of J.H. Bretz and H.A. Lowenstam.

For additional information about the Silurian reefs, see Mikulic and Klussendorf (1998).



Figure 1. Silurian exposures at the Schoonmaker Reef, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (circa 1899). (Photograph by W.C. Alden, courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey.)

REFERENCE

- Mikulic, D.G., and J. Klussendorf, 1998, Wauwatosa's ancient reef & amateur naturalist: Dedication of the Schoonmaker Reef and the Fisk Holbrook Day Home as National Historic Landmarks: Wauwatosa Historical Society, 16 p.

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