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OPINION

After 180 years, beavers return 'home' to Milwaukee River in heart of downtown

John Gurda |

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Beavers have returned to downtown Milwaukee, writes historian John Gurda, and there's evidence in this gnawed tree trunk along the Milwaukee River.

John Gurda

The beavers are back. For the first time in nearly two centuries, the buck-toothed rodents have been gnawing away at trees in the very heart of

downtown Milwaukee. What better way to start the new year than by cheering the return of these ancient natives to their ancestral home?

I first noticed their presence on a boat trip down the Milwaukee River last summer. On the west bank, just south of St. Paul Ave., several small trees had fallen into the water, and a larger one was leaning precariously in the same direction. I went back on foot a few days later, and it was beavers, all right. They had been munching away on the white poplar and green ash that line the riverbank, and there were piles of wood chips among the plastic bags and empty bottles that littered the scruffy little grove. I had to look around to remind myself that I was just east of the Pritzlaff Building and directly across the river from some of the trendiest nightspots in the Third Ward.

There was a time when beaver wouldn't have seemed wildly out of place in the center of Milwaukee. They were once among the most ubiquitous mammals in North America, damming streams and gnawing bark from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. Prized for their meat as well as their fur, beaver were a staple of both diet and dress for countless generations of native Americans.

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(I had a chance to sample beaver meat at a game feed in Stoughton many years ago. I recall it as rich and dark — much better than muskrat, which tasted like a swamp and was filled with pieces of cartilage that resembled plastic ball bearings.)

Unfortunately for the beaver, Europeans developed an absolute mania not for their meat but for their thick, water-repellent underfur. It was shaved off the hides and boiled to produce a heavy felt that could take any shape a hatter desired, from elegant top hats to military tri-corners. Brushed to a high gloss, beaver hats were the height of fashion for nearly 200 years.



Beavers have been busy in the heart of downtown Milwaukee, as evidenced by this gnawed tree trunk along the river.

John Gurda

After emptying the beaver streams on their own continent, Europeans turned to the apparently inexhaustible lodges of North America. It was beaver that brought the first French traders to Wisconsin in the 1600s. It was beaver that put Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and numerous other settlements on the map. And it was beaver, or more precisely European demand for it, that fundamentally altered the Native American way of life.

Millions of hides crossed the Atlantic in the holds of sailing ships, and the same vessels brought trade goods west on their return voyages: muskets, kettles, traps, beads, blankets ... and alcohol. French rum, English brandy, and then American whiskey were all solvents that effectively dissolved ancient native traditions.

One of the most important of those traditions was conservation. The various tribes had harvested animals sustainably for millennia, but that changed as beaver pelts became the equivalent of currency. Two hides would buy one musket or 20 knives in some years, and the temptation to overtrap proved irresistible. Beaver were scarce around the trading capital of Mackinac Island as early as 1700, and a century later they were nearly

as hard to find in eastern Wisconsin.



The Miller High Life Theatre is home to nine murals by the late WPA artist Thorsten Lindberg, an accomplished artistic craftsman, nationally recognized for his technical skill in watercolor. Much of Lindberg's work dating from the 1930s and early '40s features historical subjects of national, statewide, and local significance. This mural, in one of two grand staircases on the east side of the theater, shows the cabin and trading post Solomon Juneau established on the east bank of the Milwaukee River. The post grew to become a settlement called Juneautown.

Wisconsin Center District, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The market turned to other furs, particularly after the silk top hat came into vogue after 1800. Exports of North American beaver pelts had once been worth more than all other furs combined, but raccoon took the lead after 1822, and deer, bear, wolf, and otter were all part of the mix.

Solomon Juneau, Milwaukee's last trader and first mayor, left a clear account of the beaver's fall from eminence. Juneau's papers in the

Milwaukee County Historical Society include a letter from the American Fur Company written in 1840, five years after the county's first public land sale. American Fur announced that it would pay 7 cents for one raccoon skin, 40 cents for deer, 50 cents for wolf, and a whopping \$4 for a beaver pelt. By that time, however, beaver were not to be had for any price. After thousands of years as a fixture in the local landscape, they were completely gone.

Until 2013, that is. That's when the staff of the Urban Ecology Center, whose flagship facility borders Riverside Park, noticed that beaver had been exercising their incisors on trees in the Milwaukee River floodplain. Cleaner water, a more continuous forest, and the removal of the North Avenue dam had all created suitable habitat, and a family of furry pioneers moved in from wilder points upstream. Smart enough to know that they had no hope of damming the Milwaukee River, the beaver set up housekeeping in a lodge on the east bank.



Urban Ecology Center worker Joel Sprinsteen arranges American filbert shrubs that will be planted by volunteers in this 2013 photo at the Milwaukee Rotary Centennial Arboretum in Milwaukee. The arboretum is between the Milwaukee River and the Oak Leaf Trail and stretches from North Avenue to Locust Street at the southern end of the Milwaukee River Greenway.

Mark Hoffman, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Interestingly, the center was in the process of establishing an arboretum on the same bank, using funds from the Milwaukee Rotary Club and a federal restoration initiative. Nearly 14,000 trees have gone into the ground so far, representing more than 70 species native to Wisconsin. Having beaver in an arboretum seems a lot like putting pyromaniacs in a fireworks factory. Some stout trees have been dropped and others are on the way down, but the Urban Ecology Center, true to its mission, is determined to let nature take its course. Caitlin Reinartz, the center's forester, put it succinctly: "We can't be mad about a species coming back when the whole goal was to create a place animals would want to come back to. The beaver are here, and we're going to find a way to coexist."

It's likely, but by no means certain, that the beaver whose work is on display downtown are "dispersers" from the arboretum colony, adolescents trying to establish their own territories. Unless they can be trapped and fitted with GPS devices, their whereabouts, including where they sleep or even if they're still present, will remain one of downtown's more intriguing mysteries.

There's much more to discover, but for now, I like the image of young beaver sluicing down the rapids below North Ave., paddling south through a gauntlet of steel and concrete walls, and then finding, just below St. Paul Ave., a natural streambank with mature trees. Home again, finally!

Have they become more streetwise, these urban migrants, than their country cousins? Do they swim with more swagger? Active largely at night, have they heard the bartenders holler "Last call!" from the taverns across the river?

I have no idea, but welcome home, old familiars, welcome home.

John Gurda, a Milwaukee historian, writes for the Crossroads section on the first Sunday of each month (www.johngurda.com).

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