

## Property & Development Committee

OURS–Winnipeg

# Saving Lemay Forest

Dr. Shelley Sweeney,  
Research assistance & consultation with  
Dr. Anne Lindsay  
January 11, 2024

Photo Cat Gauthier





# Introduction

Lemay Forest:

- is a rare natural, old-growth, riparian forest
- Bisected by dike built by city after 1950 flood
- North side forest beside the Red River owned by City
- South Side forest owned by Tochal Development Group

OURS-Winnipeg, a citywide, community-based, greenspace advocate organization, **strongly recommends the preservation of this important forest**

Photo Shelley Sweeney, taken by Muriel St. John



# Benefits of Preserving Lemay Forest

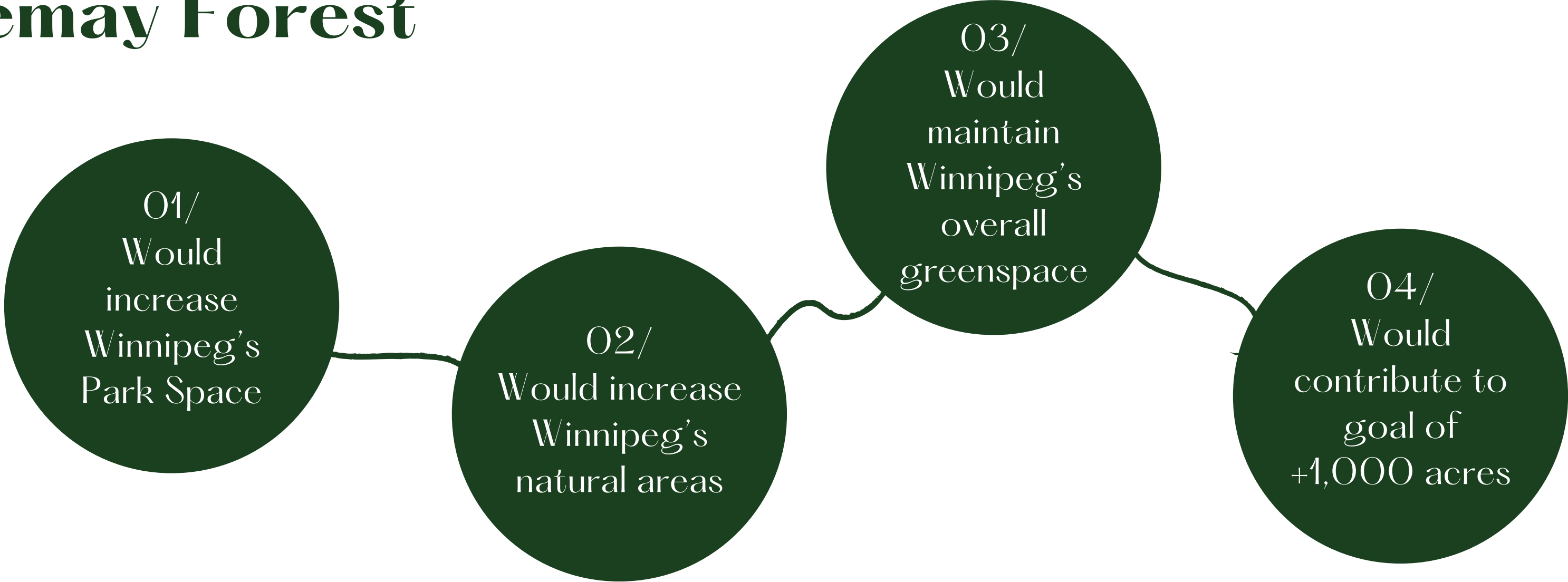


Photo Cat Gauthier



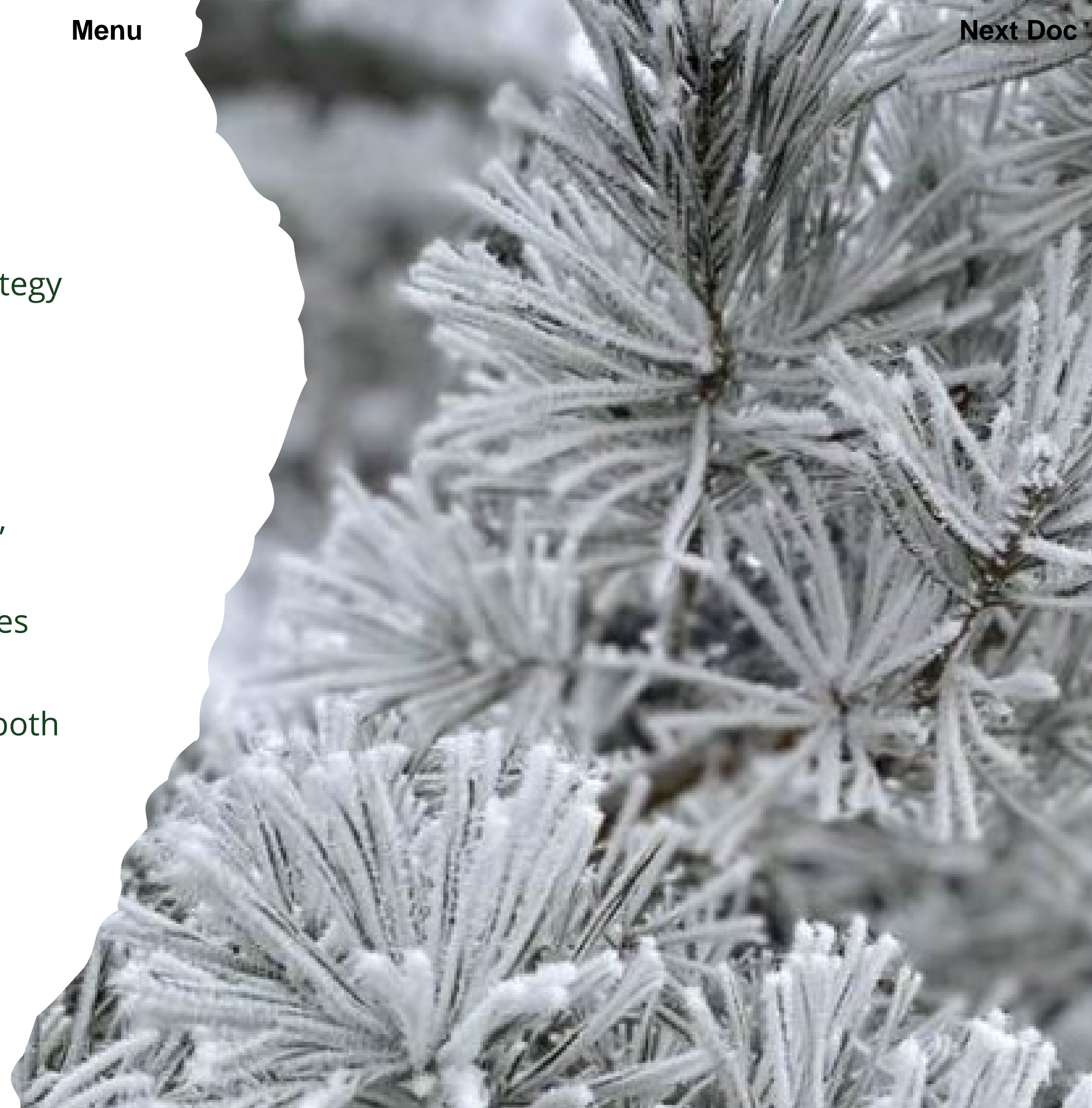
# Meeting Winnipeg's Goals

Acquiring Lemay would fit Winnipeg's new Park Strategy to acquire "ecologically significant natural lands"

Lemay:

- is susceptible to flooding
- is of special significance for animal and bird life, including nesting areas
- contains significant animal and bird communities
- is of both cultural and historical significance
- fosters connectivity between natural areas for both wildlife and the public, and
- is adjacent to waterways

Photo Cat Gauthier







# General Benefits

## Forest & shrubs

- are carbon sinks
- reduce pollution in the city generally
- provide shading & cooling
- protect biodiversity by providing shelter, protection, and food for wildlife
- mitigate flooding
- contribute oxygen to Winnipeg's atmosphere
- support mental health & physical well-being
- provide space for Indigenous cultural practices

Photo Shelley Sweeney



# Financial Implications

- The urban forest is a combination of trees, vegetation, soil, natural processes and cultural elements
- Large, mature trees provide more benefits than young trees
- It takes 40 years for trees to mature
- Creation of natural assets is 2x more expensive than maintaining existing forest

\$6.75+  
million

*It would cost over \$6.75 million to replace the trees of Lemay Forest*





# Difficulties Developing Lemay

Developers have tried to develop Lemay starting with Castlewood Homes in late 1970s with no success

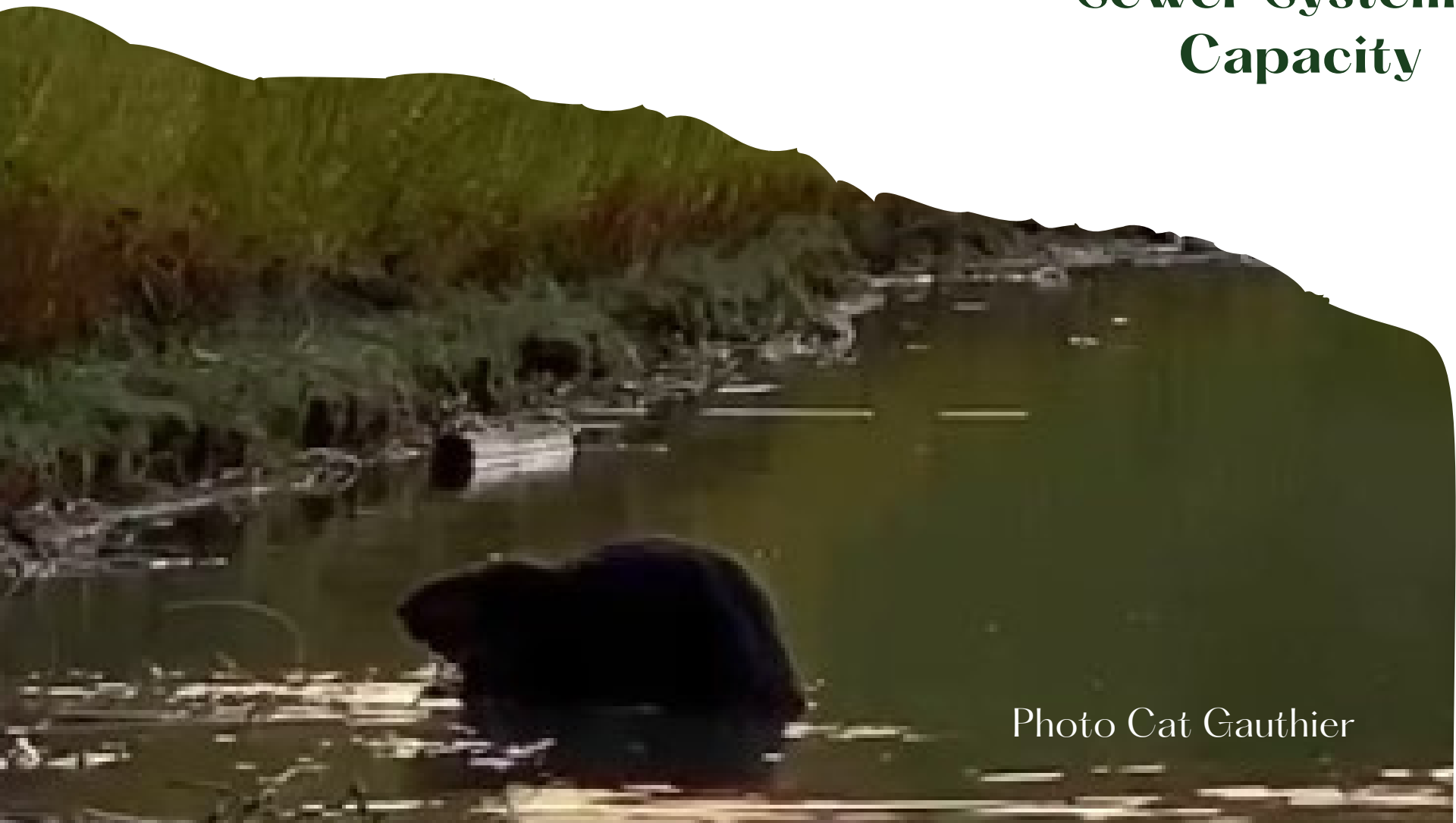
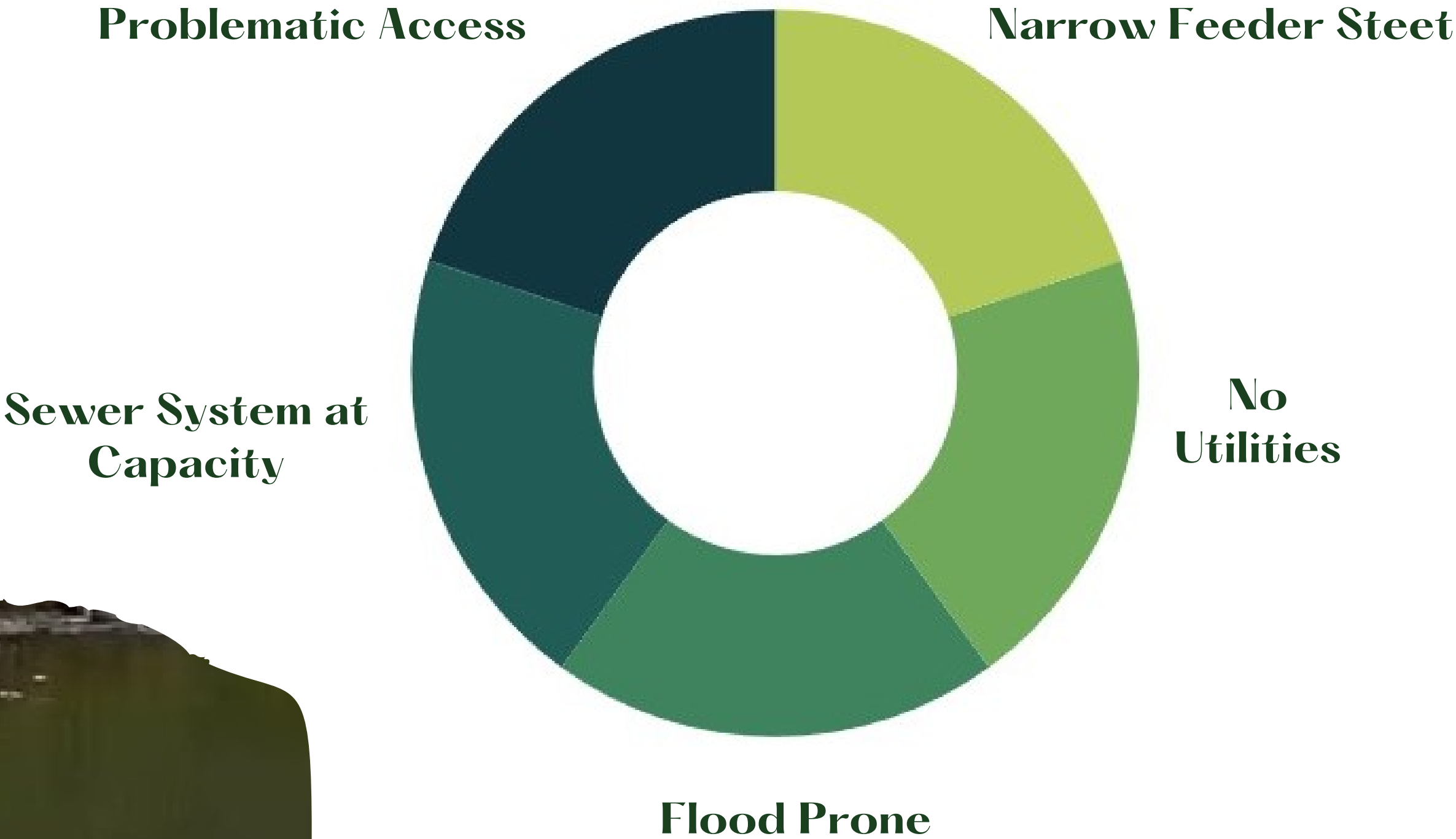


Photo Cat Gauthier





# Historical Context

- St-Norbert one of earliest & most significant French-Canadian and Métis Communities in Manitoba
- Likely the oldest trees in Lemay Forest were there when Louis Riel met with his councillors in St-Norbert



UMASC Red River Cartes de visite





# Asile Ritchot

- Today Lemay Forest sits behind the Behavioural Health Foundation
- Formerly the Asile Ritchot, an orphanage and home for unwed mothers
- The Soeurs de Miséricorde ran the Misericordia Hospital on Sherbrook Street and the Asile in St-Norbert
- During its years of operation, the Asile was part of the lives of thousands of Winnipeg women, children & families

# Asile Ritchot's Cemetery in Lemay Forest

- It is a grim fact that many children, perhaps in the thousands, died and were buried in a cemetery in Lemay Forest
- Anecdotal reports indicate that at least some of the human remains were moved but no records supporting these claims have been found to date





# Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

- Archaeological evidence shows Indigenous peoples were in the area by 6,000 BCE
- By the 1700s this area was a popular spot for Métis families because there was excellent fishing
- The importance of the Forest to Indigenous people continues to today, as Indigenous people currently use the Forest for their cultural ceremonies
- By recognizing and honouring these histories that continue into the present, saving Lemay Forest supports reconciliation



Photo Shelley Sweeney





# Wildlife of Lemay Forest

- Lemay Forest, protected from vehicle traffic and close to the Red River, is a thriving ecosystem
- Deer, foxes, coyotes, beavers, racoons, martens, squirrels and more have been photographed in the Forest
- Over 50 different birds visit & inhabit the forest including Pileated Woodpeckers and the threatened Red-headed Woodpeckers
- Preserving the forest fits with the City's commitment to sign the Montréal Pledge



# Recreation In Lemay Forest

- Generations of children have played in Lemay Forest
- Strollers, snowshoers, and dog-walkers enjoy the paths
- Bird-watchers and photographers alike use the Forest
- Animals and people happily co-exist

Photo courtesy Paul Thorimbert





# The Future of Lemay Forest

- Lemay Forest is a peaceful refuge that provides ample space for people and wildlife
- It would be tragic if this forest, that has survived for hundreds of years, fell to development today
- We ask the City to acquire and protect Lemay Forest as a high quality, nature forest for future generations



OURS–Winnipeg

# Thank You

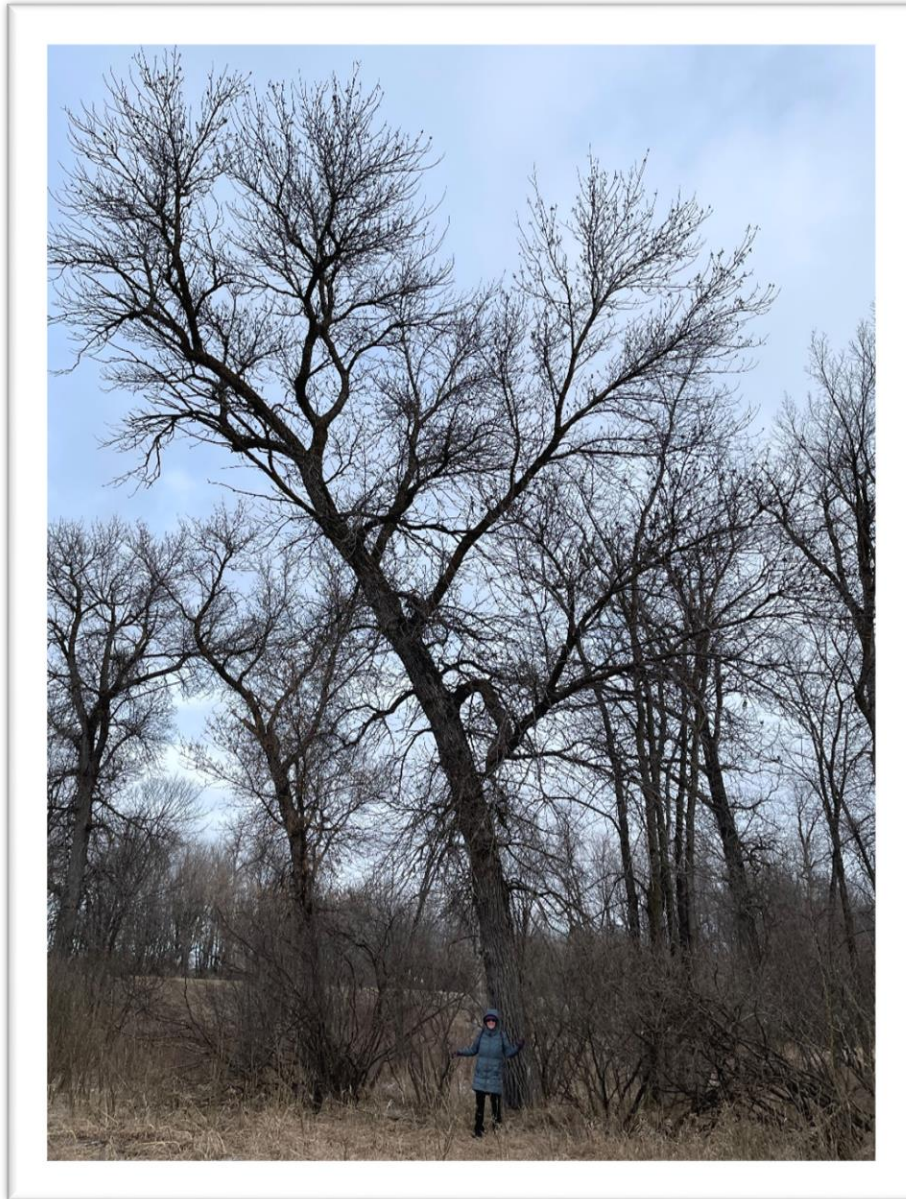


Photo Cat Gauthier

Thanks to Cat Gauthier, Jaxon Kowaluk, and Paul Thorimbert for photos



# **LEMAY FOREST**



**Shelley Sweeney stands at the foot of one of the many giant trees in Lemay Forest.  
Photograph by Muriel St. John, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023.**

**A Report by Dr. Shelley Sweeney and  
Dr. Anne Lindsay  
On Behalf of OURS-Winnipeg  
December 20, 2023**

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*Photographs of two Barred Owls in Lemay Forest  
by Lorne Coulson, November 14, 15, 2023.*



## Introduction to Lemay Forest by Shelley Sweeney

Lemay Forest is an intact old-growth riparian forest, one of the last such forests held in private hands in the City of Winnipeg. It is classified as riverbottom forest habitat.<sup>1</sup> It mainly resides on the former River Lot 85.<sup>2</sup> The forest is bisected by a dike built by the city. The north side, closest to the Red River, is owned by the City of Winnipeg. The south side is owned by Tochal Development Group.

OURS-Winnipeg (Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces) is a citywide, community-based, greenspace advocate organization with a focus on urban green spaces, river and nature corridors and the urban forest. As such our organization has a particular interest in Lemay Forest. **We strongly advocate the preservation of this important forest.**

Adding Lemay Forest to the City's roster would increase Winnipeg's park space. This is important, as Winnipeg is deficient in park space, having only 6% park space, compared to the average of 9% across Canada.<sup>3</sup> The natural forest of Lemay would also help Winnipeg increase its natural areas which fall below average compared to other Canadian cities.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the loss of the forest would be a significant loss of greenspace. According to Statistics Canada, Winnipeg has the lowest amount of greenness and greenspace of any large city in Canada, at 38%.<sup>5</sup>

From a policy standpoint, acquisition of Lemay Forest would fit Winnipeg's new park strategy perfectly: "The acquisition of new natural areas, including those designated as ecologically significant lands... will be opportunistic by necessity as privately held natural lands become available for purchase."<sup>6</sup> Lemay Forest fits the definition of Ecologically Significant Natural Lands, being susceptible to flooding (overland from rainfalls), is an area of special significance for animal and bird life, including nesting areas, and more broadly contains significant animal and bird communities, is land of both cultural and

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew M Jones, "A Holistic Approach to Dike Design: St. Norbert Manitoba, a Study and Application," University of Manitoba, a practicum for a Master of Landscape Architecture, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Lot Numbers: 2927614/1 parcel D 19405 - 12.4 acres; and 2927613/1 parcel E 16529 - 10 acres. Total 22.4 acres. Formerly River Lots 84 and 85, both in the Parish of St. Norbert. River Lot 85 was formerly HBC Register Lots 367, 368, 369. River Lot 84 was formerly HBC Lot 370.

<sup>3</sup> The Canadian City Parks Report 2020 <https://ccpr.parkpeople.ca/2020/>.

<sup>4</sup> Winnipeg is at 36% natural areas within its parks, for example, whereas Toronto is at 46% Montréal is at 39% Calgary is at 55% Vancouver is at 38% in Québec city is 62% in comparison. Yet according to the Park People, 92% of city residents said that they support naturalization efforts and parks. <https://ccpr.parkpeople.ca/2023/key-insights>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Lantz, Marcelle Grenier and Jennie Wang, Statistics Canada, "Urban Greenness, 2001, 2011 and 2019," <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/16-002-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> City of Winnipeg, "Winnipeg Parks Strategy," December 2021, <http://tinyurl.com/55z6n4ax>.

historical significance, fosters connectivity between natural areas for both wildlife and the public, and is adjacent to waterways.<sup>7</sup>

Preserving the forest in general is important for a number of reasons. The trees, shrubs, and undergrowth are carbon sinks, they reduce pollution, provide shading and cooling, protect biodiversity by providing shelter, protection, and food for wildlife, they mitigate flooding by absorbing significant amounts of water helping to combat soil erosion, contribute oxygen to the atmosphere, support the mental health and physical well-being of the broad community, and provide a space appropriate for Indigenous cultural practices.

Lemay Forest is important to preserve for the sheer number of trees it contains. Estimates of a minimum of 9,000 trees in the forest would cost the City \$6.75 million to replace.<sup>8</sup> An inventory of trees should be done before considering any development. Winnipeg is poorly placed to lose trees. Disease and pests, particularly Dutch Elm Disease and the invasion of the Emerald Ash Borer, have struck at the most common trees throughout Winnipeg.<sup>9</sup> Winnipeg has been losing on average 9,000 trees per year and is only able to replant 2,000 per year.<sup>10</sup> In the last five years alone that would mean that the City lost in excess of 35,000 trees, not counting trees on private property removed for reasons other than Dutch Elm Disease. Winnipeg needs to preserve as many healthy trees as it can. Mature trees that exist in Lemay Forest are of particular importance. Climate change with its increasing spells of severe drought and overland flooding from torrential downpours would make replacing this forest virtually impossible as time goes by. Denudation of the forest would also affect the hydrologic cycle in the area in a negative way by altering the physical environment.<sup>11</sup> St. Norbert is already a flood prone area, hence the necessity for a dike.

The difficulties in developing the land, including an older sewer system that is at maximum capacity, lack of utilities such as electricity and water, no road access (as the

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<sup>7</sup> City of Winnipeg, "Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy & Policy," February 21, 2007, <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/publicworks/parksOpenSpace/NaturalistServices/PDF/ESNL.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> The 2023 figure for replacing trees according to the City is \$750.00/tree, which covers the cost of planting and two years of watering.

<sup>9</sup> Gypsy Moth, Asian Longhorn Beetle, and Cottony Ash Psyllid are also making inroads into the urban forest According to Trees Winnipeg, <https://www.treeswinnipeg.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Winnipeg Comprehensive Urban Forest Strategy, "State of the Urban Forest at a Glance," 2021, [https://ehq-production-canada.s3.ca-central-1.amazonaws.com/3b2c717f7bea689303a701e75ac0484066e117972/original/1620669219/171ad24dc65cbd649d0a2f5e05fd777c\\_FINAL\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Urban\\_Forest\\_at\\_a\\_Glance\\_Report\\_20210507.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIA4KKNQAKIOR7VAOP4%2F20240104%2Fca-central-1%2Fus-east-1%2Faws4\\_request&X-Amz-Date=20240104T031740Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Signature=06c75fedf84d66a60fbb0e101d6333c23ac9f13019c6ae99ff4c5be3c7d73875](https://ehq-production-canada.s3.ca-central-1.amazonaws.com/3b2c717f7bea689303a701e75ac0484066e117972/original/1620669219/171ad24dc65cbd649d0a2f5e05fd777c_FINAL_State_of_the_Urban_Forest_at_a_Glance_Report_20210507.pdf?X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Credential=AKIA4KKNQAKIOR7VAOP4%2F20240104%2Fca-central-1%2Fus-east-1%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Date=20240104T031740Z&X-Amz-Expires=300&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Signature=06c75fedf84d66a60fbb0e101d6333c23ac9f13019c6ae99ff4c5be3c7d73875).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew M Jones, "A Holistic Approach to Dike Design: St. Norbert Manitoba, a Study and Application," University of Manitoba, a practicum for a Master of Landscape Architecture, 2020.



property is almost completely bound by other privately owned properties), and a very narrow feeder street, are what have helped preserve this forest to date and help explain why many older trees remain in this area.

A number of developers have tried over the years to develop the property. A residential community was proposed in the late 1970s by Castlewood Homes, which purchased the land from the Oblates. Reports made to Castlewood in November 1978 estimated that bringing services to the site would cost \$2,451,000.<sup>12</sup> This included development on both the current Behavioural Health Foundation site and Lemay Forest. The report noted that the property slopes to the east from Pembina Highway with the northeast corner being approximately 14 feet below Pembina Highway. This has implications for overland flooding from torrential rain. Any fill added to the site would endanger any mature trees left by the developers.

In a newsletter put out by Castlewood, they noted that the community would have to be a low density development, that rental multiple apartment or townhouse units would have to be minimized, and that there should be no additional traffic on Lemay Street.<sup>13</sup> Castlewood noted that they would have to serve a mid/upper income market in order to compensate for the costs of rectifying problems in the site, and would need to build between 300 and 350 units to recoup their costs. Tellingly, Castlewood also stated that "There are soil and groundwater problems on the site which increase the engineering costs above the norm and therefore increase the number of units required to carry this cost."<sup>14</sup>

After Castlewood Homes gave up trying to develop the property, they sold Lemay Forest to Peter Giannakis' group, which then sold the property in 2017 to the current owner, Tochal Development Group.

All of the problems noted in 1978 still exist, except that the costs to bring services to the site are significantly higher and the lack of sewer capacity is more critical. The city would be expected to pay for separating the pipes carrying wastewater and land drainage and surface runoff to the area. This is a significant tax burden for the City of Winnipeg. Further, the Behavioural Health Foundation occupies the front part of the property so that the second access point to the Lemay Forest area would now need to run via Lemay Avenue, which is already at capacity for local vehicular traffic. Purchase of a private lot on Lemay backing onto the Lemay Forest property would only afford at most a 60 foot clearance for a road, which does not meet city code.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Underwood McClelland (1977), Consulting Engineers and Planners, "Report on Servicing of Ex-Kalay Property for the Castlewood Homes Limited," November, 1978, SHSBA, Asile Ritchot, L 1319.M27R 1-.

<sup>13</sup> Castlewood Homes, "Newsletter: St. Norbert," 1979.

<sup>14</sup> Castlewood Homes, "Newsletter: St. Norbert," 1979, p.4.

<sup>15</sup> A residential street should be 25.5 m or 84' wide (18.0 m right-of-way and 7.5 m roadway). The City of Winnipeg, "Transportation Standards Manual: 2012 Update," 2013, p.20, [https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/finance/findata/matmgt/documents/2014/201-2014\\_B/201-](https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/finance/findata/matmgt/documents/2014/201-2014_B/201-)

In terms of how the City should accomplish securing Lemay Forest, there may be an opportunity for the City to buy part of the land and for the Tochal Developments to donate part to offset their tax liabilities. There is a fine and established tradition of preserving land in St. Norbert and in particular Lemay Forest through donation, dating to Father Ritchot's time. Going back further, Indigenous leaders signed the Selkirk Treaty under the understanding that the land would be shared. (See the section on "Reconciliation with Indigenous Communities").

For all of these reasons Lemay Forest should be saved from development and preserved for the citizens of Winnipeg and the wildlife of the forest.

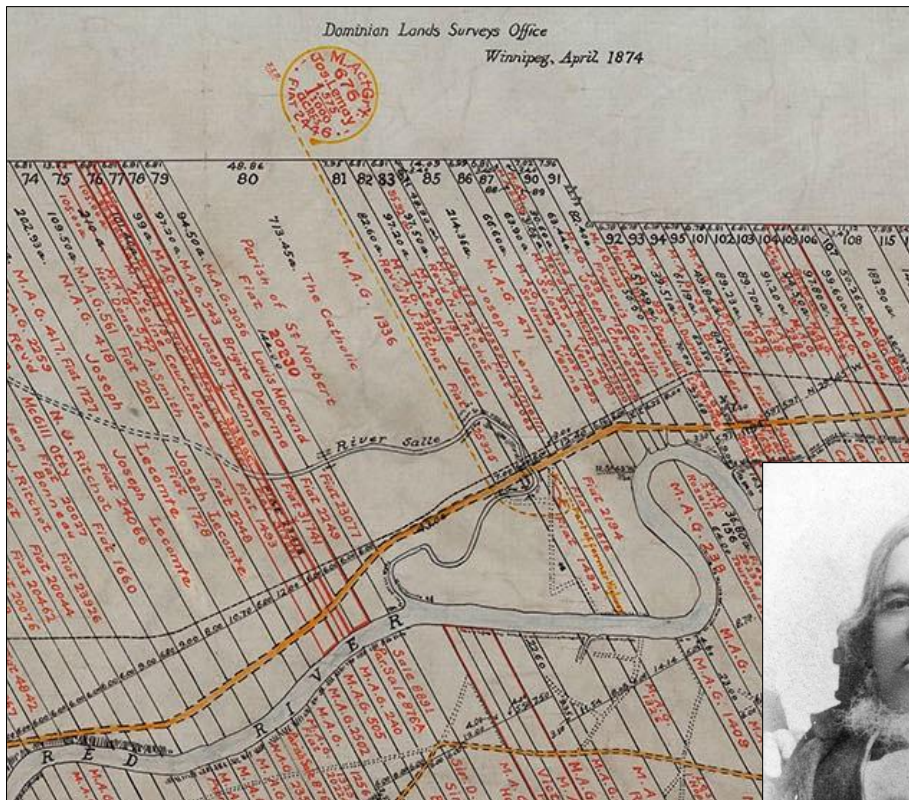


*Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.*



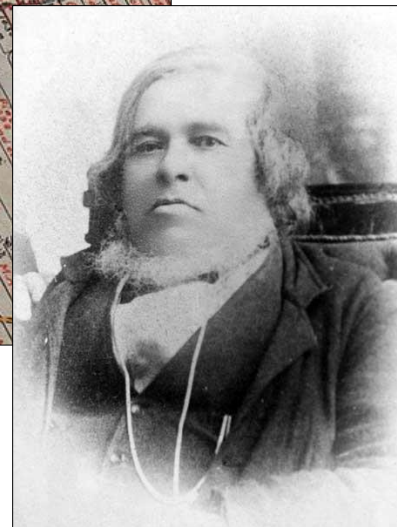
## Historical Context by Shelley Sweeney with research contributions from Anne Lindsay

Lemay Forest, the remainder of which is primarily situated on River Lot 85 in St. Norbert, is located close to where the La Salle River empties into the Red River. By the 1700s this area around the confluence of the La Salle and Red rivers was already popular as a seasonal gathering place for Métis because it was the best fishing area in the country.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1820s the seasonal gathering had developed into the year-round community of St. Norbert. In the mid-1830s the Hudson's Bay Company surveyed the entire Red River settlement using a river lot system similar to the land tenure tradition of seigneurial Québec. Over the following decades, this character of the St. Norbert area as a Métis and Franco-Manitoban community continued, even to today. As time went on, this character was supported by Father Joseph Ritchot and his colleagues who "arranged to purchase former Metis river lots before they could fall into the hands of English speaking speculators."<sup>17</sup>



Left: Close up of the Dominion Lands Office, "Plan of River Lots in the Parishes of St. Norbert and St. Vital, Province of Manitoba," 1874.

Right: Manitoba Historical Society, "Joseph Octave Lemay, 1829-1892," [https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/lemay\\_jo.shtml](https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/lemay_jo.shtml).



<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Barkwell, "La Barrière: Metis Resistance at St. Norbert," n.d., <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/10248.La%20Barri%C3%A8re2.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.2. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf).

Joseph Octave Lemay (1829 – 1892), who descended from a long line of voyageurs and fur traders, was identified as the owner of River Lot 85 in 1870. He was elected in the first general election in Manitoba in December 1870 as the representative for St. Norbert North and again in December 1874 for St. Vital. Lemay was also “county clerk, coroner, returning officer, deputy sheriff, postmaster, and also reeve of the Ritchot municipality.”<sup>18</sup> He was President of the St. Norbert Agricultural Society and Clerk of the County Court of D’Iberville.<sup>19</sup> Lemay was owner and operator of the first flour and grist mill in the area, and a sawmill, both powered by steam, from 1871 to 1882.<sup>20</sup> Lemay’s steam mill was the first in a predominantly French-speaking parish.<sup>21</sup> And likely he was the first general merchant in the area.

After Lemay’s death in 1892, his house and 80 acres, including Lemay Forest, transferred to the local church.<sup>22</sup> The church, under Father Ritchot, in turn donated the property in 1904 to les Soeurs de Miséricorde or Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order of nuns who worked with unwed mothers and children considered “orphans” in the period. The Soeurs had recently opened the Misericordia maternity hospital at the foot of Sherbrook Street in Winnipeg, but needed space for an orphanage. They opened an orphanage and a home for single mothers and their children called Asile Ritchot, or Asile Bethléem, on River Lot 85.<sup>23</sup>

The Soeurs started out in the Lemay house, but quickly outgrew it. They added a second larger building in 1911 to accommodate the enormous influx of mothers and children. The Soeurs were aided in their work by “madeleines,” some of the unwed mothers who lived and worked in the orphanage. There were a number of outbuildings and fields where the nuns and their helpers grew their food. At the back of that property was Lemay Forest. In the Forest a small cemetery serviced the needs of the Asile.<sup>24</sup>

When the provincial government took over the care of orphans in 1948, Asile Ritchot closed, reopening in 1954 as the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It is unknown at this time exactly when the associated cemetery was closed, whether all of the human remains in the cemetery were moved, and if so where

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<sup>18</sup> Corinne Tellier, "A St. Norbert Landmark: a Paper Presented to Barker and Gus Lets Associates, Architects," July 1978, SHSB L 1319.M27 R 1-, Asile Ritchot.

<sup>19</sup> Manitoba Historical Society, "Joseph Octave Lemay, 1829-1892," [https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/lemay\\_jo.shtml](https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/lemay_jo.shtml).

<sup>20</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.2. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Barry Kaye, "Flour Milling at Red River: Wind, Water and Steam," Manitoba history to (1981), [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/02/flourmilling.shtml#97](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/02/flourmilling.shtml#97).

<sup>22</sup> One source says he was in financial difficulties when he died and that the family may have sold the land to the local church.

<sup>23</sup> Sheila C. Grover, "3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot)," [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983.

<sup>24</sup> Corinne Tellier, "A St. Norbert Landmark: a Paper Presented to Barker and Gus Lets Associates, Architects," July 1978, SHSB L 1319.M27 R 1-, Asile Ritchot.



they were moved to.<sup>25</sup> However historian Sheila Grover noted that the ground was deconsecrated and an extensive grotto was developed.<sup>26</sup> The remains of the grotto still exist today. The X-Kalay Foundation, that catered to men recently out of prison who were experiencing addiction, took over the building in approximately 1970.<sup>27</sup> X-Kalay became the Behavioural Health Foundation in the early 2000's and remains on the property of the former Asile Ritchot today. St. Norbert became part of Winnipeg under the Unicity Act in 1972. This is why Lemay Forest falls under the jurisdiction of the City of Winnipeg.<sup>28</sup>



*In 1922 along the horizon of this photo of the former 931 Avenue de l'Eglise in St. Norbert one can see on the horizon the spire of the Asile on the left and the thick mature canopy of Lemay Forest stretching to the right. Historical Buildings Committee, "Former 931 Avenue de L'Eglise (St. Norbert) House," December 5, 1983, plate 6.*

<sup>25</sup> Sheila Grover stated that "When the Sisters of Mercy left St. Norbert [in 1948], they removed all the remains from a cemetery at the rear of the property, moving them to another cemetery." Unfortunately Grover does not provide a citation for this information and she didn't clarify which cemetery the remains were moved to. Sheila C. Grover, "3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot)," [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983. The webpage of Heritage St-Norbert maintains that it was 1954 when the remains were relocated, but the webpage to doesn't mention where the remains were taken to. Heritage St-Norbert, "Asile Ritchot," n.d., <https://heritagestnorbert.ca/asile-ritchot/>. A history of the Villa Rosa however states: "The cemetery of the sisters was moved in 1974 from St. Norbert to St. Boniface." "Winnipeg's Villa Rosa: Total Assistance for Single Parents," n.d., p.6, SHSBA 0554.

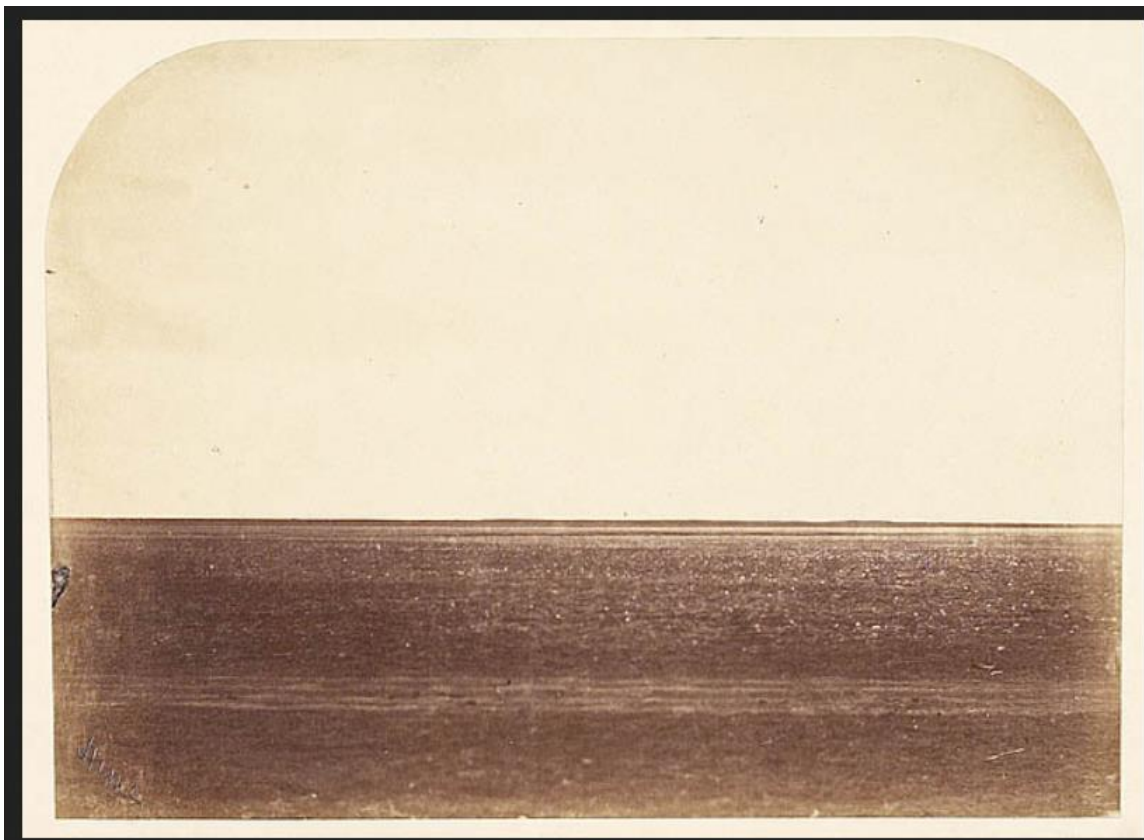
<sup>26</sup> Sheila C. Grover, "3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot)," [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983.

<sup>27</sup> The X-Kalay Foundation was a group of men from Salt Spring Island and Vancouver, BC, who moved to Winnipeg to establish the residence in the old quarters of the Asile Ritchot. See Behavioural Health Foundation, "Annual Report, April 1, 2020 – March 31, 2021," <https://www.bhf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BHF-Annual-Report-2020-2021.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> The Board of Heritage St. Norbert, "Timeline of St. Norbert," <https://heritagestnorbert.ca/timeline/>

**The History of Lemay Forest** by Shelley Sweeney with research by Anne Lindsay

Many people are familiar with the stark, treeless Red River landscape depicted in Humphrey Lloyd Hime's 1858 photograph "The prairie, on the banks of Red River."



*The prairie, on the banks of Red River, looking south, 1858, by Humphrey Lloyd Hime, [https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/canadian-west/052910/05291036\\_e.html](https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/canadian-west/052910/05291036_e.html).*

With a limited supply of trees and a growing settlement that depended on wood for a wide variety of tasks, including in construction and for making canoes or carts, for furniture, fencing, or for firewood, not long after the arrival of the Selkirk Settlers wood was in short supply in the Red River Settlement. By 1850, Alexander Ross noted that "The more solid structures of stone and lime are also, in some few instances, beginning to be introduced by the Company; and this, at no distant time, will be resorted to generally, as wood is becoming scarce, even for fuel," although, "in the upper part of the settlement," Ross wrote, "wood may still be got."<sup>29</sup> With surrounding communities with such an insatiable appetite for wood, it is rare to find an area such as Lemay Forest that can trace its literal roots back to pre-settlement, and possibly even to pre-contact times.

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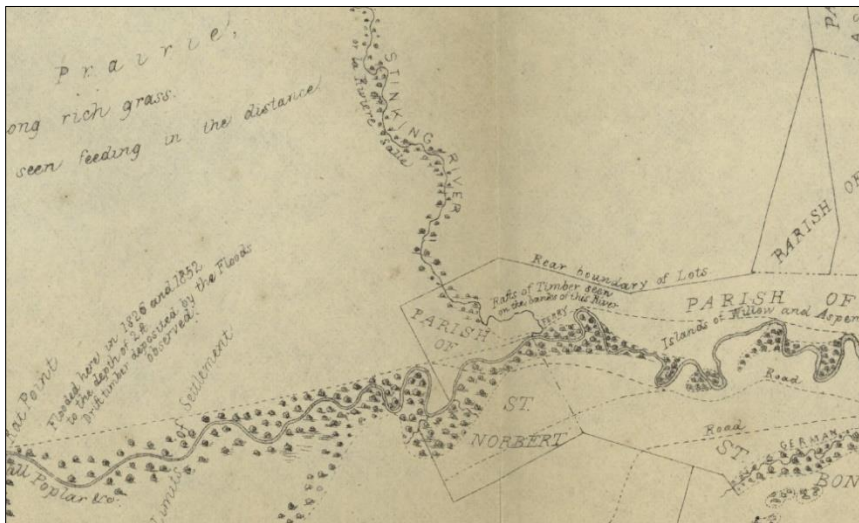
<sup>29</sup> Alexander Ross, *Red River Settlement: Its rise, progress and present state: With some account of the native races and its general history to the present day* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1856), 141.



A Hudson's Bay map in the mid 1830s shows Lemay's land as thickly forested.



HBCA E.6/14 [Taylor Map, mid 1830s].

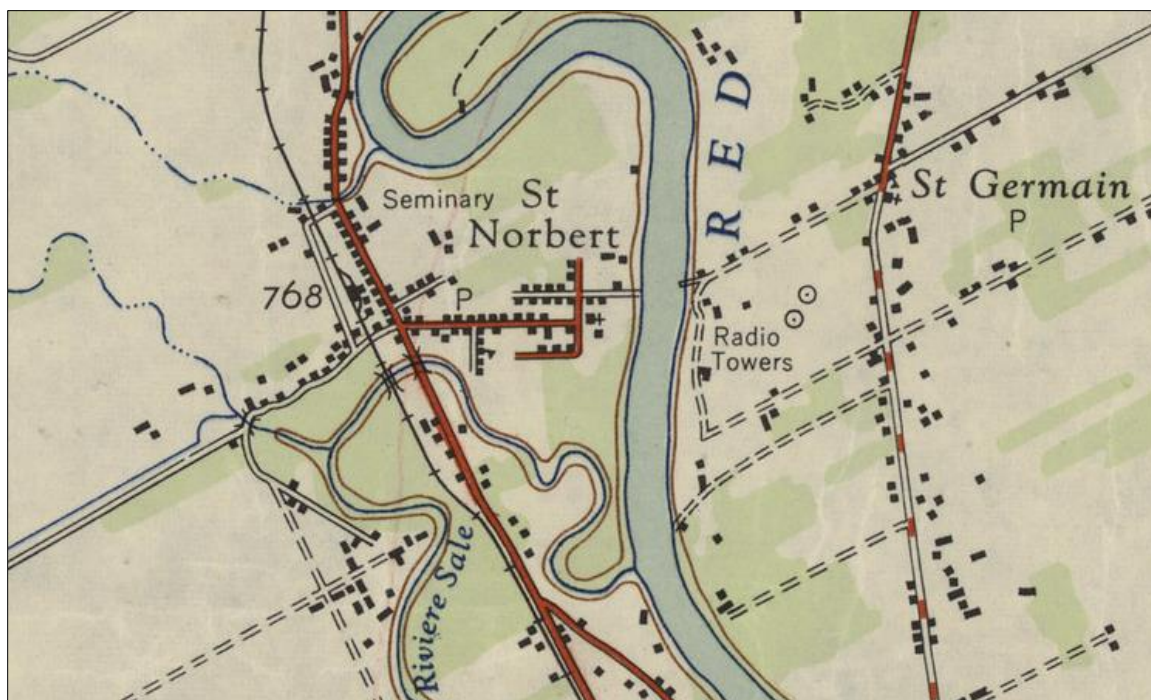


From that point on, maps show the Lemay area with an intact forest.

*Extract of Map of part of the Valley of Red River North of the 49th Parallel to accompany a report on the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition by H.Y. Hind [South Sheet] (1858)*  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/manitobamaps/3798821080/>.

Forested land shrank very quickly with settlers making their way to the area. By the time the Dominion of Canada began surveying the land in Western Canada for increased Canadian settlement, only 35% of the land was made up of forest.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Irene Hanuta, "A Dominion Land Survey Map of the Red River Valley," *Manitoba History* 58 (2008), 24.



Surveys and Mapping Branch, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, "Winnipeg, Manitoba," 1952, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/manitobamaps/2802659777/in/album-72157603459135495/> The green area indicates the forest is still extant.



Photograph by Nicole Coulson, November 2023.

Today the forest has been split by the St. Norbert dike system, built in 1950 in response to the disastrous 1950 flood.<sup>31</sup> The portion of forest on the river side of the dike was eventually purchased by the city, whereas developers have maintained their ownership of Lemay Forest. Villa Maria Place, an ecumenical retreat

centre constructed in 1960 for the Oblates, covered the east side of River Lot 85, within the dike system. Villa Maria was eventually replaced in 1987 by the Laureate Academy, a school for children with learning disabilities. Substantial trees exist on this plot of land although the land is groomed with lawns. The Lemay Forest tree coverage, except for the cemetery area, is in contrast very thick with a lot of underbrush, and many trees are also substantial in size. A 2020 report noted that Lemay Forest and the Laureate Academy site had the highest mean tree density of all sites observed in St. Norbert.

<sup>31</sup> City of Winnipeg, "11.0 City of Winnipeg Flood Protection Infrastructure," November 2004, <https://www.gov.mb.ca/sd/eal/registries/4967floodway/supp/section11.pdf>.



They also contained the largest diameter cottonwoods of all sites observed.<sup>32</sup> Although the forest has also experienced loss of trees, the city has been carefully monitoring the area and regularly removing trees infected with Dutch Elm Disease. Thus the forest is relatively intact, robust, and healthy.



*Lemay Forest is the section next to Laureate Academy, left of the dike, complemented by the section of forest owned by the City of Winnipeg to the right of the dike. Google Earth December 16, 2023.*

*Photograph by Nicole Coulson, November 2023.*



<sup>32</sup> Andrew M Jones, "A Holistic Approach to Dike Design: St. Norbert Manitoba, a Study and Application," University of Manitoba, a practicum for a Master of Landscape Architecture, 2020.



Wildlife in Lemay Forest by Shelley Sweeney

The intact riparian ecosystem, with its thick forest and undergrowth, supports a wide range of wildlife, including deer, foxes, coyotes, squirrels, beavers, martens, and others. Birders have counted in excess of 50 different birds visiting and inhabiting the forest, including Pileated Woodpeckers and the threatened Red-headed Woodpeckers.<sup>33</sup>

*Below: Still from video of coyote crossing the Red River from Lemay Forest to Daman Farm. Note the bird in the centre of the ice and the eagle's nest in the right tree. Video by Cat M. Gauthier, December 6, 2023.*



Above: a pileated woodpecker is nesting in Lemay Park. Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, October 28, 2023.

The confluence of the La Salle and Red Rivers and the relatively protected area of Lemay Forest has long provided a haven for wildlife. A record at the City of Winnipeg Archives indicates the possible early presence of bison: “at this site, in 1969, animal bone possibly Bison sp., was found eroding from the bank several feet from the top. The site appears relatively undisturbed.”<sup>34</sup>

Because Lemay includes both forest and open meadow, is located beside a source of water, and has been sheltered from

<sup>33</sup> Cat M. Gauthier, personal conversation, November 2023.  
<sup>34</sup> M.E. Kelly, *An Inventory of Pre-1880 Historical Resources in the City of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg Development Plan Review, January 1980), City of Winnipeg Archives, 33097056804906 A1054.



automobile traffic, a thriving ecosystem has developed. The wildlife happily coexist with people. Many birds have nests in Lemay Forest, and animals use the riparian corridors to travel around to find food.



*Red-bellied Woodpecker, Wood Duck, fox, Baltimore Oriole, White-tailed deer, and Red-bellied woodpeckers nesting in Lemay Forest.*



*Photographs by Jaxon Kowaluk, 2023.*





*Photograph by Cat M. Gauthier, 2023.*

Biodiversity in urban environments is becoming increasingly important. The December UN agreement known as the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims for countries to restore and protect ecosystems and endangered species worldwide.<sup>35</sup> City of Winnipeg councillors, recognizing that cities are at the forefront in observing biodiversity loss and the importance of this global movement, agreed to make Winnipeg a signatory to the Montréal Pledge.<sup>36</sup> The Pledge is an opportunity for communities to reduce threats to and share benefits of biodiversity in the urban environment and to employ solutions, governance, management and education to combat climate change.

Conservation of existing natural areas through protection is one key component of the pledge. Another is to ensure the conservation of vulnerable species. A third is to increase the amount of green and blue spaces within the urban environment. And cities must pledge to ensure the equitable and effective participation of Indigenous peoples and local communities in decision-making.

The preservation of Lemay Forest and its wildlife meets all of these specific targets and would show the strength of the city's commitment to these goals.

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<sup>35</sup> UN Environment Program, Convention of Biological Diversity, "the biodiversity plan for life on earth," <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/>.

<sup>36</sup> [https://portail-m4s.s3.é.ca/pdf/vdm\\_montreal-pledge\\_2022.pdf](https://portail-m4s.s3.é.ca/pdf/vdm_montreal-pledge_2022.pdf).



## Reconciliation with Indigenous Communities

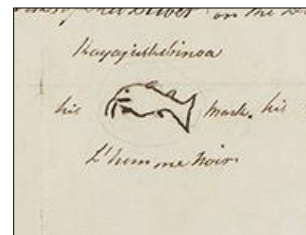
by Shelley Sweeney with research by Anne Lindsay

The Indigenous presence in the area of Lemay Forest reaches back to time before memory. Archaeological evidence of Indigenous peoples extends to at least 6,000 BCE. "An ancient Paleo-Indian spearhead discovered [in the area] probably related to the seasonal movement of hunters from the forest to the grassland to hunt buffalo."<sup>37</sup> Bone and pottery sherds dating to 780 CE were also found in this area around the forks of the La Salle and Red rivers. Between 1600 and 1800 the Assiniboin, Inninuak (Cree), and Ojibwa are known to have inhabited the area around St. Norbert.<sup>38</sup>

The land known today as Lemay Forest was part of the agreement to share the land sometimes known as the "Selkirk Treaty." This was not a sale, or a gift, as it is sometimes misunderstood.<sup>39</sup> Le Homme Noir was the Indigenous leader who agreed to share this area with the Selkirk or Red River Settlers. The doodem, or totemic markers used by the First Nations chiefs, on the written document commemorating this event, and on the accompanying map, represent the "clans" the leaders were from. "They also signified the nature and character of the land to which the settlers had arrived, and the importance of relationship within the territory."<sup>40</sup>



Right: Homme Noir was from the catfish doodem. HBCA/AM E.8/1 fo.9d,



Left: The Selkirk Map. HBCA E.8/1 fo. 11

Both at: [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/spotlight/selkirk\\_treaty.html](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/spotlight/selkirk_treaty.html)

Thus, the land was supposed to be shared between Indigenous peoples and incoming settlers.

<sup>37</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.2. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.2. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> See Nathan Hasselstrom, "An Exploration of the Selkirk Treaty" (Master's Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2019), [file:///C:/Users/shell/Downloads/Hasselstrom\\_Nathan\\_2019\\_thesis.pdf](file:///C:/Users/shell/Downloads/Hasselstrom_Nathan_2019_thesis.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> The University of Manitoba, "The Cultural Landscape of the Fort Garry Campus: Landform, Use, and Occupancy Prior to 1900," (Winnipeg: the University of Manitoba, Campus Planning Office, 2017), p.47, <https://umanitoba.ca/sustainability/sites/sustainability/files/2020-11/cultural-landscape-FG-sm.pdf>

As any student of Winnipeg's history knows, river lots and the river lot system are not only a part of the City's story; the patterns of lots, land use, and roads that the river lot system first established more than 200 years ago continues to make itself known in the arrangement of many of Winnipeg's – and St. Norbert's – streets. Located within a two-mile strip of land defined in the Selkirk Treaty, these river lots ran back from the river along roughly parallel lines running approximately perpendicular to the riverbank. Located within the two-mile settler land use limit established in the agreement to share the land, these lots were tangible evidence of the work of Indigenous leadership to create and maintain relationships. The shape of these lots cut across a cross section of resources that extended from river to prairie. Each lot included a small amount of river access and the use of part of the riverbank. Most importantly for the history of Lemay Forest, each lot usually had some woodland or at least bush, as well as some rich prairie grasslands or hay marsh. The river lots' diverse resources allowed those living on the lots to engage in activities such as processing animals, fishing, and farming.

The narrow, long shape of these river lots supported family and community interaction and cooperation. For the Métis of Red River, this contributed to Métis ethnogenesis. In 1869, the importance of the river lot system to the Métis community took on additional meaning when Métis resistance to Canadian encroachment on their land and on the system itself set in motion the events of the Riel resistance.<sup>41</sup> As a long rectangle extending away from the river, held within River Lot 85 in the Parish of St. Norbert, the shape of the Lemay Forest is defined by, but also records, the history of Winnipeg's river lots, serving as a reminder of their importance both to Métis history and to the diverse and vibrant community Winnipeg is today.

For plains hunting families, the river lots would have supported their lifestyle, culture, and connectedness. The location of the lots that make up Lot 85 today along both the river and embedded in an extensive trail system would have been important to a lifestyle that included bison hunting. Access to the rich resources a riverbank ecology presented, as well as to river transportation, would have been critical. Abundant water and access to wood to heat it are essential to processing animals and hides. Wood to build housing and outbuildings and to construct and maintain carts would be essential.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "The University of Manitoba, "The Cultural Landscape of the Fort Garry Campus: Landform, Use, and Occupancy Prior to 1900," (Winnipeg: the University of Manitoba, Campus Planning Office, 2017), p.47, <https://umanitoba.ca/sustainability/sites/sustainability/files/2020-11/cultural-landscape-FG-sm.pdf>; John Warkentin, "Manitoba Settlement Patterns," *Manitoba Historical Society Transactions* 3 (1959–60), <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/settlement.shtml>; Irene Hanuta, "A Dominion Land Survey Map of the Red River Valley," *Manitoba History* 58 (2008), [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/58/landsurveymap.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/58/landsurveymap.shtml); P.R. Mailhot and D.N. Sprague, "Persistent Settlers: The Dispersal and Resettlement of the Red River Métis, 1870-1885," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 17, no.2 (1985)1-31.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Ross, *Red River Settlement: Its rise, progress and present state: With some account of the native races and its general history to the present day* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1856).



After the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company in 1821, scores of Métis boatman and freighters were displaced.<sup>43</sup> Many settled in St. Norbert. "St. Norbert was one of Manitoba's earliest and most significant French-Canadian and Métis communities."<sup>44</sup> Large-scale hunting parties would congregate at St. Norbert before heading to the Pembina Hills after 1845. Beginning in the 1850s, the Métis began operating ox carts between Red River in St. Paul along the Pembina Trail.<sup>45</sup> Of great importance, the Métis met from 1869 to 1871 in St. Norbert to plan the future province of Manitoba. They created the National Métis Council and began discussions of the Provisional Government.<sup>46</sup>

Reflecting Lemay Forest's strong historical connection to both First Nations and Métis communities, the preservation of Lemay Forest presents an opportunity to support reconciliation. Further, the forest is currently being used for ceremonies by Indigenous peoples. Kurtis Alexson, a resident of the Behavioural Health Foundation, comes to Lemay forest a couple times a week. "I feel connected to the earth more because I'm around nature and it seems to help calm my anxiety and all that I feel on the inside... Sometimes I can just yell and then I have the trees to listen."<sup>47</sup> Preserving the forest would allow Indigenous ceremonies and related use of the forest to continue.

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<sup>43</sup> "The land around the La Salle's confluence with the Red was likely occupied by Métis families as early as 1822." Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.5. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf). See also Aileen Garland, "Notes on the Geographical Names of Manitoba" (unpublished manuscript on file with the geographical names Board of Canada, Manitoba conservation, Winnipeg, 1975), as cited in Manitoba conservation, *Geographical Names of Manitoba* (Manitoba: Manitoba Conservation, 2000), p. 239, <https://archive.org/details/geographicalname0000unse/mode/2up>. However Philippe Mailhot, former Director of the St. Boniface Museum, maintains that there was a significant Métis population in the area before 1812. The Charettes, a Métis family, predated the arrival of the Selkirk settlers. The Charettes were connected by marriage to the families that lived on River Lots 84 and 85. "New Park Commemorates St. Norbert's Métis History," *Free Press Community Review*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/our-communities/souwester/2016/06/28/new-park-commemorates-st-norberts-metis-history#:~:text=Norbert%27s%20rich%20M%C3%A9tis%20history,the%20old%20time%20M%C3%A9tis%20families.%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>44</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.5. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Historic Resources, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship, *St. Norbert* (Winnipeg: Historic Resources Branch, 1996), p.5. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis\\_riel/docs/st\\_norbert.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/docs/st_norbert.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> "Public Access to Lemay Forest Ending Friday As Advocates Push to Preserve It," CBC News (November 29, 2023), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/lemay-forest-public-access-ending-1.7044381>



*Left: Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 17, 2023.*



*Right: photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 29, 2023.*



## The Asile Ritchot Cemetery By Shelley Sweeney

During its operations, Asile Ritchot operated a cemetery on the orphanages' property. No early maps have been found to date which show exactly where the cemetery was located, however a 1970 federal topographical map shows a cemetery, noted as "C" in the map detail below.



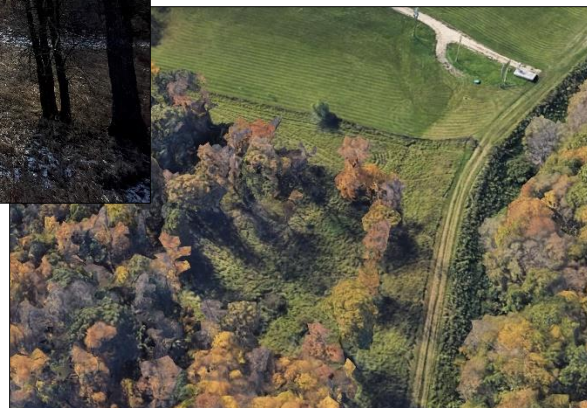
Canadians. National Topographic System, 1:50,000 : Canada : Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1970,  
<https://www.canadiana.ca/view/qmma.11140/1>.



Above: Photograph by Shelley Sweeney,  
December 7, 2023.

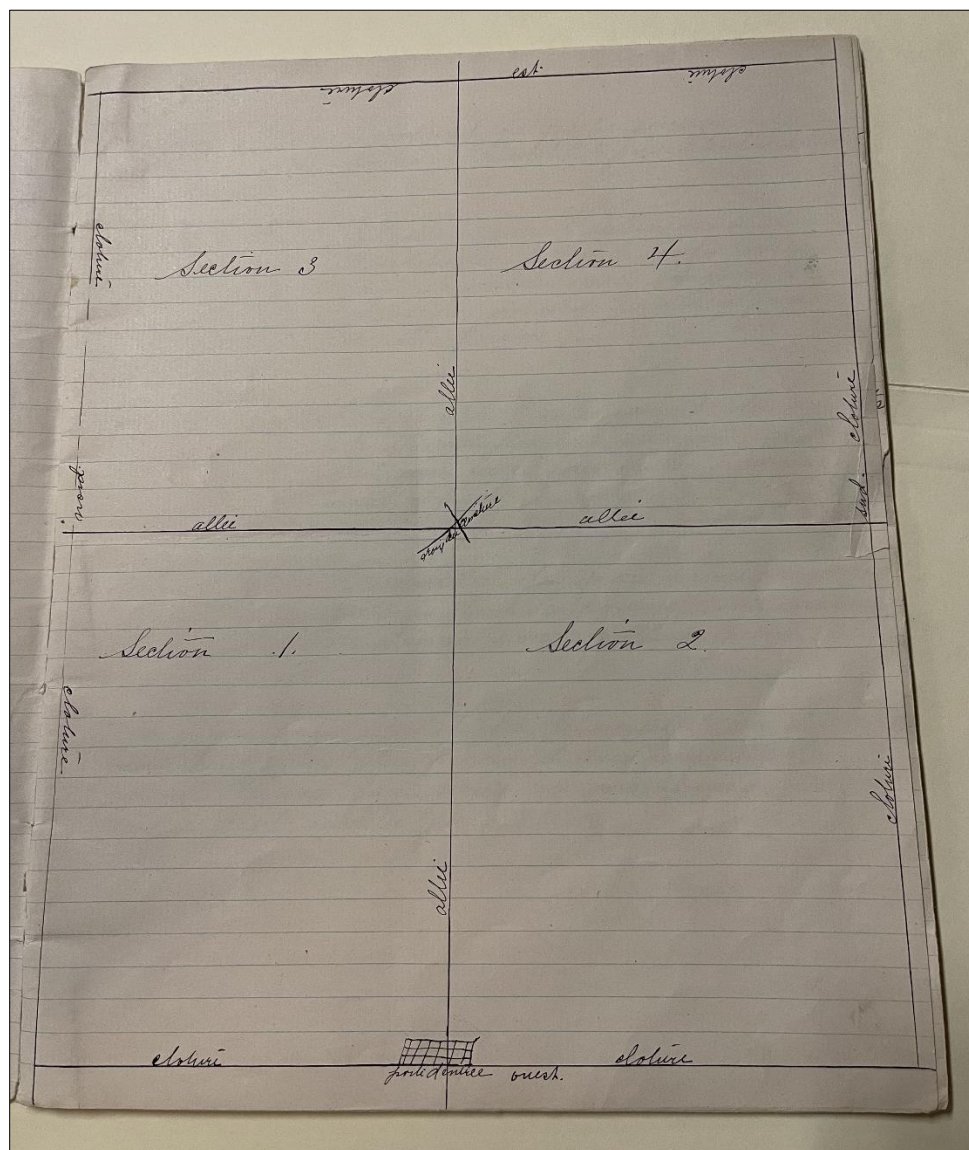
Right: Photograph from Google Earth, December  
16, 2023.

This accords with recent photos taken of the area, which show a prominent bare spot surrounded by mature trees along the edges very close to the edge of the forest on the western side. It is also quite apparent on Google Earth.



We do not know much about how the cemetery looked originally, but a writer in 1913 praised “le magnifique cimitière des Sœurs et des Madeleines.”<sup>48</sup>

Five registers of various types that record deaths have survived and are now housed in the Société historique de Saint-Boniface Archives (SHSBA) in St. Boniface.<sup>49</sup> One register, likely dated between 1904 and 1918, shows the layout of the cemetery partitioned into four sections and describes the categories of burials for each quadrant.



Cemetery Plan, Asile Ritchot, oriented with north on the left. Note the entrance (“porte d’entrée”) would face the Asile. “Registre du cimetière,” n.d., Fonds Asile Ritchot, SHSBA, 0554/421.

<sup>48</sup> “Profession Religieuse a Saint-Norbert,” *Les cloches de Saint-Boniface* 2, no. 10 (May 15, 1913): 194. “Registre du cimetière,” n.d., Fonds Asile Ritchot, SHSBA, 0554/421.

<sup>49</sup> The records from the Asile Ritchot was transferred by Villa Rosa, a prenatal and postnatal residence that eventually succeeded the Asile Ritchot. Julie Reid, personal communication, December 8, 2023.



Section 1 was reserved for the Soeurs de Miséricorde. Section 2 was for the interment of the so-called Madeleines: “filles de confiance qui sont demurées assez longtemps dans la maison pour bénéficier de cette faveur,” roughly translated to “trusted girls who have lived in the house long enough to benefit from this favor.” Section 3 was for “des enfants de l’institution” or “children of the institution.” And Section 4 was for infants whose parent(s) wished and were able to pay for private burials.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps most unnerving is what the Register says with regards to the babies and children in Section 3, that “à chaque an on fait une large fosse où ces enfants sont déposés,” or “once a year a large grave is [dug] where these children are placed.”<sup>51</sup>

Over the years the orphanage was open, from 1904 to 1948, a great many babies and young children died at Asile Ritchot, as well as some of the nuns and the female helpers.<sup>52</sup> According to the SHSBA, there are approximately 7,365 names of children who passed through the orphanage represented in surviving records. Likely there is some duplication of names, but these numbers give a sense of the significant number of children and their families whose lives connect with the history of Asile Ritchot. According to the three admissions registers located at SHSBA, dating 1904 to 1946, of the 3,756 names entered, 1,288 or 34% are marked as deceased.<sup>53</sup> A report submitted by Sr. St. Gabriel in 1909 stated that of 314 children received that year, 188, or 59.9%, had died.<sup>54</sup> That would mean the Asile had an infant mortality rate of 599 per 1,000 live births, when child mortality under five years old in 1910 was on average across Canada 262 per 1000 living births.<sup>55</sup>

There is external corroboration of the high death rate: writing about “delinquent” Catholic girls in Saskatchewan, who – before Saskatchewan had developed its own institutions – were often sent to Manitoba, Kimberley Ann Marshall states that “the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Winnipeg accepted ‘wayward’ Catholic girls, although it sent unmarried mothers to the Misericordia Hospital in Winnipeg. The nuns sent the babies to the Asile Ritchot Hospital at St. Norbert, Manitoba immediately after [their]

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<sup>50</sup> “Registre du cimetière,” n.d., Fonds Asile Ritchot, SHSB, 0554/421.

<sup>51</sup> “Registre du cimetière,” n.d., Fonds Asile Ritchot, SHSB, 0554/421.

<sup>52</sup> The orphanage included children where there was no mother to care for them or where the parent(s) did not have the means to support them. Lillian Gibbons, “Family of 74 Needs Care at St. Norbert Infants’ Home,” *Winnipeg Tribune* (October 12, 1939): 5.

<sup>53</sup> In the transcription register dating from 1902 to 1917 there were 3,597 names entered and of those, 2,085 deaths were recorded.

<sup>54</sup> Archives de l’Archevêché de St-Boniface, Report Received by the Sisters of Misericordia, 1909, as quoted in Corinne Tellier, “A St. Norbert Landmark: a Paper Presented to Barker and Gus Lets Associates, Architects,” July 1978, pp. 20-1, SHSB L 1319.M27 R 1-, Asile Ritchot.

<sup>55</sup> Statista, “Child Mortality Rate (Under Five Years Old) in Canada, from 1830 to 2020,” 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1041751/canada-all-time-child-mortality-rate/>. Note that the infant mortality rate across Canada in 2011 was 5 per 1,000 live births. Statistics Canada, “Life Expectancy, 1920 – 1922 to 2009 – 2011,” <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016002-eng.htm>.

birth, and reported that almost all of the babies died.”<sup>56</sup>

The numbers of deaths declined considerably later on in the history of the orphanage according to the death registers, but in the early years there were an astounding number of deaths, possibly due, among other things, to overcrowding, lack of staff, contagious diseases, and the fact that the orphanage may have gotten its water supply from the Red River.<sup>57</sup> Overcrowding in the summer probably took its toll. “Former neighbours remember hearing the children cry on hot summer nights.”<sup>58</sup> A 1923 Manitoba Board of Health report stated that “the graduate nurse in charge of the older children has been moved up to the baby’s ward where she has sole charge of 64 babies under two years of age, many of whom are sick.”<sup>59</sup> One might argue that no single person, even with assistance from the madeleines, could possibly manage care for 64 healthy babies adequately, never mind ones that were sick.



*The nursery at Asile Ritchot, December 1925. Sheila Grover notes that there are 36 children in the photograph, many of them babies in cribs. SHSBA Collection Générale, 10706.*

<sup>56</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Scott Papers: Social Welfare, 56137, . [https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=TC-SSU-5903&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc\\_number=1033022043](https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item?id=TC-SSU-5903&op=pdf&app=Library&oclc_number=1033022043).

<sup>57</sup> The SHSB Archives shared this information about recorded deaths from their Asile database. Sheila Grover noted that St. Norbert did not have fresh water until after the community merged with Fort Garry and Fort Garry joined Winnipeg in constructing the viaduct in 1919. See Sheila Grover, “3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot),” [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983, p.6. After 1919 drinking water was trucked in. SHSBA L 1319.M27R. The Transcription Register listed the reason for death and often the reason cited was “enteritis,” which would indicate that probably bacterial infections or viruses were present.

<sup>58</sup> Corinne Tellier, “A St. Norbert Landmark: a Paper Presented to Barker and Gus Lets Associates, Architects,” July 1978, SHSB L 1319.M27 R 2, Asile Ritchot.

<sup>59</sup> Carol Sanders, “Manitoba’s First Feminists,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (March 9, 2013), <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2013/03/09/manitobas-first-feminists>.



Of the children that passed through the Asile, only 2,734 were identified with their ethnic origin. These covered a wide range of nationalities, from Chinese to Swiss.<sup>60</sup>

Once Asile Ritchot closed in 1948, a report states that the Soeurs “removed all the remains from a cemetery at the rear of the property, moving them to another cemetery. The land was filled and deconsecrated.”<sup>61</sup> No citation was given however to indicate where this information came from. Another source however stated that the cemetery was moved after the property was purchased by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.<sup>62</sup> The archivist at La Société historique de Saint-Boniface (SHSBA) has passed on anecdotal information that remains from the cemetery were disinterred and moved to the St. Boniface cemetery on rue Archibald in 1954.<sup>63</sup> No records relating to moving the cemetery however have been discovered to date in the SHSBA archives. Research as to what became of the cemetery after Asile Ritchot closed is ongoing.

Gerry Atwell, posting to Facebook, indicated that they remembered “several small plain gravestones of babies near the entrance to the forest behind the monastery” while they were playing around the grotto. This suggests that the grotto and the cemetery existed on the property at the same time, directly contradicting the account by Sheila Grover.



**Gerry Atwell**

I grew up in St. Norbert and used to play in the back yard of the Oblate Monastery as a child when the monks were still there. They had a small mound on which there were statues of Christ on the cross and the Virgin Mary kneeling at his feet. We used to try to toboggan down that little hill. I remember that there were several small plain gravestones of babies near the entrance to the forest behind the monastery. There was also an old unpaved road through the forest that led to the Villa Maria Retreat. We used to bike that route until X-Kalay took over. It was a fascinating and deliciously creepy building inside and out.



<https://www.facebook.com/348146758548683/posts/rows-of-cribs-at-asile-ritchot-orphanage-in-st-norbert-it-was-opened-by-the-mise/925052507524769/>.

<sup>60</sup> Although some of these children may have been misidentified, the database notes that 225 were Métis, six were First Nations, and one as Inuit. Julie Reid, personal communication, December 8, 2023.

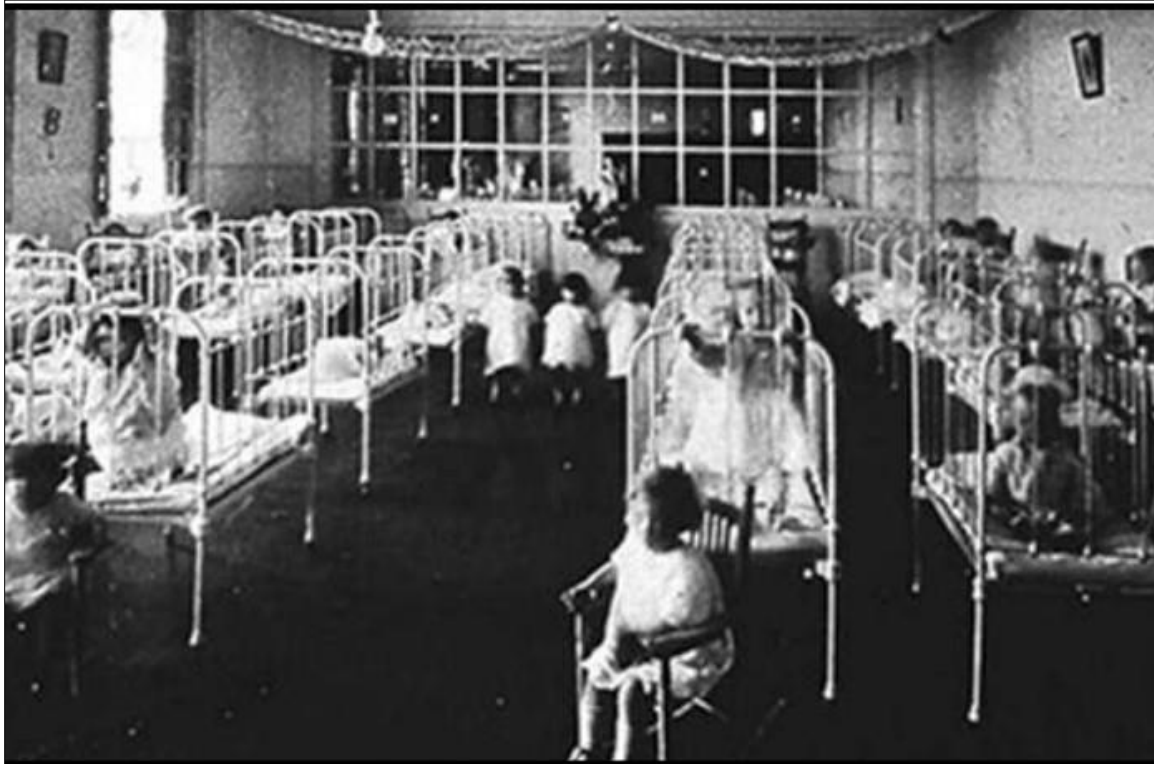
<sup>61</sup> Sheila Grover, “3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot),” [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983, p.7.

<sup>62</sup> Julie Reid, archivist, SHSBA, personal communication 5 December 2023. Requests for information have been made to the province’s Historic Resources Branch, the Archdiocese of St. Boniface, and the Saint Boniface Cathedral, however no information has been received at the time of writing.

<sup>63</sup> “The remains of the cemetery were relocated back in 1954 to the St. Boniface Cemetery on Archibald.” Julie Reid, email, December 5, 2023.

No remains of grotto structures however have been found in the area where the cemetery was located, according to the 1970 Topographical map.

It is impossible to say exactly what happened at the cemetery, but this sad episode in Winnipeg's past surely deserves an effort at clarification, identification, and commemoration that would acknowledge the terrible struggles faced by the children and their families.



*The nursery at the Asile Ritchot. Alida Laporte Gendreau and Claire Gendreau Bartmanovich fonds, SHSBA 26098.*



## Architectural Remains in Lemay Forest by Shelley Sweeney

During the time the Soeurs de Miséricorde ran the Asile Ritchot, it would seem like there was only the forest and the cemetery behind the buildings and fields where the sisters and their helpers grew food for the Asile, if these photographs are anything to go by.

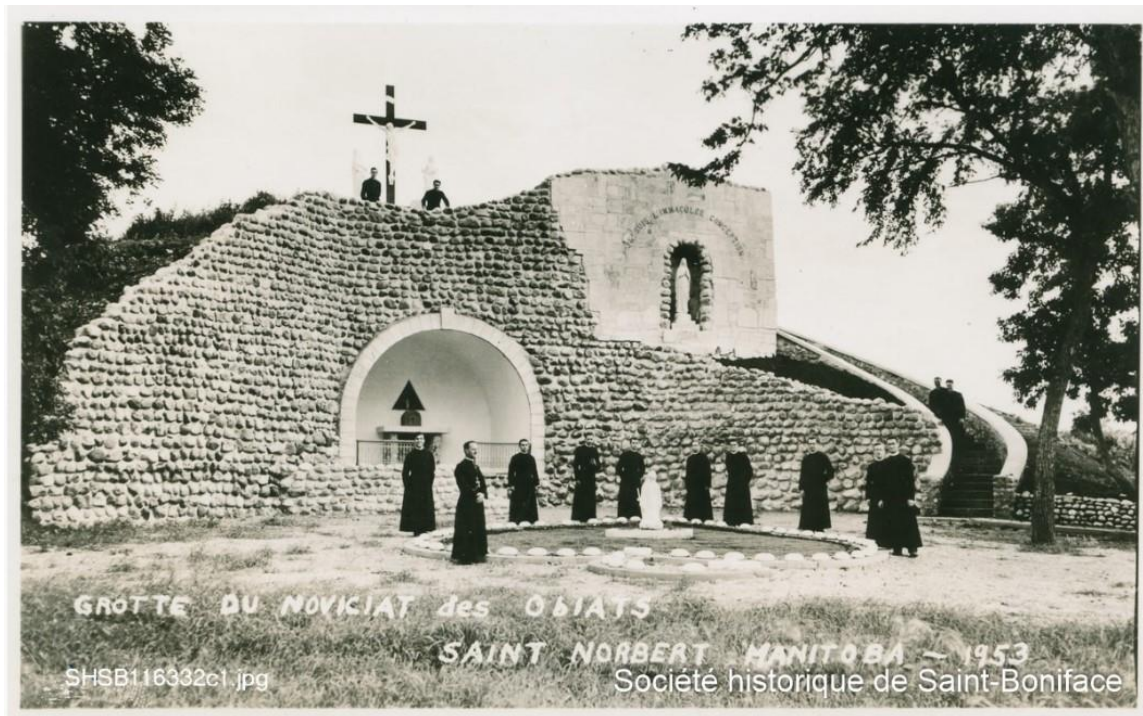


*Asile Ritchot, n.d., SHSBA, 117471.*



*Asile Ritchot, 1922, SHSBA, Fonds Tom Laporte, Saint-Norbert SHSB 26090-26098.*

However not long after the Oblates took over the land in 1950, they made plans for an elaborate grotto, part of which is seen here below in 1953.<sup>64</sup> “Young seminarians could stroll the grounds, reading and contemplating at a series of small fieldstone shrines.”<sup>65</sup>



*Grotte du Noviciat des Oblats, Saint Norbert, Manitoba – 1953, SHSBA, 116332c.1.*

Little remains of the towering structure today – just part of the mound behind the grotto, a number of cairns, several alters, several small bridges, a niche, a well, and a small chapel.



*Photograph by Shelley Sweeney,  
November 15, 2023.*

<sup>64</sup> Although Sheila Grover states that the Oblates built the grotto between 1949 and 1954, the early date is unlikely given that the 1950 flood severely disrupted the Oblates' move to the former Asile Ritchot. Sheila Grover, "3514 Pembina Highway X-Kalay (Formerly Asile Ritchot)," [Report made to the] Historical Buildings Committee, June 5, 1983, p.7.

<sup>65</sup> Sheila Grover, "Cityscapes: Asile Ritchot, St. Norbert," *Manitoba History* 11 (Spring 1986), [https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/11/asileritchot.shtml](https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/asileritchot.shtml).





*OURS-Winnipeg member Muriel St. John stands in front of one of the altars. Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 19, 2023.*

The structure below is more intact, but still just a fragment left behind, stripped of any statue or ornamentation. Although these structures have suffered extensive damage possibly from vandals, the river stone structures remain, as historian Sheila Grover noted, “an intriguing feature on the landscape.”<sup>66</sup>



*Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 15, 2023.*

Photographs taken in 1981 by Grover show that the forest was sparse of undergrowth surrounding the remains of the grotto.<sup>67</sup> The forty-two years since has filled in the property so there is now an extensive canopy.

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<sup>66</sup> Sheila Grover, "Cityscapes: Asile Ritchot, St. Norbert," *Manitoba History* 11 (Spring 1986), [https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb\\_history/11/asileritchot.shtml](https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/11/asileritchot.shtml).

<sup>67</sup> [https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2631600/manitoba\\_metadata](https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2631600/manitoba_metadata).





*Photograph by Sheila Grover, 1981*



*Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 19, 2023*



Trees immediately around the grove had likely been removed, perhaps in the early 1950s, leaving only the oldest trees to grace the structures built by the Oblates.

*Photograph by Sheila Grover, 1981.*

The thick trees and shrubs today however, provide ample protection for wildlife.

*Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, October 28, 2023.*



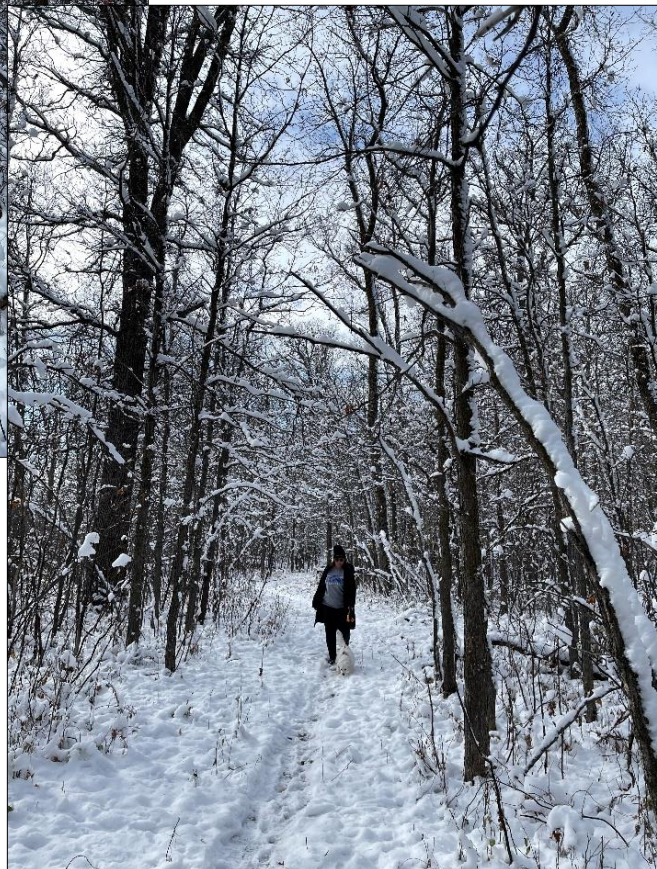


## **A Place for Recreation** by Shelley Sweeney

If the Pandemic taught us anything, it is that people love the outdoors. People have been enjoying Lemay Forest recreationally for well over sixty years. Lemay Forest is a peaceful refuge that provides ample space for people and wildlife to happily coexist. Children from the Laureate Academy and nearby schools often walk and play in the forest. People stroll through the forest, others walk their dogs. Lemay Forest and the greenfield should be maintained as a healthy biodiversity park for humans and wildlife, where visitors can find peace and tranquility.



*Strollers and dog-walkers take advantage of the snow in Lemay Forest. Photographs by Shelley Sweeney, October 28, 2023.*







*Above: This is a neighbour who has lived near and walked in Lemay Forest nearly all his life. Note Lemay Forest and Villa Maria being built in 1960 on the left. Photograph in private possession of Paul Thorimbert.*



*Left: Three White-tailed deer relax in the thick underbrush, undisturbed by visitors. Photograph by Shelley Sweeney, November 29, 2023.*



## Conclusion by Shelley Sweeney

For many reasons, Lemay Forest is well worth saving. It would be tragic to think that the forest survived for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, only to finally fall to development in 2023. The city will never regret making the effort to preserve this outstanding natural environment. Protecting Lemay Forest as the high quality natural forest it is for future generations will be of lasting importance, as these types of forest are rare in Winnipeg. We look to our City Councillors to provide leadership on this significant initiative.



*Tochal Developments cut off public access to Lemay Forest December 1, 2023. Photographs by Cat M. Gauthier, December 5, 2023.*

