Tappan Square was originally a wet (or hydric) forest and probably contained such native tree species as pin oak (Quercus palustris), American elm (Ulmus americana), red oak (Quercus rubra), and, perhaps on high ground, American beech (Fagus grandiflora). Early settlers cut down the trees, creating a field of stumps, and for a time the area was known as Stumpville. By 1846 only two trees remained, one of which was the Historic Elm at the southeast corner. The perimeter of the square was enclosed to keep out vagrant cattle, first by a fence and then by a hedgerow of Osage orange (Maclura pomifera) which remained until the 1880s.

The square acquired its present name sometime after World War II through persistent student usage. In the early years of the college it was known as the “Campus” and the “College Park” because many of the early college buildings stood here. Tappan Hall, one of the first buildings on the square, was a combined classroom and dormitory named for Arthur Tappan, a New York City merchant-abolitionist who helped the college through several early financial crises. The College Chapel, Society Hall, Spear Laboratory, and French Hall also once graced the Square. Note that the walk running diagonally to the southwest still reflects pedestrian traffic around French Hall, which was removed over 70 years ago. (See historic drawing)

The last two buildings on the Square were removed in 1927, according to the stipulations of Charles Martin Hall’s will. Hall, a graduate of Oberlin and founder of the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), was a great benefactor of the college. Eleven years before Hall made his will, the landscape architectural firm of the Olmsted Brothers (sons of the designer of New York’s Central Park) had recommended that “it would be very much to the advantage of Oberlin College in the long run to clear the main campus of buildings and to keep it as a spacious and beautiful pleasure ground.” Hall, a great admirer of open space, provided for the relocation of the functions of the buildings that still remained on the square. Through the creation of open space and the conversion of several beautiful buildings that now surround the square, the renowned architect Cass Gilbert reinforced the square’s function as the pivotal point for the development of the college. The smooth sandstone of Gilbert’s buildings and the rough sandstone of earlier architectural work were quartered locally in nearby South Amherst.

Tree planting, often annual Arbor Day event, initially involved the whole college. This practice began soon after the square was cleared. According to President James Fairchild, “Students from the East, whose life had not been a constant warfare with trees, led in the task of replanting the square with young trees from the forest.”

In 1978, President Emil Dannenberg called for a 10-year plan for the care of the campus grounds. The objective was to adorn the campus with a diverse collection of hardy plants and trees, some of which were selected for their scientific and educational usefulness to students. The tradition of tree planting continued in the 1980s under President S. Frederick Starr, who initiated a program to plant trees on all lawns and public spaces. The decade of campus-wide beautification efforts led by horticulturist Edward Thompson resulted in the presentation of Classical America’s 1997 Arthur Ross Award to Oberlin College. Oberlin was cited for “turning horticulture, the ancient instrument for giving life to the community, in embellishing the town of Oberlin and the Oberlin campus.”

As is true for many college campuses, Oberlin enjoyed a period of magnificence elms. By the middle of this century, elms lined both sides of the square’s major walkways. Scarring in 1950, Dutch elm disease began to level the grand arcades of stately elms, drastically altering the face of Tappan Square. Only one American elm remains.

Today, with tile and storm sewers draining the subsoil, Tappan Square supports a diverse collection of trees, both native and exotic. Heavy storms can still cause water to collect on the square, however, and on occasion a temporary pond is formed on the square’s lowest point (see map).

Squirrels on Tappan Square live in several squirrel boxes placed throughout the square rather than in holes in the trees. This is because the college trims dead limbs from the trees to minimize the development of tree holes and fills any holes that develop. This practice helps keep Oberlin free of tree-hole mosquitoes, which have been found by the Ohio State Department of Health to be carriers of encephalitis.

Cover: The Historic Elm. This American elm was a five-inch sapling in 1833, the year John J. Shippe and Philo P. Stewart chose the site for Oberlin College. Legend says that the founders tied their horses to this tree, knelt beneath it to dedicate their enterprise, and saved it from the axe because of its beauty and symmetry. Through the years, the elm served as a fish market and as a lost-and-found center for watches, wallets, and even a stray violin. Since 1958, the location has been a center for Oberlin’s annual United Nations flag display. A victim of Dutch elm disease, the 132-year-old Historic Elm was removed on April 13, 1965. An aluminum ring now marks the spot on the southeast corner of Tappan Square. (Etching circa 1880)
