History in Madison County is a big deal. Evidence of the formative past surrounds us, and because it’s so much a part of our daily landscape, its impact upon who we are and how we live our lives can often be overlooked. But not if Jared McDonald, executive director of the Madison County Historical Society, can help it!

In fact, during this interview, Jared distilled a new perspective about how the county landscape impacted the “Madison County Identity,” if you will. Seen through the eyes of a prospective homesteader in the 1800’s, Madison County’s diverse landscape offered bountiful, life-sustaining opportunities: plentiful, clean water; rolling grasslands and immense timber stands; diverse species of plants, animals, and fungi to feed all manner of beings; deep, fertile soils and easily accessible limestone bedrock; and weather amenable enough to support many forms of life. Such diverse natural wealth led to a land-based culture of small, centralized communities filled with gritty, autonomous but interdependent people who faced adversity and carried on. Jared finds this natural and social history so compelling that he has never left the county, and has found his life’s purpose bringing the unique character of the county’s past to the attention of the present population. Preserving and honoring our heritage while preserving an authentic legacy for the future matters to Jared.

Jared’s professional mission as the director of the historical society is carried out on the 18.5 acre homestead of the Bevington family. Carved out of the original 200-acre farm which operated in the mid-1800’s, the historical complex has added other period buildings from around the county to create an appropriately historic “feel.”

The land itself is the oldest contributor to that “feel.” Mature oak, walnut, and hackberry trees are what remains from the pre-European settlement landscape. Missing is the lush, diverse grassland the Bevingtons and their predecessors would have found. Records show that the wooded hillsides were pastured by farm livestock, but not planted to crops.

Both Jared and his predecessor, Wendell Spencer, sensed an opportunity to align the landscape more closely with the past by reconstructing prairie on the site. As anyone who has attempted such a reconstruction may have learned the hard way, trying to replicate a native biome is hard work and often filled with unknowns. Tools, techniques, and seed sources for prairie reconstruction have progressed significantly in the last couple of decades, making a high-diversity reconstruction easier. Coupled with that progress was Jared’s eye-opening experience with the death of two big oaks in the woodland. These converging forces, along with an opportunity to make the landscape both a formal and an informal learning experience, led to initiating a major public restoration project of both the oak savanna and the prairie on the complex grounds. Dubbed “Free the Oaks” by a member of a local restoration organization, the work has begun.

An enlarged prairie area will be seeded with what’s known as “ecotypical” seed, meaning seeds collected from native plants grown in or within a hundred miles or so of central Iowa. Seeding was planned for this winter, but existing turf has yet to be killed back. First and second-year prairie plantings often fail to impress because the young plants first prioritize using energy to build the massive root
systems associated with native plants. However, by the third growing season, the prairie “look” will be evident.

Oak savanna is characterized by widely-spaced, broad-canopied “specimen” trees, especially oaks like burr and white oak species. The ground level, or understory, of a savanna is dominated by a mix of sedges, broadleaf flowering plants, and grasses adapted to partial shade, which also have the massive root systems common to native plants. Creating favorable conditions for a return to functional savanna means reducing competition from faster growing, early successional tree species (think elms and locust) and removing the overgrowth of woody, often non-native shrubs (think multiflora rose and honeysuckle). All this change allows more sun to reach the forest floor, which stimulates growth of remnant and seeded savanna understory plants. Change on the ground level will present one of the many fascinating opportunities to discover the next emerging species.

“Freeing the Oaks” will be a perpetual treasure hunt for visitors of every age. The landscape will actively take us back in time. Jared will be watching for the light of understanding to dawn as we learn to see more and more deeply how heritage links to our current identity and pays forward to the legacy we preserve.