Stories from the Lower Cedar

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Stories from the Lower Cedar is a collective mapping project in which a curator will collect data from local communities across the Lower Cedar Watershed. This data will include stories, anecdotes, and histories that are based within the watershed as well as recommendations for outdoor recreation and landmarks to visit. The curator will then add this data to an online map using technologies such as ArcGIS or other available mapping technologies that visitors to the webpage of the map can click through. The goal of this project is to create a sense of community among the members of the watershed, establishing care between those upstream and downstream through storytelling and shared experience.

Background

Various organizations in the Lower Cedar Watershed, Iowa City, or other locations in Iowa work every day to find solutions to environmental issues in the bioregion. However, the larger community of the Lower Cedar Watershed often pays little attention to issues such as water quality, invasive species, or soil conditions if it does not affect them personally. This is likely due to a lack of a sense of community within the watershed. Without this community, there is no care or concern for the land or members of the community affected by these environmental issues.

If lack of care about the land and the local community is the norm, the question becomes, how do we encourage a community of care in a watershed? To create this community, there must be a sense of shared experience with the land that will lead to a sense of care towards fellow humans and the environment. I propose that one can foster this sense of place, community, and

care through a collective online mapping project, tentatively titled Stories of the Lower Cedar. Through the collection and sharing of stories, memories, histories, experiences, and more, the Lower Cedar Watershed will become a community beyond the boundaries of town or county. Instead, the members of the watershed will be connected to the land and each other through their collective storytelling.

The idea for Stories from the Lower Cedar comes from various storytelling projects throughout the nation in many different mediums. William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyEarth* (1991) as well as Curt Meine and Keefe Keeley's *The Driftless Reader* (2017) are both published collections of quotes and narratives from specific locations in Kansas and the Driftless Region, respectively. Although these books are published by editors or curators, they include words, histories, and stories of place through the works of many other voices from the area. Through this multiplicity, the reader gains a sense of place that only comes through the feeling of community created in collective storytelling. In a different medium, the online website *Queering the Map* is a global collective mapping project that collects the stories of queer people worldwide, creating a sense of shared community through experience.

Stories from the Lower Cedar brings together the medium and accessibility of *Queering the Map* with the bioregional sense of place of *PrairyErth* and *The Driftless Reader*. There have been some similar watershed-focused mapping projects—for example, the Bad River Water and Culture Maps Project in 2015 involved a large printed map that community members could add to with markers. However, Stories from the Lower Cedar is unique as an online collective mapping project that can be seen by members of the community and visitors to the watershed without needing access to a specific town or county that would limit participation. Furthermore,

as an online project, it can include continuous updates and does not have to be limited to a short event or set of events.

Details of the Project

This project involves collecting stories and histories of natural and historical landmarks in the Lower Cedar Watershed from the communities within it. Their relationships in their own words will be added to an online map of the watershed, using ArcGIS or other online mapping technologies. Locations can be clicked on, and the stories of the community will pop up to be read by anyone with access to the webpage (the map could have its own website, or it could be a page of the Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority website).

There are three main steps in realizing the Stories from the Lower Cedar Project. These are: collecting data from the community, creating a public online map to share the data with the community, and continually adding to the map and doing upkeep to ensure the map's continued usability. In this section, I will provide suggestions for ways to complete these steps using ArcGIS technologies. However, these suggestions can be translated to other mapping technologies depending on what is available to the curator.

Collecting Data

There are many ways a project leader might collect data for this project. Most simply, if using ArcGIS technology, there is an ArcGIS survey that can be linked on a watershed, town, or business website. Members of the watershed can click on the link and fill out a quick survey including their name, location, the date of their story, and their story. Here is a demo of such a survey. Furthermore, to spread awareness of the survey and the larger project, there is a QR code that could be distributed in public areas or advertised at local events. This survey would populate

a separate ArcGIS map as well as provide the information collected in list form. Then, the curator of the map would add these stories to the public-facing map.

However, to foster initial interest in the project and begin to populate the map before it is made public, the project leader can seek out stories in the community. They can do this by setting up a booth at a local event where people can write down or orally tell their stories into a recorder. Another option for collecting stories would be to reach out to schools and ask students for fun memories of outdoor recreation. They can also seek out specific members of the community, such as local celebrities, business owners, or librarians with historical interests to interview for interesting historical anecdotes.

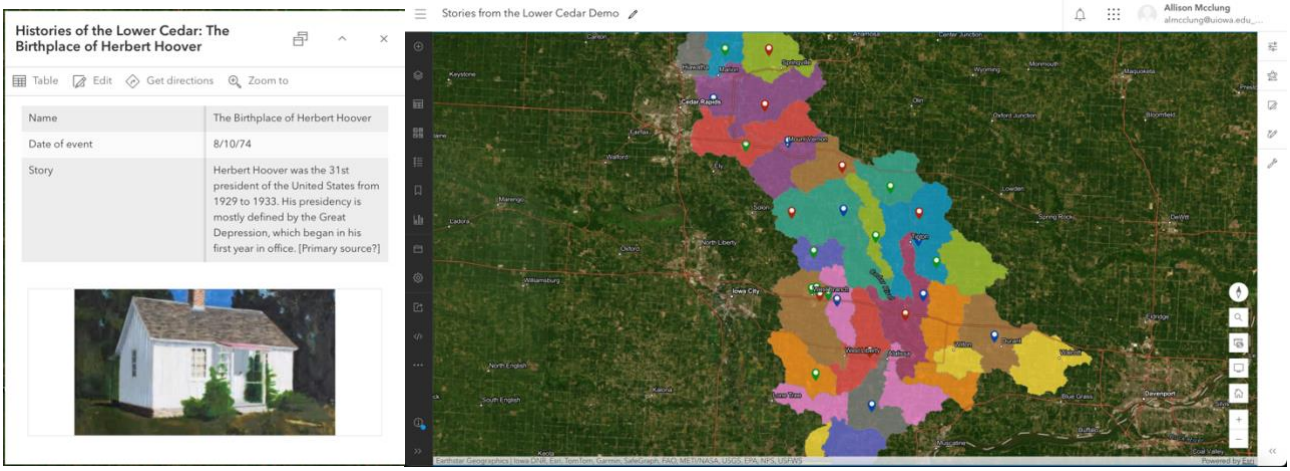
These options would require more work on the ground for the project, but by actively involving oneself with the community, the project leader could also spread awareness of the watershed. Similarly, if people are aware that they are contributing to an online map, they are more likely to seek out the map, which would be found on the Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority website. This would provide more foot traffic for this project, and it could lead to rising interest in the larger work of the Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority.

Creating and Maintaining the Map

Using ArcGIS technology, an online map can include multiple layers for the various types of data. For example, there can be a layer for histories of natural landmarks and historical sites, one for local recommendations, and another one for stories, anecdotes, and memories that local communities share with the project curator. The Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority has worked with ArcGIS technology before in creating StoryMaps (seen at this link), so a base map of the Lower Cedar Watershed that focuses on the flowing of creeks and waterways rather

than the boundaries of towns or counties is already publicly available and can be used to create the Stories from the Lower Cedar map.

Through some or all the strategies of collecting data that I covered in the previous section, the map would likely be at least partially populated with stories, histories, and recommendations before it reaches the public eye. I have included a mockup of what such a map might look like (please note: this mockup does not include any actual data of stories, histories, or landmarks. It is primarily a visual mockup to show what the points on the map would look like). I will also include screenshots of what the map and a specific data point might look like:



In this demo version, the various colors of pins represent layers of historical data, landmarks, and stories from the community. The map would be oriented according to the flow of the watershed and might include bookmarks of the various creeks and waterways that make up the watershed so visitors to the webpage can zoom in to specific, land-based areas. This webpage can be added to the Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority website, which, in advertising this project, will bring awareness to the various other projects the Watershed Management Authority does for the community.

The Stories from the Lower Cedar Project would remain ongoing for as long as there is a project curator willing to add data to the map. Since the map would already be populated when it is originally made public, it is likely that members of the community who contributed to the project might show the webpage to others, who would be willing to contribute their own histories, anecdotes, or place recommendations. By continually updating the map, the project can grow in relevance and foster a sense of community that will grow with the data of the map.

Goals of the Project

The primary goal of the Stories from the Lower Cedar Project is to create a sense of community among the members of the Lower Cedar Watershed beyond the government-enforced boundaries of towns or counties that allows for care and promotes better management of the watershed. However, there are various other positive effects that might come from implementing this project. As I have mentioned before, the inclusion of the online map on the Lower Cedar Watershed Management Authority website could create more traffic for the website and promote other projects. If community members are aware of their own contribution to a project, they will become more likely to visit such a website. They might also gain a sense of community from the collection of various stories including theirs and begin to feel interest for the various projects the Watershed Management Authority speaks of on their website. This community would go beyond the lines of generational families and recent immigrants and will evolve through a sense of sharing the land.

In a similar vein, if a community map is placed on the website next to more scientific maps on data such as water quality or flood conditions, visitors to the website are more likely to click through the other data and learn about the conditions of their watershed that they may have

been unaware of before. If the project is advertised in places such as libraries or local businesses through QR codes, it could help with tourism and industry by providing a list of local recommendations for natural landmarks or places for outdoor recreation.

Conclusion

Stories from the Lower Cedar is a project that will involve collecting data from various community resources and maintaining an online map for public viewing. It will require a willing and community focused project curator who believes that the creation of a shared community will lead to greater care in the watershed for the environmental issues it faces. By creating this sense of care, the wellness of the watershed will grow, and the community and its descendants can continue to enjoy the beautiful nature of the area.

References

Barnes, Lindsay. *Conservation Projects in the Lower Cedar Watershed.* 15 Aug 2025, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ec175ca4fae247d2a2a356b6f575aba5. Accessed 15 Dec 2025.

Conaway, Jessie. *Bad River Water and Culture Maps Project.* 2015, https://nelson.wisc.edu/blogs/badrivermaps/massive-watershed-floor-map/, Accessed 15 Dec 2025.

Heat-Moon, William Least. *PrairyErth.* Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.

LaRochelle, Lucas. *Queering the Map.* Queering the Map, https://www.queeringthemap.com. Accessed 15 Dec 2025.

Meine, Curt and Keefe Keeley, editors. *The Driftless Reader.* University of Wisconsin Press, 2017.

Survey demo:

https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/74f250aed8b54caaa1afcfb955e25cb2

Map demo:

https://uiowa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?webmap=19a41ed31bce4bac947aa10e3051b30d&center=-91.266755%2C41.778431&scale=4622324.434309