We, as humans, are continually connecting with our surroundings in an interactive manner that has a profound effect on how we move through the world subjectively and react to the landscapes we inhabit. Bonding with specific locales is natural and pronounced when each individual is able to thrive within a regional group that has historical ties to an area rich with culture, generating substantial tradition. Fundamental to this place-based connection is an understanding of the transformative nature of landscapes.

In order to fully appreciate the scope of our surroundings, we must look to and describe different views of the same scene throughout history, detailing what composes this view and why these stages are necessary in foreseeing the future of places. A notable forerunner in historically abundant landscapes, as it hugs the western shore of the Mississippi River, Hannibal, Missouri (MO) is a small town defined by its river heritage, impacts of adventurous settlers’, and most of all, change. Authentically historic and characterized by overachievement, Hannibal is one-of-a-kind. The small town’s various industrial ‘booms’ and remarkable past have lifted it up for generations, while its fictional, tourist driven, aesthetically based landscape of today is challenged by its historic district’s restorative, growing heritage movements—creating a disparate view of the landscape.

Hannibal’s various stages of history in its successive ecological alterations, land usages and stark population changes have been characterized most noticeably by landscape as place, ideology, problem and wealth, with great concern for the site’s history and cumulative processes on the land, in reference to D.W. Meinig’s classifications. Although it is said that the first inhabitants in Hannibal, Missouri were the pre-historic mound-builders whose ancient fortifications owe their “origin to a people much more civilized than our Indian”, the more widely documented history of Hannibal begins with the native tribes that roamed the areas of northeast Missouri, when man was miniscule compared to the environment (Houck, n.d.).

After spending the warmer seasons up north as far as Minnesota, the Sauk and Fox tribes traveled south to Missouri to hunt and make their winter camps. Interestingly enough, according to an interview with Ken and Lisa Marks, curators of the Hannibal History Museum, “the river was called misi-ziibi (Great
River) by the Ojibwe (Chippewa) tribe who were also found in this area, and coyote, raccoon, beaver and wolf hides were traded between natives and the French and Spanish traveling the Mississippi River.

Between the groups, uprisings were quite common, as the Indians even destroyed salt factories just southwest of Hannibal that were being constructed after explorers noticed potential in the area. Yet, peaceful negotiations did occur and primitive trading posts were a factor to Hannibal’s rise in significance later by its founder, Moses Bates.

Truly, humans have always been knowledge-seekers, striving to thrive in various locales with a dosage of curiosity for life. Subsequently, in the late 17th century, among the first explorers in the Upper Mississippi Valley was a French Jesuit priest by the name of Father Marquette. Initially, Marquette led the first expedition of the area and just years later, a man by the name of Louis Hennepin would be the first white man to set foot in the region of Hannibal after coming across the scenic river shore in 1680.

Similarly, according to facts compiled for the Hannibal History Museum by historian Lisa Marks, a Frenchman named Don Antonio Soulard first mapped the area in 1800. Soulard named the small tributary that flowed west from the river through the southern part of town “Hannibal” after the historic Carthaginian general. In fact, upon noticing black bears sleeping in the fallen sycamore trees on the banks, the region’s settlers renamed the river that inspired the name of Hannibal to Bear Creek in 1819, the year the town would become a newly founded place in northeast Missouri territory.

Without a doubt, early settlers and explorers were more in tune with their landscape, adapting together while domesticating the Earth.

Central to Hannibal’s transition from village to city was a young, ambitious, prolific entrepreneur named Moses Bates. Bates, after arriving in St. Louis to establish one of the first lumberyards and even build a home for General William Clark, noticed the opportunity to join the survey team as a chain carrier working in the northeast area of the Missouri Territory. Taking advantage of this assignment, Bates met a fur trader who had much success negotiating with Native Americans, and noticed potential in the land around Bay de Charles, or today’s Hannibal. Without hesitation, Bates built the first log cabin in 1819 near the southeast corner of Main and Bird Streets, a “one-story, “double log” house chinked with mud” (Moses Bates: The Founding of Hannibal 4). His logical plans were just the beginnings of a long history of “booms” and declines in population, as the environment created a problematic landscape that would prove challenging yet soon after, greatly prolific.

It seems that Hannibal was a town that came into existence through a string of rather bizarre natural disasters that altered the landscape and made for slow, controversial, struggled growth. For instance, an earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale quite literally shook the center of the United States in 1811, with an epicenter in the small Missouri town of New Madrid. In fact, the quakes’ intensity gave power to the Mississippi River to change course, as it even “appeared to flow backward for a short time” (p. 5). As a result of destroyed settlements severely displaced families after this uproar, Congress granted New Madrid Certificates to landowners, which allowed them to obtain up to 640 acres in unclaimed area in Missouri. These certificates had a major impact on the sites in Hannibal, as Bates in his savvy ways convinced a farmer by the name of Abraham Bird, who received an earthquake certificate, to stake claim to the land.
Regardless of the several duels and deaths that arose over land disputes, including the death of the town’s first mayor, settlement continued and Hannibal was officially surveyed and established in 1819 by Moses Bates. The Hannibal Company sold the land at costs as low as $0.50 per acre, according to Ken Marks, to encourage settlers to stay after Missouri became the twenty-fourth state admitted to the Union in August of 1821 (Houck, n.d.). Consequently, population increased as winter approached and Bates continued his trading posts. Specifically, when Hannibal was chartered as a city in 1845, “the town grew considerably—from 30 in 1830 to 2020 by 1850” (Welsh, 1962, p. 29). Ironically similar to the earthquake disaster escalating the growth of Hannibal, only a few years later in 1836, a true story surrounding the failure of Marion City documents a massive flood to be paramount in catapulting Hannibal’s success as a big boom town, and was remarkably the inspiration for Charles’ Dickens ‘City of Eden’ in his narrative, “Martin Chuzzlewit” (Hannibal History Museum).

When speaking with Hannibal author and curator Lisa Marks about this incident, I learned of an ambitious businessman by the name of William Moldrow, who decided to create a metropolis that was undoubtedly going to be the first major town in the west. After bragging to east coasters in Boston and New York City about how fabulous Marion City was going to be, he sold lots of land to speculators and started construction. The winter proved harsh, and in the spring when the snow started to melt, the Mississippi flooded and they realized Marion City was situated in this massive floodplain. “The town then was under water, say, 20 feet and the mud was left over, with mosquitos and malaria setting in,” Lisa noted.

All in all, Marion City turned out to be this gigantic failure yet success for Hannibal, as those that had come to Missouri from back east to live in this new city fled to Hannibal. The residential areas are protected due to topography and only the river front really flooded, as it extended just three blocks from the river. With a colorful history profoundly tied to natural disasters, Hannibal was a permanent refuge that was soon stimulated with development alongside its pleasant river scenes, becoming a breeding ground for businessmen and commerce.

 Shortly after this migration of settlers, Stephen Glascock finally drew the first platted map of Hannibal in 1836 (see Appendix for Plat of Hannibal Map, Hannibal Magazine). After the settlers arrived and built log cabins, they started blacksmith, hatter businesses and “dram shops” (taverns), and the first white children in Hannibal were born in 1820 and 1821. According to Donald H. Welsh, “In 1847 the Gazette discussed Hannibal and its prospects with great enthusiasm. Estimating the population at 3,000, the editor stated that “everything had a strangely new appearance” as nearly all the buildings had been erected within the last six years” [p. 28]. At this stage in Hannibal’s history, the town grew physically, industrially, and became its own distinguishable place in northeast Missouri where residents would come together and begin their own residential culture as a small river town.

Especially relevant, Tuan’s discussion of “Home” as it pertains to the physical/material characteristics of a place in his article View of Geography, centers around the idea of home as a symbolic concept that has been built to the point where human-made environments become “mini-poems” that evoke and enhance the personality of places and are dense with moral meaning that can be passed down in objects, such as maps (Tuan, 1991, p. 103).
According to the Hannibal Courier-Post, “the plat of 1836 is considered the first workable map to be filed. It shows the town divided in 30 full-size blocks, with two other blocks on the riverfront which thrust their lower half into the Mississippi.” In fact, after analyzing the map myself at the Hannibal History Museum, curator Lisa Marks informed me that on the original map, Block 24 was shaded green and set aside for use as a common-area or park, and along the shores of the Mississippi, Glascock set aside land marked, “Public Landing.” Shortly after, Hannibal, unlike other small Mississippi river towns, experienced several industrial ‘booms’ throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, with not one single industry defining its past.

Just as Sauer noted about the Mid-West’s growth at the turn of the century, even though it may have occurred extremely fast, it was in a “rational” responsible manner (Forward to Historical Geography). In the days preceding the Civil War and Reconstruction, specifically The Antebellum years in Hannibal, strong manufacturing and commerce were stimulated by the steamboat trade and the riverboat era, as the railroad generated the lumber industry and altered the landscape to one surrounded by dollar signs, systematic transport and artifact. “With the arrival of the riverboats, Hannibal evolved from a muddy, homespun pioneer village to a civilized, modern, mid-nineteenth-century town” (Riverboat’s-a-Comin, 2012, p. 5).

In fact, it wasn’t until this time that Hannibal was truly noted as a river town on the Mississippi. In reference to the river map of the Upper Mississippi Valley, as the areas to the west of the river became fully settled, the towns on the west bank of the river tended to outgrow those on the east bank. According to Burghardt (1959), “the west bank towns were situated between their hinterlands and the pre-dominant market and manufacturing area of the United States, whereas, in relation to the prevailing movement of goods, the towns on the east bank lay behind their hinterlands” (p. 308). Undoubtedly, the town of Hannibal was growing as a river hub.

Hannibal’s rich railroad history has allowed it to stand out from towns in the area, as the Hannibal- St. Joseph Railroad was completed in 1859 in a quick five years, which allowed the lumbering industry to bring Hannibal to a prospering era about a decade later. After the turn of the century, however, the lumber barons had completely exhausted the white pine forests up north in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and the railroad was no longer necessary in Hannibal anymore. Seemingly overnight, the town went into terrible economic decline, and the whole landscape changed, as the mansions in the town went into disrepair and most residents were unemployed (Hannibal History Museum).

Then, a significant savior was the Roberts, Johnson and Rand owned International Shoe Company that brought its manufacturing plant to the town, becoming the largest employer in Hannibal, with 5,000 workers out of 15,000 residents at its peak employed. And, for 50 years until after World War II in the 1950s, all north Main Street was known as the notorious Red Light District, according to an interview with Lisa Marks. Interestingly enough, she described, “full of brothels and taverns and elicit card games...it was so serious that if you go into the city directory of that time period, you’ll find that whole blocks of north Main Street aren’t listed because they didn’t have any legitimate businesses in the directory.” A small city that provided cement for a growing America in its civic progress despite its population, Hannibal has been characterized by its overachievement and quirky character with history at its core.
Today, there exists an extreme dichotomy between the fictional landscape that has resulted from literature inspirations of the famous resident Mark Twain, and the reality of the landscape in Hannibal. Specifically, those who wish to highlight the cultural heritage tourism separate from fiction attempt to live alongside the past rather than mask it, striving to preserve Hannibal’s oldest neighborhoods. Troubled by the destruction of this industrial village to a fictional landscape, author of “City of Dust: A Cement Company Town in the Land of Tom Sawyer,” Andrews (1996) interprets its demise as a product of the commercialization of Mark Twain: “Hannibal boosters embraced Twain as an advocate of industrialism, conveniently ignoring his substantial written record against it” (p. 3). Andrews continued to describe the new landscape as a “commercialism-at-any-cost mentality” which is indicative of its Mark Twain place names throughout the town in the modern day.

Oftentimes to a larger degree than the historical facts of an area, the fictional recreations of stories and literature has unusual power in taking over whole landscapes – especially in small-town America. Nothing says ‘Missouri literature’ like Mark Twain, and nothing screams ‘This person is significant’ like naming national forests, landmarks, caves, historic buildings, dinettes, theaters, hotels, statues, gift/book shops, taxi’s and even riverboats in commemoration of his craft. Dahl (1961) spoke of Twain’s stories as containing various elements of local color that serve to enrich the plots, and are anecdotal as well as historical: “they recounted the legends connected with various islands and points and snags, stories of Indians, escaped slaves, steamboat disasters, lynchings and romantic elopements. They described the life of the people in the various localities up and down the river” (p. 22).

However, when the history is seemingly masked and competing with this artificial, aesthetic landscape, there arises a problem. For example, upon visiting Hannibal History Museum (ironically located just across the narrow street to the Mark Twain Museum), Lisa and Ken Marks informed me that they created the museum recently for the sole purpose of preserving the historic traditions in spite of Mark Twain, to demonstrate and celebrate the phenomenon that make Hannibal distinct and still thriving in the modern landscape and lifestyles. While walking through Historic Main Street, it occurred to me that residents and tourists alike are utilizing Mark Twain’s literature to adapt their experience of the land.

For instance, now, the river is seen more of as a festival “steamboat” rides due to Mark Twain Riverboat roadside attraction, and asphalt covers the original brick from Moberly. Furthermore, the cave tours are centered overwhelmingly around Mark Twain’s legends in literature, as the town uses fictional character names for profit. Without having to venture too far out of the way, one Native American shop stands out among the Mark Twain bookshops, dinettes and souvenir stores, while Historic Riverview Park is adorned with Mark Twain quotes plastered on every sign. Lastly, Jackson’s Island, a 3 mile long uninhabited island in the Mississippi is known to tourists and residents to be solely where the boys of Twain’s stories got lost when out exploring. Overall, the fictional landscape, while generating revenue for the town’s economy, seems to be masking reality which could be extremely detrimental in the long run for the small-town culture of Hannibal, and the land that has thrived in it for centuries.

In the midst of all the literary place names, it is difficult to notice that Hannibal is known for its remarkable architecture, and that nearly every type of Victorian architecture can be seen in Hannibal. Also appealing, women’s rights and their significant role in the history of Hannibal appear to be
overshadowed by the fictional landscape. For instance, according to town records in the History Museum, the first woman to receive a degree at the University of Missouri in 1870 was Hannibal native Mary Louise Gillett, the first vote in the United States cast by a woman occurred in Hannibal on August 31, 1920, and Doctor Margaret Ruck de Schell Schmidt was the first licensed woman doctor in Missouri who practiced medicine in Hannibal in the 1860’s.

Truly, Hannibal attracts much cultural heritage tourism as it is, due to many wishing to experience the landscapes that embody the spirit thriving in the town to this day, characterized by its monuments, parks, historic buildings, and topography. However, more attention needs to be given to the prominent history that made Hannibal prosper into what are now the debated landscapes of the present.

Preservationists and residents of the Historic District east of Highway 61 are not giving up, as the fictional landscape keeps growing and swallowing up the oldest portion of the town around them. For instance, today on North Main Street, there is a building that stands now at 130 years old that was previously known as the site of ‘Murphy’s Motors.’ In the winter of 2012, the City of Hannibal purchased the building with plans to create a space to augment the downtown festivals, which center mostly around Mark Twain, including Tom Sawyer Days and parades once a month, as Lisa hinted. As a part of the Mark Twain Historic District of Hannibal, the building remains in relatively good condition with no need for demolition, in a part of the town venerated for its historical content, yet there are plans for the city to demolish it (Marks, L. & Marks, K, 2012b).

With conditions quite literally all over the map, many of the old properties in Hannibal are known to have been saved just days before scheduled demolitions. For instance, the Raibles, Hartleys and Rollers purchased a property known as the famous Rockcliffe Mansion in 1967, and Charles Anton and fellow preservationists banded together after the flood of 1973 without the intention of quick profit, to save a significant portion of North Main Street with their love and desire to preserve history (p. 14). Even so, rehabilitation projects are now the challenge of various transplants (non-native born Hannibalians) to the region, who embrace the “big little river town” for what it is—a quirky fictional landscape hugged between the bluffs of history.

"From all the earth in all the time of human existence, we build a retrospective science, that out of this experience acquires an ability to look ahead." Without a doubt, as Carl Sauer so eloquently noted in his Forward to Historical Geography, the discipline of geography as a social science is all encompassing and widespread with countless elements tied in, each affording us the ability to think holistically and spatially. Once history is embraced in a community along with its various landscape transformations, people begin to view their own heritage differently, as they become one with a place and as a people, with vested interests. Even so, seeking meaning not implicit in the landscape is difficult to ponder, yet second nature in our minds– using this idea to look beyond one’s one needs to the overarching scope of views is necessary in the everyday to appreciate what really lies ahead. I believe that Hannibal, Missouri will always be a small town characterized by its diverse past, with history at the forefront of its regional character. Yet, if literature characters, businesses and inspired landscapes aren’t kept to a minimum, the area may lose its historical integrity, and with it, the oldest districts still standing.
Indeed, the purpose of the spoken and unspoken traditions in Hannibal, regardless of landscape type and ulterior motives is what keeps the appreciation of history alive and celebrated. All age groups have the opportunity to be inspired in becoming one with the fictional landscape—whether in their best interest or not. Without a doubt, creativity flourishes along with the old Victorian architecture on the slanted, deteriorating sidewalks during festivals and parades that occur frequently in Hannibal, while the old brick buildings seem to shed light on another time. The preservation and circulation of history in this internationally known river town, with its distinctive flare for land use and off-the-wall stories, will continue for generations to come.

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Appendix.

1. 309 of Burghardt Article (above)

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