



Map Source: Iowa Department of Natural Resources, "Natural Resources Geographic Information Systems Library," <http://www.igsb.uiowa.edu/nrgislib/>.

Historic Vegetation

Historic vegetation maps provide insight into vegetative patterns that existed within the landscape prior to significant disturbance associated with nonnative settlement. When combined with other maps that depict vegetative conditions from other eras, this map is helpful in predicting where pockets of native vegetation of various types may still exist. When considering future landscape restoration, the maps provide insight into what types of vegetation thrived historically and could thrive again.

The plant communities mapped by the United State General Land Office (GLO) surveyors varied in classification as time went on, and the extent of each surveyor's plant knowledge influenced how they classified vegetation. When faculty and students at Iowa State University interpreted the hand-drawn maps and notes to create a GIS map, they did not recategorize any vegetation types. For example, "slough" and "marsh" appear as separate map units, but both describe similar conditions—herbaceous vegetation on perennially wet to partially flooded land. "Oak barrens," adjacent "timber," and "large expanses of timber" are also identified. "Oak barrens" undoubtedly referenced what is called oak savanna today. Oak savannas are frequently burned woodlands dominated by oak and hickory species with a unique, shade-tolerant, prairie community beneath. "Timber" and "prairie," as used by the GLO, are catchall names that included many vegetation types. Examining water-table data can reveal hydraulic patterns that would have influenced what specific plant communities were present in vast areas of "timber" and "prairie."

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