



History of Ozaukee County

By Don Silldorff, Director, Mequon Historical Society **Copyright © 1998**

Other than one or two transient fur traders the only residents of Ozaukee County before 1835, were Potawatomi and Menominee Indians. The land comprising Ozaukee County was part of Milwaukee County, Michigan Territory. In 1835 Michigan Territory was in the midst of petitioning Congress to become a state. One of the requirements was for Michigan to assist Wisconsin in becoming a separate territory. The U.S. Government moved the process along in 1835 by advertising land for public sale in Wisconsin, prompting thousands of New Englanders to come to Wisconsin to purchase the cheap land at \$1.25 per acre. They traveled by way of the Erie Canal to Buffalo, New York and then by way of the Great Lakes on ships to Wisconsin where they found bountiful land and new business opportunities.

The early history of Ozaukee County before Wisconsin became a separate territory in 1836 is a separate story which began with native Americans, explorers, fur traders and military activity. Before the white man occupied the land, travel through the heavily forested wilderness was by canoe on the rivers and streams and by foot on the many Indian trails that threaded their way throughout the land. One of these trails, used for thousands of years, extended from Hudson Bay all the way to Florida. A portion of this trail connected Fort Howard at Green Bay with Fort Dearborn in Chicago, and became known as the Green Bay Trail.

Early Settlement of Southeastern Wisconsin

The land sale announced by the President of the United States in 1835 brought thousands of settlers to the soon to become Wisconsin Territory. These pioneers were mostly New England "Yankees" who saw great opportunity for tradesmen, professionals and other business enterprises. They found a fertile, heavily forested land with a moderate climate, well suited for the growing of crops. They found many streams with abundant water power to drive saw mills and grist mills, assuring that Wisconsin was a good place to begin a new life.

The Green Bay Trail had a great impact on the settlement of Ozaukee County and on the history of Wisconsin. It was along the Green Bay Road, a few miles inland from the Lake shore, that many thousands of immigrants settled, using the road to reach their new homes and to carry on trade with their neighbors. The road in Ozaukee County is now Highway LL from the Sheboygan County Line; it follows the Green Bay Road and Main Street in Saukville; Highway "O" to Grafton; Twelfth Avenue and Green Bay Road through Grafton; Green Bay Road and Main Street through Hamilton and Thiensville and on Cedarburg Road through Mequon to County Line Road at the Milwaukee County line. The 1993 State Legislature designated the Green Bay Trail route, from the Illinois State line to Green Bay the "Green Bay Ethnic Trail". The entire route has been marked by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation with official 'Heritage Trail' sign markers.

Surveying of the land in 1834 and 1835, in preparation for the sale of land to the public, was the white man's first activity on the land in Ozaukee County. The first parcel of land sold in Ozaukee County was to Daniel Wells on September 7, 1835 on the lake shore in Mequon. The lands put up for sale in Ozaukee County in 1835 were the four northern townships and the land east of the Range Line Road in Mequon and Grafton.

As early as 1836, before the 1839 land sale, a few enterprising pioneers took up residence as squatters along the Green Bay Trail near the Milwaukee River in Mequon and Grafton. They were New England Yankees who registered their claims with the Milwaukee Settlers Association. The association was chartered by the leaders of Milwaukee to protect those registered from losing their claims to unscrupulous speculators. The house at 11312 N. Cedarburg Rd. across from Mequon's City Hall was built in 1838/39 by one of these squatters, Isham Day.

Almost all of the desirable land in Milwaukee had been sold by the time of the second public land sale in March of 1839. The population had grown to nearly 5000 people in the four years since the 1835 sale. The 1839 sale opened up the rest of Southeastern Wisconsin including Ozaukee County for settlement. particularly to thousands of immigrants who bought land amongst the Yankees who preceded them. Twenty three members of the Bonniwell family, established the Bonniwell Settlement in Mequon in May of 1839. They were originally from England, spending seven years in New York,. William Opitz and Adolph Zimmerman from Saxony, Germany, were the very first German immigrants to settle in Ozaukee County, arriving in Mequon in June of 1839. They were followed in August by a half dozen or so families accompanying Andreas Geidel also from Saxony. Twenty "Old Lutheran" families from the northern German state of Pomerania, Prussia settled on Mequon's far west side in October of the same year naming their Lutheran community "Freystatt". A few of these same Old Lutheran families set up a separate community along the Milwaukee River on the Green Bay Road immediately north of the Ozaukee County Line.

The first land sale saw many speculators take advantage of the opportunity to make large profits. They purchased the land for \$1.25 per acre and sold it for what ever the market would bear. There were more speculators than actual settlers, those who had come to this forbidding land to carve out new homesteads for their families. By 1839 speculators charged exorbitant prices for land in Milwaukee. This prompted many new settlers to look for land outside of the village of Milwaukee. The foreign settlers in particular, sought out large tracts of land to keep their communities intact where they could continue speaking their own language, carry on the customs of their homeland, and worship as they wished.

Ozaukee County was settled predominantly by Germans along with a sizable population of Irish and Luxembourgers. Saukville was the site of a Norwegian settlement. A number of massive stone houses built by the Irish and Luxembourgers are still standing today as legacies of their craftsmanship.

Establishment of Businesses

The material required for the construction of the earliest homes came from the trees of the forest.

Saw mills, utilizing the excellent water power of the region, were some of the earliest businesses established in the territory. The saw mill was needed to produce the timbers and boards from the harvested trees Peter Turck's saw mill south of Hawthorne Road on Pigeon Creek was the very first constructed in Ozaukee County, in 1837/38. A second mill was built about a thousand yards downstream from Turck's mill on Pigeon Creek by Barton Salisbury in 1841/42. In 1843 John Bublitz bought the mill from Salisbury when Salisbury found more reliable water power on the Milwaukee River above West Bend. In addition to a saw mill Salisbury constructed a grist mill. The community, platted by Salisbury, was given the name Salisbury's Mills and later renamed Barton.

John Henry Thien came to Mequon in the summer of 1842 where he had a mill race dug and a dam constructed with the help of Native American labor. Then Henry Hayssen built a saw mill and a grist mill for Thien. Rueben Wells operated a sawmill on Cedar Creek in Cedarburg. Another sawmill was located downstream on Cedar Creek in New Dublin (Hamilton) in conjunction with the Columbia Mill. A saw mill and a grist mill were built in Waubeka on the Milwaukee River on a forty acre parcel which was purchased from the United States in 1847. Another saw mill was constructed on the Milwaukee River three quarters of a mile north of the village of Saukville in 1846, a grist mill was constructed later. The construction of a saw mill almost always preceded the construction of a grist mill. Other businesses then followed, blacksmith shops, cobbler shops, tailors, wagon makers, general stores, dairies, cheese factories, breweries saloons and inns. When things were needed many of the items had to be made by hand by the settler himself. Manufactured items, such as machinery, glass, yard goods, stoves, pots and pans, dinnerware and books, were readily available in Milwaukee, many of these items having been procured from Europe.

The date of settlement of Ozaukee County depended on the state of transportation to Milwaukee. Almost all of the 343 people counted in the 1840 Washington County census lived in Mequon, the first to be settled. Cedarburg and Grafton were settled in 1842 to 1845, and Ozaukee's two northern townships, Fredonia and Belgium were settled between 1846 and 1849. By the time Ozaukee County was created out of Washington County in 1853 all of the available public land was in private hands.

Ozaukee County Created out of Chaos

When Washington County (which included Ozaukee County) was created out of Milwaukee County in 1836, Wisconsin City (now Port Washington), was named as county seat. Because of a financial crisis and the shortage of food Port Washington was abandoned. In 1840 the citizens of Washington County (almost all of the 343 persons counted in the 1840 census were residents of Mequon) asked the Territorial Legislature for permission to elect County Supervisors and to establish Washington County government. They also asked for permission to conduct the county government business out the home of William Bonniwell who lived on the Wauwatosa Road in Mequon.

In 1844 a building was constructed in Hamburg (Grafton) from which some county government was conducted, however, the County Supervisors continued to meet at the Bonniwell House. The

building in Grafton was known in recent years as the 'Court House Inn'. A running argument prevailed over naming Port Washington or Grafton as the county seat.

When the Territorial Legislature gave approval to switch county government to township form on January 20, 1846 eleven new townships were created out of Washington County. The legislation also directed the citizens of each township to vote on the matter of the location of the county seat. At the organizational meetings of the townships a large number of voters simply indicated the 'center of the county', these were thrown out. Of the remaining votes Port Washington received 164, Cedarburg 100, Hamburg 74, and West Bend received 12, none of which was a plurality. This prompted a movement to establish either West Bend or Hartford as the county seat.

The legislative act of January 25, 1847 named the Village of Port Washington the county seat for five years, however, Port Washington was so remote from the center of population that this legislation was ignored. So much controversy was stirred up that the new State Legislature passed the Act of August 8, 1848 setting up another vote for county seat, Port Washington received 697 votes, Cedarburg 570 votes and West Bend 336 votes, still there was no plurality. Another vote was taken November 7, 1848, with the following results: West Bend 1117, Cedarburg 944, and Port Washington 640. Still another vote was taken January 1, 1849, at which Cedarburg received 1643 votes and West Bend 1,111, while 986 votes were cast opposing both of them. This vote resulted in a court suit which revealed ballot box stuffing, particularly in Belgium, Port Washington, and Grafton.

On February 8, 1850 the legislature divided Washington County into two counties, the north half was named Washington with West Bend as county seat the south half was named Tuskola with Cedarburg as county seat. The legislature provided for the people of the newly established county to determine if the division should take place. It was rejected by a vote of 275 for and 716 against. The legislature on February 13, 1852 then decided that Grafton would be the county seat, and provided that West Bend could be named later by a special election. This was rejected on a vote by a margin of 789 to 2496.

Controversy was again stirred up, with accusations of fraudulent and illegal voting and ballot box stuffing. Port Washington and West Bend interests successfully lobbied to divide the county by a north and south line. This resulted in the establishment in 1853 of Ozaukee County as it is this present day. The division was tested in the Supreme Court, and was determined to be constitutional.

After all this controversy, Ozaukee County refused to give up the records to Washington County. Late one night the records were abducted from Port Washington to West Bend, causing endless confusion for many years. The lost records have since all been recovered.

Time Line of Ozaukee County History

1834 - 1836

Spring - Topographic Bureau surveying crews set section corners and quarter section corners in the public lands in preparation for the first public land sale.

1835

March - The Green Bay Indian Trail is surveyed from Illinois State Line to Fort Howard by the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers.

Sept. 7 - First piece of land sold in Washington County, Daniel Wells, Jr. in Mequon. - Sec. 17, T9N, R22E) 100.9 acres on Lake Michigan. Public lands available for sale in 1835 were the four towns in the north half of Ozaukee County and the lands east of Range Line Road in Mequon and Grafton

November - Wooster Harrison purchased land and platted Wisconsin City (Port Washington).

1836

Isham Day, Peter Turck, Isaac Bigelow, James Woodworth, Taylor Heavilon, Stephen Loomer, Jon Weston and John Willett register squatters claims.

July 3 - New Wisconsin Territory created out of Michigan Territory.

July - First Territorial Legislature creates eighteen new counties out of Milwaukee County, of which Washington County was one.

1836/1837

Trees are 'grubbed out' for wagon travel on the Green Bay Road from Milwaukee to Saukville.

1837

Wisconsin City (Port Washington), where city lots were laid out and sold, is abandoned due to a financial crisis and to a shortage of food.

1837/1838

Peter Turck constructs the first saw mill in Ozaukee County on Pigeon Creek in Mequon, before the official public land sale.

1838

November - Squatters Isaac Bigelow, Peter Turck, Taylor Heavilon, Daniel Smith and a few settlers in Town Ten (Grafton) exercise their preemptive right to purchase their claims at a special 1838 land sale.

1839

Yankee Isham Day completes craftsman's cottage on Green Bay Road, then gives it up to George B. Warren because of financial reasons. -- The Yankee Settler's Cottage. -- Ozaukee County's oldest remaining building still standing on its original foundation. Attested to by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, May 1998.

March - All of the remaining land in Washington (including Ozaukee) County was placed on sale, opening a 'flood-gate' of settlement.

May - Bonniwell settlement, 23 family members settle in Mequon purchasing over 1200 acres.

July/August - First German immigrants (Opitz, Zimmerman, Geidel, Koehler, Lanzendorf, Mueller and others) settle in Mequon.

October - Twenty of forty "Old Lutheran" families who came to Wisconsin from Pomerania, Germany establish the settlement of Freistadt. Six families from this group establish a settlement on the Milwaukee River.

1840

The 1840 census of Washington County records 343 settlers, almost all are Mequon residents.

Fall - Residents of Mequon in Washington County petition Territorial Legislature to establish the local County form of government.

October - First meeting of the new County government conducts organizational meeting in home of William Bonniwell. This is the County Seat for the next four years.

1841

Territorial Legislature passes enabling legislation which permits establishment of local Town government upon petition of residents.

1841/1843

Irish immigrants settle in Mequon, Cedarburg and Saukville.

1842

Property owners return to resettle in Port Washington.

1844

January - County seat moves to Grafton, 12th Ave. and Bridge St. (But seldom used)

1846

January - Washington County (Ozaukee County) petitions Territorial Legislature to establish eleven independent Townships with their own local government. Amongst the towns established are Port Washington, Grafton and Mequon in Ozaukee County.

April 7 - Organizational meetings are conducted according to identical agendas in all eleven Towns at 10 AM on the first Tuesday of April, simultaneously in establishments as specified in the legislative bill.

1847

Fredonia Township is created out of Port Washington.

1848

Saukville and Belgium Townships are created out of Port Washington.

1849

Cedarburg Township is created out of Grafton.

1853

Ozaukee County is separated from Washington County after years of controversy over location of the County Seat. West Bend is named county seat of Washington County and Port Washington is named county seat of Ozaukee County.

Donald E. Sillardorff (Don)

Mequon Historical Society

6100 W. Mequon Rd.

Mequon, WI 53092

414 242 3107