The Reed Brothers

The Reeds were among the most distinguished and highly respected people in the State of Wisconsin during its early development. Seth and Rhoda Reed came to the state with their eight children - George, Julia Ann, Orson, Augusta, Harrison, Curtis, Martha, and Herbert - in 1836. Seth was born in 1781 in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, and had married Rhoda Finney of Vermont in 1804. He was then a farmer. In 1823, the family moved to Rhoda's native state, and her husband became a hotel keeper and seller of horses, sheep, and cattle, shipping mainly to Boston.

When the family moved to Milwaukee, Seth opened a hardware store, a first-time venture. However, it was not long before he began farming again, this time in Summit, Waukesha County, where he died July 15, 1848. Sons, Harrison and Curtis, are the most important members of the Reed family to the story of the Twin Cities.

Harrison Reed, who bought the government property in Winnebago Rapids (later Neenah), had been a popular and well-known personage in the Milwaukee and Madison areas for some time before beginning his building of a city on the south branch of the Fox River between Little Lake Butte des Morts and Lake Winnebago. He was described as being a thin, light-complexioned, small-featured man of medium height. His hair was sparse and colorless; his beard was longish and thin, and because of his near-sightedness it was necessary for him to wear spectacles. His calm manner and careful speech confirmed the impression of wise deliberation. Later in his life he was easily identified by his black broadcloth Prince Albert coat and tall silk hat. The coat was always the same cut and texture with the only variation being the improvement in quality on Sundays and state occasions.

Harrison started the first Sunday School in Milwaukee, became the superintendent and always led the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. He was
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a Christian man who had great compassion for others. At one point he tried to raise money for a monument to Emanuel Pannen, a young orphan boy who refused to tell a lie and was beaten to death by a foster father. Sufficient money was collected for a plain marble shaft, but younger brother Herbert thought a more expensive monument should be erected. The additional money could not be raised, so the project was abandoned, much to the consternation of Harrison.

The panic years of 1837 and 1838 were not the best time to begin a business venture, and Harrison had his share of trials and tribulations with management of the Sentinel, a Milwaukee newspaper. He was forced to bargain for a barrel of flour and a barrel of "mess pork" in order to sustain his mother and siblings through the winter. The arrangement was to trade the flour for $12 worth of printing and advertising. In Gregory’s History of Milwaukee, Reed told of his problem:

It was during this period that The Sentinel met with the severest trials. Its income would not afford much hired force, and consequently I had to be editor, printer and purveyor, and was obliged to labor about eighteen of the twenty-four hours to meet daily necessities ...

In carrying out my contract for printing I was required to print an eight-sheet handbill, to do which I worked all night as type-setter, roller boy and pressman, while enduring the cursing of my landlord, whose rest in a room below was so disturbed by the clatter of the press that I was compelled to vacate the premises.

But Harrison was courageous and resourceful; he was never short of ideas - just short of money - and was not too proud to accept commodities from patrons who could not pay in cash. This announcement appeared at the head of his editorial columns at the time:

WANTED -- If some of our friends who are indebted would send us a few barrels of good FLOUR, we would take it kindly.

By the time the notice appeared in the paper for sale of some government lands on the Fox River, Reed was ready for a change in his occupation. It had become necessary for him to borrow money from his sister’s husband-to-be in order to set up housekeeping when he married Ann Louisa Turner in 1840. He was also in debt for newsprint which he had bought on credit to keep the newspaper going.
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The Sentinel had supported the policies of Governor Doty who had become a friend of Harrison, so Doty was consulted by Reed as to the advisability of purchasing the approximately 542 acres at Winnebago Rapids. It was after serious consideration and after receiving a strong recommendation from Doty that a bid was placed. Thus, Harrison Reed came into possession of Winnebago Rapids without having any cash. Harvey Jones provided that elusive material, and Neenah was on its way to becoming a prosperous city.

Harrison Reed was the first white man to be closely identified with Neenah, having become Neenah’s first postmaster in 1844, with the office being held in his home and the mail being carried in his hat. He also cut the first road between Neenah and Oshkosh and built the first barge, The Growler, on Lake Winnebago. Then he was elected chairman of the County Board of Supervisors. In 1847 it was he who went as a Whig delegate to the convention which drew up a constitution for the State of Wisconsin and who continued to participate in all areas of politics. Harrison had much influence with his associates, and in 1848 he was a presidential elector on the Taylor ticket.

Reed was one of the founders of the Republican Party in Wisconsin, and when he began the publication of the Neenah Conservator in 1856, the newspaper became an outlet for expressing Whig attitudes and policies and was Doty’s political echo.

When Harrison and his partner, Harvey Jones, had so many misunderstandings and disagreements, Harrison sided with his brother, Curtis, and the others who were promoting the building of a dam and canal in Menasha.

Curtis Reed was born in Westford, Massachusetts, on March 16, 1815, and had made the trip overland by stage from Vermont to Milwaukee with his family in 1836. His education had been stopped at age 15 when he began clerking in a store in Castleton, Vermont.

The first thing Curtis did upon arriving in Milwaukee was to find employment as a clerk in Solomon Juneau's trading post. Being intelligent, capable, and active, the young man soon became a well-known figure among the area pioneers.

Because of the poor economy in 1837-38, the family moved to Summit in Waukesha County and Curtis purchased 200 acres of farm land. At the first fair in Waukesha County in 1842 he took a prize for best milch (sic) cows.

Soon Curtis was becoming more and more political and was chosen to be a supervisor and later served in the upper house of the Territorial Legislature. The
Curtis Reed home near the Fox River on Manitowoc Street in Menasha.
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story is told about his pushing his way into the lime-light in the spring of 1838 when he heard that Governor Dodge was on his way to the village to organize county government and to make official appointments as were necessary. Reed recognized the importance of the visit and hurriedly organized a small party and rode out to meet the Governor who was making the trip on horseback. Curtis made an address of welcome four miles from town and completely captivated Dodge with his initiative and self-assurance. From that time on Governor Dodge took a great liking to the bright and enterprising young man and appointed him to a county office.

In 1846 Curtis had been appointed contractor for the United States Government to supply the Menominee Indians with beef, pork, and farm implements. His experience with cattle and his political connections made it logical that he be appointed for this choice position. The playgrounds where the distribution was made was at Grand Butte des Morts. This brought him near the area where brother Harrison had made his historical purchase of Winnebago Rapids.

Although Curtis was not the flamboyant person his brother was, he did not take a back seat to him when it came to ambition and drive to make his fortune in land speculation and politics.

Together with Charles Doty, Curtis owned about 300 acres of land where Menasha now stands. Charles platted the village, with Curtis acting as his attorney. Both sold and gave away lots. Curtis was the first white man to reside there after Wisconsin had been organized as a state; indeed he is appropriately called the "Father of Menasha".

Curtis was similar in build and coloring to his brother, but he did not have whiskers until later years. He was indifferent to his appearance and could be seen around town at all hours. He hated mean men and had bitter enemies and warm friends. He was a good debater and had untiring energy and a strong will to further the prosperity of Menasha. He was a strong Democrat and his opinions influenced the townspeople. Even today, the Reed opinions prevail - Neenah usually favors the Republican candidates and Menasha the Democratic.

Menasha's Reed never attended church except on funeral occasions when he went with family and servants. That did not mean, however, that he was not a compassionate Christian man. He was liberal to all denominations, although not a member of any church, and gave generously to all. He donated land on the island to the Baptist Church (his mother was a Baptist), but the church was never
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built. He was also known to give land to other religions which wished to build churches.

Reed continued to buy land on the north side of the river, and Doty bought what is now downtown Menasha (66 acres) for $838 besides the greater share of the island. The entire area was in Doty’s name, and the section between the two branches of the river was called Doty Island.

Downtown Menasha was laid out by Reed with a town square where Main, Chute, Mill, and Milwaukee Streets later converged, and there was a flagpole in the center. Over the years, different factions which were in control of the city from time to time disagreed over whether or not the flagpole should be there. One time it would be there, and after the next election it would be removed. Presently there in no "center", but a flagpole has been placed to the west and a fountain has been installed on the northeast corner of Main and Milwaukee Streets, which partially retains the idea of a town square as Curtis Reed remembered from the East coast towns. In deference to him, the area has been designated as "Curtis Reed Square".

It was because of Reed’s efforts that the government canal was built in the Menasha branch of the Fox River instead of the south branch. He also built a sawmill, a grist mill and the steamer, Menasha. His first home, which he built in June, 1848, was a log house at the head of the canal. He also built a store nearby. Knight’s Tavern, a two-story building about 30 feet wide and 50 feet long, where the early church services were held and which served as a boarding house for the workers on the canal, was just north of the store. All three were in the proximity of the intersection of Mill and Water Streets where the first Elisha D. Smith Library stood.

Curtis Reed himself related that in this same tavern several distinguished gentlemen were gathered one evening talking at random on different subjects. As the conversation proceeded, one of the parties proposed that they find a name for the settlement in which they were sitting. Up to this time it had been called everything and anything that happened to come into the mind of the party speaking of it. Several letters which had been written to people on the east coast in 1848 had called it Waupakun.

Because Indian names were very popular at that time, it was learned that the exact name for the village on the island was "Menashay". Everyone seemed to like that, except that they cut off the letter "y" which had given the last syllable the
pronunciation of "shay" and just called it "Menasha". Then and there this new settlement was sent into the world with a name.

Doty appears to have given the city of Neenah its name which in the Winnebago language means "water". G. A. Cunningham, in his book, History of Neenah wrote:

On one occasion Governor Doty met quite a band of Indians here, and during their talk he asked one of the chiefs, pointing to the river, "What is that?" meaning to ask the name of the river. The Indian answered, Nee nah, supposing that Doty was asking him what he called the water. Doty took a fancy to the name, or more properly speaking, the word, and even afterwards applied it to this locality, and in time it became its only name.

In 1850 Curtis married Augusta Lydia Ripley in Jefferson County, New York, and they made their wedding journey to Menasha on horseback. He had faithfully corresponded with her while he was developing Menasha, and the letters describe the struggles he had. In one letter he said:

I have had to watch over this place as a fond mother would watch over her newborn babe for fear of approaching ill and thus far have I got it safely on and the hopes of its enemies fast coming to naught, I am yet Captain of the craft and cannot leave it for a moment until safe in port or fair sailing ahead.

. . . . he who thinks it an easy task to oversee the building of a city in the woods better try it and learn his mistakes.

It is difficult to mention all of the positions which Curtis Reed held in service for Menasha. He was elected as the first village president in 1853. He represented the northern district of Winnebago County in the State Legislature for eight years when Wisconsin first became a state and also served on the County Board of Supervisors. He was a member of the State Board of Public Works which was appointed to conduct the improvements in the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers. In 1855 Reed was appointed postmaster for Menasha (during Cleveland's first term), and served for five years. He was later elected mayor for 2 terms.
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Both Harrison and Curtis Reed came to this area with vision and hopes. They became the outstanding figures in the development of both Menasha and Neenah, although Curtis was the most durable and served the locality for the longest period of time. Nearly every good thing that happened in the development of the village and city could be attributed in some way to him.

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Winifred Anderson Pawlowski